

## PARISH BIRDS—SEVENTY YEARS OF CHANGE—WOOD WARBLER

This is another in a series on the recollections of parish residents, Paul Marten and Clive Poole. In this article I refer to articles highlighting one of the birds which have been found annually in Danehill and Chelwood Gate in living memory, particularly calling our focus on the fortunes of the **WOOD WARBLER** (*Phylloscopus sibilatrix*).



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The WOOD WARBLER was one of “the three species of the Willow-wrens” that were distinguished by the early naturalist Revd. Gilbert White, vicar of the Parish of Selborne in Hampshire. He first described this species in his letter X1X of 1768 to another naturalist, Thomas Pennant: “the yellow-green of the whole upper part of the body is more vivid and the belly a clearer white. The (bird) haunts only the tops of trees in high beechen woods and makes a sibilous, grasshopper-like noise, shivering a little with its wings when it sings “. The other two species he described were the Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*) and the Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*), both of which have always been more common summer visitors to our parish from Africa.

The WOOD WARBLER has never been common in Sussex and is rarely heard and even more rarely seen. A great shame since this is by far the most beautiful of the three, with a bright lemon-yellow throat and breast, strikingly contrasting the pure silver-white underparts and olive wings and back. It reminds me, with its fat belly,

of a corpulent old gentleman bloated after a large repast! But the surprising and unique thing about the Wood Warbler is its beautiful song, delivered from the branch of an oak or beech tree within a clearing in a wood. After a few melancholy whistles the male delivers a piercing sweet “shivering” trill which literally shakes its wings and body with the gusto of its delivery.

Arriving in Britain from Tropical Africa in late April this warbler seeks out cool mature and dense close canopy woodland, a feature of which has to be little or no ground vegetation: so ideally a beech or oak wood with just leaf litter. Why? Because the Wood Warbler nests (for reasons best known to itself!) on the ground and so needs to be quickly able to see approaching danger from a ground predator such as Weasel (and in former times Polecat).

In Sussex the Wood Warbler was particularly associated with “hanging, mature oak and beech woods on the steep slopes of north-facing hillsides on Ashdown Forest from Priory Road to Kidds Hill but particularly the northern side of The Ridge Road (Coleman’s Hatch Road) and its adjacent ghylls”.

In the 1950s and 1960s Paul Marten used to hear and see Wood Warblers when they arrived in late April from tropical Africa. He would find them in Cowstocks Wood, on Freshfield Lane, Danehill, the males belting out their song from oak woodland. Sadly Paul confesses he has not heard or seen any Wood Warblers anywhere in the parish for many years.

My last record of a male WOOD WARBLER singing in its territory in this parish was on 7<sup>th</sup> May 2019. I was overjoyed by its unmistakable song and tracked it down to a clearing with beech and oak trees at Churlwood north-west of Macmillan Clump .There it was, sure enough, rendering its sibilant body-shaking trill. What an inspiring little green,white and yellow gem!

The reason for the relatively recent absence, in historical terms, from our woods of this summer-visiting migrant is almost certainly climate change i.e. global warming .This species favours the cool woods of northern Europe. Last summer (2022)we experienced record-breaking temperatures in southern England. Our parish woods remain unchanged suitable habitat: Sussex is approx..50% wooded, but sadly, just a bit too warm now for the Wood Warbler.

Clive Poole