

The Art of Migrations

Each year hundreds of species of bird migrate to the British Isles, and Oxfordshire Artweeks artist and bird enthusiast Jane Tomlinson has chosen 42 to highlight. This attractive watercolour map shows the approximate direction and season for each bird's migratory journey. Esther Lafferty finds out more.

“In spring and autumn, millions of birds fly to and from the British Isles,” says Jane. “I have used the term ‘British Isles’ to describe geographically the archipelago that lies off the north-west coast of continental Europe. It consists of the sovereign nations, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland. I am using the term ‘British Isles’ in an entirely non-political way as birds know nothing of history and politics – they see only opportunity, safety and place to make a living. And in my world, migrants are welcome!”

Some species move within the archipelago, some come from Europe whilst other avian guests travel tens of thousands of miles. For example, the bee-eater may come north from Iberia for the summer, while the swallow comes all the way from southern Africa. And birds migrate for many reasons. Overwintering birds come here to escape the harsh dark and cold further north – these include geese, waders, divers and ducks. Summer visitors come to breed knowing they'll be able feast on the summer bounty of airborne insects. These include warblers and also swifts: there's a large colony in the tower of the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, which has been studied since 1948 – one of the longest continuous studies of any bird species in the world.

Much as I would like to have done, I couldn't possibly fit all the birds that come to and from the British Isles onto the map so I know there are glaring omissions,” she smiles. “The nightingale is left out because I was looking for distinctive species to show. Nightingales are a small brown bird and don't wear snazzy costumes; they don't need to with such a



gorgeous voice!

And warblers. So many warblers. Reed warblers, grasshopper warblers, garden warblers, willow warblers, chiffchaffs, etc. Many of them look very, very similar. I chose one warbler to represent them all, the sedge warbler, because I see them every summer, and I love their bonkers song.

I have been asked ‘How do birds know where to migrate to?’ Science is still trying to work out exactly how the birds ‘know’ where to go and when to go there. In most cases, day length appears to be the cue that sets the birds off. It is thought that some species are born with an innate endogenous ability to know where to go – a kind of mental map. Other species need to ‘learn’ the migration routes, accompanying their parents and siblings on their first journey. And it may be a combination of these factors. In my painting I have illustrated the main means which it is thought that the birds use: the Earth's magnetic field, the position of the sun, moon and stars, including Polaris, the Pole Star but there's still lots to learn.”

You can order an A2 print of this map and see more of Jane's maps and paintings inspired by the natural world at www.janetomlinson.com

