

## Spring Warblers

During March the very first avian summer visitors arrive in Pembrokeshire from the warmer climes where they have been spending the winter. One of the first arrivals is the Chiffchaff. They arrive in small numbers at first, but by the end of March on sunny mornings their monotonous little song can be heard wherever there are trees or bushes. The song is usually described as a repetition of “chiff chaff”, but in fact it is really a bit more like “zilp zalp”, which is exactly how the bird is named in Germany. And of course there are variations – some birds go “chiff chiff”, some do a three note repetition and others vary it quite a lot.

The Chiffchaff is a dull little bird in terms of plumage – brownish above, and beige-brown below (sometimes yellowish) with a cream eye stripe. But it is always a pleasure to watch as it hangs upside down on rose bushes eating the aphids, and sallies out from bushes and trees after midges. It is a very active little bird and this is often the best way of picking one out at a distance.

By April the woods and copses are ringing with “chiff chaff”. A good number of these birds stay to breed but many are also on their way through to more northern parts.

In other areas of the UK, the Chiffchaff is particularly associated with mature woodlands and large trees, whereas its cousin, the Willow Warbler, is more closely associated with scrub and wetter areas. However, in Pembrokeshire, we seem to be a Chiffchaff stronghold and they can be found everywhere there are trees and bushes, even in blackthorn and willow scrub.

In the past, the Chiffchaff was always thought of as a summer visitor. However, in recent years an increasing number of birds have been spending the winter here. They tend to choose sheltered, wettish spots where there are always a few insects – particularly winter gnats – even in the depths of winter. There are plenty of suitable sites near here - typically sheltered little valleys close to the sea. For example, there are always a few birds at Monkhaven where they can be found near the lake and near the sewage works.

We usually have one bird here at Orlandon Kilns. It feeds by the stream, and on sunny days catches flies attracted to the warm wall of the house. This year we did indeed have a regular bird until the cold snap in January but then it disappeared. It is impossible to know if it succumbed to the cold weather or it has simply moved elsewhere – in any case they usually seem to move on in February just before the summer visitors return from Africa. Interestingly, these wintering birds are thought to breed in Eastern Europe, so when they leave here in the spring they will be heading eastwards.

The Blackcap is another warbler that can be seen here in the winter. Again, normally a summer visitor, Blackcaps have been wintering in the UK in some numbers since the 1970s. They choose to spend their time in areas with gardens, as they are happy to eat berries and feed on garden bird feeders, which Chiffchaffs will not do. This winter I have seen a male Blackcap at Monkhaven and there have been reports of a female Blackcap (which has a russet cap) in several gardens in Dale, where it has been terrorising the other birds on the feeders! Again, most these birds will return to their breeding areas in Eastern Europe just before the summer visitors arrive here from Africa.

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