

## ONGAR WILDLIFE SOCIETY

### WINTER HOME OF THE SUMMER MIGRANTS by Peter Lack

At a recent OWLS meeting, Peter Lack talked about something which has fascinated bird watchers for years - why do so many species of birds fly off to another continent in the winter - how do they get there, how many birds are involved and how do they manage to find their way back to the UK. Peter tried to answer these questions, describing the main birds that migrate and the route(s) they take.

It is only in the last thirty years or so that studies have been made to find out why migrant birds go to Africa. What we do know is that 4,500,000 birds (185 species) leave these shores, their journeys are varied and can consist of different routes (depending on the type of bird) before they arrive at their destination in South Africa via the Sahara desert - to a much warmer climate and there are far more food resources. In the early days, birds were ringed to determine their whereabouts, but today, satellite tags are used which are so much easier to maintain and monitor. They are attached to the bird and weigh only 100 grams; however, these tags and the equipment used, for the process is very expensive. Nearly all of the migrant birds not only survive the long journey to Africa but all arrive home safely.

Although certain birds were mentioned, such as swallows and herons, no hard and fast rules apply. Certain soaring birds do not like going over Oceans, some prefer crossing over land, and some do not like crossing deserts and there was also birds which choose to migrate on either the west coast or the east coast of Africa.

In the Sahara, there is very little vegetation, food and rain for birds and it is 1,500 miles across. However, at the Suez Canal, there is an easier crossing and the further south of the desert you go, the greater the vegetation, and the rivers are vital for survival for the birds.

The vast majority of migrant birds don't like the forests in Africa and prefer savanna (open plains of grassland to woodland). The African forests are open house to many species and the savanna caters for many types of birds especially in the rainy season from July to September and by mid November, the weather changes dramatically with heavy rain arriving and changing the vegetation which causes the insects to appear much to the delight of the birds that are around. South of the Equator, very few migrants are seen until November. Of course, not all birds are accounted for and the whereabouts of different species like sand martins/ house martins and swallows are not fully known.

Bob Jenkins