

= Whinchat =

The whinchat (*Saxicola rubetra*) is a small migratory passerine bird breeding in Europe and western Asia and wintering in central Africa . At one time considered to be in thrush family , Turdidae , it is now placed in the Old World flycatcher family , Muscicapidae . Both sexes have a strong supercilium , brownish upper parts mottled darker , a pale throat and breast , a pale buff to whitish belly , and a blackish tail with white bases to the outer tail feathers , but in the breeding season , the male has an orange @-@ buff throat and breast .

The whinchat is a solitary species , favouring open grassy country with rough vegetation and scattered small shrubs . It perches in elevated locations ready to pounce on the insects and other small invertebrates that form its diet . The nest is built by the female on the ground in coarse vegetation , with a clutch of four to seven eggs being laid . The hen incubates the eggs for about thirteen days and then both parents feed the nestlings . Fledging takes place about eighteen days after hatching and the parents continue to feed the young for another fortnight . Moulting takes place in late summer before the migration southwards , and again on the wintering grounds in Africa before the migration northwards in spring . The whinchat is a common species with a wide range and the International Union for Conservation of Nature has classified it as being of " least concern " .

= = Taxonomy and systematics = =

This species represents a fairly basal divergence of the genus *Saxicola* . It retains the supercilium found in many Muscicapidae but lost in the more derived *Saxicola* species such as the European stonechat or African stonechat (*S. torquatus*) .

As with other species of *Saxicola* , it was formerly considered a member of the thrush family (Turdidae) , but is now placed in the Old World flycatcher family Muscicapidae . It , and similar thrush @-@ like Muscicapidae species , are often called chats . Its scientific name means " small rock @-@ dweller " , in reference to its habitat . *Saxicola* derives from Latin *saxum* (" rock ") + *incola* (" dwelling ") ; *rubetra* is a Latin term for a small bird . No subspecies are recognised .

Very rarely , hybridisation occurs between the whinchat and the Siberian stonechat (*Saxicola maurus*) , with a case being reported in Finland in 1997 . It has also been reported to hybridise with the European stonechat in western and southern Europe .

= = Description = =

The whinchat is a short @-@ tailed bird , moving on the ground with small , rapid hops and frequently bobbing and flicking its wings and tail . It is similar in size to its relative the European robin (*Erithacus rubecula*) , being 12 to 14 cm (4 @.@ 7 to 5 @.@ 5 in) long and weighing 13 to 26 g (0 @.@ 46 to 0 @.@ 92 oz) . Both sexes have brownish upperparts mottled darker , a buff throat and breast , a pale buff to whitish belly , and a blackish tail with white bases to the outer tail feathers .

The male in breeding plumage has a blackish face mask almost encircled by a strong white supercilium and malar stripe , a bright orange @-@ buff throat and breast , and small white wing patches on the greater coverts and inner median coverts . The female is duller overall , in particular having browner face mask , pale buffy @-@ brown breast , and a buff supercilium and malar stripe , and smaller or no white wing patches . Males in immature and winter plumage are similar to females , except that adult males retain the white wing patches all year round .

Though fairly similar to females and immatures of the European stonechat (*S. rubicola*) , the whinchat can readily be distinguished by its conspicuous supercilium and whiter belly , and also in western Europe , by being paler overall than the western European stonechat subspecies *S. rubicola hibernans* . It also differs structurally in being slightly slimmer and less ' dumpy ' , and having longer wingtips (an adaptation to its long @-@ distance migration) . It is more easily confused with female or immature Siberian stonechat (*S. maura*) , which (also being a long @-@

distance migrant) shares the longer wingtips ; however , Siberian stonechat can be distinguished by its conspicuous unmarked pale orange @-@ buff rump (in whinchat , the rump is the same mottled brown colour as the back) .

Its main call is described as a hue @-@ tac @-@ tac , the ' tac ' softer and less grating than that of the European stonechat ; the call is used both for contact between birds and predator alarms . The male has a whistling , crackly but soft song used during the breeding season , consisting of a mixture of soft whistles , tacs and more grating sounds ; it is often mimetic , including phrases from the songs of at least 12 other assorted bird species . It sings from a fence , bush , tree or wire , or occasionally from the ground or in flight , between about April and July . On the wintering grounds , it often gives alarm calls but only occasionally sings , being most likely to do so at the end of winter , when starting spring migration .

= = Distribution and habitat = =

The whinchat is a migratory species breeding in Europe and western Asia from Ireland and northern Portugal east to the Ob River basin near Novosibirsk , and from northern Norway south to central Spain , central Italy , northern Greece , and the Caucasus Mountains .

Birds arrive on the breeding grounds between the end of April and mid May , and depart between mid August and mid September (odd birds lingering to October) . They winter primarily in tropical sub @-@ Saharan Africa from Senegal east to Kenya and south to Zambia , arriving in western Africa at the start of the dry season in late September to November , and leaving between February and March . Small numbers also winter in northwestern Africa in Morocco , northern Algeria and Tunisia . Vagrants have reached northwest of the breeding range to Iceland , west on migration to the Canary Islands and Cape Verde , and south of the wintering range to northern South Africa .

= = Behaviour and ecology = =

The whinchat is a largely solitary bird though it may form small family groups in autumn . It favours rough low vegetation habitats such as open rough pasture or similar minimally cultivated grassland with scattered small shrubs such as hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) , and bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) or heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) stands on rock @-@ strewn ground . It also commonly inhabits new and clear @-@ felled conifer plantations until the new tree crop is about five to six years old and a metre or two tall . It always needs at least a few perching points (shrubs , tall weeds , or fence posts) to scan from for food and for use as song posts .

Breeding takes place in late April and May . The nest is built solely by the female , and is made of dried grasses and moss , and lined with hairs and fine bents . It is built on the ground , hidden in dense low vegetation , often at the foot of a bush . The female lays and incubates a clutch of four to seven eggs which hatch after eleven to fourteen days . Both parents bring food to the young which leave the nest ten to fourteen days later , while still too young to fly . The chicks fledge at seventeen to nineteen days after hatching and remain largely dependent on the parents for a further two weeks . Whinchats are short @-@ lived , typically only surviving two years , to a maximum recorded of just over five years in the wild ; breeding starts when birds are a year old . Predators include weasels , stoats , and small raptors such as the merlin and nest predators such as crows and magpies . Nests are also lost due to agricultural operations such as silage cutting (the main factor in the species ' decline in western Europe) or trampling by livestock , and are sometimes parasitised by the common cuckoo .

Whinchats are insectivorous , feeding largely (about 80 ? 90 %) on insects , but also consume a wide range of other invertebrates including spiders , small snails and worms . They also eat small amounts of fruit such as blackberries , primarily in autumn . The birds like to perch on elevated spots such as shrubs , from where they make sallies to catch insects , mostly taken off the ground , but also flying insects . While so perched , males in particular frequently flick their tail and sometimes their wings to show the white tail and wing flashes , for display or territorial communication signals to other whinchats .

Adult whinchats have a single complex complete moult in late summer (late July onward) after breeding and mainly completed before southbound migration . Juveniles have a partial moult at the same time , growing new body feathering but retaining the flight feathers . All ages also have a partial moult in early spring on the wintering grounds before northbound migration .

= = Status and conservation = =

Fairly common across its wide range , the whinchat is classified as a species of " least concern " by the International Union for Conservation of Nature . Some populations are however in serious decline , particularly in the west of its range in Britain , Ireland , France , Belgium , the Netherlands , Denmark , and Germany , primarily due to agricultural intensification . In Britain it is amber @-@ listed with an unfavourable conservation status ; it had all but disappeared from former lowland breeding areas in the south and east between surveys in 1968 ? 72 and 1988 ? 91 , remaining common only in upland areas of the north and west where low @-@ intensity livestock rearing is the main land use . There has been a similar decline in Ireland , where it is now classified as " rare " .