

Blackcap and cheese Winter warbler

nate in the low countries, Germany and Austria; birds that have travelled using a west - north-west trajectory from their natal areas in Autumn. British breeders fly south - south-east in order to reach their pre-programmed over-wintering destinations in Spain, Portugal and North Africa. Our local breeding birds set off towards the Mediterranean basin during September, with numbers of their incoming continental cousins arriving on the east coast of Britain in October, where they gradually filter westwards during the early part of Winter. Many sightings occur in west Highland gardens during the period December - February.

Blackcaps appear to have a somewhat localised breeding distribution in the west Highlands.

They prefer deciduous or mixed woodlands with a healthy shrub layer; indeed, they appear to hold a strong association with rhododendrons, wherever they have been planted as understorey to taller tree

species, such as Oak, Beech and Sycamore, as has been the case in the policies of old estates. Blackcaps belong to a genus referred to by birdwatchers as *Sylvia* warblers, characterised by their skulking nature. Unless the song and calls of this spe-

cies are known to the would-be observer, a pair of breeding Blackcaps could easily go undetected because of these habits. It is so much easier if they decide to drop in on your bird table, and decide to stay around for a few days munching your sultanas!

If you're really lucky, warm March days may induce our Winter visitors into an early burst of song, although it is usually not until mid-April onwards that the woodlands and gardens of the west Highlands rejoice to the rich and flutey warble of returning Blackcaps. Those that really are Summer visitors to the gardens and woodlands of Oban and Lorn, and not their over-wintering, central European cousins!

