

# Out of Africa :

## The Spotted Flycatcher



Spotted Flycatcher by Steve Round



By Mike Toms  
Head of Garden Ecology

Despite its rather dull plumage and less than impressive vocal repertoire, the Spotted Flycatcher has always attracted a great deal of public affection. This may be because of its long association with rural gardens; a summer visitor that breeds within the creepers adorning our walls. It is important to remember, though, that this rather unassuming bird is ours for only a small part of the year. As one of the last of our summer visitors to arrive, it spends a greater part of the year either on its wintering grounds, located to the south of the equator, or on migration.

Despite the association with rural gardens, the Spotted Flycatcher is largely unobtrusive in habits and is thus easily overlooked. One knock-on effect of this is that we probably know less about this species than we really should. It is this lack of knowledge which makes the Spotted Flycatcher's long-term

population decline all the more alarming. BTO data show an 86% decline in the breeding population over the period 1967–2006, a pattern seemingly being repeated elsewhere in Europe, where numbers are estimated to have fallen by 59% since 1980.

### ARRIVALS

Gilbert White, charting the wildlife around the parish of Selborne in Hampshire, once commented that the annual return of 'his' Spotted Flycatchers occurred almost to the day. An examination of his journals does indeed reveal a consistency in arrival dates, with a concentration of sightings around the 20<sup>th</sup> May each year, with one or sometimes two pairs nesting within the grounds of his property, The Wakes. If you take a look at the records logged through the BTO-led BirdTrack project ([www.birdtrack.net](http://www.birdtrack.net)) then you'll see that the pattern of arrival still

delivers the bulk of our Spotted Flycatchers to us in the second half of May, though average arrival dates may now be slightly earlier than they were during White's time.

The available evidence suggests that adults return to the same local area in subsequent breeding seasons, so Gilbert White may have seen many of the same individuals in his garden in consecutive years.

## NESTS AND NESTING

Most Spotted Flycatcher nests are built against a vertical surface, such as a wall, but some may be positioned on a beam or within an open-fronted nestbox. Very occasionally, the species will make use of a hole. Although both sexes get involved in building the nest, it is the female who does most of the work (I can hear the comments of readers as I write).

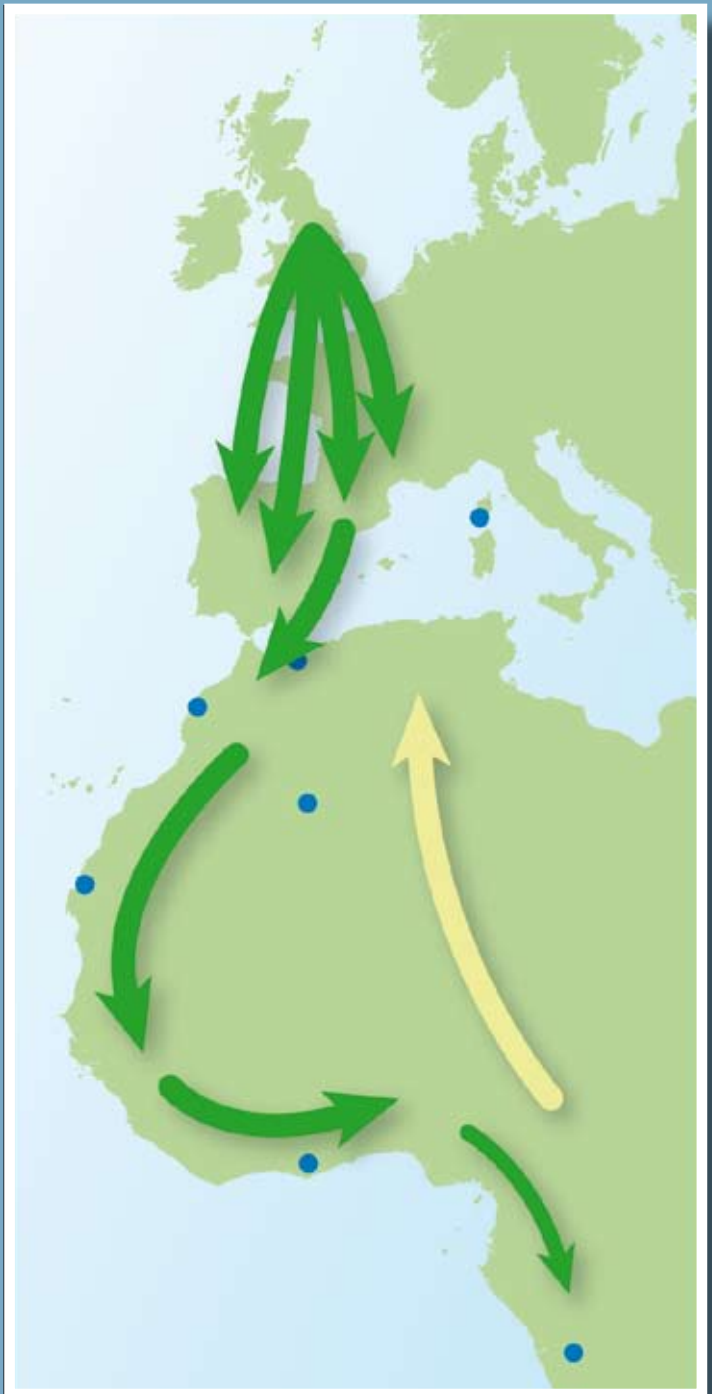
The nest itself is a fairly delicate structure, slightly built and containing moss, wool, hair and cobwebs. Into this the female will deposit four or five eggs (rarely six) before she initiates incubation – a job that she undertakes almost entirely on her own. Females take more calcium-rich prey (like small snails and woodlice) over the period of egg production. Bouts of incubation are broken by short periods, of 7–10 minutes, when the female may leave the nest to feed. While she is away the male will appear, typically as if from nowhere, to watch the nest, very occasionally even settling on the eggs.

Once the eggs hatch, the female will continue to brood them until they are 7–10 days old; the young are blind and naked through to day five. Both sexes will then provide food for the growing chicks, hopefully bringing them through to successful fledging and avoiding the unwelcome attentions of nest predators like cats. Newly fledged young

## FLYCATCHERS ON THE MOVE

Our Spotted Flycatchers begin to move south in late July, with most birds heading through western France and Iberia during August–October and reaching North Africa from September. Recoveries of ringed birds suggest that many Spotted Flycatchers winter in coastal West Africa but others continue south to cross the equator. Just how far south our breeding birds winter is unclear; a juvenile ringed in Wales during August (which could have been on passage from a breeding area outside Britain) was recovered in South Africa the following March.

Map taken from 'Time to Fly' by Jim Flegg and published by the BTO. Order your copy from 01842-750050



A Spotted Flycatcher in Mallorca by Steve Round

# SPOTTED FLYCATCHER

## VARIATION

Like most birds, the Spotted Flycatcher shows a degree of variation in plumage across its breeding range. This gives rise to a number of recognised races. The race that breeds in Britain is called *striata* and it is characterised by being darker in colour and with more heavy streaking on the breast (see bird below at nest). Eastern race birds, *neumanni*, occasionally reach Britain and tend to be paler in colour, with broader pale fringing to the wing feathers. Birds from the Balearics (right) constitute another race, *balearica*, and are pale in colour, with more white on the forehead and less pronounced streaking on the breast.



Spotted Flycatcher by Steve Round

are fairly conspicuous; noisily, they continue to beg for food from their parents for at least another 10–12 days. The pair may then initiate another breeding attempt, sometimes in the same nest. There are records of young from the first brood attending and feeding young from the second brood, a behaviour that also occurs in a number of other bird species.

Spotted Flycatcher by John Harding



Most Spotted Flycatchers breeding in Britain go on to make a second breeding attempt, although the number of eggs laid is typically reduced from 4–5 down to 3–4. This may reflect the energetic demands of rearing two broods and/or a reduction in the availability of insect prey this much later in the season. Research has shown that on cold days (or in the cool of early morning) the Spotted Flycatcher switches from taking larger aerial insect prey to gleaning smaller prey from amongst foliage. These smaller prey are likely to be less profitable for the flycatcher and a run of cooler days late in the breeding season may reduce the chances of the birds successfully rearing a second brood.

## IDENTIFICATION

While the Spotted Flycatcher lacks the more brightly marked plumage of many other birds, it does have something of an understated beauty to its plumage tones. Of course, the lack of easily recognisable features does mean that you might mistake this bird for another, equally drab, species – such as Dunnock or even female House Sparrow. However, the plain tones of the adult flycatcher are less strongly patterned across the back than either Dunnock or House Sparrow. In addition,

# FACTBOX : Spotted Flycatcher

there is the streaking on the breast and the thin but broad-based bill, quite different from the chunky bill of House Sparrow or the fine bill of Dunnock. Fortunately, the Spotted Flycatcher can also be identified from its behaviour and the poses that it adopts.

Spotted Flycatchers are seldom seen on the ground (while Dunnocks prefer to feed on the ground) but usually feed from a perch, making sallies after aerial insects. The flycatcher often adopts an upright posture when perching, making the bird appear rather sleek. Additionally, it is rare to see several Spotted Flycatchers together, unless they happen to be a family party of two adults feeding newly fledged young (the latter looking very different from their parents because of their strongly patterned plumage). One other feature that you might just come across is the audible snapping sound that the bill sometimes makes when the bird snatches an insect from the air.

## THE FUTURE

While the prolonged and accelerating decline in Spotted Flycatcher populations is alarming (the species remains on the Red List of birds of conservation concern), ongoing and planned work should help to reveal the underlying causes of population change. In particular, the BTO's 'Out of Africa Appeal' will enable us to examine the wonderful series of nest record data already collected by volunteers. Work will need to be carried out elsewhere as well, looking at the Spotted Flycatcher on its wintering grounds. Understanding the factors that drive Spotted Flycatcher numbers should stimulate conservation action and help to secure the future of this endearing bird.

You can do your bit too (see boxes, below and right), either by helping the birds directly or by contributing to the Out of Africa Appeal. You might even be rewarded by the sight of a Spotted Flycatcher nesting in your garden.

### Nesting in your garden?

If you are fortunate enough to have Spotted Flycatchers breeding in your garden on a regular basis then we would like to hear from you. It might be that you are able to contribute a nest record of each breeding attempt or that by telling us you have flycatchers breeding we can add a dot to a breeding map for Bird Atlas 2007–11.

Contact [gbw@bto.org](mailto:gbw@bto.org)



**Common Name:** Spotted Flycatcher

**Scientific Name:** *Muscicapa striata*

L.: *musca*=a fly + *capere*=to seize and L.: *stria*=a line

**Family:** Muscipidae

### World distribution:

**BREEDS:** Europe, West & Central Asia

**WINTERS:** Africa

**Habitat in Britain & Ireland:** Open woodland, gardens

**Diet:** Mainly flying insects (especially flies, wasps and bees)

### Population:

**Breeding:** Fewer than 59,000 territories

**Winter:** Does not winter here

**Conservation Status:** **RED**

**Migratory Status:** Summer migrant.

**Average date of first arrival:** 28<sup>th</sup> April

### BREEDING ECOLOGY:

**Clutch Size:** 4–5 eggs

**Incubation:** 13–15 days

**Young in nest:** 13–16 days

**Number of broods:** 2

**Age at first breeding:** 1 year



Spotted Flycatcher egg by Paul Sterry

**Typical lifespan:** 2 years

**Maximum recorded lifespan:** 7 years 10 months



Spotted Flycatcher by Steve Round

### How you can help:

Grow a climber up a wall and/or put up an open fronted nestbox. Spotted Flycatchers like to be able to see out of the nest, so only attach a front of 60 mm to the box. Grow nectar-rich plants to attract flying insects.

[www.bto.org/birdfacts](http://www.bto.org/birdfacts)