

▲ Autumn is the highlight of many a birdwatcher's year.

FIELD CRAFT

Staying focused in the field

Training Manager Nick Moran considers how to make the most of your birdwatching trips at this fantastic, yet fleeting, time of year.

Autumn birding is full of promise! The chance to experience large movements of birds, such as arriving waterbirds and winter thrushes, and encounter species that might be unusual in your local area at other times of year: maybe Meadow Pipit, Grey Wagtail or Siskin. However, other priorities usually limit how much time we can spend outdoors and it is all too easy for the opportunities autumn offers to sail past like leaves on the wind. Here are some practical suggestions to help you make the most of your birdwatching at this exhilarating time of year:

PRACTISE MINDFULNESS

The idea of being 'present in the present' is key to making the most of any experience (*BTO News* 343). It can be easy to take this for granted as a birdwatcher, as we are often keenly attuned to the sensory cues of the natural world. Nonetheless, distractions are a recurring theme in our busy lives, from the thoughts in our heads to the buzz of incoming messages on our phones. Actively recalibrating at regular intervals in the field can

be a helpful way to reduce the impact of these distractions. Whether birdwatching alone or in a group, take a minute every so often to pause, acknowledge any distractions then refocus on the sensory experience: the way a Woodpigeon rows through the air, or the excited contact calls of a flock of Long-tailed Tits.

SET GOALS

Going out with a particular target in mind – whether that is a certain scarce species or an 'event' such as a fall of grounded migrants – can lead to despondency if that target doesn't materialise. However, having modest goals can be a great way to maintain motivation and help you gain a wide range of experiences during the autumn. It might be aiming to spend time observing a relatively common species that is only regular in your area during autumn: perhaps Wheatear, Stonechat or a wader such as Ruff. Another approach could be to make a few early starts on days with light winds, in the hope of witnessing visible migration (*BTO News* 332) Alternatively, consider focusing on a specific habitat, especially if you are visiting a large, species-rich area with multiple habitats.



◀ Grey Wagtail passage peaks in mid autumn, when they often appear far from breeding locations.

Rather than trying to cover all the tantalising habitats on offer, concentrate on one or two. The weather conditions may help guide your choice: a calm, sunny day on the coast is probably better spent looking for landbirds in more exposed habitats than staring out to sea for hours. Conversely, a wild, windy day is much more likely to be suited to seawatching or seeking landbirds in sheltered areas. You could also focus on a particular family, trying to find all the species of that family regularly found near you and looking for any differences in their behaviour, such as the way Chiffchaffs habitually pump their tails (Willow Warblers tend not to do this with any vigour).

ASK QUESTIONS

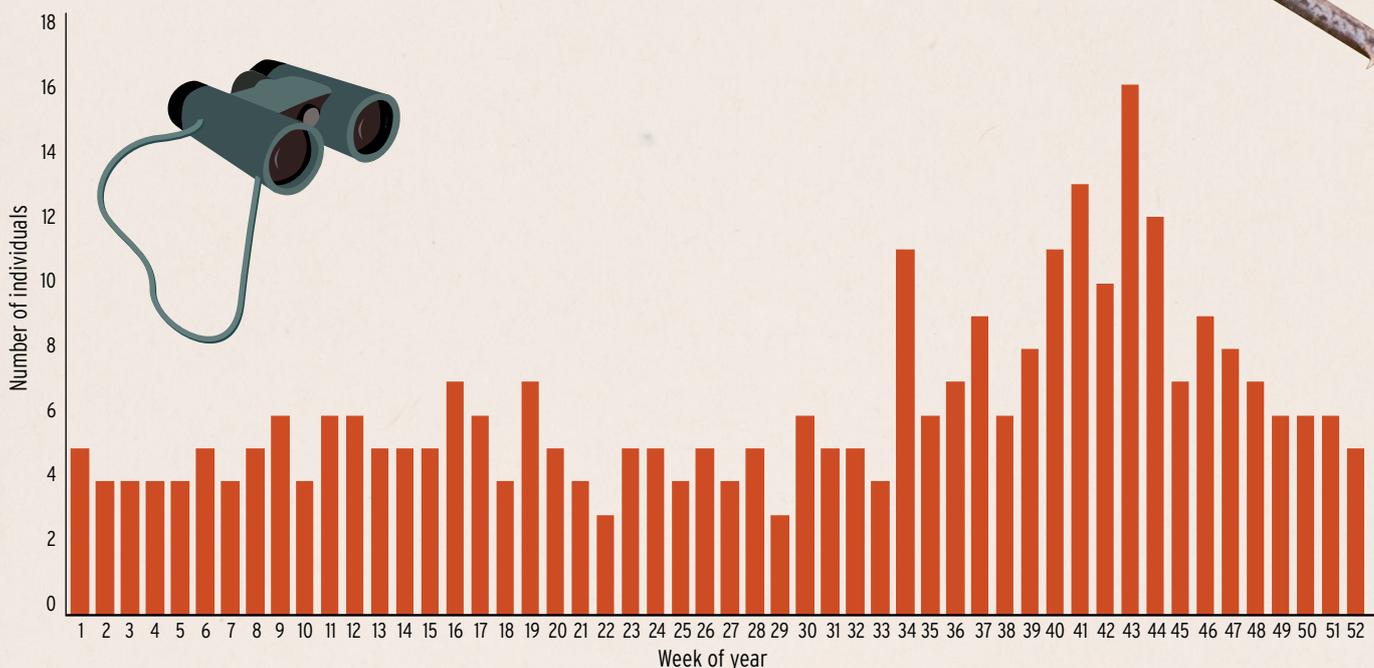
Birds are fascinating and there is always something new to learn! Having a few questions in mind can enhance your experience and add interest to even the quietest of days. Adopting a local patch that you visit regularly will make it easier to detect patterns in your observations and start answering those questions. If you live anywhere other than the east coast, how long does it take before a reported coastal arrival of thrushes reaches your locality? Can you determine when a particular species moves through or reaches your area? This applies for species that can be found in the UK year-round but also where the numbers in Britain are bolstered by continental birds arriving or passing through in autumn. Lapwing, Skylark, Chiffchaff or even Blackbird are good species to try. Reading up about the general timings of movements for any such species

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GOLDCREST: PEAK COUNT PER WEEK AT BTO NUNNERY LAKES, 2009–22

Counting individuals of certain species at your local patch can reveal migration in action, even away from classic watch-points. For example, the autumn influx of Goldcrests from northern Europe can be detected inland.



will prepare you for what to expect at different stages of autumn; the reporting-rate graphs available in BirdTrack’s ‘Explore data’ tools are a rich source of information (www.birdtrack.net), and keep an eye on the BTO Migration blog.

STRUCTURED RECORDING

Recording what you see and hear is key to picking up patterns and ultimately, answering questions. Taking notes is a good start, as this encourages close observation, which in turn helps to develop strong identification skills. Adopting a structured approach in the field is also very valuable and getting into the habit of logging BirdTrack complete lists – all the species positively identified by sight or sound – is a simple and effective way to achieve this. One advantage of doing complete lists is that every species has equal value, removing any observer subjectivity about what is (or isn’t) noted. This in turn helps maintain concentration in the field, as it is just as important to detect and record a Dunnock as a Dusky Warbler! A natural,

if challenging, extension of this is to count individuals. This is not mandatory for BirdTrack complete lists; one approach I often take is to count a subset of the species encountered, for example winter thrushes and passage waders. Counting can be very rewarding, and has the potential to reveal the answers to some questions more quickly than you might expect!

Last but by no means least, enjoy whatever you see and hear! And if you

are new to birding, try not to be overwhelmed. Celebrate what you do know and don’t worry about identifying everything you encounter – even for the most experienced observers, there will always be ‘ones that got away’.

Get involved The BTO Migration Blog is weekly during the autumn, and can be found at: www.bto.org/blog. Register for BirdTrack via: www.birdtrack.net



◀ Colourful and vocal, Siskins can be relatively easy to spot as they move through increasingly bare trees in autumn.

BIRDER: DAVID TIPLING/BIRDPHOTO.CO.UK, GREY WAGTAIL: TOM STREETER/BTO, GOLDCREST: DAVID TIPLING/BIRDPHOTO.CO.UK, SISKIN: ALLAN DREWITT/BTO