

The first of the summer visitors has arrived already, in the shape of a wheatear which was spotted at Trefil Quarry on 8th March. Wheatear are almost always the first migrant to arrive in the UK and interestingly, these early birds all tend to all be males. They get here in early March to stake a claim for a suitable breeding territory and are followed a few weeks later by the females.

In common with many other summer visitors wheatear spend the winter in South West Africa and cross the Sahara and Mediterranean to get here – However some merely use the UK as a staging post and carry on even further North and West to breed in Canada. This means that they have an additional journey across the Atlantic - A phenomenal feat for a small bird weighing 20 – 30 grams!

Wheatear are also a stunning little bird and quite a common sight in South Wales. There are estimated to be about 200 pairs breeding in Gwent and they seem to be drawn to the upland areas where there are plenty of dry stone walls in which to nest.

Look out for them during any upland walk from now until September. You can't miss them; They have a very upright stance and can often be seen perched on rocks or walking along the ground. Whilst the males are more prominent as they have a slate grey hood and a black 'mask', the most recognisable feature can be seen when the bird flies away from you, as both sexes have a black 'upside down T' on the tail and a vivid white rump. Supposedly this latter feature meant the bird was formerly known as 'white arse', only for it to be prudishly renamed wheatear during the Victorian era – What a shame, I much prefer the original.

Starling Conundrum

I suppose many readers will have heard of the puzzling discovery of 75 dead starlings on a driveway in Somerset, seemingly having flown full pelt into the ground. I remember seeing a similar sight when I was younger, though in that case a whirling host of starlings came too close to a moving high sided lorry, causing about 20 birds to collide with it.

My theory on what happened to the Somerset birds is that whilst starlings show fantastic spatial awareness and manouverability when in a flock, they were startled (probably by a predator such as a sparrowhawk) when travelling close to the ground and hit the deck taking

evasive action.

Coming Up

Don't forget tonight's illustrated talk at Goytre Village Hall (Saturday 13th), when WPC Tracey Bowen-Quirke will be on hand to talk about wildlife crime. If you fancy questioning a police officer - or just listening to what promises to be a very informative talk, please feel free to come along.

There is another talk (same time and venue) on Saturday 27th March. This time the speaker is Terry Bond who will be talking about the birds of Scandinavia. Terry likes to head North for his holidays, and will undoubtedly make us all envious with his pictures of great grey shrikes, nutcrackers and Siberian jays.

Goytre Village Hall is situated just off the A4042 Newport to Abergavenny road (SO 323 046) and the talk starts at 7.30pm. Entry, including tea and biscuits is £1.50.

Also on Saturday 27th is a guided birdwatching walk along the River Usk at Llanwenarth. This lovely spot near Abergavenny is great for farmland and freshwater birds, such as sand martin which nest in the riverbank. The walk is being led by my mate Steve Butler – an absolutely brilliant bloke, who will make you very welcome and be on hand to help you identify your sightings. If you would like to join in, meet Steve at Abergavenny Bus Station at 8.00am.

Please make sure you dress suitably and bring binoculars if you have them (a few sandwiches and a drink would also be a good idea).

New faces are always welcome at GOS events – For more details visit www.gwentbirds.org.uk or give me a call on the number below.

Keep in Touch

Thanks to all readers who have taken the time to get in touch. I enjoy hearing from you and can be contacted at m.stevens@webster.uk.net or on 01633 866470.

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