

Over-wintering Blackcaps - Stephen Lilley

Having had a pair of over wintering Blackcaps in my garden in two of the last five years I was interested enough to research a little into previously published work, to find what the facts were in relation to why some Blackcaps decided to spend the winter in our gardens.

The Blackcap is traditionally regarded as a summer migrant arriving here from early April, the male a week or so before the female. They leave from late August and from ringing data it is thought that the majority of populations winter in Iberia and N W Africa.

Data from Garden Birdwatch shows that in the last thirty years or so there has been a dramatic increase in the number of Blackcaps overwintering in our gardens taking advantage of supplementary food to be found there.

Recent work has shown that these birds are not British and Irish breeders but instead are breeding populations from central Europe, the large number of birds involved suggests there has been a change in migratory behavior of part of this population. The birds that have wintered here have been shown to arrive back in their Central European breeding grounds some two weeks before those individuals that have overwintered around the Mediterranean basin.

Wintering birds arriving in September - October feed on natural foods in woodland and scrub, moving into gardens in late December and January. Unlike many Warblers the Blackcap is able to make use of a wide variety of foodstuffs from our gardens and bird tables, this is no doubt a significant factor in their presence during the winter months, milder winters may also be a major factor.



Male Blackcap seen on 15th February.

photo: Stephen Lilley

Researchers at the University of Freiberg in Germany have found that birds which overwinter in the UK may be in the earliest stages of forming a new species, (incipient evolution). It is argued that some birds would always have travelled a little further north than others, some eventually ending up in Britain during the winter. Those birds would have had nothing to eat in the depths of winter and did not survive, but as bird feeders became increasingly popular in Britain a greater number of birds took the route to the UK in winter and so an evolutionary division began to emerge.

It has been shown that biologically the British overwintering birds and the Mediterranean overwintering birds show enough genetic differences to indicate that there is not a full mixing of genes on the breeding grounds each year and a degree of genetic isolation has taken place. It is argued that as the UK wintering birds arrive on the breeding grounds earliest and therefore mate within that group. The two groups also differ slightly in their morphology (mainly wing and beak shape, head, body and beak colour).

It does seem however, that full speciation is far from a done deal. The two populations are not separated by a physical barrier on the breeding grounds and there is no doubt that some interbreeding within the two groups still occurs. It seems more likely from what I have read that a degree of equilibrium will be achieved and the two groups will remain as races (morphologically distinct groups).

A thought occurs to me, are there any other species that are in the process of changing or may, in the future, change their migratory route to take advantage of climate change, not to mention the bird feeding habits of the British public?. As those dark dismal January days approach, I for one will be ensuring my feeders are topped up whilst keeping an eye out for our continental visitors.