

MARCH 2007

BIRDNAPPING?

Towards the end of October, someone must have kidnapped all the birds from the garden. One day the garden was full of the usual throng of birds, stuffing themselves with peanuts and sunflower seeds, the next day they were gone. Up until then we had to fill the feeders about every other day. They had completely deserted us. The feeders hung untouched right through November, with hardly a visit from any bird, till we threw away the old seed just before Christmas. After the New Year we had the occasional visit, but it was not until the middle of January that they started to drift back. By the end of the month, greenfinches, blue and great tits, goldfinches and house sparrows were again stripping the feeders with gusto. Even allowing for the extremely mild conditions, which would allow them to find natural alternatives away from habitation, it seems most odd that they could disappear for so long and then turn up again in large numbers.

GOLD RUSH

We had a golden day towards the end of January. In one sheltered spot the first celandines shone like varnished *gold* stars, from an emerald bed of sprouting cow parsley (sheep's parsley to us locals). Round our pond the first coltsfoot held up their proud heads on tall, silkily downy stems, with flower sofa softer *gold*.

On the bird feeders *goldfinches* were sharing their ever-changing perches with greenfinches. The male greenfinches are now in full breeding splendour, displaying vivid flashes of *gold* from both wings and tail, to complement the mossy green of their breasts. At the same time a small flock of larger birds were flying in tight formation to and fro across the fields. They twisted and turned incomplete unison, sometimes almost invisible, then with a sudden turn, flashing brilliant white as their lighter parts caught the sun, only to disappear just as abruptly as they veered sharply again. Backwards and forwards they sped on sharply pointed wings till, feeling it safe, they landed as one, out in the field. These *Golden* plovers, equally at home on farmland or coastal mud flats, are winter visitors, nesting on the moors of northern Britain and way up into the Arctic Circle. Still in their winter plumage, these elegant little birds have an overall colour more light sand than gold. However seen in their full summer regalia, no one would begrudge them their name. If you've got a bird book, look them up and see for yourself.

I wrote last year about the abnormally late spring that we experienced. This year shows all the signs of being abnormally early, but time will tell. The first celandines were coming into bloom about the third week of January. Early February saw the first blossom on cherry plum trees, last year it was towards the end of March before it dared to burst forth. First coltsfoot flower end of January this year, early March last year. Many reports of red admiral butterflies on the wing, during Jan. and Feb. most unusual.



Certainly one pair of collared doves thought that spring had arrived early. In mid February the female was already sitting on two eggs, the nest tucked neatly into the ivy that covers our old apple tree.

However, I must try not to repeat my mistake of last year, regarding nests..... We have a Morella cherry tree growing against the wall of our bungalow, every year we have to net it in, to ensure that we get our share of the fruit. Neglect to do this and our local blackbirds arrive in droves,

to make short work of the crop, as we found out to our cost, years ago. That year, in their feeding frenzy they redecorated our stone coloured walls with a delicate, if blotchy, shade of pink, as the juice squirted out of the ripening fruit. Last year on the 30th June, we fixed the net, as always, being careful not to leave any gaps. It is all too easy for a small bird to find its way into the net, panic, and find itself trapped. Well, we were out all the next day, but that evening the constant cheeping of a bird led us to the net. To our dismay, we found a young chaffinch well entangled in the net. With great care we cut the little bird free, getting a few spirited pecks, and off it flew into our rowan tree. Back indoors; Wendy again heard the cheeping, as before it came from the net. But this time the bird was inside the net, so we lifted the net and released this second young bird. Scouring the net for possible points of entry, I spotted a nest, hidden cleverly in a forked branch, a real masterpiece of camouflage. So, rather than netting the birds out from the cherries, we had netted these ones in. We had noticed, that morning, a chaffinch carrying a beak-full of wriggly green caterpillars, flitting about close to the kitchen window. It then became obvious to us that for over a day the parent birds had been feeding their incarcerated young through the mesh of the netting. A happy ending to a potential tragedy.

The warmth of the burgeoning spring brings forth creatures that spend the winter in a state of torpor. Queen wasps venture out and seek a suitable site to begin their Herculean task of nest construction. The nest is built with "paper" which the queen manufactures from chewed up wood, which she scrapes from any exposed wood, which is not too hard. Once the structure is big enough, she laid her first eggs. Still adding to the nest, she feeds her offspring. They hatch as grubs and eventually pupate into workers (non fertile females). These workers then take on the task of enlarging the nest and caring for their siblings. This leaves the queen free to fulfil her real purpose in life, to lay the eggs that provide the thousands of wasps that will make up the final colony. Towards Autumn, the slightly larger males and even larger queens are produced. Once the new queens and males leave the nest, they mate. She looks for somewhere to hibernate, to start next year's population. The last workers and males all die with the onset of winter. The old nests are never re-used.



Cowslips on Little Dean Spinney 2007

It looks like being another good year for cowslips on Little Dean Spinney, our village conservation area near Upper Houses. Take a stroll up there towards the end of April, when they should be at their best.

Sad to say that as soon as the collared doves hatched out, they were taken from the nest by the large tabby cat that often frequents the garden.

JUNE 2007

I said in March that it looked as though we were heading for an early spring this year. How true that true that turned out to be, with the last three weeks of April serving up temperatures more in keeping with summer than spring. This premature warmth brought the oaks into leaf and the cow parsley into flower, a good three weeks earlier than usual. On the bird front, I spotted the first swallow, skimming over the backfield on April 7th and a swift on the 24th. Both a few days earlier than the average for the last few years. The first whitethroats, three of them, were

flitting about in the Upper Houses lane, on the 24th. which is about the usual time of their arrival. House martins turned up on 28th April, the same date as last year. However, 5th of May for a cuckoo, was considerably later than normal.

Isn't it strange that many things that we take for granted are not always as straightforward as they seem at first sight. If you've ever been enthralled by the electric blue flash of a kingfisher darting across a river, or simply admired the colours of a blue tit, you will probably be most surprised to learn (as I certainly was) that birds have no blue pigment in their feathers at all. The blue colour is actually produced by the microscopic make up of the feathers, which, by refraction, will only reflect the blue section of the spectrum. The same process, in a rainbow, splits up the light to produce the different colours that we see in the bow. Most of us are used to the concept of birds moulting and changing their plumage from season to season, but here again, there are other mechanisms at work, which I had never suspected. Young starlings for example.

These, in late summer and autumn, display a most varied plumage; being covered with large white spots and mottled white patches. As the months progress, these outer white feathers gradually wear away, exposing the black feathers underneath. The male house sparrow demonstrates this again, the filigree black collar, part of their breeding plumage, is uncovered gradually during the winter, as the lighter outer feathers slowly disintegrate to expose darker ones underneath. These feathery facts were gleaned from a fascinating talk that we attended a few weeks ago, delivered by Geoffrey Abbott at the Lavenham Bird Club.

The sun parched days towards the end of April made it a difficult time for a pair of song thrushes, as they sought out food for their nestlings. They spent ages on our lawn, only to be



rewarded with a few measly little slugs or the occasional worm. Thinking to make life a little easier for them Wendy hunted out some snails from their hidey-holes and threw them on the lawn. (Song thrushes are the only birds that have perfected the art of smashing snails on any handy stone or hard surface) Would you believe it, the thrushes ignored the snails, which made their escape at breakneck speed into the border! Ah well, you can take a horse to water, etc. etc.

Nature watching should be a relaxing pastime, but when cameras are involved, it can be more than a little frustrating. One of my ambitions has long been to get some acceptable video of a cuckoo, actually calling. About the middle of May, some loud "cuckoos" awakened me quite early, obviously very close at hand. I Quickly set up camera and tripod. Clearly, the cuckoo was just behind our boundary trees, in our neighbour Maudie's garden. As I was keeping my vigil, two large birds swept into view. A carrion crow mobbing a buzzard! and close at hand. Not

something to miss. I whipped the camera off the tripod and leaned out of the window to get them in my sights, whereupon they promptly wheeled back over the roof and out of my sight. Whilst all this was going on, I was still aware of the cuckoo still calling merrily away. Well might I have heard it, for it was perched on our garden weather vane, in full view, where it remained for all of five seconds. Needless to say, it took off down the field before I could even focus on it. If it hadn't have been for that damned buzzard!.....

Welcome additions to our garden this spring, are a couple of bee orchids. They have appeared, as if by magic, on the lawn, in mid May. Makes a change from dandelions.

If you've got a garden pond, watch out for colourful little damselflies that will probably have hatched there. On our pond we get the Large Red, Common Blue, Azure and Blue Tailed Damselflies. Their larger relations, dragonflies also turn up from time to time, including Britain's largest, the Emperor, with a wing span of about 4 ins.(100mm) The Broad Bodied Chaser is the most colourful, the male's broad abdomen being a vivid sky blue, whilst the female is quieter honey brown. Other dragonflies, which visit us, include the Migrant Hawker, Brown Hawker, Common Darter and the Four spotted chaser, pictured. To dispel any ones fears, damselflies and dragonflies, neither bite nor sting.



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### SEPT 2007

**IMPORTANT** Wild bird disease. You may have heard of this disease (trichomoniasis), which is being spread amongst finches, particularly Greenfinches. The disease has spread to Bulmer, a Greenfinch in our garden was showing all the signs, fluffed up plumage, lethargy, breathing and swallowing difficult. The disease is spread through their saliva and droppings. Precautions against further spread of the disease are as follows: - **Don't** put out more than they can eat in one day. **Clean** the feeding area daily (including the ground under hanging feeders) **Give** fresh water daily. **Disinfect** feeders weekly with a diluted household disinfectant and allow to dry. **Move** feeding areas around to lessen build up.

There are always special things to be anticipated with pleasure with the turn of each season. Autumn brings forth the wild fruits. Picking blackberries on a sunny September afternoon, when all around is mellow and comfortably warm. Be prepared for a few scratches though and take a **crome**, a long stick with a branched hook on one end, to reach the best ones. They will invariably be well out of arm's reach. The overripe berries will be attracting Comma and Red Admiral butterflies, which imbibe themselves on the sweet fruity liquor, through their long curved proboscis. Fitting the mood of the season and half drunk on the mellow juice, they lazily flit off, when disturbed by us more clumsy products of evolution.

A **crome** is also useful for gathering hazelnuts and what a fantastic year it has been for them. A great winter pastime is sitting by a good log fire, armed with the crackers, to deal with these armour plated capsules and freeing the often-minuscule nut inside. Then, of course, you get wrong for shooting the splintered shells across the carpet! These nuts are a great food source for many wild creatures. Especially the grey squirrel, that tree rat, which was stupidly released into the Wild decades ago, having been brought over here from North America. It has now displaced our native red squirrel from most of England. The last red squirrel that I saw locally was beside the Belchamp Brook in the mid 1950s. I can still picture it now; as it peeped put at me from behind an elm trunk, before scampering off into what turned out to be, local extinction.

Look on the floor under any Hazel stub and you will find it littered with opened shells. Look carefully, there will be splintered ones, roughly opened by grey squirrels, some with quite neat round or oval holes, the work of field or wood mice. If however, the holes are round and so perfect that they appear almost machine made, you could be looking at the work of that very rare little creature, the dormouse. Not only rare, it is also extremely secretive, only coming out at night.



This brings me to another highlight of our autumn. On a nature reserve in south Suffolk, we assist the warden in checking the dormouse boxes. This is the only way that anyone is likely to see one of these cute little animals. Around 5 ins in length, about half of which is the bushy tail, large protruding eyes with a golden, ginger tinged coat of soft fur. Only the warden is licensed to handle these little gems, as he records their sex, age and weight. Once, a particularly lively one escaped his hand, ran up his arm and sat on his shoulder, (see picture below) before darting up a hazel stem. From about 10 ft up he surveyed us with big liquid eyes, whilst clinging to the stem, head down. They spend the winter hibernating in a cosy nest, tucked into the

roots of a coppiced hazel stub or at the base of one of the big trees. To survive the winter they must build up a supply of fat and need to weigh at least 20 grammes (3/4 oz) or more. A good nut year should enhance their chances of making it through their long winter sleep.

Thanks to everyone who contacted me about the pyramidal orchid by the side of Church Road in July, This has always been an interesting road verge, bee orchids, broomrape, blue fleabane and many other interesting plants can be found there.

Apart from the obvious pleasures of a country stroll, it's nice when you meet and chat with others who share similar interests. One couple that we occasionally bumped into were Lyn and Roger Hunt. There was always an interesting discussion on local and rural matters. Roger had that instinctive understanding of the countryside and wildlife, that only comes from a life spent in close contact with the land, working through seedtime and harvest on Bulmer's soil. The news of his passing came as a shock to us all. He will be sadly missed.



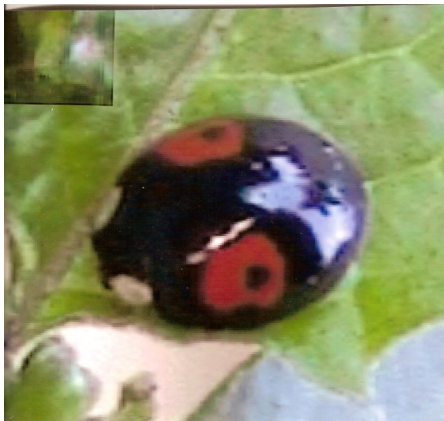
### **Little Dean Spinney update.**

The extraordinarily wet May and June we suffered this year, resulted in a "crop" of grass and other herbage much higher and more lush than usual. As usual we have had some areas of the site cut again this autumn, we try to cut each area once in two years, except at the top of the site and on the right side, where the slow-worms and common lizards were released two years ago. George Millins, who was in charge of the release programme, surveyed the site in April this year and found seven lizards and three slow-worms. He was well pleased and optimistic about their future on the site. You may remember, they were rescued from construction sites in Sudbury. Whitethroats again nested in the hedge and blue-tits in one of the nest boxes. On the plant front, we have had cowslip, common centaury, wild basil, burnet saxifrage, toadflax, dark mullein, perforate st.Johnswort, agrimony, corn spurrey (a rare arable weed native to the site) and three species of vetch flowering this summer, as well as ragwort, which we do prevent from seeding. The black and yellow striped caterpillars of the cinnabar moth feed on ragwort and we found many of the plants stripped by them this year. The moth is a mixture of crimson and grey, very striking. I saw a couple there in June. On 15th July I found a privet hawk-moth clinging to a fence post, one of our largest moths with a wingspan of over four inches. I am greatly indebted to Steve and Chris Davies, who have taken on the task of cutting the paths around the site, many thanks. Thanks also to the other members of the "last of the summer wine" gang, who turn out so willingly for our work parties. We usually meet on Thursday afternoons, on an irregular basis. Anyone is most welcome to join us, please ring if you feel like a little fresh air and exercise.

## DECEMBER 2007

**Bird disease update.** Since seeing the greenfinch showing the symptoms of trichomoniasis, as reported in the last "What's on", we have happily seen no more signs of this disease. I have constructed a stand about 7 ft. high to hang our feeders on. I move this about the lawn every two days, this prevents food waste and droppings building up in any one place. We are getting a good selection of birds, including greenfinches, which seem to be the most vulnerable to the disease.

**Departures and arrivals.** My last dates for summer migrant birds seen in Bulmer are Swift 9th Aug. whitethroat 6th Sept. chiffchaff 23rd Sept. house martin 25th Sept. swallow 7th Oct. The first fieldfares were spotted on 18th Oct. and redwings on the 25th Oct. Many of our smaller birds appear to be flourishing, mainly due to the mild winters that we have enjoyed of late. Wrens seem to be everywhere and large parties of long tailed tits are often encountered. John Battersby counted an amazing 27 in one flock of these delightful little birds. With their rounded little bodies and long tails, ex Bulmer resident Neville Hume christened them "flying spoons".



An insect that is rapidly colonising most of Britain is the harlequin ladybird (see picture). "Harlequin" because they come in an amazing variety of colour combinations, from almost black to pale yellow, with varying numbers of spots. We had many of them coming indoors this autumn. They originate in the far east. Being extremely voracious, when it comes to devouring aphids, they were introduced into Europe, as biological pest controls. Inevitably, they escaped into the wild and within a couple of years were over here. The same has happened in America, where they are already branded as pests. One concern here is that they will replace our native ladybirds, by out-competing them for food and also eating their larvae. They join the ever-lengthening list

of species introduced into our countryside that have become pests, like grey squirrels, muntjac, mink, American crayfish etc.

We recently attended a fascinating conference at Ipswich, which focussed on farming and wildlife. Whilst we were encouraged by a lot of what was discussed, it was disquieting to realise how political decisions taken on a worldwide scale, could bring significant changes to our local environment. The big push to lessen the use of fossil fuels has seen a huge decrease in the acreage of cereal crops grown, as farmers, particularly in America and Australia, are encouraged to grow crops to produce bio-fuels. This and other factors, has resulted in a worldwide shortage of some cereals, doubling the price of wheat in about two years. This has turned the economics

of farming on its head in this country. Set aside is no longer compulsory, which means that some farms may return to hedge to hedge intensive, farming. Many farms have taken up country stewardship schemes under which they receive extra payments for implementing wildlife friendly practices, such as the 6-meter strips around fields. These are left as grass, in some cases sown with plants, which will provide sources of pollen and nectar for insects and seed for the birds. These strips are terrific assets to all of our wildlife, from the tiniest insects and on up the food chain. A couple of years ago, the payment that they received for these strips was, acre for acre, more than the profit they could have made from producing wheat. Today the payment would only amount to about half the value of the wheat, owing to the increase in grain prices. Thus, clearly, there will be no financial incentive to continue with these schemes when they come to the end of their term. It's to be hoped that, with increasing profit margins, landowners will continue to protect wildlife friendly habitats, whether in or out of agri-environmental schemes. We are fortunate in Bulmer in having farms that are well managed both for wildlife and (or) game shooting. There may appear to be a conflict of interests here, between shooting and conservation, but in fact, providing suitable conditions for pheasants and partridges, inevitably provides good habitat and feeding opportunities for a host of assorted creatures birds, like finches and small mammals. Long may this sporting interest, combined with the good will of landowners and the right sort of environmental support from the government, continue to benefit our local wildlife?

It's been a really good year for Autumn colours, with golds, russets and soft reds shining up at us from the trees down in the Belchamp Valley. Have you noticed the spindle bushes this year? They have excelled themselves, bearing a heavy crop of carmine pink berries so thick that from a distance the whole bush looks on fire. As they mature, the four lobed berries split, to reveal the bright orange core peeping through the outer pink. Not one of nature's most complementary colour combinations! Spindle is in the euonymus family. It gets its name from the fact that in the past, being a very hard wood, it was used for making spindles for spinning yarn and also for making meat skewers.