

A walk on the wild side...

Cholderton Estate

Yellow Wagtails – brightening dour days

It has been pretty dour here for the last few weeks with intermittent showers and little sun. This, together with a rather small combine prone to breakdowns, has delayed the harvesting. However, my days have been brightened by large flocks of Yellow Wagtails gathering around our dairy cows. Recently, there was a flock of over 80. There are elegant and graceful little birds with their pale or dun plumage, scurrying around the moving feet of the cows. As the herd moves, they fly alongside or pass over with a characteristic 'psweep' call – often repeated, to settle with the leading animals, fearlessly running within inches of the moving cows, catching flies, gnats and small beetles.

Yellow Wagtails arrive in the spring on the south coast and move rapidly north. I seldom see them at that time of the year, but they must pass through. They breed mostly in the midlands and eastern England on rough pastures, but numbers have greatly diminished with the conversion of grassland into arable. The loss of mixed farming has been catastrophic for them.

It is always exciting to see Wagtails amongst the cattle and gratifying to know that they are able to find the right feeding conditions here with the combination of cows and organic pasture land.

From here they will move south with some flying over the Sahara Desert, apparently achieving this in 72 hours of continuous flight. Then, they will be feeding amongst the Wildebeest on the Serengeti! I have seen them skimming the waves while crossing the Bay of Biscay and wondered at the extraordinary risks these birds take as a normal part of their lives.

It demonstrates what an important role our management decisions can play in the life of birds as vulnerable as these. Yellow Wagtails need cows and pasture, an arable desert is an anathema to them.

Henry Edmunds FRES
September 2015