

## Stonechats

We have just returned from a week in Fuerteventura. Although we did quite fancy a few days in the sun, the main reason for the trip was to find 5 species of bird which can only be seen there or can be seen more easily there than anywhere else. The first reason for the trip was a bit of a flop – we had 3 days of pretty rough weather with gale force winds and torrential downpours – but the second was a great success.



*Fuerteventura Stonechat*

The most important bird to see was the Fuerteventura Stonechat, because, as its names implies, this bird species exists only on this island. It is quite similar to our familiar Stonechat, but has a thin white line above the eye and only a small rufous bib rather than the rufous underparts of our local birds. Its behaviour also seemed different to us – on two occasions we were quite close to an obviously territorial pair, but although they were flicking their wings and tails and appeared anxious, they were not making the loud “ee-chack” calls which are such a familiar accompaniment to our walks along the coast path.

Our local Stonechats will be returning to their gorse cliff-top nest sites shortly. I don't think we know where our local birds actually go in the winter – generally speaking they spend the winter in dampish scrubby places where they can find insects, such as the Teifi marshes. However, there are not enough of them in these places to account for all our local breeding birds so I suspect that many of these birds must cross the channel in the winter – perhaps they are haunting the marshes of the Cotentin peninsula or sunning themselves much further south in Spain. There is evidence that older birds stay closer to home and younger birds tend to travel further afield.



*Stonechat*

Not all Stonechats overwinter in such salubrious locations – when I was working on a project for the Coal Board in Cannock in 1976 my desk looked out on to an abandoned mine working. In the winter the area was occupied by a small group of Stonechats, which at the time was not a familiar bird to me. In the summer they disappeared – probably up on to Cannock Chase.

One very different bird that we were especially keen to see on Fuerteventura was the Houbara Bustard. This bird has a huge global range all across N. Africa and into Asia but it has become very rare partly due the fact that it is the prey of preference for Arab falconers. It is safe from this hazard on Fuerteventura but I worry that the pressure of visitors (and indeed birdwatchers) cannot be good for it. It is a very impressive bird, especially when displaying - the male bird turns into a white pom-pom on legs and rushes madly around. We were lucky to get really great views of this amazing occurrence.

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