



▲ Although rare, Red-rumped Swallow sightings peak in late April.

▼ Wheatear numbers build through March and April, as birds return to breed.

FIELD CRAFT

Making the most of spring birding

As the days become longer and the weather brightens, the natural world springs into life. Now is the time to get outside and make the most of the season, cueing in to the gradual yet dramatic changes as they happen, as Training Officer Kate Fox explains.

SPRING-SPECIFIC BIRDWATCHING

The UK is an important breeding ground and staging site for many species, and over the coming months migratory birds will be streaming northwards. This migration can be a spectacle to witness, and many happy hours can be spent 'vismigging' in the right conditions (*BTO News* 332). Spring is also a great time to seek less familiar species close to home as they pass through en route to their breeding grounds further north, plus there's always the potential for the odd surprise!

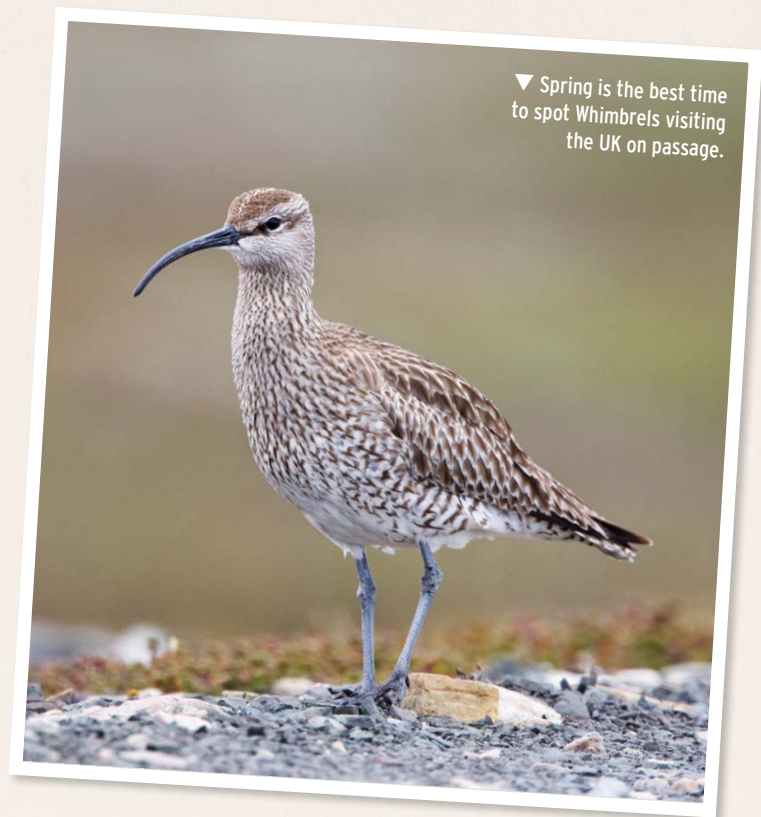
Of course, spring also delivers one of nature's greatest performances: the dawn chorus! Starting around 30 minutes before sunrise, it's certainly worth setting your alarm that bit earlier at least once this season to experience this natural orchestra, and you may not even need to leave your bed! Leave the window ajar and wake up to the sound of birdsong. If you are feeling adventurous, challenge yourself

to visit different habitats throughout the season to embrace the different soundscapes. How does the cacophony of a wetland site compare to the symphony of birdsong emanating from a woodland?

LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

As breeding birds are in full voice, now is a great time to build on your birdsong ID skills. A top tip is to start early in the season and take small steps. For example, getting to grips with Blackcap song in late March and early April will help you distinguish them from their close relative, the similar sounding yet later-arriving Garden Warbler. Focus on just a few species at a time to avoid overwhelming yourself. Enjoy the dawn chorus, of course, but if you are heading out specifically to practise your birdsong ID skills, it's best to wait until later in the morning when the peak of song output has passed, leaving fewer species to sift through.

A good way to practise is to repeat 10-minute point counts in the same spot each week (*BTO News* 341) during the breeding season to hone your skills, and cue in to the



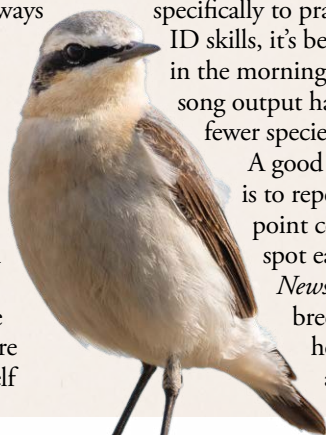
▼ Spring is the best time to spot Whimbrels visiting the UK on passage.

If you are feeling adventurous, challenge yourself to visit different habitats throughout the season to embrace the different soundscapes

progression of spring as new songsters pipe up. Also, take advantage of resources to help you, such as our #BirdSongBasics series on our YouTube channel 'BTOvideo' (www.youtube.com/btovideo) and tips on how to approach bird sound ID (*BTO News* 322 & 348).

MAKING IT COUNT

Many people will have their own harbinger of spring: a species which heralds the arrival of the season. Whether it be your first singing Chiffchaff or Cuckoo, Swallows or screaming Swifts, noting it on the calendar is a momentous occasion. This spring, why not also consider logging your sightings in BirdTrack (www.birdtrack.net)! You can use the 'quick add' function to record a single species or, even better, try





Spring birding: the basics

► Welfare first

Nesting birds can be very sensitive to disturbance, particularly early in the season when they are prospecting and nest building. Be mindful of this and always follow the NRS Code of Conduct (www.bto.org/nrs-coc).

► Rise with the lark

As the days get longer, it can help to get out early with the peak of activity, but make the most of the midday lull to have a break.

► Make the most of the weather – even when it's bad!

For those less willing or able to make an early start, birdsong and activity often spikes following heavy rain and bad weather, or in the early evening. This is a great opportunity to enjoy the hustle and bustle of spring without getting up at stupid o'clock.

► Embrace the unfamiliar

If you encounter a new sound or fledglings in an unfamiliar plumage (*BTO News* 331 & 339), stay calm and take the opportunity to put your ID skills to the test.

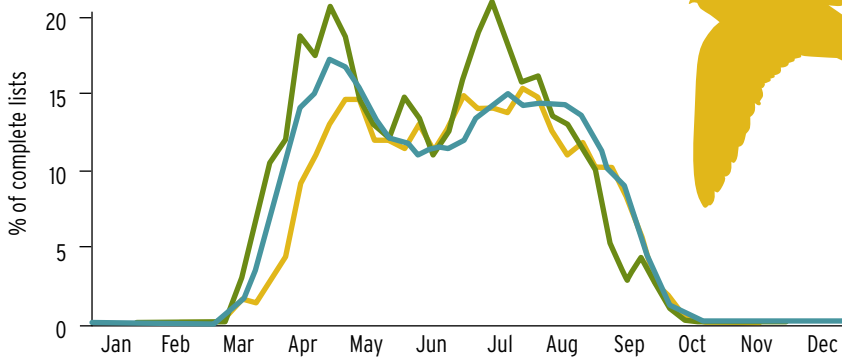
► Enjoy the show!

Many birds will be out to impress, performing elaborate courtship displays. Allow yourself time to relax into watching common birds change their behaviours as the breeding season progresses.

SAND MARTIN BIRDTRACK REPORTING RATE

Sand Martins, our earliest-arriving hirundine, reach our shores from early March.

— 2023 — 2022 — Historical



recording a complete list next time you go out. There is also the option to include breeding evidence, which is valuable for monitoring population changes and distribution of our breeding birds (*BTO News* 341). The process of recording birds will encourage you to notice the new arrivals, and can add to the satisfaction of adding a new species to your year list! Using BirdTrack also allows you to keep your records in one place for easy access, and helps us keep a finger on the pulse of bird migration and identify how our birds are responding to environmental change.

This is also the peak breeding season, so a great opportunity to learn about other aspects of bird ecology through contributing to the Nest Record Scheme (NRS) (*BTO News* 326). Following the NRS Code of Conduct, you can safely monitor nests to help us better understand the breeding success of our breeding birds, while gaining a privileged insight into this part of the avian lifecycle. Or, if you want to monitor a small number of nests in your garden you might prefer our simpler nest recording survey, Nesting Neighbours. ■