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SHORT REPORT



## Remarkable recapture of a Common Whitethroat *Curruca communis* almost 19 years after ringing

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### ABSTRACT

A new longevity record has been registered for the Common Whitethroat *Curruca communis*, with a bird recaptured in Italy 18 years and 11 months from the date of ringing. This exceeds the previous longevity record by almost 10 years. A comparison is made with records of known longevity for other species of small passerine birds. The possible migratory routes and the total distances travelled by the bird are discussed.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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On 25 April 2019, during a ringing session of the MonITRing project at the Brusà–Vallette Marsh Nature Reserve (Cerea VR, Italy, 45°10'N 11°13'E), an adult male Whitethroat *Curruca communis* marked with the metal ring 'AH47298 INFS – Ozzano BO Italy' was recaptured in a mist net: the bird was recorded, measured and released in good health. The Brusà–Vallette Marsh is a wetland listed under the Ramsar Convention and included in the Natura 2000 network as SIC/ZPS area IT320016; the capture site is located in damp scrub at the edge of a pond about 1.5 ha in extent. From a search of the ringing forms of the 'Piccole Isole' Project (Montemaggiori & Spina 2002), coordinated by the Istituto Superiore per la Protezione e la Ricerca Ambientale (ISPRA), the original ringing data were traced. The bird had been ringed on 2 May 2000 in the station of Palmaria Island, Portovenere (La Spezia, Italy), located about 167 km south-west of where it was recaptured. At ringing, the bird was aged '5' according to the EURING code, meaning it had hatched in the summer of 1999. At the time of recapture, after 6932 days, the bird was therefore approaching 20 years of age and in its twenty-first calendar year. The data entered in the ringing and recapture forms are consistent as regards species identification, sex and age, and coincided almost perfectly in some biometric measurements (maximum chord and third primary feather lengths).

An interesting account of the maximum longevity achieved by ringed birds is given by Fransson et al (2017), who include the recent longevity records for

Common Whitethroat: an individual recaptured in Sweden reached nine years, one in Denmark eight years and 11 months, and another was controlled in Sweden seven years and 10 months after ringing. The current record therefore exceeds the two highest previously known cases of longevity for Common Whitethroat by almost 10 years. For species of the sister genus *Sylvia*, the maximum longevity reported by Fransson et al (2017) are 14 years and two months for a Garden Warbler *S. borin* in Germany and 13 years and 10 months for a Blackcap *S. atricapilla* in the Czech Republic. Among other passerines similar in size to the Common Whitethroat, maximum longevity reported are 20 years and 10 months for a Dunnock *Prunella modularis* in Denmark, 19 years and nine months for a House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, also in Denmark, and 19 years and four months for a Robin *Erithacus rubecula* in the Czech Republic.

The Common Whitethroat is a migratory and breeding summer visitor on the Italian peninsula, with localised breeding pairs on some of the smaller islands and in Sicily (Brichetti & Fracasso 2010). A long-distance, trans-Saharan migrant, the Common Whitethroat winters in central and southern Africa, from Senegal to Ethiopia to South Africa; the highest numbers of wintering birds have been found between 12°N and 18°N (Cramp 1992). The recoveries from Common Whitethroats ringed in Italy have come mainly from coastal African countries (Morocco, Libya and Egypt) while the southernmost recapture

site is in Chad (Spina & Volponi 2008). Considering this geographical distribution, it can be estimated that, from hatching up to its recapture in 2019, our bird had travelled around 150 000 km on migration, corresponding to more than 3.5 complete circuits of the globe. This measure is a minimum, assuming that the bird has wintered in the most northerly sub-Saharan belt: if the bird wintered regularly in northern South Africa, for example, the distance travelled would be at least twice as far!

The breeding populations in continental Europe show autumn migration directions tending towards either the south-west or the south-east, with a migratory divide at about 10°E. The populations located west of this longitude are channelled along the Iberian Peninsula, while the eastern ones pass along the Italian and Dalmatian coasts (Cramp 1992, Spina & Volponi 2008). Recapture data indicate that the autumn migrants that cross Italy originate mainly from central northern Europe, with Germany and Sweden as the most represented countries. These birds come from longitudes slightly both west and east of the hypothesised migratory divide, suggesting that Italy is used as a 'bridge' across the Mediterranean Sea. The recaptures made outside Italy in spring or during the breeding season, on the other hand, have a more easterly distribution, which could suggest a loop migration movement affecting Italy. The few direct recaptures made within Italy do not allow us to define clearly the routes the birds follow; however, there is quite an extensive record of such movements, even between eastern and western coastal sites (Spina & Volponi 2008).

The European populations of Common Whitethroat experienced a sharp decline from 1968 until the end of the 1980s (Batten 1971, Berthold 1973, Marchant 1985, Taylor 1985, Marchant et al 1990) due to a worsening of the drought on the wintering grounds in the Sahel Zone of western Africa (Winstanley et al 1974). Currently, the European population size is considered stable (IUCN 2020). We hope that this longevity record is a further small sign of a definitive recovery in numbers for this fascinating species, which was in the past one of the most representative species of the bushes and hedges of our countryside.

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