



MID-APRIL TO MID MAY BIRDLIFE ON THE WEST CHASE DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

Mid-April saw migration continuing with a small passage of 4 **House Martins** stopping to feed on insects skimming low over a large pond followed by a single **House Martin** feeding on gnats over the same pond a few days later. Within a day or so these were followed by a party of three **Northern Wheatears**, their chests and bellies showing buffy-ochre in bright sunshine as they stood very upright before running in short bursts over bare ground. All had made the long journey from sub-Saharan Africa on southerly winds.

On this central part of the West Chase taking regular daily walks here had revealed no less than 5 territories of **Tree Pipits** and also 5 territories of male **Redstarts**, (both uncommon birds for which Ashdown forest is a favoured area in Sussex) in each case the birds favouring the tops of mature scots pines to render their songs.



Redstart by Clive Poole



Tree Pipit by Clive Poole

Both species had likewise flown from Sub-Saharan Africa to spend their breeding season here, the Redstarts looking stunning in their multi-coloured plumage; for me the most beautiful bird of the Forest.

We now have two resident male **Cuckoos** in the area, one of whom could be heard this morning singing at 4.45 am! was he singing for a female?



Cuckoo by Nicky Marrable

The female Cuckoos arrive later than the males, and once mated will look for host nests (probably **Dunnocks**) in the gorse in which to lay their egg, one in each of over 20 nests, before she leaves for Africa probably in June.



We have a resident **Reed Bunting** on the wet heath, singing his simple song near pools bounded by cotton grass. Whitethroats and **Garden Warblers** have now arrived too from sub-Saharan Africa to add delight to the may birdsong.



Garden Warbler by Clive Poole



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Look for a bird making a crazy display flight over the gorse and emitting a scratchy song and you have found a **Whitethroat**. Listen for a bird with a speedy melodic song coming from tall birch scrub and gorse and the bird you cannot see is a **Garden Warbler**.! It sounds like its close relative the Blackcap but sings as though it is in much more of a hurry. Our **Blackcap's** beautiful song can be heard in the woodland areas of the Chase.



Blackcap by Clive Poole



Blackcap by Clive Poole

Barn Swallows have also been evident around the edges of the Chase since late April, having made their long migration from South Africa, and as their name suggests they will be making their nests in barns and outbuildings. Their close relative the **House Martin** meticulously makes its nest by sticking mud pellets onto the underside of house eaves, and today a pair were looking for insects over the heath.

A surprise for me recently was to witness the spectacle of a male **Kestrel** stooping down in a maniacal dive to attack a Brown Rat which it caught in its claws and impaled on the ground.

Keep your eyes open; nature has lots of surprises.

Clive Poole
Voluntary Ranger. 9 May 2020.