

## Country Notes for May 2017

One of the truly exciting things about the arrival of May each year is not just the knowledge that there is the rest of spring and summer to look forward to - but also the fact that all of our visiting summer migrant birds should now be with us. The last to arrive is nearly always the swift. These amazing birds begin to arrive in the last few days of April and the first few days of May. With their long, thin wings and short bodies, these birds soar through the sky, often making a screaming sound as they do so. What is really amazing is that they will not have landed or perched anywhere since leaving their nesting sites in Britain last year! Already here at the beginning of May are the swallows, house martins and sand martins. Like the swifts they will have travelled up from Africa. The swallows have forked tails, the house martins have a white rump and the sand martins have a brown necklace. The most easily spotted of these are the house martins, welcome guests which nest under the eaves of so many of our village houses.

Other summer visitors to be found in our village include chiffchaffs, which are small, fairly unremarkable birds, which call their name incessantly from trees and bushes. Spotted flycatchers, with their speckled fronts, may be seen darting from exposed twigs and branches to catch any insects which dare to fly too close. One of the features of these birds is that they often return to the same perch over and over again after each catch! Blackcaps are also regular visitors to our village, the males with their black caps and the females sporting a similar brown cap. On the downs you may be lucky enough to see a whitethroat. These small, light brown and grey birds have, as their name suggests, a white front but are probably most easily identified by their fast, scratchy call, often delivered from scrubby bushes and hedgerows.

High above, in the skies of our village, we may, from time to time be lucky enough to see hobbys, which are summer visiting falcons. These wonderful birds of prey look similar in some ways to our native kestrel, but are much darker and dash around catching small birds and their favourite - dragonflies!

The surprising omission from this list is the cuckoo. Years ago these birds were easy to find in Hollingbourne, but are now much rarer. They may be seen and heard in some of our neighbouring villages, but it is several years since I have heard one in our village.

There are of course many other summer migrants which may be seen, but those listed above are the most likely in this corner of Kent. Enjoy your springtime bird watching - I certainly will!

Andrew Snowdon