

Parish Birds-Seventy Years of Change-Spotted Flycatcher

This “little brown job “, roughly the size of a Robin, but with longer wings and tail, is not with us all year being a summer visitor from tropical West Africa. Since it is entirely insectivorous it times its arrival accordingly late in May to coincide with an abundance of flying insects in England, on which food source it specialises and leaves again for tropical climes in September. This Flycatcher has brown upperparts, grey streakings on white breast, a plain face and large black eyes. The species typically perches on an exposed bare branch of an old oak tree, giving it a clear view of any unsuspecting flying prey. Suddenly the flycatcher flits, catches the insect and returns often to the very same branch to eat its snack. Oak trees harbour an abundance of insects so no surprise that our Flycatcher favours it.

Paul Marten recalls when Spotted Flycatcher nests were relatively common in our parish. There were a number of their small nests to be found in the Freshfield Lane area from the 1950s to the late 1990s. There followed a gradual and then a steep decline in numbers returning to nest. He vividly remembers discovering up to three nests in a breeding season. They were often built close to human habitation in dense climbing plants such as clematis, honeysuckle and climbing rose. Jenny Marten also watched Spotted



Flycatchers in the Freshfield area of Danehill around Enholmes Lane, near her mother’s house. The last nest that Paul remembers finding was in 2016. A pair of these fearless little birds had built their home in a climbing rose under overhanging tiles on the side of a house in the south of our parish.

Spotted Flycatchers have suffered a serious decline in numbers returning annually to Southeast England particularly starkly since 2010. This is thought to be due to climate change and habitat loss in the Sahel region of tropical West Africa where our Spotted Flycatchers spend our winter.

I have recorded just one pair of these flycatchers in our parish which were present from 2006 to 2011 within parish land north of the “Bear Pit” off the Old Airstrip (just to the north of Chelwood Gate). They were in the same location on the edge of a wood with oaks and honeysuckle understorey. After that records cease except that in 2020 a pair attempted again to breed there. The future looks bleak for these charming birds returning from a drought-stricken Africa.

Clive Poole