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**T**HE DARTFORD WARBLER is one of only two resident species of warbler in Britain, but, being at the edge of its range, it can suffer badly during cold winters, with local populations being wiped out if the weather is too severe. Nonetheless, this attractive little bird holds its own, and is a real star of our heathland habitats. Getting good views of a male Dartford Warbler, sat on top of a gorse bush in the bright sunlight, is one of those birding sights that you will always remember. The uniform dark grey upperparts and wine-red underparts, complete with delicate white spotting on the throat, make this a very attractive bird, indeed.



A male perching in typical heather habitat

However, this coloration is more subtle than it sounds, enabling the bird to easily blend into the gorse and heather when skulking around, which is what it does most of the time. Luckily for the birder, this is an inquisitive bird that will often pop up on to an elevated perch to see exactly what is going on.

In Britain, its range is largely restricted to southern England, parts of East Anglia and South Wales, but this is a bird that is beginning to expand northwards, where suitable habitat allows, and it can now be found in places like the Midlands.

This small warbler suffers badly in extended periods of cold weather, though, and the bitter winter of 1962-63 almost completely wiped it out in Britain. It is estimated that only 10 pairs survived the onslaught of that winter, and its future as a British species was in the balance. Thankfully, due to its ability to have more than one brood each spring, coupled with the fact that its young have a good survival rate, the bird was able to recover and recolonise its breeding areas.

Although the recent cold winters and heavy snowfall of 2009 and 2010 knocked the warbler back a bit, especially in areas of sub-optimal habitat, the more general trend of milder winters is helping the species to continue to expand its range in Britain.

These milder winters also led to our second resident warbler becoming established – the Cetti's Warbler didn't colonise Britain until 1973 but has since established itself across southern England, and is now probably more numerous than the Dartford.

#### SPECIES > FACTFILE

##### DARTFORD WARBLER

Scientific name: *Sylvia undata*

Length: 13-14cm

Wingspan: 13-18cm

UK numbers: 3,200 pairs

Habitat: Mostly heaths with gorse and heather

Diet: Insects

### Well-managed gorse is vital

In Britain, the Dartford Warbler is mainly restricted to heathland habitats, the majority of which are now protected and often actively managed

to help safeguard the species. Well-managed areas of gorse are important for the bird, as these provide good dense cover for it to forage and shelter in during cold spells. Indeed, an old rural name for the bird was 'furze-wren'. Inside a dense thicket of gorse, the small warbler is sheltered from cold winds and temperatures as well as being

“ An old rural name for the bird was ‘furze-wren’. Inside a dense thicket of gorse, the small warbler is sheltered from cold winds and temperatures as well as being surrounded by lots of spiders – a food that the Dartford particularly enjoys ”

Dartford Warblers are only the size of a long-tailed Wren, so can cling to thin heather stems and hardly bend them



Ben Hall / rspb

Calum Dickson / Alamy