

Welcome back Chris & Lyster

Despite the fact that cuckoos are conspicuous birds when breeding in the UK they can be very difficult to find in their winter quarters in Africa – they skulk in the tree canopy and are virtually invisible – so it is not surprising that only one ringed bird had ever been recovered during the winter, and only then because it was shot for the pot!. Because the whereabouts of their winter quarters and their migration route is very poorly known this means that it is difficult to put together any theories about why this iconic bird is decreasing rapidly in Europe, and impossible to take any action to halt the decline. So, last May, five cuckoos (Martin, Clement, Lyster, Chris and Kasper) were fitted with very small solar-powered satellite loggers which transmitted the position of the birds every 48 hours

The 5 monitored cuckoos have produced some fascinating results. Firstly, 4 of the cuckoos left the UK in June, much earlier than expected. Some crossed the North Sea to the east, others went south. Two of the birds went down through Spain and around the western seaboard of the Sahara, a previously completely unknown migration route, whilst the other three went down through Italy and straight across. They all finished up in the Congo not far from each other. All the birds survived the winter in the rainforest, but Clement disappeared shortly after starting the northward migration – was it a forest goshawk, a human hunter, a poisonous snake – who knows? The other four headed west towards Ghana and then set off north across the Sahara, not necessarily retracing their outward routes. Kasper finished up in a date palm plantation in Algeria and signals have stopped – his transmitter was always unreliable so he may still be alive. Martin arrived in Spain just as a period of terrible weather hit Europe and, probably tired and hungry after his Sahara crossing, he did not survive this. However, both Chris and Lyster, the last two birds to leave the wintering grounds, made it back to the UK, arriving back in the areas where they were ringed in early May, rather later than expected, having been held up by bad weather in Europe.

These results have provided much needed new information about cuckoo migration and wintering areas. The plan is now to monitor 5 Scottish cuckoos, to see if their migration strategy is the same (cuckoos are currently faring a lot better in Scotland than in England). For more information, including maps and blogs, look at www.bto.org/cuckoos.

*In April, I open my bill
In May, I sing night and day
In June, I change my tune
In July, away I fly
In August, away I must*

Rosemary Royle

