

Tuesday Club Nature Notes

with Jan Flamank



The Cuckoo

More people have said that they have heard again, for the first time in years, the unmistakable call of the cuckoo. They are one of the migratory birds that fly over here from sub-Saharan Africa, which is an exhausting and dangerous migration.

I think one reason for more cuckoos this year may be the imposed lack of global human activity due to COVID-19, including the appalling traditional spring hunting/shooting season in Malta, where the cuckoo flies over. So, less shooting by horrible humans means more cuckoos make their long migration safely! Yippee. Less pesticide use may also be a positive factor in this recent resurgence, as they particularly enjoy feasting on hairy caterpillars.

The reed warbler, dunnock and meadow pipit may be less enthusiastic than me about this though, as they are the main target of the unusual 'brood parasitism' the cuckoo is famous for. Which basically means the female lays her eggs in other birds' nests and then simply leaves them to bring up her offspring.

Cuckoos always lay their eggs in the nest of the same species that raised them, and have evolved the ability to lay eggs that closely resemble the host bird's egg in pattern and colour, although their egg size will always be larger. She can lay up to 20 eggs each season, far more than if she was also feeding and raising them.

The cuckoo egg hatches at about 11 days, but before the host egg, and soon after hatching, the baby cuckoo manoeuvres the host eggs on to its back, and throws them out of the nest. It now has the sole attention of the small host bird, who feeds it every hour during daylight.

It grows at a rapid rate, overfilling the nest, and as soon as it fledges, usually in June or July, it makes its first migration to Africa. This is a complex journey of several thousand miles. And all this without ever meeting its parents, or being shown where and when to fly that vast distance!

We often underestimate the intelligence and ingenuity of birds, including the elusive cuckoo. I hope you heard one this year.