

TRACKING SPRING

In 2015, the British Science Association calculated the speed of spring advancing north through Britain at 2mph (3.2kmh). Different events moved at different rates. Flowering hawthorn, for example, crept along at a relatively sedate 1.9mph, equating to 45.6 miles a day or the length of the mainland (600 miles) in 13 days. I reasoned I could easily cover this on a bicycle in the same time frame, though I would have to cover a greater distance (70–80 miles each day) because I would inevitably be zigzagging as I pedalled. In spring 2017, I set off on my ride – stopping off at different nature reserves along the way – to track the arrival of the season as it moved up the UK. And to see if I could indeed beat hawthorn to the top.

DAY 1 FRIDAY 21 APRIL

“Welcome to Funderpark – open daily roam.” I’m not sure now what exactly I was expecting at Dawlish Warren – lizards basking on sand dunes, perhaps – but it wasn’t this. It had just gone roam, so I could have climbed onto one of the elephants on the merry-go-round, but there was no time for such frivolities.

My cycling companion – for one day only – regular *BBC Wildlife* contributor Pete Dommert was due to arrive any minute, and I began to mull over what was in front of me: a cycle ride from here, the south coast of Devon, to mainland Britain’s most northerly point, Dunnet Head, while chasing spring

north. Just that day, we were bound for the Somerset Levels, 80 miles away.

Our first port of call was the Turf Hotel on the River Exe, where we met the warden of RSPB Exminster Marshes, Pete Otley, who gave us an idiot’s guide to identifying reed and sedge warblers. “Think of reed warblers as sounding like Metallica,” he said, “and sedge warblers as Miles Davis.”

We trundled through Exeter and on to Tiverton, where we picked up National Cycle Route 3. Hawthorn was very definitely out, bedecking our route like confetti at a wedding, with chiffchaffs the choir.

DAY 2 SATURDAY 22 APRIL

We were up early to meet RSPB Ham Wall warden, Steve Hughes, who’d said I’d hear booming bitterns, and we did, though I thought the sound more reminiscent of someone blowing over a milk bottle or a note repeated by an Andean pan-pipe band.

It was the marsh harrier food pass I remember most from that morning, however. Despite near perfect approach work by the male, his partner dropped the food parcel. “#butterclaws,” I tweeted. The glossy ibis – a species that summons up images of heat haze above a drying water hole – was a surprise, too.

Pete and I parted company, and I cycled on fast roads to Wells and then my first properly hilly terrain in the shape of the Mendips. ▶

SPRING cycle 1

When the season of new life arrives in the UK, it advances north at 2mph. **James Fair** gets into gear to track the welcome signs of spring on a bicycle.





Just outside of Keynsham, I narrowly avoided a predation attempt when a coach-driver tried to overtake on a blind bend. The sigh of his air brakes was the first indication he was behind me, looming like a shark out of the pelagic gloom.

DAY 3 SUNDAY 23 APRIL

Another early morning appointment – this time 6.30am with the warden of RSPB Highnam Woods, Hannah Booth. My feet had turned into two blocks of ice by the time I reached the reserve – the temperature had barely climbed above 3°C – but what of it? Within earshot of the car park, a nightingale was synthesising a series of long, pure notes from the middle of a tangled thicket. While a small reserve by RSPB standards, Highnam Woods is micro-managed for these songbirds.

But creating perfect habitat is only one part of the equations – March and (so

AT DOVE STONE'S CHEW RESERVOIR, IT BEGAN TO SNOW – SO MUCH FOR CHASING SPRING NORTH, WINTER HAD CREEPT UP BEHIND ME.

far) April hadn't received much rain, and Hannah was worried about how it would impact on the nightingales' ability to find food for their chicks. "I've never seen it so dry," she said, kicking at the ruts in the forest ride we were walking along.

From Highnam, I skirted Worcester via Ledbury, Leominster and Ludlow and some of the loveliest back roads I encountered during the trip. At Upleadon, near Newent, bluebells shimmered like a mirage in a woodland desert.

DAY 4 MONDAY 24 APRIL

I was bound for RSPB Coombes Valley on the edge of the Peak District. I descended alarmingly from the Shropshire Hills into the Severn Valley, down and down and down until I started to feel like Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, though purgatory came on the other side of the river when I hit the traffic hell of Telford.

At Combes Valley, warden Paul

Bennett and I set off in search of two classic spring songsters – redstarts and pied flycatchers. Paul was an excellent guide, his ears twitching as they listened out for the distinctive notes of these woodland sprites. "Hang on a minute, what's that?" he'd say every minute or two, while I heard nothing. The redstart bellowing out from the top of a Scots pine was the highlight. From the reserve, I cycled into a wicked northerly wind and along the A523 through Leek to Bollington, and my friends Kate and Chris' house.

DAY 5 TUESDAY 25 APRIL

Buoyed (and yet, perversely, weighed down!) by an unhealthy supply of Kate's home-made flapjacks, I set off in almost sub-zero conditions for the Peak District reserve of RSPB Dove Stone. Above Pott Shrigley, I climbed to more than 300m and found ice nestling besides drystone walls.

I arrived at Dove Stone four hours later after the hardest riding of the whole trip and chilled to the bone, but a hot

Vimto drink, a cultural phenomenon I'd not come across before, soon put me right.

Warden Jon Bird had promised to find me a ring ouzel, or mountain blackbird, but at Chew Reservoir just above

500m, it began to snow – so much for chasing spring north, winter had crept up behind me. On the way back down, Jon somehow spotted something moving several hundred metres away. He whipped out his scope like an old-school magician and there it was, my second trip tick (to go with the glossy ibis).

From Dove Stone I took the train into Manchester and then out to Clitheroe (cycling through Greater Manchester didn't appeal), from where I rode up into the Forest of Bowland. I stopped briefly at a sign welcoming me to the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty depicting a hen harrier – what were my chances of seeing one, I wondered? Responses on Twitter were not encouraging.

DAY 6 WEDNESDAY 26 APRIL

A spectacular ride out of Bowland produced sightings of lapwings, curlews and other breeding waders for which the area is famous and I noticed that hawthorn was

MY CYCLE ROUTE: 844 MILES IN 13 DAYS

During my journey I decided to take in as many spring events at reserves I visited along the way as I could. These are the best of them and the wildlife you can spot.

1 RSPB HAM WALL

A wetland reserve in the Somerset Levels that's renowned for having six species of breeding herons. My goal was to hear booming bitterns, but April is also a good time to visit for marsh harrier action, plus reed and sedge warblers and other migrant songbirds such as blackcaps. www.rspb.org/hamwall

2 RSPB HIGHNAM WOODS

Just outside Gloucester, Highnam Woods is at the extreme edge of the nightingale's UK range, a species more easily found in the south and east. It's a splendid location for this most famous of songbirds, not least because you can hear them singing the moment you get out of your car (or off your bike). They arrive in the last week of April, but perhaps the best time to hear them is mid-May. www.rspb.org/highnamwoods

3 RSPB DOVE STONE

Briefly famous outside of birding circles in 2015 and 2016 when the body of an unidentified man was discovered near the reservoir, Dove Stone is an upland reserve that's good for breeding waders such as golden

plovers and dunlin. My goal, however, was a ring ouzel, a rare (in the UK, anyway) African migrant otherwise known as the mountain blackbird. www.rspb.org/dovestone

4 RSPB LOCH GARTEN

One of the best locations in the country to see ospreys, views of the 'fish hawk' are almost guaranteed at the hide a short walk from the car park. I was also hoping to see capercaillies, but there have been so few sightings of this sadly declining (in the UK) species of grouse from the Osprey Centre that the RSPB has now brought its 'caper-watch' programme to an end. www.rspb.org/lochgarten

5 RSPB FORSINARD FLOWS

Everyone should see the flat peatbogs and peaty lochans of the Flow Country at least once in their lives. I went in the hope of catching a hen harrier or short-eared owl, but had to make do with calling skylarks and greenshanks (a strange,

two-tone sound that's not a bad imitation of a car alarm). There are black- and red-throated divers too, though these are hard to see. The train ride is spectacular – the line runs from Inverness, but the best part is heading inland from Helmsdale – and stops at Forsinard. <http://bit.ly/2G4Zg9T>

6 RSPB DUNNET HEAD

Mainland Britain's most northerly

point, with nesting seabirds including puffins, guillemots, razorbills, fulmars and kittiwakes an added bonus, though all are declining because of the reduction in sandeel stocks. Look out for cetaceans here, too – porpoises and common dolphins can both be seen, but also larger species such as humpback and minke whales. www.rspb.org/dunnethead

not in flower here. It could be because I was at altitude, I reasoned, or perhaps I'd not just kept pace with spring, but overtaken it.

At RSPB Leighton Moss, Kevin Kelly took me on a tour of the reserve. "We've got bitterns here," he told me, "but they haven't bred for two years, and they don't boom, they grunt." For reasons to do with the hydrology of the site, the reedbeds are in a less-than-perfect state, meaning the bitterns can't get into condition to breed. So instead I had to make do with a – successful, this time – marsh harrier food pass, the two birds performing like trapeze artists in the sky.

I stayed several hours longer than anticipated at Leighton Moss. Consequently, I was short on time and caught another train – Oxenholme to Penrith – before cycling over to Dufton YHA under the shadow of the North Pennines.

DAY 7 THURSDAY 27 APRIL

From Dufton I cycled along the edge of the Pennines, past fields of brown hares, and arriving at Castle Carrock where I was meeting RSPB Geltsdale warden Stephen Westerberg. At the reserve office, Stephen showed me bundles of fluff pretending to be just-hatched lapwings.

Though Geltsdale should be near-optimal territory for hen harriers, breeding attempts are sporadic and birds disappear if they nest too close to the border with a shooting estate, Stephen said. Whinchats are his big passion, with the reserve one of the best locations in the country for them. In 2016, he fitted 20 with dataloggers to find out where in Africa they spend the winter. "I hope to get about half of those come back next year," he said. "And then you've got to catch them."

With Geltsdale behind me, I set my sights on Scotland and headed on to Moffat.

DAY 8 FRIDAY 28 APRIL

The route shadowed the M74 along already quiet roads that also had dedicated cycle lanes. Only the rather prosaic terrain and continuing northerly detracted from my

enjoyment. Every now and then I'd stop to listen to a burbling curlew, and just outside of Abington I encountered my first midges of the year.

I was heading for Motherwell, where I was meeting Mark Mitchell of RSPB Baron's Haugh. A pleasant and charismatic woodland reserve, it does nevertheless present unusual difficulties for a conservationist. "The hides are all concrete



● Overnight stops

TRACKING SPRING

because local youths burned down the wooden ones,” Mark told me.

From Baron’s Haugh, I was Stirling bound. I stayed at the youth hostel and had supper with ‘Discoveries’ writer Stuart Blackman.

DAY 9 SATURDAY 29 APRIL

The route from Stirling to Pitlochry took me into Perth and Kinross, the self-proclaimed “Heart of Scotland”. Just north of Crieff, I saw a sign saying, “Slow Down – Red Squirrels”, and then the road through Glen Cochill passed beneath the 600m peak of Beinn Liath. A caravan park at Dunfallandy – just the other side of the River Tummel from Pitlochry – was awash with the delicate pink of lady’s smock. I might have overtaken flowering hawthorn, but clearly I had a way to go to catch the cuckoo flower.

DAY 10 SUNDAY 30 APRIL

Without doubt, my favourite day’s cycling, as I skirted the edge of the Cairngorms on my way to the youth hostel in Glenmore, a salmon’s leap from Loch Morlich. It was mostly on cycle tracks, and even though I reached my highest point of the trip – the 462m Drumochter Pass – the ascents were all gradual so it was an easier ride than the morning I spent rollercoasting the Peak District. A close encounter with a red grouse, three roe deer sauntering across the track in front of me, the occasional roadkill mountain hare and a tawny owl caught napping by my sneakily quiet approach on two wheels were the main wildlife sightings of the day.

I’d arranged to spend that evening at the nearby Rothiemurchus pine marten hide with Cath Wright of Speyside Wildlife – nothing especially spring-tastic about pine martens, of course, but it felt like too good an opportunity to pass up. The appearance of a female gave me my third trip tick.

DAY 11 MONDAY 1 MAY

I headed for Loch Garten well before the crack of dawn in the hope of seeing capercaillies but it had been a bad year for them, according to the RSPB’s Chris Tilbury. The ospreys more than made up for it, however, the female putting on a splendid dog-fighting display with a crow.

I took a long cut to Inverness over the hills past Lochindorb and into the Findhorn Valley. I crossed the Moray Firth, and headed

“A CARAVAN PARK NEAR PITLOCHRY WAS AWASH WITH LADY’S SMOCK – I’D OVERTAKEN HAWTHORN, BUT I HADN’T CAUGHT THE CUCKOO FLOWER.”

CYCLING SPRING IN NUMBERS

1,525 HIGHEST ALTITUDE (IN FEET)

844 MILES COVERED

12 RESERVES VISITED



2 NEW BIRD SPECIES TICKED OFF

10 MAMMAL SPECIES SPOTTED (ALIVE)

5 MAMMAL SPECIES (DEAD)

PIECES OF CAKE CONSUMED TOO MANY TO COUNT

1 PUNCTURE
1 SEVERE DRENCHING



40,000 CALORIES BURNED
2 NEAR MISSES

over the Black Isle to the home of nature writer Kenny Taylor, where I was spending the night. He suggested we take a trip to Chanonry Point, an excellent location for bottlenose dolphins. Despite it being a falling – not rising tide – we saw one anyway.

DAY 12 TUESDAY 2 MAY

From the Black Isle, I had to cross first the Cromarty then the Dornoch Firth, while trying to avoid spending too much time on the A9. At the Dornoch Firth I caught sight of a large bird hovering like a cumbersome kestrel above the estuary. I feverishly grabbed my binoculars from my saddle bag and confirmed my hope – an osprey, and fishing too. It dived once, and came up with nothing, but the second time it flew with something in its talons. Along with perhaps the marsh harrier food pass, the single best wildlife encounter of the trip.

I cycled on to Golspie, from where I took the train up to Forsinard for a night at the RSPB’s new field centre. The Flow Country is an other-worldly landscape of flat peatbogs and alien conifer plantations. There was no

one else around, and with its tumbledown hotel, the place reminded me of a one-horse town in a Hollywood Western, and I half expected to see tumbleweed blowin’ in the wind.

DAY 13 WEDNESDAY 3 MAY

I headed first north to join the A836 (joyously freewheeling for 20 miles, or so it seemed), then through Thurso to Dunnet Head. Now I was closely monitoring the hawthorn, none of which was in flower – I’d beaten it, I thought exultantly, suggesting it had moved more slowly than 1.9mph. What caught my ear was the occasional willow warbler, however. How far north would I hear them, I wondered? Cycling up Dunnet Head itself, I found one on a gorse bush 500m from the edge of mainland Britain. While dubbing it our most northerly songbird was hardly scientific, there could not have been many rivals.

Warden Dave Jones gave me his guided walk. “When I’m doing them, I say ‘Turn right at the tree’,” he said, bending down to spread the leaves of a plant growing a few inches off the ground. “It’s my idea of a joke – this is juniper. It grows horizontally not vertically, because of the wind.”

Dave offered me a lift back to Thurso as I was taking the train back to Edinburgh that afternoon. Having been no more than half an hour late for any of the appointments I’d set up using pedal power, it was perhaps inevitable that my return via rail should prove less reliable. A delay forced me to miss my connection at Inverness, and I was bundled into a taxi for the rest of the journey south. ☒



JAMES FAIR is environment editor of *BBC Wildlife*. This month he also writes about Tasmanian devils (see p46).