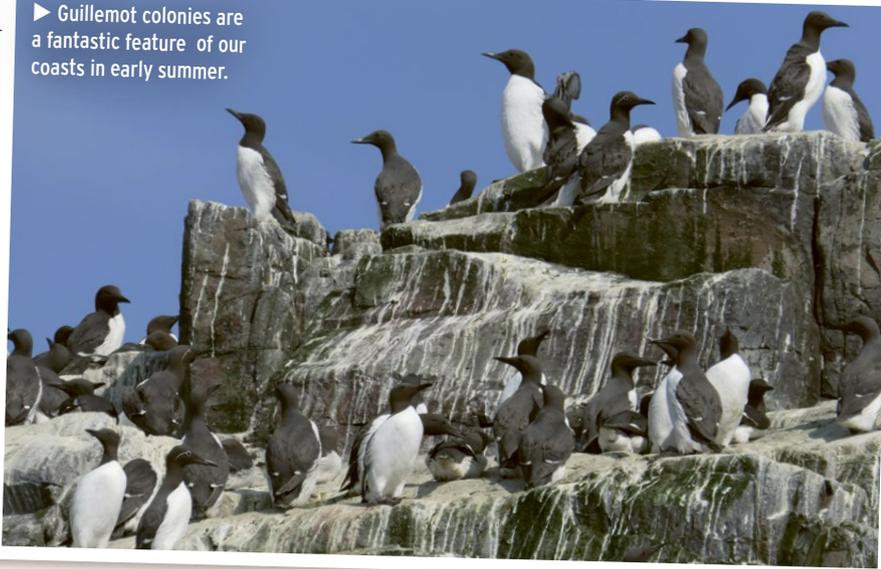


▶ Guillemot colonies are a fantastic feature of our coasts in early summer.



FIELD CRAFT

Making the most of summer birding

After the hustle and bustle of the breeding season, we could all do with some time to sit back and relax. But while we're soaking up the last of the summer sun, don't be tempted to hang up your binoculars and wait for autumn migration to start. The birds are still very busy, as Training Officer Emily Cuff explains.

SUMMER-SPECIFIC BIRDWATCHING

The UK is home to a great variety of birds and holds internationally important populations of species not just in winter, but in summer too. Bird numbers swell here in the UK throughout the

summer months with the arrival of many migrants, who make arduous journeys over land and sea to breed. You can enjoy views of birds in summer across a range of habitats; whether it's the flycatchers in woodland, Wheatears on moorland, or waders on estuaries.

Heading to a breeding seabird colony is a must through the summer months; the chaotic cacophony of calls that fills the air is an experience that you won't want to forget! Outside the breeding season, many seabirds spend their lives at sea, so summer is the perfect opportunity to get good views and brush up on your identification skills. Our distinctive auk

species create the foundation of our 'seabird cities' and start to depart in mid- to late July, as pufflings emerge from their burrows and Guillemot and Razorbill 'jumplings' plummet off the cliffs and follow their parents out to sea.

Birdwatching through the summer months at wetland areas, such as lakes and reservoirs, provides the stars of the show (in my opinion!); the hirundines. With insects in great abundance over water Swallows, House Martins and Sand Martins can congregate, swooping and diving to get their fill. Hirundines will stay well into late summer and beyond. If you're lucky, you may see a Hobby in their midst. These small falcons typically snatch dragonflies, but will sometimes go for Swallows and martins.

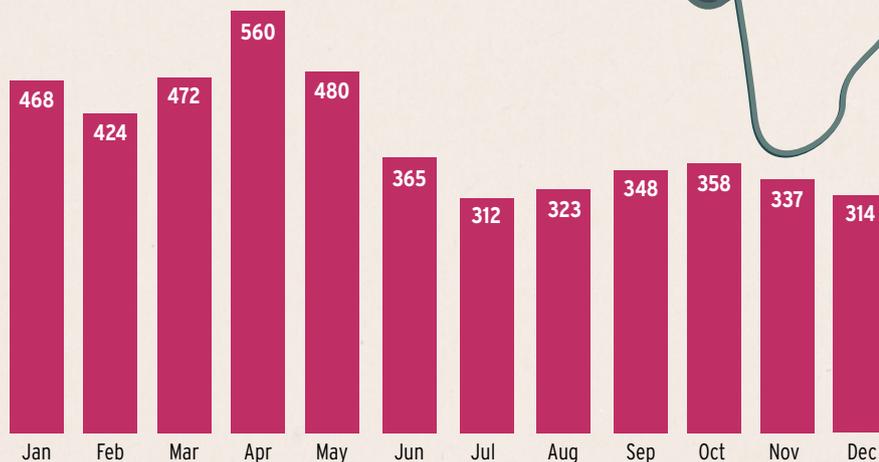
LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

Summer is the perfect time to get to grips with the changing appearances of resident and migrant birds. Every bird must moult its feathers to replace old, worn feathers with fresh, new ones. This can be tricky for many birdwatchers as the 'norm' drastically changes. Using this time to 'get your eye in' to juvenile plumages, whether it's a Dunlin or a Robin, is a useful discipline, as it helps you understand the process of ageing in birds (*BTO News* 331) as well as feather wear. The same can be said for adults undergoing moult. Switching from worn breeding plumage into fresh winter plumage can, in some species, make the birds almost unrecognisable. Ducks, for instance, moult all their flight feathers at once (*BTO News* 340). To compensate for this, male ducks moult their brightly coloured feathers first, replacing them with the brown feathers seen in the females, until their flight feathers have regrown, at which time they moult in fresh colourful feathers. Familiarising yourself with a species' multiple plumage types will be priceless in furthering your identification skills.

Not only does moulting affect birds' appearance, but also their behaviour.

BIRDTRACK COMPLETE LISTS PER DAY (AVERAGE), 2003–22

After the excitement of spring, BirdTrack submissions drop off sharply, with July having the lowest rate of the year.





◀ Hobby numbers peak in late summer, as juveniles fledge and all birds feed up ready for migration.



▼ Hirundine numbers are down this year, so do make the most of watching them if you have the opportunity.

Summer birding: the basics

▶ **Welfare first.** Many birds will still have broods to look after through to midsummer. Try to avoid disturbing them unnecessarily, whether they are feeding or near their nests.

▶ **Rise with the lark.** Summer months have daylight aplenty, but temperatures can get quite high. Birds make the most of cooler mornings to look for food, and then seek shade during the hottest part of the day. Get an early start for great views of your local birds before they (and you!) head off for a nap.

▶ **Look to the sky.** As the day heats up, have a good look for soaring birds high in the sky. Some larger birds use thermals (pockets of warm air rising off the land) to effortlessly gain height. You never know, the next time you look up, you might even spot an eagle!

▶ **Plan ahead.** Remember to consider not only the safety of the birds, but yourself too. Take plenty of water and a hat, and try to take regular breaks out of the sun, especially on hotter days.

▶ **Sit, relax and enjoy.** How often do you sit and watch the wildlife around you? Try finding a peaceful spot in the shade to sit for a while. Birds will get used to you being there and will carry on with their day. Be patient though; it might take a little while.

▶ **Keep up the feeding.** Food shortages can occur at any time of the year, and birds will come and take advantage of the treats you leave out for them in any season. In the summer months, high-protein foods, such as sunflower hearts and mealworms, are best as parents are finishing rearing their broods and birds will be moulting in new feathers.

Summer is a good time to start a new type of structured data collection, such as logging complete lists in BirdTrack

Whilst it's out with the old and in with the new for flight feathers, birds become more vulnerable to predators. During this time, many birds including sparrows, warblers and thrushes become less vocal and altogether much harder to find, but they are still there, and all the more rewarding to spot!

MAKING IT COUNT

Recording the birds that you see is a useful tool, not only for assessing personal improvements, but also as a great starting point for making your birdwatching count towards more structured

surveys. Summer is a good time to start a new type of structured data collection, such as logging complete lists in BirdTrack (www.birdtrack.net) or adding your weekly garden sightings to Garden BirdWatch (GBW). Unfortunately, July and August often receive the lowest entries into BirdTrack, yet regular complete lists would help to fill in the gaps on where birds go when they have finished nesting and give a more thorough understanding of behaviour and habitat use. Gardens are important habitats for wildlife and GBW provides vital information about how and why populations of garden birds and other wildlife are changing and how we can help them. ■



◀ Summer is a good time to learn juvenile features in fledgling birds.

GUILLEMOTS: MIKE TOMS/BTO, HOBBY: PHILIP CROFT/BTO, SAND MARTINS: TOM CADWALLENDER/BTO, JUVENILE ROBIN: JOHN PROUDLOCK/BTO