

NatureNotes



Born and bred in St Albans, Rupert has enjoyed observing and recording local wildlife for over 30 years. Drawing inspiration and insight from the sights and sounds that accompany the seasons throughout the year, he invites you to tune in to the often overlooked natural world all around us.

Rupert Evershed's monthly diary of the natural world

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Herts' exotic travellers

Inevitably holidays must, at some point, come to an end and journeys home must be undertaken. For me this involved long tiresome drives northwards through Italy, Switzerland and France but with treasured memories of the weeks before.

In addition to the breathtaking scenery and the delightful lake swims I also carried with me memories of unexpected encounters with wildlife that I would not usually see in the UK.

An early morning walk in the Bernese Alps had led to glimpses of chamois leaping high atop rocks as the first rays of sunshine lit the craggy peaks. Sitting out on the chalet balcony we practically hand-fed Alpine choughs that became bolder and bolder with each morsel of bread. Though over 500 miles from home and over 1,600m above sea-level, these black crows with yellow beaks and red legs, reminded me of squabbling starlings noisily competing for food-scrap on the lawn back home.

Further south, in the Italian lakes, a black kite – a close relative of the increasingly familiar red kite but only a rare visitor to the UK – paid daily visits to the lake shore as we swam, swooping down to pick up scraps in the water just yards from our bobbing heads. The kite's boldness in scavenging so close to human settlement revealing that family trait that led to years of persecution for the red kite in the UK.

As we travelled home to England, news of some other avian travellers reached me – appropriately via Twitter. A group of seven of what must surely be the most beautiful and exotic-looking birds to grace European lands had been spotted taking a break in a Hertfordshire garden, just outside Hertford. A bird of the hot southern European regions, the bee-eater could win awards for its plumage but perhaps not for its penchant for bees, a staple of its diet.

With a warming climate bee-eaters have been appearing in the UK more regularly and this

year a group of seven birds attempted to breed in England. Not finding their usual sandy riverbank in which to make their nest burrows they settled instead for a Cemex sand quarry in East Leake, Nottinghamshire. Closely monitored by the RSPB and observed by thousands of visitors the bee-eaters were seen to mate and then build three nests.

Unfortunately, despite successfully hatching chicks from all three nests, the weather took a turn for the worse and, it seems, reduced the bee-eaters' food supply such that all three nests failed. Sadly their summer holiday, if that's what it could be called, had ended and all seven bee-eaters had left the quarry by August 4.

However, like all travellers, they had to take a break and chose, much to the delight of the owners, a private garden in the village of Bayford just south of Hertford in which to overwinter. All seven birds were seen by a small contingent of lucky local birdwatchers before they headed



European bee-eaters.

Picture: WIM HOEK (SHUTTERSTOCK)

south again on August 17, bound for their wintering grounds in southern Africa. A final sighting of seven bee-eaters flying over New Romney on the Kent coast on August 28 marked their final departure from our shores.

Though clearly not a successful trip for the bee-eaters, they nevertheless brought a bit of the exotic to our shores and quite possibly herald further visits in the future as southern England moves, although it is often hard to believe, closer towards a Mediterranean climate. While the sighting of bee-eaters in

Hertfordshire is the first for over forty years they represent one of many bird species making their way across Europe at this time of year.

So keep your eyes (and ears) open for the less usual visitors to your garden – maybe a willow warbler or chiffchaff on passage to Africa or the last few swallows twittering overhead. And you never know...something more exotic might turn up! A great way of keeping up to date with recent bird sightings locally is to visit the Herts Bird Club website: www.hnhs.org/herts-bird-club/home.