

Just a short visit

As I write this at the end of March, shivering in weather which is as unlike last March as it is possible to be (I have a picture of me sitting outside sipping wine by the barbecue from 26th March last year!) I console myself with the fact that it is nearly April and surely it must get better. If it does not then all the avian arrivals which join us here around mid-April will be in for a shock. It's not the weather as such which would be a problem but the lack of insects and the delayed flowering of catkins and suchlike.



A few Chiffchaffs arrived in mid-March as usual – I wonder how they have been faring? But most birds arrive in April, as is enshrined in the old rhyme about the Cuckoo in the box above. And this rhyme highlights just how short a period some birds spend with us. Recent tagging of cuckoos show that some male birds, having mated with what they obviously consider to be a sufficient number of females, leave as early as June – they are only here for two months. Yet despite this short visit, we still regard these Cuckoos as “our Cuckoos”! Other birds, in contrast, like Swallows, arrive in mid April, but then spend the summer here producing several broods of young. They therefore don't leave till September at the earliest – often October.

For some birds, such as Dotterel and Phalaropes, the usual sexual roles are reversed. The dull-coloured male does all the incubation of the eggs and brings up the young while the brightly coloured female “just” lays the eggs. For these female birds, the time spent on the breeding site is even shorter than for male cuckoos – they arrive on their nesting areas in the Arctic in May, lay a set of eggs for their favoured male then disappear again in June perhaps finding another willing male on the way. I have to say I think this is a splendid system!

Rosemary Royle

In April I open my bill
In May I sing night and day
In June I change my tune
In July away I fly
In August away I must.