

THE SPOTTED FLYCATCHER

At this time of year it is pleasant to look back at the balmy days of summer, and no bird is more characteristic of a summer day than the Spotted Flycatcher. This is yet another small brown bird, rather undistinguished at first sight. However this little bird, with its brown back and wings, pale breast with faint streaking, large black eye and serious looking black bill – has real character. First of all, although about the size and colour of a female Chaffinch when perched, you can tell it's a flycatcher because of its characteristic upright stance. Also, it will be perched in a spot with a good view all round – a telephone wire, a dead branch half way up a tree or a fencepost – casting its beady eye around for some unsuspecting insect. When it spots one the reason for the bird's name becomes obvious. It takes to the wing - the wings are characteristically long and triangular – and then after a few skilful aerobatics there is an audible “snap” as the insect meets its doom. In late summer, when there are so many insects around, life is very easy for a flycatcher, which explains why they choose to breed quite late in the season.

We have been lucky enough to have a pair of Spotted Flycatchers nesting in our garden this year. We noticed a pair in the area last year at the beginning of June but they moved on after a few days – maybe there was no suitable nest site we thought. So at the end of May this year up went a suitable box – open fronted, with a good view out and some shelter from the weather with an overhanging roof. The flycatchers arrived in June and didn't seem to be taking much interest. After a few weeks Peter climbed up the ladder to check the box. Much to our delight there was a nest – Peter described it as “just like a bagel made of moss”. We didn't look in the box again, to avoid disturbing the birds, but could tell when the eggs hatched as we would see both adults flycatching then taking their offerings back to the nest, though usually via a circuitous and hidden route. The adult birds would vigorously chase off any other birds which came too close to the nest – innocent Chiffchaffs attempting to forage in the nearby blackthorn bushes would be treated to some vigorous aerobatics! The youngsters fledged on 20th July and are now hopefully somewhere around the Mediterranean on their way to Africa.

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