

► Willow Warblers spend the UK winter in sub-Saharan Africa, whereas those Chiffchaffs that leave the UK migrate to southern Europe and North Africa.



FIELD CRAFT

The importance of **timing**

Every comedian, successful or otherwise, knows the phrase ‘timing is everything’. Whilst there are lots of other factors to consider when it comes to finding and identifying birds, timing is an often-overlooked clue that will increase your chances of locating certain species, and provide powerful supporting evidence for (or against) a confident ID, as Nick Moran explains.

Time of year

Summer or winter visitor, passage migrant? Although these terms still abound in some fieldguides and other identification tools, they don't do justice to the precise seasonality of most species that migrate to the UK to breed or spend the ‘winter’, or pass through en route to breeding or wintering areas elsewhere. For many species, it is often possible to ascribe the timing of arrival to a particular week or fortnight (depending on the latitude): Chiffchaff in the second or third week of March, Whitethroat in mid April, the first Redwing in the last few days of September and early October, Fieldfare a week or so later. Furthermore, our four seasons become rather meaningless when ‘autumn’ waders such as Green Sandpiper start to reappear in early June, as failed breeders and non-breeders begin to disperse.

Familiarity with these patterns can be helpful when faced with more challenging identifications. For example, the ‘autumn’ peak for Willow Warbler is mid August, whilst Chiffchaffs peak five weeks later. This doesn't mean that a ‘Willowchiff’ on 30 September is definitely a Chiffchaff but does indicate that the balance of probability favours that species, and that a potential Willow Warbler perhaps deserves a little more scrutiny.

Changes in detectability, including of non-migratory species, are often equally predictable. For example, the chance of encountering Marsh and Willow Tits where they occur drops rapidly from the end of March, as these two species tend to reduce their song output quite early in the breeding season.

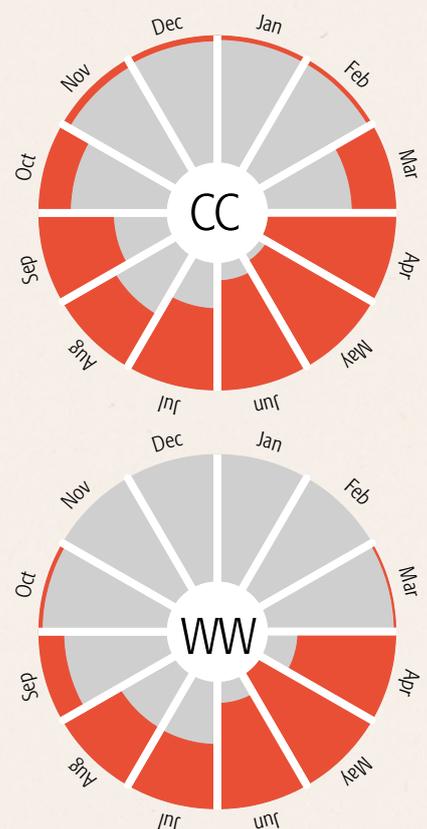
TIME CHECKS

There are plenty of resources that can help you increase your awareness of these patterns.

Good field guides will mention the months that non-resident species are usually with us, and some have visual representations of seasonality, such as the ‘calendar wheels’ in the *BTO Collins Bird Guide*. BirdTrack reporting rates are fantastic for acquainting yourself with the week-by-week changes in detectability of all species, not to mention any between-year differences, and are well worth taking the time to explore. If you regularly log complete lists in BirdTrack, you can even see how the reporting rates for species on your own patch relate to UK-wide patterns. Other BTO work provides valuable practical insights for birders, too: if someone tells you they heard a Cuckoo in early March, our Cuckoo tracking work shows why that is very unlikely.

CALENDAR WHEELS

Chiffchaff (CC) and Willow Warbler (WW) presence in the UK. Chiffchaff is present (red shading) year-round, and the main spring arrival is earlier than Willow Warbler.



Time of day

It doesn't take long to discover that there is little point searching for territorial Tawny Owls or displaying Nightjars at midday. However, it is easier to overlook the fact that the detectability of most diurnal species also varies by time of day. Initial analysis of BirdTrack data by Staffan Roos highlighted early morning and late afternoon as the peak times for encountering Cuckoo, presumably because that is when they sing most frequently. Hirundines tend to become active once it has warmed up a bit, whilst larger raptors and other soaring birds often wait until it has warmed up a bit more, so are best looked for from mid morning onwards. Certain predators, including harriers and Short-eared Owls, are most likely to be active at dawn and dusk, particularly outside the breeding season. Knowing the typical pattern of a species' daily activity and timing your effort accordingly will give you the best chance of finding it.

Going birding immediately after heavy rain can be rewarding, whatever the time of day

Weather conditions

Many of us will think twice about setting out to go birdwatching in the pouring rain or when it is blowing a gale. However, if you are in a position to synchronise your birdwatching efforts with particular weather conditions, this can pay dividends.

WEATHER-WATCHING

Going birding immediately after heavy rain can be rewarding, whatever the time of day. Activity often increases as birds make up for the time they couldn't effectively forage, display or go about other essential activities. Additionally, rain during migration periods can 'drop' birds that would otherwise have passed overhead or moved through. This makes it a good moment to check wetlands for newly-arrived waders, and patches of

scrub or other suitable habitat for 'falls' of migrant passerines such as warblers, chats and flycatchers. And you don't have to be at the coast to reap the rewards: migratory birds can pop up in all sorts of places in the right conditions.

If you are 'weather-watching' and notice a front approaching in April/May or July/August, this can be a great time to check for flocks of Swifts, Swallows,

martins and even terns moving ahead of it. Changes in wind direction are often essential for creating good seawatching conditions (*BTO News* 323), whilst passing squalls can temporarily push seabirds closer to land, making them easier to observe. Visible migration is often at its most impressive straight after any 'blocking' conditions, so pay attention to the forecast if you are hoping to see thrushes, finches, pipits, wagtails and more passing over a suitable watchpoint (*BTO News* 332). ■

Find out more

Standliffe & Sterry. 2015. *Collins BTO Guide to British Birds*
Record your sightings and explore other people's in Register for BirdTrack at: www.birdtrack.net



► Red Kites are best spotted once the day has started to warm up.

► The middle of the day is not a good time to find a Cuckoo.



◄ Migrating Black-tailed Godwits may suddenly turn up on wetland sites after heavy rain.