

# **Sedge Warblers (*Acrocephalus Schoenobaenus*) Holding Territory In Fields Of Oil Seed Rape**

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## **Introduction**

In the years 1986-89 observations were made of Sedge Warblers holding territory (ie, singing) in rape fields. Whenever possible an attempt was made to locate the nesting area of these birds. Each breeding season these sites were revisited and a record made of the new crops planted. Any territories reoccupied in subsequent years were noted.

Birds were only recorded as holding territory when they were observed singing regularly in the oil seed rape. In most instances, however, these territories contained a small area of grass, hedge or marshy ground. Where this was more than a few square feet and was large enough to contain a sedge warbler territory the observation was discounted so that birds holding territory in the rape could not be confused with birds simply visiting the field from outside.

## **Observations**

Observations were made of Sedge Warblers singing in fields of oil seed rape. The low population of territories held in the following year after the crop was changed from oil seed rape, together with the high proportion of territories reoccupied when rape was replanted in a subsequent year (see Table 1) suggests that Sedge Warblers find it a suitable habitat.

Although it was almost impossible to confirm the exact site of most nests, by observing adult birds carrying food it became apparent that most birds (about 80%) did not nest in the rape but instead preferred the small area of 'natural\* cover contained in their territory.

It seems then the the value of the rape to the Sedge Warblers is mainly as a food source and this is confirmed by many observations of birds foraging in rape fields and carrying insects long distances, even across two fields, back to the nest site in traditional, marshy habitat.

## **Discussion**

Sedge Warblers usually arrive and begin to hold territory during the last week in April/first week in May. By this time the oil seed rape has grown to nearly its full height (3-4 ft) and has begun to flower. As such it is the only local crop which provides substantial cover when birds are beginning to hold their territories. Rape fields probably attract Sedge Warblers because they provide a good environment for insects, their densely packed leaves provide shade and retain moisture in the soil and their flowers attract many pollinating insects. Their prolonged flowering period which lasts about 10

weeks, coincides with the Sedge Warblers' arrival and first brood. The crop provides foraging and cover until it is harvested in late July.

## Summary

Oil seed rape provides a suitable habitat for sedge warbler territories either by creating a new breeding site or by extending the cover around small areas of rough ground in which they prefer to nest. The high density of flowers which the rape produces attracts insects and consequently increases the food supply for Sedge Warblers during the breeding season.

	<i>Year</i>	<i>86</i>	<i>87</i>	<i>88</i>	<i>89</i>
<i>Newly observed Territory Held in Rape Field</i>		4	9	11	12
<i>Territory not held after change of crop</i>			4	8	11
<i>Territory held after change of crop</i>			1		
<i>Territory Reoccupied in Replanted Rape</i>			4	8	
<i>Territory not Reoccupied in Replanted Rape</i>			1	1	