



Nightingales (*Luscinia megarhynchos*)

From mid-April onwards, as the days grow longer and warmer, we await the return of the Nightingales. Male birds are the first to arrive after wintering in West Africa and their distinctive song-call, drowning out other song birds as darkness settles, is a herald of summer.

Nightingales really are heard rather than seen, as anyone who has forlornly gazed into a thorn bush while one is in full song can testify. They are a little larger than a Robin and have similar movements when in flight and on the ground. Both male and female nightingales have the same red-brown plumage with a white throat. If you are indeed fortunate enough to see one in full song, they reveal the orange inside of their beak. And what a song that is: starting with jaunty sharp notes and running into bursts of high rolling song. Only the male birds sing throughout the night and competing songs are thought to be single birds trying to serenade and attract migrating females as they fly over. The happy couple will then rear one brood of 4-5 eggs and depart for warmer climes in September. Bird ringers have evidence that birds return to the area they fledged in, which could mean our local birds have migrated here for generations.

We are fortunate to be able to anticipate the return of nightingales, as it is estimated that in the past 40 years numbers have declined by more than 90% and they are included on the RSPB's Red list of UK Birds of Conservation Concern. Nightingales build their nests on or just above ground level and favour the protection of scrubby thicket and thorn. Their ideal habitat would be a dense thorn hedge at the edge of a field with a margin of grass, nettle and flowering plants to supply insects, larvae and caterpillars. The 'tidying up' of thick hedge and scrub areas and the edges of fields together with browsing by the ever-growing deer population are significant factors in the birds decline.

Nightingales are well represented in verse and song and, like the Skylark, have a cultural significance that is celebrated by some who may never see or hear one (I simply refuse to believe one was ever singing in Berkeley Square), although Keats did write Ode to a Nightingale (1819) after spotting one in his Hampstead garden. Samuel Coleridge countered the idea that nightingales are melancholy birds with his haunting poem The Nightingale (1798). Nightingales were the subject of the first ever live radio broadcast of birdsong when, in 1924, the cellist Beatrice Harrison duetted with a bird in her garden, although there are now claims that this was voiced by a variety performer called Maude Gould. More verifiable, and less scratchy to listen to, is the folk singer Sam Lee singing with nightingales on BBC Breakfast TV and in recordings of his duets.

If you would like to hear a nightingale, or two, as dusk falls in Plumpton, keep an eye on the Wildlife Group social media sites as we will be hosting the Nightingale Walk and Sausage Supper once it's confirmed the birds have returned. Let's hope we have not heard the last of these wonderful birds. Just as Coleridge wished his son, by growing up to love the nightingale's song:

That with the night/He may associate joy

