

SOMERSET'S WILLOW WARBLERS

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Grassy areas and expanses of dead bracken provide suitable nesting places for the willow warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*; nevertheless, as the male must have nearby trees or large bushes from which to sing, the required habitat becomes more exacting. Along paths, willow warblers may nest in banks, provided that there is sufficient grass cover; further, in young plantations, there are ample potential nest sites where grass grows up amongst the saplings, whether of conifer or hardwood origin. Closed canopy, mature woodland becomes too dark in summer to permit such grass growth on the forest floor: willow warblers will not colonise such a habitat. Many large woods will, of course, have been modified to contain glades and rides and willow warblers will readily breed under these circumstances. Open fields are not attractive to the birds and nor are trimmed farm or roadside hedges; moorland devoid of bushes of reasonable size is regarded similarly. Marshy patches, with willows or alders, providing they are not too wet, also attract the birds and so will moorland slopes with scattered birches or hawthorns.

It follows from this that Somerset contains an enormous area where it is suitable for willow warblers to breed: scrub or woodland verge habitat may have a density of 100 pairs per square kilometre or even more. Wooded places on the slopes of the Blackdown Hills have a high summer population and the same applies to the Brendon Hills; the Wimbleball Reservoir and Haddon Hill region support many pairs, as does the country round Monksilver and Nettlecombe. In the same way, the combes and wooded inclines of the Quantocks are strongholds of willow warbler population. South of Taunton, woods near Corfe are evidently attractive to willow warblers, including especially the Staple Fitzpaine and Neroche areas and the verges of Thurlbear wood. Amongst villages of the Somerset Levels, willow warblers are absent on exposed grassland and near rhines where vegetation has been cut back; nevertheless, where there is rough herbage near copses (which provide song-posts), the birds are common enough. South of Street, Great Breach Wood and associated woodlands evidently provide the requirements necessary for successful willow warbler breeding, judging by the number of young birds which are usually about in mid-summer. The Mendip Hills support a high willow warbler population, particularly in the valleys: the birds do not remain on the high, open moors. As would be expected, wooded margins of both Blagdon and Chew Valley Lakes show a high density of breeding willow warblers.

Probably most local naturalists can remember spring days when bushes along the North Somerset coast have seemed filled with restless willow warblers. They are, after all, the commonest migrants to breed in Britain so, if they are delayed by adverse weather conditions, large numbers can quickly build up before they move off to their nesting areas. Arriving after the chiffchaff *P. collybita*, which has a somewhat similar appearance, the diminutive green-brown willow warbler can be

recognised with certainty on hearing the song of the male. The musical, undulant warble, with most of the notes in the descending scale, so differs from the repeated two notes of the chiffchaff that confusion between the two singing cocks is hardly possible. Unlike willow warblers, chiffchaffs require trees of reasonable height from which to sing; they also require an undergrowth tangle where nests may be built.

Gilbert White, curate of Selborne, wrote in the eighteenth century of the willow warbler's 'joyous, easy, laughing note' – surely, a description which epitomises the nature and character of the song. In April and May it is heard almost everywhere on suitable terrain throughout Somerset and, occasionally, may extend to town parks or large gardens. The females have similar plumage to the males and arrive a week or so later, being attracted to suitable territories by the cocks' advertisement songs. Like chiffchaffs, willow warblers seem constantly active in the developing foliage: the search for insect prey is almost ceaseless. Compared with chiffchaffs, willow warblers have longer wings and legs of lighter colour; thus, identification should be possible if the bird stays still long enough. Even so, most honest bird-watchers will admit to errors sometimes: just occasionally, a confident opinion has to be reviewed when the male begins to sing!

The breeding season has truly come when the female willow warbler begins carrying dead leaves and dried grasses as a base for her nest under a grass tuft. Some individuals, apparently, do not mind being watched by a naturalist while others regard the nesting process as one for complete secrecy. But the ground-building habit means there is danger from treading by cattle or horses: I recall my dismay at finding a squashed willow warbler's nest in bracken where a red deer *Cervus elaphus* hind had been lying.

Even so, the domed nest, when completed, has a surprisingly strong roof of woven grasses or rootlets; moreover, once the grass has grown up around it becomes beautifully concealed. The chiffchaff's nest is much looser in construction and is sited in cover a foot or so above the ground; often it appears like a flimsy nest of a wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*. Like chiffchaffs, willow warblers install a feather lining, so giving a warm, snug interior. However, feather carrying can be a danger for the bird as, in theory, a hopeful predator could note the destination. Somehow a travelling, pale feather can be followed more readily than a piece of dry grass. At times, the feathers selected are mainly white; hence, by light reflection, the feeding of small nestlings in their dim cavity is made easier. For the same reason, the finding and removal of the faecal sacs of the young by the adult birds is easier too.

Furthermore, the five or six eggs are white, speckled in pale red and, as a result, they are not conspicuous from the outside on a white feather pad. The entrance-hole at the side of the nest, slanting inwards from the base upwards, may be of mousehole size with the eggs barely visible from the outside but sometimes, with a larger aperture, they can be viewed quite readily. When the nest is situated on an incline, as in some of the moorland valleys on the Quantock Hills, the entrance normally faces down the slope. As a result, should heavy rain occur, water does not run into the nest.

Besides willow warblers and chiffchaffs, a third leaf-warbler breeds in Britain. Wood warblers *P. sibilatrix*, larger than willow warblers and showing pure white bellies, nest in mature woods devoid of much undergrowth. Somerset's woods have their share of nesting wood warblers; breeding is not uncommon amongst the fine oaks and beeches of the Quantock Hills. Wood warblers' nests, domed like those of willow warblers and chiffchaffs, are sited in hollows on the forest floor; strangely, the linings are of fine, dried grasses instead of feathers. The male wood warbler's song is a series of accelerating notes of the same high pitch; in between these

phrases, piping call-notes of a plaintive quality are uttered as a variation. As with the song of the chiffchaff, that of the wood warbler cannot be confused with the willow warbler's territorial vocalization.

Warning calls which indicate the approach of a predator are significant for all ground-nesting birds, especially considering the large population of wood mice *Apodemus sylvaticus* and other small mammals which search for eggs and small nestlings as a ready meal. Weasels *Mustela nivalis* and stoats *M. erminea* will seize the adult birds as well, particularly if they can be surprised at the nest. Various birds, such as carrion crows *Corvus corone* or magpies *Pica pica*, will also search for nests in the herbage; should a predator intrude into a willow warbler's breeding territory then high-frequency calls, 'hu-eet, hu-eet', are given. Chiffchaffs have a call of similar tone and quality when anxious, but this is of one rather than two syllables.

The willow warbler's repeated anxiety or contact call is one of the commonest of woodland summer sounds: this was demonstrated to me recently as a fox *Vulpes vulpes* progressed slowly across a forest glade. I had not realised that willow warblers held territory there until the fox appeared in the middle of the afternoon. But another loud type of call is produced should a cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* fly in to land near a nesting willow warbler pair. A male willow warbler will stop singing or feeding and fly at once into a tree where a cuckoo, male or female, has perched and, as wings are flicked and the tail feathers spread, so high-pitched squealing sounds are made. These calls, intermingled with gruff notes, remind one of the noise of a small mammal in distress or injured. The calls may be made with the willow warbler perched on a branch or as it hovers or flies. If the cuckoo is near an occupied nest, the female will leave her eggs or young and, after joining the male, the willow warbler pair will alarm together.

When a male cuckoo calls from a tree, or the hen bird just perches to survey the nearby nesting situation, it can be assumed that local willow warblers, if in breeding condition, will demonstrate alongside. On occasions, a cuckoo will be heard calling with a willow warbler singing its territorial song from the same tree or bush; almost certainly, that willow warbler is either an unmated bird or its nest does not, as yet, contain eggs or young. After a cuckoo has flown off, an agitated willow warbler will return, to hover and call in the same situation again and again, such has been the emotional effect of the intrusion. Of course, when a hen cuckoo is looking for a nest in which to lay an egg, she waits with great patience until she finally makes the attempt, usually in the late afternoon instead of the morning. Normally a hen cuckoo will wait until the chosen egg-laying host bird is away from the nest: there will be less disturbance in that case. But a cuckoo rarely succeeds in placing an egg in a willow warbler's nest, doubtless due to the noise and often spectacular display which has been evolved. In Somerset, the common bird hosts for cuckoos are dunnocks *Prunella modularis* and meadow pipits *Anthus pratensis*; with these species, the visual or acoustic reaction to the approach of the nest parasite is not nearly so dramatic as in the case of the willow warbler. Around lake-margins, the common host for the cuckoo is the reed warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*; again, the reaction to a nearby cuckoo is not as pronounced, or intense, as with the willow warbler.

Wood warblers and chiffchaffs also will react towards an intruding cuckoo and will call and flutter before the bird. However, the type of call uttered does not, from my observations, resemble the squealing tones of the anti-cuckoo vocalizations of the willow warbler. But it is not only a cuckoo which will provoke a squealing form of response from nesting willow warblers. Last June I noted a remarkable demonstration by a pair of these warblers towards a hunting stoat. The

birds, which had half-grown young in a nearby ground nest, hovered and squealed as the stoat moved amongst whortleberry and heather vegetation. The stoat must have been distracted for it moved off and, eventually, the young birds flew successfully from the nest.

Willow warbler nestlings grow and feather rapidly, urging their parents to more and more food-gathering, often spiders and small caterpillars, by exhibiting their bright yellow mouth gapes. The gape is outlined by a pale rim, so it is more readily seen in the shady nest-cavity. Another important factor in the development of the nestlings is to maintain the body temperature; the thick, insulating feather nest-lining helps here but probably the brooding female plays the main part, certainly in the early stages, soon after hatching. 'Feather birds' or 'groundwrens' are understandable country names for willow warblers; when they migrate in autumn the countryside loses one of its most lively and fascinating species. We can only await that day in the following April when the willow warbler's 'joyous, easy, laughing' song is heard again in Somerset's bushy places and woodland clearings.