

## Nature note (welcome migrants)

April and May are the great months for travel in the natural world. For centuries people have used the comings and goings of birds as a sort of seasonal calendar. As the Song of Solomon has it in the Old Testament, 'For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land'. Well, the lovely 'voice of the turtle' (that is, the turtle dove) isn't much heard in this land now, because the numbers have declined so precipitously in recent

years, though the prophet might still hear the odd pair at Boyton in May if he struck lucky. But the general point is true. Bird migration has long been a source of wonder, particularly its regularity. I've been recording the arrival dates of summer visitors like the chiffchaff, swallow,

cuckoo and swift (usually in that order – you can see a summary on the Shingle Street website, <http://www.shinglestreetsurvey.org.uk>) for years, and although the dates have been getting steadily earlier with climate change, I still look out for particular birds on particular days each spring and welcome them like old friends, with a mixture of familiarity and relief. It's a bit like those airport announcements, 'The 12 April Swallows from Cape Town have just arrived on time at the Coastguard's Cottages'.

But it isn't just birds that make these huge and hazardous journeys. Lots of butterflies and other insects do, too. Most of the red admirals and painted ladies we see here in the summer have migrated from the continent, sometimes in huge numbers. I well remember the extraordinary summer day in 2009 when painted ladies poured in off the sea at Shingle Street in what seemed like a continuous stream for hours on end. It's estimated that over ten million of them crossed the channel into Britain that day. Some moths migrate, as well, and we are just learning some remarkable facts about how they manage it. The Silver Y moths, for example, can choose exactly the right altitude at which to fly to catch the most favourable tail-winds and can even orient their tiny bodies in the best direction to compensate for cross-winds. Incredibly, they can sometimes fly faster this way than migrating birds like warblers. Ladybirds have also been recorded migrating at great heights – sometimes as high as 1,100 metres. And marmalade hoverflies (what a great name) arrive in their millions every summer, to perform a wonderful pest-control service in your gardens where their larvae consume literally trillions of aphids. And they do it for free.

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*Swallow (Hirundo rustica)*

Howard Booty