

Our migrants are in trouble

Headlines similar to those above have even been seen in national newspapers recently. And no, it does not refer to those indispensable Polish workers, but to the many species of bird which return to our shores to breed but spend the winter elsewhere.

The problems are many and various. If you are a Turtle Dove, you have a pretty good chance of being shot as you land for a rest in Malta – though thankfully Malta's EU membership will eventually put a stop to this awful spring massacre.

If you are a Swallow, you may have encountered extremely cold weather in South Africa just as you were about to leave – it is estimated that this year over a million swallows died of cold and starvation in March.

If you are a Willow Warbler, a Spotted Flycatcher or a Cuckoo, you will have to fly over the Sahara twice during our winter, and then when you get to the Sahel on the far side of the Sahara you may find that your favourite patch of scrub is not there any longer – it is now a millet field with not much insect food.

So we don't see so many Cuckoos now, and Spotted Flycatcher populations are in a crash dive. And there is very little we can do about it. With global warming it will all get even more complicated.

But bird populations are surprisingly resilient – maybe they will find other places to spend the winter. The Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps that now spend the winter in the UK may be the forerunners of new populations of these species that will no longer head south because they don't need to. And Swallows now breed in South Africa – some of them have realised that they don't need to do the long journey north.

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