

Country Notes for April 2019

Some time ago I was asked to be question master for an inter-school quiz. The questions and answers had all been prepared for me - and I had not seen them in advance. One of the questions turned out to be 'What is Britain's smallest bird?'. The answer that I was given was 'wren' and indeed that was the answer on the question sheet as well. I queried this as I knew it to be wrong but was told that the answer on the sheet should be adhered to. Distance in time tends to blur the memory and I cannot remember how the matter was resolved!

The wren is indeed a very small bird. Perky in appearance it is brown all over and with its upward pointing tail it looks very dapper. What it lacks in size it certainly makes up for with its song, which is very loud and melodious with a distinctive trill in the middle of it. What, however, is in no doubt, is that it is not Britain's smallest bird!

The honour of being Britain's smallest bird is shared by the goldcrest and the firecrest. It used to be said that it was the goldcrest but as the firecrest has also been proven to nest in Britain in small numbers the honour must indeed be shared! The two birds are very similar and the only real difference is that the firecrest has a bold white eye stripe which the goldcrest does not. The goldcrest is a resident and although seldom seen, is more common than people think. The fact that it is not often seen is due not only to its diminutive size but also the fact that it favours coniferous trees where it can easily hide away. Once one becomes familiar with its call, which sounds like a high pitched squeaky door being opened and shut very fast, they are much easier to locate. The firecrest is principally a summer visitor in small numbers, with a few breeding in some parts of the country. Both birds are essentially khaki green, with the goldcrest having, not surprisingly, a gold crest and the firecrest having a more orange crest. The firecrest also tends to be rather more grey underneath.

There are certainly plenty of wrens and goldcrests to be seen and heard in our villages. Not so the firecrest however!

Andrew G Snowdon