

Northern Wheatear travels over 30,000km to Seychelles

29-January-2018



Most tourist visitors from Europe in search of winter sunshine undertake a round trip of 10,000 kilometres or more to reach Seychelles. One small bird may travel three times this distance entirely through its own exertions.

At Alphonse, a pair of Northern Wheatears arrived in mid-January, both remaining for a few days. Seychelles Bird Record Committee has accepted 76 records of Northern Wheatear and around 60% of all records are in January and February, later than any other migratory land species, for which sightings peak in October to December. What could explain the lateness of these sightings?

Northern Wheatears breeding in Western Europe have spread to eastern North America in recent times while the Asian breeding population has spread to Alaska. However, they all winter in Africa. To reach Africa, birds in eastern North America travel via Europe while those breeding in Alaska go the opposite way around the globe and cross the whole of Asia. So the pair on Alphonse Island are most likely to be eastern birds from as far away as Alaska. Miniature tracking devices have recently shown that the Northern Wheatear has one of the longest migratory flights known - 30,000 kilometres, birds crossing Siberia and the Arabian Desert and travelling, on average, 290 kilometres per day. This is the longest recorded migration for any songbird.

Migration is driven primarily by the availability of food. It involves costs in terms of predation and high mortality. Its timing seems to be controlled by changes in day length. The longer days of the northern summer provide extended time for breeding birds to

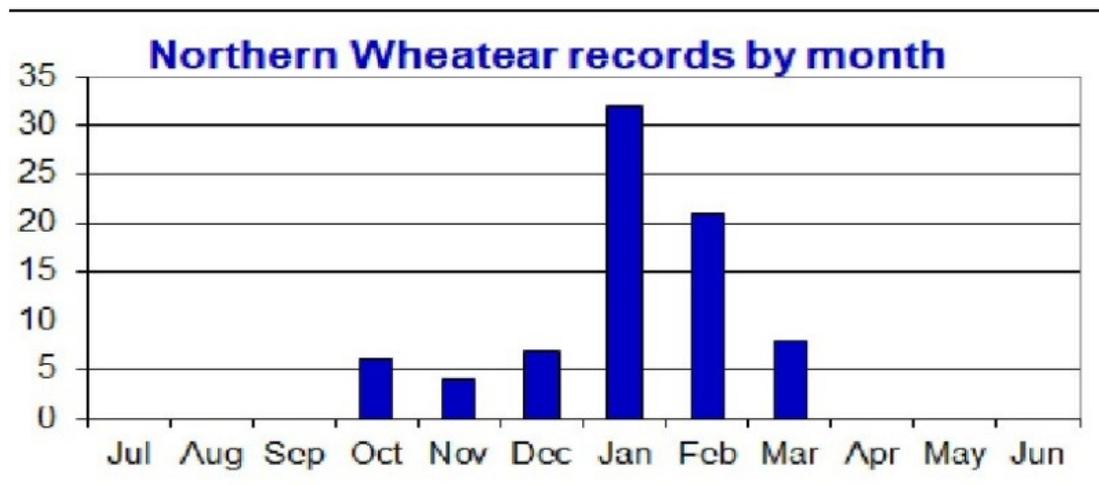
feed their young, and also help daytime birds to produce larger clutches. These advantages offset the high stress, physical exertion, and other risks linked to migration.

Short migrations are common in many bird species, including those made in response to changes in habitat, weather, food availability, and/or altitudinal migrations on mountains such as the Himalayas, where birds that nest at higher altitudes spend the winter at lower altitudes. Most birds migrate in flocks at varying altitudes to reduce the energy cost. But bird migration is not limited to birds that can fly. Penguins migrate by swimming covering routes of over 1,000 kilometres.

There are many fascinating theories - and equally fascinating questions - about this seasonal, predictable occurrence. Bird migration is known from as much as 3,000 years ago during the historical period of ancient Greece; however, much is still being learned today.

This got us thinking about just how far some species are willing to fly each year. We know that many species of birds make amazing long-distances migrations and that such migrations are explained by food availability. An example of this is the number of insect-eating species that travel south to warmer regions where insects remain active. However, 'food availability' does not entirely explain why some birds travel far distances. While they cover large distances, they navigate by using celestial cues from the sun and stars, the earth's magnetic field, and mental maps.

Alphonse is one of the best places in Seychelles to see rare visiting birds, partly due to its isolation. This provides an attractive target for tired migrants flying over the Indian Ocean seeking a stopover to refuel. During recent months, we have recorded many interesting species of birds that included Alphonse Island in their flyway to make their seasonal migration. In fact, it has been surprising to see the diversity of species that passed through. They include Pacific Golden Plover, Collared Pratincole and Black-winged Pratincole, Yellow Wagtail and White Wagtail, Red-throated Pipit, Amur Falcon, Common Cuckoo, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Broad-billed Roller, Common Swift, and many others.



Pep Nogués

