

Autumn Flux



It's a moot point when autumn begins but birds have been on the move south and westwards since June: failed waders on the coast, first broods of Lapwing coming from the Continent, Swift already gone by early August and hedgerows busy now in late August with mixed flocks of resident and migrant birds throughout the country. It is the latter which have caught my eye, and ear, this year with a noticeable arrival and movement of juvenile Willow Warblers, in particular, on several dates and in several widely dispersed places. Overnight rain can bring them down in large numbers but at this time of year they trickle through anyway most of the time. The plaintive call of the Willow Warbler (a sort of tu-reet) is often the first sign that something is going on. The trick is to locate the flock and then stand close to the hedgerow looking along the line of advance, which is often south or westwards. And here they come: Long-tailed Tits frequently at the top and leading the way followed by a mix of Blue and Great Tits with the Willow Warblers darting in and out below, often chasing one another and making brief excursions into the surrounding crops. They are putting on weight to carry them southwards and ultimately as far as the tree cover of Central Africa or, for some populations, further south still to the southern tropics. For the longer crossings they will actually use up not only their excess fat but even some of their own internal organs and have to rebuild them once more in their wintering quarters in Africa.

Each flock will have a variety of fellow travellers which one can never quite predict. There may be other warblers such as the very similar Chiffchaff, or a Garden Warbler or a Blackcap or two, and perhaps a Common Whitethroat. A wonderful surprise in one flock locally was this year's first Spotted Flycatcher, sadly no longer a breeding bird in the Abbey grounds. Similar flocks in Oxfordshire produced Whinchat as well, and in the New Forest, Redstart, Tree Pipit, Siskin and lots more Spotted Flycatchers. And so each bundle of energy passes like a pulse throbbing its way steadily southwards. My guess is that the tits, and other residents such as Robins and Chaffinches, do a circuit of the neighborhood while the migrants take their leave at night to be replaced by further migrants heading south each day.

Happy hunting.

Br. John

