

Pale Blue over Yellow, a tale of an unusual Stonechat.

Typically, juvenile Stonechats *Saxicola rubicola*, leave their natal area on completion of post-juvenile moult if not before. Not so in the case of a sibling pair colour-ringed in the nest on Kelling Heath in May 2010 and subsequently recorded on the Heath throughout the winter of 2010/2011 and never more than 300m from the nest in which they hatched. This particular winter was exceptionally harsh with heavy snowfalls and record low temperatures including the UK's coldest December since 1910 but long before the cold weather set in, the other Stonechats either breeding or hatched on Kelling Heath in 2010 had departed for more temperate climates which is the normal behaviour. Ringing has shown that a significant number of Stonechats hatched in the UK, may spend their first winter overseas mainly in southern Europe and North Africa while adults and other juveniles which remain in this country, move in a westerly or southerly direction and tend to spend the winter months in a coastal environment.

Although Pale Blue over Yellow had yet to acquire the full breeding plumage at the start of 2011, he was clearly a male and his sibling, colour-ringed White over Yellow, was female and as the weeks passed it was equally clear that they showed every sign of becoming a breeding pair. The pair successfully fledged 2 broods but did not attempt a third and remained together on the Heath until the female disappeared in early December. The male spent the rest of winter alone on the Heath and after associating with a sequence of migrant females in March 2012, eventually one decided to stay and the pair successfully fledged 2 broods. As in the previous year, a third brood was not attempted and the pair remained together until late October when the female is thought to have moved on. Again, it seemed Pale Blue over Yellow was destined to spend the winter alone on the Heath and was regularly sighted within the usual restricted area until there was a report of a most unexpected and final sighting in early January 2013 at the northern edge of the Heath about a kilometre from the natal area. So ended a remarkable and what is believed to be unprecedented record of a Stonechat remaining for 32 consecutive months within 300m of the natal site.

In a personal communication, John Callion who continues to operate a pioneering nestling Stonechat colour-ringing project he started in Cumbria in the early 90s, states that such site fidelity shown by Pale Blue over Yellow is quite unknown in his experience. In addition, John states that for a Stonechat to nest within less than 5km of its own natal site is also unknown to him.

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