

Predictions and Quails

Paul Westley 2004

In last year's newsletter in my article 'Birding Snapshots 2002' I made some predictions. I suggested that the date of returning summer visiting (breeding) migrants could be predicted, as follows:

Chiffchaff - 15th March. My spring indicator (see 14th March 2003). Right on cue, they arrived the day before on the 14th, with two birds singing from the oaks in Surlingham Wood.

Sedge Warbler - 12th April. Arrived four days later on the 16th, located on Blake's Marsh. However, the previous week had seen several sharp frosts and freezing north winds. If I were a returning Sedge Warbler in the face of the above, I'd drop down into the south of France for a few days before continuing...!

Whitethroat - 24th April, and Reed Warbler - 26th April. A visit to Wheatfen on the 30th provided both birds, in good numbers. Evidence from colleagues at Wheatfen and from other sites indicated both species singing away over the weekend of the 26th/27th - so both were on or about their date. This visit was also rewarded with a booming Bittern from across the water at Strumpshaw Fen.

Two predictions I didn't make were Blackcap and Willow Warbler. They both arrived around the 2nd of April which, give or take a day, is their annual arrival date. The remaining summer visitor to Wheatfen, the Grasshopper Warbler arrived on the same weekend as the Whitethroat and Reed Warbler. Given the time, wouldn't it be a fantastic vocation to walk the paths of Wheatfen on a daily basis and record the first flower, insect, returning migrant and so on over the years. What an amazing picture that would paint.

The 11th of May revealed another new Wheatfen bird with a calling Quail. Or, maybe two - it could always have been the same bird moving around. The life story of a Quail is fascinating. It is believed that those that over winter in Africa start to move north as early as December and breed where and when conditions allow. After the brood has fledged, the parents will migrate further north and breed again and repeat the pattern, often making it as far as the British Isles in varying numbers from year to year. The young from early broods will migrate north at two months old and will be able to breed themselves one month on. This really is a survival instinct and a concerted effort to spread their range.