

A remarkable journey (with an unfortunate end)

A bird of cryptic colouring and nocturnal habits, the Nightjar's insect-like churring song is often the only clue to the presence of this mysterious denizen of heaths and plantations. Greg Conway and Ian Henderson explain how light is beginning to be shed on the lives and travels of these long-distance visitors.

By late September, the majority of British Nightjars have departed on their journey south to winter in sub-Saharan Africa. The Nightjar is a widespread bird, breeding across much of Europe and Asia and, although the species is known to winter in Africa, ring recoveries outside the UK have mainly been in France, with one in Spain and just two in North Africa. There are no recoveries from the African wintering areas; we could only speculate on the actual routes taken between breeding and wintering locations and where exactly our British birds winter.

TRACKING TEASES OUT JOURNEY DETAILS

In order to unravel some of these mysteries and, in collaboration with Biotrack, we commenced a geolocator study building on a previous Biotrack pilot study involving three retrieved tags. During summer 2011, a total of 19 adult Nightjars were caught in Thetford Forest on the Norfolk/Suffolk border and fitted with geolocator tags. These tags record light levels, which allows the global location to be calculated from length of day and time of midday. Although the calculated locations may be accurate only to within 100 km and there are limitations during the periods around the equinoxes (late March and late September), this still provides detailed and unique movement information at the Continental scale. Once birds are recaptured, when they have returned to their breeding sites the following year, the data can be downloaded and their journeys mapped.

ONE BIRD'S TALE

The first tag recovered in May 2012 was from an adult male bird ringed on 25 June 2011 (Fig 1). After leaving the UK, it appears that LB12420 moved fairly slowly through Europe, with the first locations logged in Libya in October. Thereafter he moved rapidly southeast to Sudan and eventually wintered in the Democratic Republic of Congo. During late February there was a temporary shift to the northwest before commencing a westward spring migration through West Africa (although the precise route is uncertain) before moving



steadily east through North Africa and then across the central Mediterranean with a brief stop in northern France before returning to Thetford Forest on 10 May. Having completed his journey, LB12420's story was also about to end as, just a few days later, he fell victim to a bird of prey 5 km from where he had been ringed. By a remarkable stroke of luck, his body was found on 21 May and handed in to a local RSPB reserve, from where he was promptly collected. We were able to download the precious information stored on the geolocator.

▲ On returning from Africa, male Nightjars flaunt their white wing flashes and tail spots to attract females and in territorial disputes.

FIG 1. MIGRATION TRACK OF NIGHTJAR LB12420



Orange ellipses indicate autumn migration locations, blue indicates winter locations and yellow indicates spring locations. Solid lines show actual routes of movement. Broken lines indicate likely routes of movement.

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