

March 2006
VIGILANTE PATROL IN BULMER
A new approach to community policing?

A Bulmer resident, of foreign extraction, who moved into The Street last Autumn, has taken on the responsibility of patrolling an area of Bulmer Street, in an effort to combat theft. He is believed to come from either Norway or Sweden and is not too keen on some of the locals. Petty thieves have been entering private property and making off with various small items that had been left lying around. Worryingly he uses considerable violence against any interlopers and there is concern that one of the locals will be seriously injured. You may have read my warning in the last "What's On" that we would be receiving newcomers from Scandinavia and this individual is one of them.

This vigilante is a Fieldfare, a most handsome member of the thrush family. He spends most of his time perched on our bottom gate, defending a pile of old windfall apples that we had thrown out, which he regards as his own. Woe betide any Blackbird, Thrush or other Fieldfare that dares to land and attempt to get as much as a beak full for themselves! They find themselves instantly attacked and usually beat a very hasty retreat. I'm sure that he expends more energy defending these half rotten apples, than he actually gains from eating them.

The vast majority of Fieldfares over wintering in this country spend nearly all of their time out in the fields, searching for worms, slugs and other invertebrates, amongst the sprouting cereal crops. Why the odd one or two should choose to leave the flocks to set up a winter territory, is anyone's guess. Usually it's only in times of really sharp frosts and snow that many of them venture into gardens, when the fields are frozen solid.

Most of us in the village are only too aware of the continuous overhead procession of raffle, heading for Stansted. For at least 20 years another form of overhead traffic has been passing over Bulmer during wintertime. Over in the Belchamp valley, up to 1500 Rooks and Jackdaws congregate in a winter roost and each morning the birds disperse in all directions, to return again at dusk. This is when they can often be seen crossing the skies of Bulmer, sometimes dropping down to feed in our fields on the way. Given the large numbers of birds involved, it is obvious that most of them must be miles away from their nesting sites, where they will have returned to by now.

I've added a new bird to my Bulmer bird list, on the 9th. Feb. Strangely enough I was watching some of the Belchamp Rooks from the footbridge over the Belchamp Brook, when a very harsh sort of croak, very like the call of a Jay, quite startled me.

Scanning the trees and finding nothing, I was surprised and delighted to see a Little Egret fly up from the edge of the stream. For the uninitiated, this is like a small heron, but pure white, a most beautiful and graceful bird. These striking birds are very speedily colonising the south and east of England, ten years ago they were rarities. At first restricted to the coast, they gradually found their way up the river valleys and are now venturing into the smaller tributaries, like Belchamp Brook. After the Egret had disappeared in the direction of Belchamp Church, I had just turned around, when a largish bird glided into view, a Barn Owl, the first I've personally seen in the village for the better part of 25 years. Back then, a pair used to nest in one of the hollow oaks in Smeetham Hall Lane. They would quite often hunt over the old allotments where St. Andrews Rise now stands, when from "Cornfields", we had an uninterrupted view to the church and beyond. Ah, those were the days!

JUNE 2006

LACK OF TRAINING IN BASIC LIFE SKILLS?

Back in March I witnessed a puzzling incident. I was watching a buzzard, something of a rarity in Bulmer. It was perched on a small oak, close by a strip of bare cultivated ground. I must have spotted the rat the same moment as the buzzard did, which took off in pursuit. The rat was a sitting target, 30 yards out from the hedge with no other cover. The raptor swooped down on its target, I expected a quick kill, but, inexplicably, landed about a yard short of the rat and then attempted to scramble along the ground in pursuit! Needless to say the rat escaped, scurrying off into the hedge. How could a seemingly mature bird of prey be so inexpert at it's most basic method of procuring a meal, how has it survived so far? Was it that it had never been taught by example, by watching its parents hunt? Or was it just having an "off day". Whatever the reason, it's nice to report that these handsome birds are becoming increasingly common in the eastern counties; I've had two other sightings of them in Bulmer this spring.



We have heard more cuckoos this year, their call drifting up to us from the Belchamp valley. It's worrying though that two other migrants don't seem to be doing as well. I haven't seen, or heard, a willow warbler or a turtle dove in our area of the village this year. Ten or more years ago they were relatively common.

Some of our local wildlife is doing really well (farmers and foresters will say far too well) In late March, on one of our work party days at Little Dean Spinney, we were all surprised to see at least ten fallow deer crossing the fields between us and the church. Three of them were carrying good heads of antlers. These are relative newcomers to Bulmer, having spread from the Belchamp area. For years we've had a small population of roe deer, sometimes up to six or seven in a group. The fallows seem to form larger herds, I've seen up to fifteen across the valley in Belchamp. Then of course there is the muntjac, which reminds me more of a pig than a deer, with a fat little body and short legs. They tend to be more solitary than the other two.

Returning to Little Dean Spinney, our village conservation area, I'm pleased to say that most of our young trees are flourishing. We have now got enough established. One annoying factor, the protective tubes around the trees provide ideal sites for ants to expand their nests to, often filling them up with soil to about 2ft, creating a sort of tower block for these industrious insects. This can smother and kill the young tree in the tube. There was a great show of cowslips flowering around the path again this year; they certainly find the site to their liking.

Another success has been the survival of our "asylum seekers". These, you may remember, were common lizards and slowworms, rescued from development sites in Sudbury and released on the Spinney. We have seen both of these reptile species on the site this spring, so we know that many of them survived the winter, a good start, which hopefully will lead to permanent

colonies of these fascinating creatures.

Apart from the planted trees, self-sown shrubs are colonising the back of the site beside the ancient hedge and saplings are springing up. This will develop into a Scrubby area, ideal cover for small birds to nest in. We have already had a yellowhammer and a whitethroat nest in the hedge.

I will take this opportunity to thank the little band of helpers, who turn up so willingly at our regular work parties, to undertake the necessary chores. Without them it would be impossible to keep the Spinney open.

SEPTEMBER 2006

NATURAL SCULPTORS ENHANCE ROSES

Visiting my sister Jean, she showed me what she regarded as an attractive addition to the beauty of one of her rose bushes. The leaves of one vigorously growing stem were displaying an interesting decorative pattern. The edges of the leaves had been neatly cut, leaving them with a crisp scalloped edge, making a dainty pattern and adding a certain beauty to the emerging greenery.

As we inspected this strange aberration of nature, a bee, about the same size as a honeybee, alighted on one of the leaves. Not finding it to its liking, it moved on to another leaf and quite unbelievably in no more than three or four seconds, had cut out a perfect semicircle of leaf about the size of a 10p coin. It was off instantly, we watched it as it sped away over neighbouring gardens, fading out of sight about 200yds off. This, I realised, was a leaf-cutter bee. I had seen their work before, but had never caught one in the act; it was the sheer speed of the operation that was so amazing.

In a way this added another piece to a jigsaw for me, I had found the nest of one of these fascinating insects in my own garden a few years back. I followed what appeared to be a strange green insect as it flew into a flowerbed, of course it turned out to be the bee plus the leaf segment that it was carrying. It disappeared into a little tunnel in the soil, taking the leaf with it. Afterwards I investigated, carefully pulling out the portion of leaf, which was rolled up like a cigar. Turning to the reference books, I read that this tunnel can be over a foot long. After each plug of leaf is inserted, an egg is laid and then supplied with pollen and honey to feed the larva, which will hatch out of the egg. More plugs are inserted plus eggs until the tunnel is full

Eventually, having overwintered in the tunnel, spring will see the next generation of leaf-cutter bees emerge to carry on their tradition of leaf sculpture.

IT'S AN ILL WIND

I am sure that everyone else in the village shared our disappointment, when travellers set up their home on the wide grass verge at Dogs Pit Corner a couple of times last year. We had an extra concern, four of our less common wild flowers flourish on this particular stretch of roadside and we feared for their survival. Happily, our fears were unfounded. Far from destroying them, they all seemed to be flourishing with extra vigour this year.

It's probable that in the area churned up by the many wheels, the growth of the more dominant grasses was retarded, allowing the other plants a breathing space and for fresh seed to germinate. The two most showy of these flowers, are soapwort and dark mullein. Introduced to Britain in ancient times from southern Europe, soapwort, as its name suggests, was in the past

used as a substitute for soap. The leaves were boiled up and the resulting frothy brew did the rest. So the next time you run out of Persil..... Dark mullein, a verbascum, has a tall yellow flower spike, worthy of any garden. The other two flowers are burnet-saxifrage, a late flowering white umbellifer, and restharrow, a member of the pea family. The latter has such tough roots that, in the days of horse farming, it impeded the process of cultivation, bringing the harrows to a halt. Also it's reputed that if milk cows fed on its leaves, it tainted the flavour of their milk and even the cheese made from it.

On three separate occasions this summer I have had people contact me, convinced that they have seen an adder locally, so I thought that I should put people's minds at rest. There are no adders living within twenty miles or so of Bulmer, they thrive on sandy heath land, not our intensively farmed countryside. The nearest to here is probably Fingringhoe Wick Nature Reserve, south of Colchester. The "adder" invariably turns out to be a grass snake, they do vary somewhat in colour, but they will always have a creamy white collar, just behind the head. They grow up to four feet in length with a gracefully slender body, whereas the adder only attains a couple of feet in length and appears fat and almost "slug-like". Grass snakes are as much at home in the water as they are on dry ground; we have often had one in our garden pond.



Well, another summer has drawn to a close, the last swallows and martins are now leaving for warmer climes and the swifts and the cuckoo have long gone. It's been a great summer for migrant butterflies and moths. I was amazed to be told that some of these actually make the long flight from North Africa in one hop. Carried, I would assume, on southerly gales. The red admiral is one of these, having arrived; they breed and produce a second generation here. These go into hibernation, but very few



survive the winter in this country. But it's the painted lady that has been the most prolific migrant; this brightly coloured butterfly was over here in swarms. In mid July, we had at least fifty in our back garden, feasting on our buddleias. Last year we only saw one all summer. At the same time there was a mass arrival of silver y moths (they are brownish grey and show a white "y" on each wing) Being day fliers, they were very noticeable and almost as plentiful as the painted ladies. The most delightful of any of these migrant insects is the humming-bird hawk moth. Very like a real humming-bird, they hover in front of flowers, probing into the bloom with their long proboscis to reach the nectar deep inside. With those sweet thoughts, I will sign off.

DECEMBER 2006

A COUNTRY WAKE

There had been a death out in the middle of the field and the wake was in full swing. The mourners were gathered round, all anxious to pay their respects. As was only fitting, they were

all clad in sombre black. But an interloper in their midst, improperly dressed in dirty white and dingy greybrown, had taken on the role of chief mourner and undertaker, having administered the last rites. He was now busily attending to the corpse and re-arranging its form. The mourners, in case you hadn't guessed, were our local mafia of twenty or so carrion crows, which rule the field behind our bungalow with their own brand of mob violence. The interloper, who the crows treated with watchful respect, was an immature lesser black backed gull. It was intent on procuring as much nourishment as it could from the rabbit's carcass. The crows, jealous of being ousted from their usual roles, milled around the gull, looking for the least opportunity to regain their rightful position and claim their customary perks. The gull, slightly larger than the crows, was seriously outnumbered.

In a similar incident about a year ago, just two crows mugged a sparrow-hawk and robbed it of its prey. Now the boot was on the other foot. Despite their superior numbers, the crows were just no match for the gull, which only had to threaten with its viscous beak, to send any of its would-be assailants into feather ruffled retreat. In fact it treated them with admirable contempt, which I found most pleasing.

The lesser black back gull only comes inland in small numbers and is much larger than the black headed and common gulls, with which we are all so familiar, as they follow the plough, in white, swirling multitudes.

THE DISAPPEARING LAKE.

We've got a magic lake in Bulmer; it must lie submerged somewhere beneath our feet, in some mystical parallel world. Occasionally it surfaces, to show itself in awesome splendour. I've seen it recently, on a warm afternoon this October. Shimmering waves, softly undulating to the kiss of a gentle breeze and glistening under the rays of the lowering sun. It's whole surface so dazzling that one had to look away. The entire field beside the Village Hall was submerged under its delicate waves.

This spectral lake is a child of the sun, one cloud will dispel its delicate beauty and render it invisible, and to be replaced by the rough clods turned up by the plough. But this apparition, although summoned - up at the whim of the Sun, is created by the earth-bound members of the Araneae tribe, spiders. The whole field, acre upon acre, was covered with gossamer. This, the product of countless thousands of spiders, made a fine floating layer, which stretched to every hedge. As the sun caught this gently undulating mass, it was impossible to believe that it was not some pristine body of water, the setting sun mirrored in its waters. The manner in which the gossamer occurs sounds almost as far-fetched as my magic lake. Apparently, money spiders are responsible for this phenomenon. Millions of them spin long single strands of web in the early mornings. The warming air rises and carries each individual strand upwards, complete with its spider. At the mercy of the winds they are carried aloft until cooler air brings them down, sometimes as much as 100 miles away. So, that being the case, we may have uncovered another case of mass illegal immigration, if they had floated across from the continent.



Of course the gossamer must have covered our whole area, just how many millions of spiders took to the air on that day? As a measure of the fineness of a spider's web, if a spider could spin a thread right around the world, it would weigh less than 6 ozs!

NATURAL HISTORY?

I recently chanced upon some of my old bird notes that I had made as a teenager, about fifty years ago. (1954 - 1956) It has been interesting to compare these

records with today's. Although not all doom and gloom, this does pinpoint what we have lost as breeding species and in the much-reduced numbers of many others. Nightingales singing, a Lesser spotted woodpecker on our apple tree, Tree sparrows nesting and Barn owls hunting, all in, or within 100 yards of our garden at Upper Houses. All of these birds were Bulmer residents then, but alas, not today.

As you might expect, our migrant birds are now arriving a little earlier in the spring, than they were 50 years back, underlining the reality of global warming.

My findings, taking three year averages for '54, '55 and '56 and comparing them with the averages for '04, '05 and '06, were as follows:- Chiffchaff and House martin now arrive 6 days earlier, Swift 3.5 days earlier, Whitethroat 2.5 days earlier and the Swallow just one day earlier. The Cuckoo averages 3 days *later*, but this is because they are now quite scarce and my 2005 record was abnormally late. Although I had arrival dates for Nightingale, Turtle dove, Willow warbler and Spotted flycatcher from the fifties, there are not enough current records (or in some cases no records) to make any meaningful comparison.