



AS WE are finding out to our cost, global warming has an awful lot to answer for.

Rarely, do we seem to enjoy a 'real' Winter, anymore, when prolonged spells of snow and ice engender a wild re-calibration of the central heating; woolly hats and gloves to be looked out; and hours of kiddie fun, spent making snowballs and snowmen.

When we do suffer the hardship of a few days of prolonged frost, when night-time temperatures threaten to freeze the mercury, birdwatchers should be ever watchful, as this is the time when gardens may play host to a number of unusual visitors. Nothing drives small birds, like thrushes, sparrows, tits and finches, into the sanctuary of a garden that has a well-stocked feeding station than a sustained bout of cold, wintry weather.

It's precisely during such times that a bird that we normally think of as a Summer migrant may announce itself to the grated cheese and sultanas that temporarily adorn your bird table. The Blackcap is a sparrow-sized, greyish warbler,

The sultana loving W

the males of which have a distinctive black cap (females have chestnut crowns!)

It is predominantly a Summer visitor to Britain, arriving in April from over-wintering grounds in Iberia and North Africa. Ringing studies reveal that a small percentage of this population are greater travelled and can genuinely be classed as trans-Saharan migrants.

Local birdwatcher, Stuart Gibson, commented: 'Previously, the Blackcap was a very rare occurrence in Britain during Winter.

'However, the numbers of this soberly-plumed warbler recorded over-wintering in Britain have dramatically increased during the past 30 years. 'So much so, that small (although largely unknown) numbers of Blackcaps now spend the Winter months in and around woodland thickets in Argyll and the islands, venturing into gardens when bad weather cuts off their more natural food supplies.'

Of greatest (or 'gratest', given this species' penchant for a bit of cheese) interest, however, is that ornithologists have discovered that the Blackcaps that choose to over-winter in this country hail from a different population than the birds that arrive to breed here during the Summer months. So much so, that a previously unknown migrational direction for this species has been discovered.

The Blackcaps that spend the Winter months here in Britain belong to populations that origi-