

Last Call for the Cuckoo?

Join in the Langdyke Cuckoo Census!



If, as they say, one swallow does not a summer make, then equally hearing your first cuckoo in spring doesn't mean that the bad weather is over and mid-summer is almost upon us – although over Easter this year it felt a bit like that.

Nevertheless, for many of us I am sure the sound of the cuckoo has to be one of the most evocative of our local countryside, ringing out as it does across the fields and hedgerows. And with the coming of the cuckoo we can at least feel that spring is here and that our natural world is turning in its normal way as the cuckoo and millions of summer migrants arrive back after their winter break in north and southern Africa.

But imagine how we would feel if one year the cuckoo didn't come back? Or there were no more swallows around our barns and sheds? Or even no more swifts screaming over our village roof-tops in their aerial chases at the height of summer?

The stuff of nightmares or scare-mongering conservationists? It would be reassuring to think so, but sadly there is more than a grain of truth and reality in such possibilities. It is a sad fact that the numbers of cuckoos reaching our shores every year has fallen by 59% since 1967 and by a terrifying 37% since 1994 alone. Or that 41% of our swifts have disappeared since 1994? Or that even here we have already lost most of our spotted flycatchers and turtle doves?

Quite why this decline is happening is open to debate. Current estimates suggest that 16 million birds migrate to and from Britain every summer – an avian tide that most of us seldom see in flow as

migration mainly happens at night. Migration has always been a perilous pursuit in search of optimum breeding and feeding conditions, reflecting the seasons of the earth. Migrants face threats to their existence in their winter feeding grounds, where climate change, deforestation and population growth is degrading the environment and where periodic famine hits their chances of survival hard. And they face considerable risks as they fly north and south – not least from illegal shooting in southern Europe, but also simply from the stress of such an amazing journey.

They also face increasing pressure when they arrive here. In part because there is simply less food. We rarely notice insects except when we are plagued by wasps or flying ants. So perhaps for many of us we don't care if insect numbers are in steep decline. But for birds like the cuckoo that is like turning up at Tesco to find the shelves increasingly bare. We know that some of the cuckoo's favourite snacks – moths such as the white ermine and garden tiger moth have declined by over 70% in recent years, a result of the intensification of agriculture which leaves fewer weeds, seeds and insects in the countryside.

We are lucky enough around our village to still have our cuckoos with us. I heard one this morning calling away from Maxey Pits and they are regular too at Bainton Pits and Castor Hanglands. But I don't wake up in the morning any more hearing them call in Helpston itself and haven't for about five years. They used to be here every spring.

Ted Hughes wrote in a poem about swifts that when we see them return each year we rejoice because

*They have made it again
Which means the globe's still working, the Creation's
Still waking refreshed, our summer's
Still all to come*

We need to do whatever we can to make sure that our future summers too are 'still all to come'. And there is nothing like a bit of random science to help us do that. This year the Trust is launching its Cuckoo Census and we are asking all our members and Tribune readers to email in their sightings (or more likely hearings) of cuckoo throughout May and June. Just email me at richard@athene-communications.co.uk and tell me when and (as exactly as possible) where you heard a cuckoo in the Tribune area. We will plot this on a map so we can establish a baseline of where our cuckoos are now and by repeating the census annually we can keep tabs on what is happening locally to this wonderful harbinger of summer.

Richard Astle