

Thorndon Birdlife December 2021 & January 2022

Most of the Cuckoos that have migrated to Africa this summer have arrived in the Congo, one is in Chad and two are listed as unknown.

PJ the cuckoo was tagged in 2016 as part of the BTO's Cuckoo Tracking Project, he arrived back in his Suffolk home this spring – becoming the first bird to complete his fifth annual migration circle, he is now back in the Congo. In the five years since he was tagged PJ has travelled over 50,000 miles to and from his breeding grounds in Kings Forest, Suffolk. The project, started in 2011, aims to find out why the UK's population of Cuckoos has dropped by over 50% in the last twenty years. After ten years and over 80 birds' satellite tagged, we have learnt a huge amount about Cuckoo migration, we can track their locations and learn about their journeys, discovering the consequences of the different routes they take and identifying potential pressures they face whilst migrating.

I start garden ringing this week as part of the BTO's Constant Effort Site (CES) project for winter ringing. I have heard Lesser Redpolls, Brambling, Redwing, Fieldfare and Siskin whilst out walking the dogs.

Siskin (*Spinus spinus*) is a small passerine bird in the finch family Fringillidae. It is very common throughout Europe and Euro Siberia and can also be found in the North of Africa. It is found in forested areas both coniferous and mixed woodland where it feeds on seeds of all kind, especially of alder and conifers. It is one of our smallest finches (smaller than a Goldfinch) Its plumage is predominately yellow-green with a striking yellow band on the wing and yellow patches at the base of the tail. Adult males have a black crown and a lot of black on the wing which contrasts with the yellow wing-band. Females are more olive in colour than the males, streaked above and without the black crown. The young have a similar colouration to the females, with drab colours and a more subdued plumage. The breeding range of Siskins within the UK has expanded following the spread of new conifer plantations. This, coupled by the exploitation of peanuts provided in gardens has resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of Siskins visiting gardens during the late winter months. In spring there is a rapid movement of birds away from gardens and back to the breeding areas. Birds continuing to visit gardens during the breeding season will be local breeders with adults accompanied by young a feature of the late summer in these areas.

Pairs are generally formed during the winter period before migration. The males compete aggressively for the females. As part of the courtship the males fluffs up the feathers of the pileus and rump making itself bigger, extending the tail and singing repeatedly. They also make mating flights from tree to tree, although they are not as eye-catching as the flights of other finches. They construct a nest that is generally located at the end of a relatively high branch in a conifer, such that the nest is reasonably hidden and difficult to see. On the Iberian Peninsula they make their nests in European silver fir, Scotch pine and Corsican pine. They form small colonies of up to six pairs with the nest located near to each other. The nest is small and bowl-shaped, it is made from small twigs, dried grasses, moss and lichen and lined with down.



Siskin



Dartford warbler

We concluded our coastal ringing site last week and we will return early spring next year. Results were disappointing compared to previous years, there was still a trickle of Redpolls, Brambling and Meadow pipits coming through although one of the resident breeding birds, the Dartford warbler (*Sylvia undata*) seems to have had a reasonably successful breeding season.

The UK's breeding population of Dartford warblers crashed in the 1960s, only 10 pairs remained. As recently as the early 1980s they were considered very rare in the UK having declined due to habitat loss and a succession of very cold winters, and were then confined to the heaths of Dorset, Devon and the New Forest. Careful habitat management and milder winters helped the population to slowly increase in the early 1990s and in 1996 they recolonised the Suffolk coast. They are distinctive birds with dark-slaty upperparts and deep wine-red underparts, a red eye ring and a very long cocked tail. They are birds of heathland being almost exclusively seen around gorse and heather. Unlike most of our warblers that migrate, these are resident in the UK remaining all year round and rarely wandering far from their favoured habitat.

Sightings; Barn owl along The Clint, 2 Common Buzzards, Fieldfare, Redwing, Redpolls, Raven, Tawny owls in garden, lots of Jays.

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