

Thorndon Birdlife, June 2015

The swifts have now joined the swallows and house martins around and over the village. I saw my first swifts of the year on 9th May, when two were hawking for insects high over The Street, and I received reports of others being seen on 6th and 8th May. The two that I saw on 9th may have been part of a more general arrival as there were several flying low over the rooftops in Eye that evening.



Swifts are uniformly dark brown in colour, apart from a paler throat, which is quite hard to see. They have long, narrow and pointed scythe-shaped wings and a short forked tail. Later in the summer you'll hear their characteristic screaming call as they career around near their nesting sites at improbable and impressive speed.

Swifts are remarkable birds that spend almost their entire lives on the wing. They eat, mate and collect their nesting material whilst flying and they even sleep on the wing, coming to rest only when nesting. The birds that have just arrived will have been on the wing continuously since leaving us in August of last year for their wintering grounds in the skies of central and southern Africa.

I was delighted to hear of two turtle doves in the garden of a house along The Street on 9th May. The people who had seen them very kindly contacted me and allowed me to call round to see them. Turtle doves are summer visitors to Europe and their purring "Turr Turr" song, from which the bird gets its name, used to be a familiar sound in the English countryside but the numbers of this once common bird have crashed by 95% since 1970 and so seeing them now is rather noteworthy.



The two turtle doves were feeding with woodpigeons and collared doves on the ground on seed that had fallen from feeders hanging in a tree. The benefit of a side-by-side comparison made it immediately apparent that the turtle dove is smaller, shorter-tailed and much more brightly marked than the familiar collared dove. Whereas the collared dove is plain and uniformly grey-brown, the turtle dove is beautifully and intricately marked with bright orange-brown fringes to the dark-centred wing feathers, a greyish head, pinkish breast and striking white belly. Unlike the dark eye of the collared dove, the turtle dove has a pale iris and a reddish eye-ring and, unlike the single white-bordered black bar around the neck of the collared dove, the turtle dove's collar is made up of alternate black and white bars. In their fast and flicking flight, the turtle dove's blackish tail with an obvious white tip is very obvious.

It was a real pleasure to be able to study these two birds in detail. One was slightly smaller and less brightly marked than the other and when they flew up into a nearby tree and preened one another I wondered whether they might in fact have been a pair. If so, I hope they stay here to nest and raise their young.

When you see turtle doves, swallows, house martins, swifts and all the others that have flown thousands of miles to breed here, overcoming unimaginable obstacles along the way, it is hard not to be humbled by their determination and the sheer effort involved.



During June the last of our summer visitors, the spotted flycatcher, will arrive. These sparrow-sized birds are greyish-brown, with darker streaks on the forehead and whitish on the breast and belly, with indistinct darker streaks on the breast. They have a blackish, pointed bill like a robin and a dark eye, which, set in a relatively plain 'face' gives them an open-faced, benign appearance. As their name suggests, spotted flycatchers catch flying insects and they do so by watching from an exposed perch, flying up to catch their prey, before, generally, returning to the same perch. Like robins, spotted flycatchers will nest in open-fronted nest boxes, as well as in holes in trees and on a vegetated fence or wall.

I am always pleased to receive reports of birds and other wildlife of interest in Thorndon, Rishangles, Braiseworth and Hestley Green.

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