

Hawfinch Grosbec casse-noyaux Coccothraustes coccothraustes

I always think of the Hawfinch as a little parrot – despite the lack of a hooked beak. It is in fact a big colourful finch with a huge powerful beak. However they are not always easy to get a good look at. In England I have hardly seen any, but here in Dordogne they are quite a common, if sometimes rather discrete species. In France as a whole, this is a species of the interior and eastern regions, becoming very rare towards the coast. In summer they seem to disappear amongst the tree canopy where they live quietly. In winter, residents are augmented by large numbers of north-eastern immigrants. Small flocks are regularly to be seen flying above the forest areas and calling a high-pitched clipped ‘pix’, or flying up from a track or road as they are disturbed from feeding on fallen seeds, notably of hornbeam.

Somewhat surprisingly, Hawfinches are nearly as big as a small thrush but appear stouter and have a beautiful plumage – a French friend says they are a perfect blend of colour and pattern! In good light they look stunning. The large head is orangey with a massive beak which has a bluish-grey sheen in summer. The face has rather Puffin-like eye make-up, and the wings have areas of black, white, blue and orange. The underneath is beige and the tail is orangey with a white tip. The head needs to be big, as it carries exceptionally large muscles which enable the beak to generate over 50 kg of force! It can even crack cherry stones - hence the French name. In fact until the 19th century, the Hawfinch was known as the Common Grosbeak in Britain. When the bird flies up there is a whirring of white from the wing bars and tail. The flight is fast and gently undulating caused by rapid bursts of wing-beats. The bird then appears rather like a projectile - front heavy, with a thick neck and short tail! On the ground it is very wary and stands erect, hopping about or waddling on short legs – again rather like a Puffin. The song is a weak, strained warble, unlikely to be picked out amongst the woodland cacophony of summer birdsong. The male’s territorial flight however, is remarkable as it takes a ‘rollercoaster’ route above a wood before diving into the canopy. If you have a garden near woodland, putting sunflower seeds out regularly may well attract this beautiful bird.