

A Wrangle of Wrynecks

Unfortunately there does not seem to be a collective noun for Wrynecks so I have just invented one. I need a collective noun because this year there have been loads of them – up to 4 on the Deer Park, 2 on Skokholm, 3 on Skomer and singles in various other places around Pembrokeshire. This all happened in the first fortnight of September when Wrynecks are regular here. But why are they here?

They breed from northern Spain right through eastern Europe to China and eastern Russia, and from Scandinavia south to Italy. They spend the winter in warmer places such as central Africa, India and SE Asia. Any sensible bird flying from north to south in a straightish line would not come anywhere near Pembs, but they do – and it appears, from ringing recoveries, that it is Scandinavian birds that take this scenic trip. I often wonder if they have a slight compass error and set off in more of a westerly direction than they should. When faced with the Atlantic they put the brakes on and finish up in Pembrokeshire.

Whatever the reason, they are truly interesting birds. They have extraordinary plumage which looks like tree bark – a mixture of grey, brown and black with white spots which makes them very hard to see when hiding in a gorse bush. They perch at unusual angles and can rotate their heads through almost 180°. They use this facility when defending their nest, accompanied by loud hissing – it is thought that they may be imitating a snake. They are a member of the woodpecker family and like a number of woodpeckers they often feed on the ground, mainly on ants, but also on insects in decaying wood. They nest in old woodpecker holes.

Wrynecks like to live in sunny, dry country-side with scattered trees – think orchards and olive groves. They used to breed in the UK but have declined rapidly so that they were virtually extinct here by the 1990s. Numbers have also fallen rapidly in western Europe and by 50% in Scandinavia. The decline is possibly associated with wetter summers but is probably also due to increase in pesticide use, loss of orchards and unimproved meadows plus intensive farming practices in general.

I'll finish by including pictures of two of the Wrynecks seen recently in the area: with thanks to Richard Brown and Dave Astins.

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