

THE TRANS-SAHARAN FLIGHT

Every year, as autumn arrives in the Northern Hemisphere, millions of birds across Europe get ready to migrate. To beat the chilly winter and nippy winds, birds will fly thousands of miles to warmer climes.

When it's time to go, birds take to the skies in huge numbers. Several billion birds leave Northern Eurasia for warmer places! Some fly alone, some in groups, and every sort of bird takes a slightly different route across the continent. These clever jetsetters use various navigation 'tools' to always know exactly where they are: rivers, valleys, mountains, the moon, stars and sun – even Earth's magnetic field.

The Mediterranean/Black Sea Flyway

One of the most popular routes is called the Mediterranean/Black Sea Flyway. This invisible pathway links Central and Eastern Europe, Western Siberia and Asia with Africa, and is taken by 2.5 billion birds each year.

However, it's not so easy getting from A to B. The Mediterranean Sea is a huge obstacle, followed by the arid and inhospitable Sahara Desert! Birds have to fly vast distances without food, water or even a nap to get across these treacherous areas.



A place to refuel

Luckily, there is a safe place to take a pit stop! The Sahel is the name given to the grass and woodlands in the countries just south of the Sahara Desert, and it is vital to the birds' survival. Stretching roughly 1,000km across North Africa, the Sahel is the first place birds come to rest after their titanic trek. As soon as they get there, a feeding frenzy begins! The area is jam-packed with acacia and baobab trees, as well as thorny shrubs.

For some birds, this stretch of greenery is the end of their journey, but to others, it's just a vital stop-off point on their way to South Africa. Either way, it's an enormous reward!



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The price to pay

Migration comes with many dangers. The daring quest for hot weather pushes birds to the limit of their **endurance** – many don't survive the massive crossing. Millions of tiny travellers are killed by hunters. Many others crash into tall buildings and power lines. Those that make it to the Sahel often find their habitat destroyed by increased areas of farmland. The Sahel is a paradise that must be protected for these brave bird heroes!

Trans-Saharan Bird Heroes



Alpine swift

Weight: 100g

Wingspan: 57cm

Migration: Can travel for up to 200 days (that's over six months) and cover 10,000km without stopping, the longest flight duration ever recorded by a bird!

Top survival strategy: Alpine swifts eat on the wing – which means they feed as they fly!



Northern wheatear

Weight: 19-29g

Wingspan: 26-32cm

Migration: 14,500km from the Arctic to Africa – one of the longest migrations in the world!

Top survival strategy: Can fly 40 to 60 hours across the Sahara Desert without stopping!



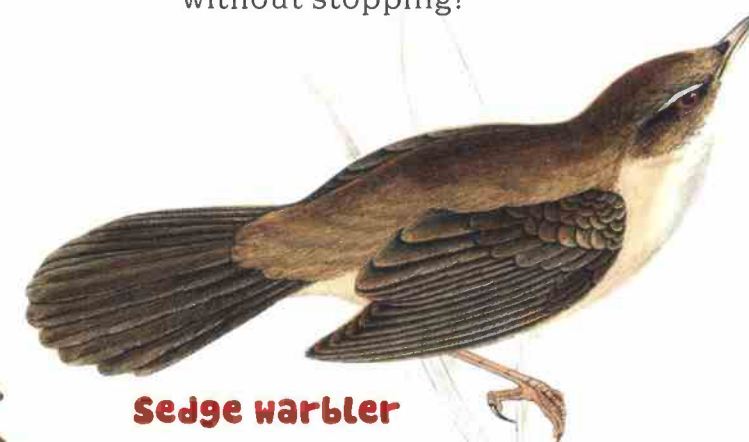
Bluethroat

Weight: 15-25g

Wingspan: 20-23cm

Migration: 6,000km

Top survival strategy: These nocturnal migrants fly at night, using the stars for navigation, and rest in the shade during the hot African day.



Sedge warbler

Weight: 12g

Wingspan: 23-27cm

Migration: 5,600km. Some can make this journey non-stop!

Top survival strategy: These tiny birds fatten up to survive the **arduous** Sahara stretch. They weigh 23g when they start their journey, and just 9g at the end.

Vocabulary

Arduous: Requiring huge effort.

Endurance: The ability to undergo a difficult experience without giving up.

