

Spring is here

I know this for certain now, as apart from the splendid display of daffodils in the garden, I have just heard my first Chiffchaff singing in the copse across the road. It is an eagerly awaited moment and greeted (by me anyway) with some excitement, exceeded only by the sight of the first Swallow flying high overhead sometime in April. I have kept a record of "first Chiffchaff at Orlandon Kilns" for seven years now and March 16th is quite early but certainly not the earliest.



However the Chiffchaff is not the first Spring arrival here – early in March the first Wheatears arrive on our grassy clifftops on their way to their breeding sites in northern Britain and in Scandinavia. Some are not passing through – they stay here to breed. There is usually a pair at the western end of Marloes beach and there are several pairs on the Deer Park. All they need is short turf on which to hunt insects, a few rocks to stand on and a hole under or between some rocks to nest in.

They are very attractive birds - the male has a beautiful grey back, apricot underparts and black and white stripes through the face, and he bobs around on the short turf and rocks standing very upright. When he flits from rock to rock you can see the characteristic white rump with a T shaped black mark on the tail. This white rump is the origin of the name – White Arse has been gentrified to Wheatear!

Later in the spring a second wave of Wheatears arrive – these are bigger and more brightly coloured. They often stay here for a while (one Marloes resident regularly has them for several weeks on the stone heaps in the back garden). They are probably fattening themselves up as they have a long journey ahead – they fly over the sea all the way to Greenland and Northern Canada where they breed as soon as the snow has melted.

Wheatear females and young birds (and the male in the winter) are duller – mostly pale brown – but they still have the characteristic white rump patch. In late summer and autumn you can find these brown birds in all sorts of places as they slowly travel southwards – they can often be seen at Pickleridge Pools flitting around on the rocks by the causeway.