





Wood Warbler

Phylloscopus sibilatrix

Red listed

THE TRILLING song of a Wood Warbler, augmented by a far-carrying ‘tew-tew-tew’, has long been a feature of Devon’s oakwoods from late April to early June. To watch this bright lime-green warbler with its lemon-yellow breast and pure white underparts as it tumbles from branch to branch in search of insects is pure joy. That its days in Devon may be numbered as its seemingly inexorable decline continues is unthinkable, but such is the current outlook, albeit long-term, for one of Britain’s fastest-disappearing migrants.

Wood Warblers are birds of mature broadleaf woodland – principally of Sessile Oak but also stands of Beech, Ash and even Sycamore – where they require a sparse understorey in which to nest and a dense canopy in which to feed (BWP). In Devon, their strongholds are the sessile oakwoods of Exmoor, particularly the ‘hanging’ oak woodland of the north coast, and the northern and eastern slopes of Dartmoor.

Bird Atlas 2007–11 reports a 37% contraction in the species’ range in Britain since the *Breeding Atlas 1988–91*, mainly around the margins of the core areas. In Devon this is reflected in the current Atlas breeding-period map which shows a very marked withdrawal from lowland wooded areas, especially in the north and east of the county, since the *Devon Tetrad Atlas 1977–85*. The figures are stark. In 1977–85, Wood Warblers were recorded in 477 (26%) of tetrads; this compares with 162 tetrads (less than 9%) for the current Atlas, with confirmed breeding in only 17 tetrads compared to 137 in 1977–85. For a species that is relatively easy to survey, given its restricted habitat, far-reaching song and relatively easy-to-find nest sites, there can be little doubt that these figures indicate the reality of the situation. More broadly, across continental Europe the species

declined by 35% between 1980 and 2012 (PECBMS 2014), while in Britain the Breeding Bird Survey has shown a 69% fall between 1995 and 2011 (BTO BirdTrends 2014), resulting in the Wood Warbler being ‘red-listed’ as a species of conservation concern in 2009.

Peter Goodfellow, in the *Devon Tetrad Atlas*, estimated the Devon population to be 1,200–1,600 pairs, 3–5% of the British population. With tetrad occupancy rates having fallen throughout the Wood Warbler’s range in Britain since 1988–91 (*Bird Atlas 2007–11*), Devon’s contribution to the national population may still hold good, though with greatly reduced numbers. Reduction in habitat quality may be a key factor, as shown by Mallord *et al.* (2012) who recommend the introduction of a moderate grazing regime to restore optimum nesting conditions. Loss of habitat arising from changes in land use, along with climate change, in the Wood Warbler’s wintering area in the humid tropics of West Africa are likely contributory factors in the species’ decline, and may also be affecting survival on migration (Ockendon 2012).

In his summation in the *Devon Tetrad Atlas*, Peter Goodfellow wrote: “To keep them, we must conserve the type of mature, broadleaf woodland which they require.” Never have such words been more prophetic – but however much we maintain our oakwoods, the key is probably to understand and address what is going on in the wintering grounds and along the migration flyway.

Text: Tim Jones & Tim Davis / Photo: Gray Clements

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Balmer *et al.* 2013: 526; Sitters 1988: 220; Tyler 2010: 492