

Marsh Warblers in Aberdeen: the first confirmed breeding record for North-east Scotland

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Marsh Warbler (*Acrocephalus palustris*) is a very scarce spring migrant and occasional breeder in the Northern Isles, and a rare and irregular migrant in the rest of Scotland (Forrester et al., 2007). It is particularly rare in North-east Scotland with only 10 accepted records prior to 2023 (per North-east Scotland Bird Reports).

On 27th July 2023 JK sent a photo to IB of a warbler with a beak full of food, describing its call as a rattling sound “like a broken gear or a sprocket with a ratchet”. He had first noticed the birds on 19th July upon his return to Aberdeen from 4 weeks travelling. IB expected the birds to be Whitethroats or Sedge Warblers, but the bird in question was clearly too plain to be either of these species, and he asked if JK could obtain more photos. These duly arrived on the 28th July and IB was excited to see that the birds were either Reed or Marsh Warblers, with the photos favouring the latter species. IB was able to visit the site the next day and confirmed the identities of the birds as Marsh Warblers; there were clearly two adult birds present and they were seen carrying food re-



MARSH WARBLER CARRYING FOOD
(PHOTO BY J. KĘDRA)

peatedly into dense patches of gorse mixed with broom, thistles, docks and nettles. The birds were often seen visiting nearby alder and buddleia to collect invertebrates before flying back into the thicket presumably to feed their young. The short, dry rattling call was heard several times, often for long periods of repetition, and sound recordings were made (see e.g. <https://xeno-canto.org/830423>).

Over the next few days, the birds continued carrying food, and two adults were still present on August 2nd although they appeared to be venturing further afield, at least 100m away from the previous area of main activity. On August 3rd however, JK noted that the behaviour of the birds had changed considerably with them becoming very elusive and only a few short calls heard occasionally. The rattling call was last heard on the 3rd August, and a single bird was seen on 4th and 5th August but not thereafter. As no juveniles were seen for certain, it is possible that the breeding attempt was ultimately unsuccessful (the area was frequented by several Magpies and domestic cats), but we cannot exclude the possibility that the juvenile birds fledged successfully and left the area without detection.

The birds were present in an area of land within the city limits of Aberdeen, covered mostly by gorse and bounded from the south-east by a strip of spruces, close to houses within 1km of the coast. However, in line with Rare Breeding Birds Panel guidance, the specific location was not made public due to the sensitivity of this Schedule 1-listed species to disturbance and accidental trampling of habitat.

Bell et al. (2021) describe the changing fortunes of Marsh Warbler as a breeding species in the UK over the past five decades, detailing its extinction as a breeding species in its former stronghold of Worcestershire. The authors note that the species has undergone a northwards expansion in breeding range in Fennoscandinavia (Keller et al., 2020), mirroring the recent UK trend towards its somewhat sporadic and opportunistic breeding attempts mainly on the east coast of England (e.g. Siddle, 2023). Breeding records in Scotland are extremely rare but have increased in frequency since breeding was first confirmed in Orkney in 1993 (Meek and Adam, 1997) and in Shetland in 2002 (Maher et al., 2003). There have been several further Scottish breeding attempts in the 21st century (Bell et al., 2021; Eaton et al. 2022), although these have been confined almost exclusively to the Northern Isles, with birds feeding young typically in July and early August. This constitutes the first breeding record of Marsh Warbler for North-east Scotland.

References

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