



AUTUMN MIGRATION

One of the thrills of birdwatching is to stand on a beach in Norfolk or Suffolk in September or October and, if time and weather are right, to observe scores, and sometimes hundreds of birds on the move. On some mornings there will be a continuous procession of ducks and geese, gannets and gulls, divers and waders, passing by over the sea. Many of these will be on their way from the Arctic to their wintering grounds further south. Also on their way south will be numbers of terns, swallows and house martin - some travelling as far as Capetown. Mixed in with all these will be other perhaps less expected birds - a short-eared owl flopping steadily westwards, a small flock of snow bunting flitting between the waves, thrushes and starlings suddenly appearing from over the sea and disappearing inland without a break. The passage of these landbirds over the sea is always exciting to watch, perhaps because they appear so out of place. And out of place indeed they are, many fail to make it to the land as a stroll along the shoreline will often reveal. It is especially sad to see a bird that has perhaps travelled 400 miles from Scandinavia simply fail to make it to the shore by a matter of a dozen yards or so.

Many, and probably most, do make it, however, and we only have to step outside our backdoors here in Turvey to see some of these very same flocks still flying determinedly westwards. On a recent Sunday morning the sky was full of birds bounding over the trees and hedges in flocks varying from a dozen to a hundred birds. Most consisted of redwings, some 590 passing over in one hour with others no doubt missed. But every so often a slightly heavier looking flock would appear and the white underwings would confirm it as a flock of fieldfares. Wood pigeons, chaffinches, starlings, lapwings, and skylarks were also on the move, and at one point even a cormorant flew over, also heading west. There is every probability that many of these birds, especially the redwing and fieldfare, will have been flying continuously since just after dusk the day before. The thrushes certainly fly at night and complete their journeys in daylight with time then to replenish their stores of energy. The chaffinches, and most finches, are more likely to have travelled in shorter stages during the day, only flying at night if forced to do so by still, for example, finding themselves at sea. This is probably also the case with wood pigeons, lapwings and skylarks, but starlings are known to fly by day or by night without any certain preference. It is interesting to speculate why some birds prefer to travel by day and others by night, but, as the starlings demonstrate, we should perhaps be wary of always seeking a certain pattern for every species - it could just be that the preference is an individual one just as in human beings, and isn't that ultimately what evolution is all about?

Br. John

