

Grasshopper Warblers

In late April and early May, our little patch of Pembrokeshire is something of a hotspot for a little known and relatively uncommon bird called the Grasshopper Warbler. This is a streaky brown little bird with retiring habits and very little in the way of distinguishing features. However, the males do have a very distinctive voice, which is just as well as otherwise we would never know they were there. The song is a fast repetition of a single “tick” note, and the end effect is a sound like a fishing reel being unwound at speed, as if there were a monster fish on the end of the line. The song is therefore often described as “reeling”, and can go on for many minutes with just a few short breaks. The books say that Grasshopper Warblers sing at dawn and dusk, but we have heard birds singing in Winterton Marsh at all times of the day. Usually the birds sing from the middle of a bush, often in a marshy spot, but just occasionally they sit out in the open and give a good view.

Quite a few Grasshopper Warblers breed in the area – any wettish, scrubby spot will do and we have quite a lot of those – but at this time of the year many more pass through. On one memorable early morning walk in April 2005 we counted 6 singing birds just around St Brides. Before we moved here, I had only actually seen one Grasshopper Warbler (and heard a few more) but now we they are almost (but not quite) a garden bird!

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