

Thorndon Birdlife June 2021

On everyone's nature 'bucket list' should be the Nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*) it is the bird that has inspired writers and poets from Keats to Shakespeare, and composers from Beethoven to Tchaikovsky in fact its song has been described as one of the most beautiful sounds in nature. "Nightingale" is derived from "night", and the Old English *galan*, "to sing". The genus name *Luscinia* is Latin for "nightingale" and *megarhynchos* is from Ancient Greek *me-gas*, "great" and *rhunkhos* "bill" Sadly, their famous song is disappearing from the countryside as numbers have fallen in Britain by 90% in the last 50 years and there are increasingly few places where it is possible to find them. Fortunately, I did see two at Dunwich Heath last week.

Less than 6,000 pairs are thought to remain nationally. In the U.K., the bird is at the northern limit of its range which has contracted in recent years, placing it on the red list for conservation. Despite local efforts to safeguard its favoured coppice and scrub habitat, numbers fell by 53 percent between 1995 and 2008. A survey conducted by the British Trust for Ornithology in 2012 and 2013 recorded some 3,300 territories, with most of these clustered in a few counties in the southeast of England, notably Kent, Essex, Suffolk, and East and West Sussex. By contrast, the European breeding population is estimated at between 3.2 and 7 million pairs, giving it green conservation status (least concern).

Nightingales are relatively dull in colour but they are famed for their rich and distinctive song. It is slightly larger than the European robin, at 15–16.5 cm (5.9–6.5 in) length and has a robust, reddish broad-tail, rather plain brown appearance and sexes are similar. The eastern subspecies (*Luscinia megarhynchos golzii*) and the Caucasian subspecies (*Luscinia megarhynchos africana*) have paler upperparts and a stronger face-pattern, including a pale supercilium (stripe over the eye). Breeding occurs between April and June, during which time four to five eggs are laid. The nest is constructed with leaves as well as grass, usually at ground level. Chicks will fledge when they are around 12 days old.

It is a migratory insectivorous species breeding in forest and scrub in UK, Europe and the Palearctic and wintering in Sub-Saharan Africa. I am part of a twelve-man bird ringing team that flies to The Gambia, West Africa where the Nightingale is one of the target birds. Each year the team visit to study the migration of Western Palearctic birds and to understand what is happening to birds in the places they live and how this affects population increases and decreases. It also gives information on the movements individual birds make and how long they live, this knowledge is vital for conservation. We try to capture as much information as possible about the birds we ring, each ring has a unique ID number which we record onto a central database, we also capture information on age, sex, moult score, feather condition, fat, wing length and weight and all this has to be done as quickly as possible as we are working in temperatures of approximately 80+ degrees so we need to release the birds as soon as we can. We normally ring about twenty Nightingales per year. The work can be quite hazardous as crocodiles lurk on the banks of the reedbeds where we are ringing.

Another species that has just returned to the UK from West Africa is the Whitethroat (*Sylvia communis*), they are migratory warblers that spend the winter in the Sahel, just south of the Sahara in Africa. It is a medium-sized warbler, about the size of a Great tit. It has quite a long tail which flicks and cocks as it darts rapidly in and out of the undergrowth. The male has a grey head, a white throat and a brown back and is buff underneath. This is another species of bird we ring a lot of in The Gambia, normally about seventy per year. They arrive in the UK from mid to late April. They will visit gardens, especially during the spring and autumn migration. Whitethroats are mainly found in scrub habitats preferring low cover, including brambles, nettles and hedgerows. This has led to the species gaining the local name of 'nettle creeper'. They mainly feed on invertebrates such as beetles and caterpillars but will take berries during the autumn before they migrate. We ringed a Whitethroat that was born on RSPB Minsmere then migrated to Western Africa, and we re-captured the bird for five more years, that's a staggering 40,700 miles for a creature that weighs approximately 14gms.

Sightings; Swifts, swallows, house martins, sand martins, willow warbler, whitethroat, garden warbler, chiffchaff, blackcap, mistle thrush, linnets, yellowhammer, cuckoo heard

Your local sightings would be appreciated

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