



Thorndon Birdlife

April 2023

For many birdwatchers, the spring migration is the most exciting time of the year. It's the departure of winter visitors and arrival of summer migrants.

If you live on the coast or inland, you will see birds moving and birdwatchers regularly record the first arrival dates of migrants such as the first Swallow or Cuckoo. These first dates are often extremes and don't give the British Trust for Ornithology much information about the main periods of migration. You can contribute to Bird Track and help build up an annual picture of spring migration and the BTO will be able to monitor the timing of arrival of spring migrants and departure of winter visitors.

There is a lot of excellent information collected annually by the 18 Bird Observatories that are dotted around our coastline. The wardens make complete counts of the birds in a defined area each day and record the results in daily logs. These log books are an incredible resource and have been used to look at arrival dates over time. For some species the average arrival dates at all the observatories are very similar i.e. Willow warbler and Ring Ouzel which suggests that these species move quite fast northwards. Other species such as Turtle dove seem to move more slowly northwards in the spring, with 20 days between the average arrival dates at Portland and Bardsey.

Not all birds migrate. A few, such as Partridges never move more than a kilometre or so from where they were born. These are called sedentary birds. Then there are regular migrants and of these are the long-distance travellers such as Swallows, which breed in Europe and spend the winter as far south as Southern Africa. Even the Blackbirds in your garden in January could well be winter visitors from Eastern Europe.

Instead of migrating between north and south or east and west, some birds migrate up and down. This is called altitudinal migration—or vertical migration. Birds that breed in upland areas in summer move down to lowland areas in winter in search of a milder climate and more food. Although the journey may not be long, it often involves quite a change in lifestyle. Altitudinal migrants in the UK include Skylarks, Meadow pipits and Snow buntings.



Skylark



Snow bunting

Passage migrants are birds that stop off in the UK during their long journey north or south, such as Green sandpipers and Black terns. They use the UK like a service station, taking a few weeks during spring and autumn to refuel and rest before moving on. Some species such as Dunlins behave differently according to where they come from. The smaller Dunlins that breed in Greenland and Iceland are passage migrants – stopping off with us on their way to west Africa. The larger Dunlins that breed in Russia and northern Scandinavia stay with us for the whole winter.

Partial migrants are birds that migrate in some places but not in others. For instance, most Starlings that breed in the UK stay put for the winter. But Starlings that breed in eastern Europe, where winters are much colder, migrate to the UK in the winter. The same goes for Chaffinches, Robins, Lapwings and many other common birds.

Having spent the winter months in the tropical rainforests of the Congo Basin the satellite tagged Cuckoos are well on their way back to the UK. The BTO are currently following four male Cuckoos and they have recently completed the first leg of their northward migrations which takes them out to west Africa. Cuckoos Ellis and JAC are in Guinea, while Joe and Victor II are in Ivory Coast. These birds will spend the next few weeks feeding up, putting on fat reserves which will fuel the next leg of their journey across the Sahara and on into Europe.

Movements in Suffolk at the moment are Wheatears, Firecrest, Alpine swift, Woodcock, White stork, Cranes x 3, Sand martins, Swallows, Black redstarts, Waxwings x 4. Chiffchaffs.

Garden sightings: Lots of Blackbirds, Common Buzzard x 2, Mistle Thrush, Green woodpecker, Red Kite, Tawny owl, Chiffchaff calling.