

Thorndon Birdlife September 2021

Last week I had the privilege of observing a Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) on the Suffolk coast. It is a predominately ground nesting falcon and the UK's smallest bird of prey. The UK breeding population is at the south-west extremity of the Merlin's European range and is thinly scattered across upland moorland from south -west England north to Shetland. In winter, birds leave upland areas and come south to inland lowland and coastal areas, and the UK population increases as most of the Icelandic breeding birds migrate to our warmer climate. It is a Schedule 1 listed species on the Wildlife and Countryside Act, it is on the Red List since a population crash in the late twentieth century. It feeds on small birds especially larks and meadow pipits caught in the air, low to the ground. Their small size allows them to hang in the wind as they pursue their prey. The flight silhouette is not unlike a Peregrine. Male Merlin's are blue-grey above with a grey head and orange-creamy underparts that have black streaks. Females are mainly grey-brown with dark streaking underneath. This compact, dashing falcon has a relatively long square cut tail and rather broad-based pointed wings, shorter than those of other falcons. Its wingbeat tends to be rapid with occasional glides, On the 28th August 2018 we caught a young Merlin on the Suffolk coast that was originally ringed as a chick in Scotland in May the same year



I was ringing yesterday in Suffolk and caught a few Goldfinches (*Carduelis carduelis*). It is a small passerine bird of the finch family that is native to Europe, North Africa and western and central Asia. It has been introduced to other areas including Australia, New Zealand and Uruguay. The breeding male has a red face with black markings around the eyes, and a black-and-white head. The back and flanks are buff or chestnut brown. The black wings have a broad yellow bar. The tail is black and the rump is white. Males and females are very similar and easier to sex in the hand. Adults moult after the breeding season, with some individuals beginning in July and others not completing their moult until November. After moult birds appear less colourful, until the tips of the newly grown feathers wear away. The goldfinch's preferred food is small seeds such as those from thistles (the Latin name

is from Carduus, a genus of thistles) and teasels, but insects are also taken when feeding young. It also regularly visits bird feeders in winter. In the winter, European goldfinches group together to form flocks of up to 40, occasionally more. European goldfinches are attracted to back gardens by bird feeders containing niger, (commercially described as Nyjer) seed. This seed is an annual from Africa is small and high in oils. They also adore sunflower hearts seeds. Goldfinches would frequent most local gardens. I wrote in a previous article about the BTO cuckoo tracking project, this is an update from 17th August, AJ has continued his journey east, swapping Togo for Nigeria. He is now one of five tagged Cuckoos in the country along with PJ, JAC, Calypso and Ellis. AJ is currently 235 km west of the capital Abuja. Last night was showing that Harry has flown 2,000 km south from Spain and is currently crossing the Sahara in Mauritania. Between 04:02 and 08:54 yesterday morning we got several updates from Attenborough showing that he has finally left Greece and is crossing the Sahara. He has covered 1,651 km so far and is now on the northern edge of the Tibesti mountains in southern Libya. After his extraordinary detour from Spain to Greece, it was a relief to see him on the move again. He has around 1,000 km to fly before reaching the other side of the desert, fingers crossed.

Your local sightings would be appreciated

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