

MARCH 2008

Walking the footpath past the Village Hall towards Upper Houses in mid January, a sizeable flock of small birds arose from the game strip across the field to the left. I estimated that the flock was between 150 and 200 strong. Seemingly very wary, they frequently took off and re-landed, only to spring into the air again a moment later. With a very erratic, bouncy flight they wheeled around, each bird dipping up and down, as if hung on a strand of elastic. This was an unusually large flock of linnets, members of the finch family. This flock, which several people have commented on, are likely to be migrants, only wintering here and nesting either further north, or on the continent. In fact they are becoming increasingly rare as breeding birds and have been put on the red list of endangered species. There are always a few that nest locally, but their numbers have dropped by about a quarter in eight years. It's not unusual to find a flock of mixed finches, especially where there's a plentiful food source, chaffinches, greenfinches, goldfinches making up the bulk, with maybe the odd linnet or yellowhammer amongst them, but these linnets were in a flock of their own. Buzzards are being sighted more and more frequently in the village, but a more notable bird of prey was spotted by Ashley Cooper along the Gestingthorpe road in late Feb. It was a red kite, these are being re-introduced in Northamptonshire and the odd one strays across into our area. Much larger than buzzards, although less chunky in build, their main distinguishing feature is their forked tail.



Looking back to last winter, (2006-07) I remember that many of our garden birds deserted us through December and part of January, for no accountable reason, very different this year, we have had good numbers of greenfinches, chaffinches, goldfinches, blue and great tits stripping the feeders in quick time, right through the winter. We also get regular visits from long tailed tits. On January 8th the chaffinches feeding in our garden were joined by a fine cock brambling, a visitor from Scandinavia. Very like a chaffinch, but with orange, rather than pink on its breast and flanks.

Another good sighting in mid February was a nuthatch, investigating a hole in a half dead sycamore, near the back entrance to the Auberies, in Sandy Lane. These delightful little birds, like the treecreeper, find most of their food on the trunks and larger branches of trees. The nuthatch is the only one which will actually come down the trunk head first. One sight that was not so

welcome, close to that spot, were several large rats, attracted by the sweet corn strip just over the hedge. There does seem to be large numbers of rats all over the place at the moment.

Changing tastes? A few weeks before Christmas, I spotted a wood pigeon scoffing berries from a small holly in a neighbour's garden. I couldn't remember seeing this before and mentioned this to an old mate. Strangely enough he had noticed the same happening to his holly and like me, it was something new to him. He added that his brother, a shooting man, had opened the crop of a wood pigeon to find it crammed with holly berries, which again he thought unusual. I'm sure that pigeons have eaten holly berries before, but it does seem strange that it was new to all three of us.

Spring has arrived early again this year, first sign for me was the celandine that peeped through by the side of the lane to Upper Houses on 30th Jan. Primroses and wood anemones were

showing well near Henny Ryes by the third week of February. Some years they can be at least a month later. We also discovered a red campion flowering, but this was a hanger-on from last year, that had survived the mild winter, rather than a fresh spring growth. Before long we will be braving the "blackthorn winter", which like last year looks like being early.



Several birds were nesting by the start of March, with blackbirds and collared doves collecting nesting material in the garden. On 1st March we came across a pair of long tailed tits building in a bramble thicket. As we watched, each bird took its in turn to fashion the nest, shuffling down into the nest hollow and carefully arranging it around it's body. Moss, lichen, hair and spiders webs are among the materials they choose. When finished the nest will be domed right over, with an entrance hole in the side. Then it is lined with feathers. Someone once counted over two thousand feathers in an old nest.

It's always nice to see the back end of February, with the return of the lighter evenings. By the end of March we will be listening out for the song of the chiffchaff in the woods, nearly always our first migrant to turn up. Always an interesting time of the year, with the new migrant birds turning up, but still a few redwings and fieldfares around as they work their way back up Scandinavia for the summer.

JUNE 2008

Well, we "enjoyed" the earliest Easter for the better part of a century, and didn't we know it! With freezing north winds and a couple of inches of snow, it would have been perfect for Christmas. But despite the Arctic weather, for us it was an Easter of bees. Not however of the buzzy variety, our first "B" was a buzzard. This we encountered whilst walking at Borley, on the Saturday, sailing high above the trees in a majestic arc, before disappearing down into an ancient water meadow. Not too uncommon a sight nowadays, but our next "B" was even more welcome. Back home, scanning the fields behind Bulmer Street, where a number of gulls had been feeding, a white bird drifted over the hedge. At first dismissed as another gull, until it suddenly hovered and dropped like a stone into the hedge-side ditch a barn owl. After a couple of minutes it took to the air again, only to be mobbed by a couple of carrion crows. The owl took off to the further side of the field, where it landed, again close to the hedge. Through the telescope, I could just make out its head above the tufted grasses. This was about 5.30 pm. It was still there over an hour later, until it was too dark to see, having sat out a mini blizzard, which howled in from the north. It was over two years since I had seen one in the village. I later found out that one had been seen quite regularly in the Goldingham Hall area, and once there were two seen together. My next "B" arrived amid another snowstorm, on Easter Day. It was a brambling, which perched on our garden wall in a couple of inches of snow, before dropping down to feed with the resident chaffinches. The second one we had seen this year, but far from common for us.

Goings and comings of migrant birds.

The last fieldfares we saw this year were on 28th March, of the arriving migrants, the following were noted in or close to Bulmer; 11th April - chiffchaff & blackcap, 17th April - swallow & cuckoo, 23rd April - whitethroat. 28th April - house martin, 2nd May - willow warbler (these are becoming increasingly uncommon, this one was at Hill Fm. Gestingthorpe), 3rd May - swift.

The summer temperatures that we revelled in during early May, suited the spring butterflies, especially the orange tip. I don't think I remember a better year for them. It's only the male that has the bright orange tips to its forewings, the female can easily be mistaken for the small white (cabbage white). However the orange tip is no enemy of the gardener, its caterpillars feed on the wild garlic/mustard, otherwise known as "Jack by the hedge". Another colourful spring butterfly is the brimstone, a vivid yellow, which has also been reasonably plentiful.



Road Rage?

One of the unfortunate sights encountered when driving, whether on country lanes or motorways, are road kills. Birds or animals, not fleet enough to escape on-rushing vehicles. One most frequently seen is the pheasant. When it comes to the Highway Code, they clearly don't do any homework! The times one has to almost stop to avoid them. They all seem most intent on committing suicide. By complete contrast, some members of the crow family, especially rooks, show complete mastery of the feat of snatching some tasty morsel (probably a hare brained pheasant, or a bird brained rabbit) from just in front of some juggernaut's wheels, missing their own demise by a nanosecond, sweeping off onto the safety of the verge. These birds must have an inbuilt ability to assess both the speed and the exact line of the vehicles bearing down on them. This led me to ponder the difference between the clueless pheasants and the more calculating rooks. A flock of rooks taking flight, especially in a blustery wind, will duck and weave through the air, crisscrossing with one another, diving and weaving through a mad maelstrom of speeding black bodies, yet never colliding with each other. Clearly, this inherited skill stands them in good stead for life in the fast lane!

A "Harey" moment.



We had a memorable encounter back in April. We were conducting an RSPB farm survey at Lavenham. Crossing a field on one of the tramlines, we suddenly realised that a hare was speeding along towards us from the opposite direction. We froze in our steps and the hare carried on straight towards us. It stopped about six yards from us, and started feeding! After about a minute, suddenly aware of our company, it turned and sped off to the far hedge.

for an easy meal.

Every picture tells a story, a pile of hen pheasant's feathers on the field edge. Less than a yard away her nest, tucked neatly into the tall grasses, with half a dozen eggs still intact. The murderer was probably a fox, which grabbed the sitting bird,



Another really good year for bluebells, both Brakey Hill and Deal Nursery were awash with a haze of blue, the colour intensifying as you drew closer. At the moment these are all true native bluebells. There has been a lot of talk about "Spanish bluebells" invading our countryside. These are the flowers that are normally grown in gardens, where they are fine. The problem arises when well meaning, but misguided folks decide to plant some out in the wild. Unfortunately, they all too easily cross-pollinate with our native bluebells, which, in Bulmer are at present of a pure strain. Spanish flowers differ from our native species, in having shorter and fatter bells and are of a paler blue. It is most important to protect the pedigree of our native bluebells and not allow them to hybridize with the Spanish and produce what in doggie terms, would be mongrels.

SEPTEMBER 2008

Maureen Dixey thought that her husband Tony was playing games on her earlier this year. When, instead of finding a few early "scrapers" in her potato patch, out rolled a couple of ducks eggs! They had already found the ducks nest in a corner of the garden. Dark deeds were afoot here; some wanton thief had made off with some of the eggs and had buried them for future reference, but just what? A fox will often bury its prey, so that's a possibility. I once watched a stoat roll a pheasant's egg across a road, but I don't think they would actually bury them. Of course, the number one animal for burying small food items, is the grey squirrel, but eggs? I doubt it. If anyone knows of any similar happenings or have any ideas about it, please get in touch.



In the last issue I gave the dates that I had noted down for the arrival of some of our migrant birds this spring. One of the later birds to arrive is the spotted flycatcher, which, like many others of our migrants, has suffered a sharp drop in numbers in recent years. They appear to be very faithful to their nesting areas. This year a pair nested in a hanging bird feeder in Sandy and Allen Burbidge's garden. They had one in their garden 2 or 3 years ago and last year one nested in Vicars Orchard, only 100 yards or so away. But the real hot spot in for them in Bulmer is down at the Brick Yard, where Peter Minter reported three pairs nesting this year, which is quite exceptional nowadays. As you can see they are very dapper little birds and as their name implies, they are very adept at ambushing

insects. They will sit on some prominent perch, then launch themselves out, often vertically, to snap up anything to their taste, from gnats to honey bees. The one pictured, was filmed in the Burbidge's garden. The adult was supplying a beak-full of flies to the nest about every five minutes. At that time they had three young, but Allen tells me that only two fledged, a dead youngster being left in the nest.

Little Dean Spinney

In 2005 George Millins, a specialist in reptile conservation, released common lizards & slow worms, rescued from construction sites in Sudbury, on the site. In 2006 & 07 lizards were regularly seen on the log habitat piles built at the release end of the site. This year however we have been disappointed, with no lizards using the piles. George (who homes in on things that seem invisible to the rest of us) surveyed the whole site in August and to his, and our delight, found two juveniles out in the middle of the field. He is satisfied that they have now spread out and are probably doing very well. This does present a problem. We normally have a portion of the site cut by tractor every Autumn, leaving the end where the lizards were released uncut. George is sure that tractor cutting would result in killing many of the little reptiles. He suggests cutting with a strimmer, as that will give them a good chance of escaping in front of the operation, but take an awful lot longer!



It's always nice to meet up with old friends, and that's just how we feel each year, as we come across plants and flowers growing in the same locations as they have for years. Late summer flowers for us include the showy nettle leaved bell-flower and the delicate enchanters nightshade, growing side by side, on the edge of an oak wood. Yellow swathes of common fleabane displaying in a damp meadow. Toadflax, a yellow antirrhinum like flower, has really flourished this year, especially in our wild patch at home. Unlike flowers, fungi are never very predictable,

but this autumn should be good for them after all the rain, provided that we get a few warmish days.

DECEMBER 2008

As I'm writing this, large flakes of damp snow are sloshing against the window and it's only 23rd of November. We had planned to meet some friends down at Shotley for a spot of bird watching, but allowing for the conditions outside, we didn't feel so bad about having to chicken out. Hanging about on the edge of a windswept estuary, in a blizzard, is not my idea of fun! Yes, winter has arrived with a vengeance, a good excuse to sit in the warm and take stock of the past few months. Firstly the comings and goings of our migrant birds, for the most part seen in our garden.

Departures, Summer visitors, last Swift 19th Aug; Willow Warbler 31st Aug; Blackcap 12th Sept; Whitethroat 13th Sept; Swallow 28th Sept; House Martin 2nd Oct and Chiffchaff 6th Oct. (Of these the chiffchaff and the Blackcap, will sometimes over winter in this country).

Arrivals, winter visitors, both Redwings and Fieldfares, put in an appearance on the same day, 18th Oct. There were about eight Fieldfares, but little groups of Redwings kept flying across, maybe a hundred or so, all heading westward. On 31st Oct. we had two Bramblings feeding with the Chaffinches under the bird feeder, but we don't get these every year. A pair of Stonechats was an unusual sighting in the Upper Houses Lane on 24th Oct. (Another one was reported by Ashley Cooper on one of the Goldingham Hall fields, at the beginning of December).

Back in the middle of September we took a walk past Henny Ryes and through the new woodland, planted about eight years ago, by the late Phil Morton. It was the perfect autumn day, pleasantly warm and sunny (we've had few enough of them this year). At this stage of the wood's development, there is plenty of space and light for a wide variety of wild plants to establish themselves. This in turn attracts other wildlife, on this day the young wood was alive with butterflies. We counted seven species, including the brilliantly coloured Common Blue and the Small Copper, both of which shone like jewels in the mellow sunlight. Such a peaceful and relaxing spot to visit and a very fitting memorial to Phil.

Re-cycling, of course is nothing new in the natural world. One years plant growth decays down into the soil to provide nutrient for the following years greenery, the remains of any creature that has succumbed to life's struggles, are eagerly scavenged by the likes of Carrion Crows, or used as nurseries by Blow Flies, their eggs hatching out to produce fat maggots that can make your skin crawl just to look at them. That's just a couple of examples; the list could go on and on. But this autumn we've watched a more amusing example. Our neighbour Maudie's walnut tree bore a real bumper crop, but for most of September two Grey Squirrels made it their business to systematically strip the tree of this bounteous crop. The nuts were still in their green husks. A little cache of five or six nuts was made on the edge of our lawn, and then each one was stripped of the husk, before being buried, usually on the lawn, a few yards away. It amazed us that, despite knowing roughly where they were buried, we found it almost impossible to find them, so well were they concealed. Here comes the re-cycling bit. At the end of the month, a couple of Jays turned up. They wasted no time in locating some of the hidden nuts and made off with several. They were disappearing for only a very short time, certainly not long enough to open the nut and eat it. It was obvious that they were re-burying the nuts! They are of course famous for burying acorns and thereby producing young oak trees. No doubt we will have loads of seedling walnuts next year.



Fieldfare and two Redwings – by Wendy Rowe

Walnuts weren't the only bumper crop this year; many hedgerows were laden with blackberries. On our only black berrying trip, we picked six and a half pounds in no time. Gorgeous fruit, even if the pips do get infuriatingly stuck between my well-filled molars! Whilst gathering them we came across a clump of ivy heavy with flowers.

A few hornets were buzzing around, feeding on the pollen, but also trying to ambush the flies that were also feeding on the flowers. This put me in mind of a happening from years ago. A group of us were on a visit to North Warren, The RSPB reserve near Aldeburgh. One of the group spotted what he thought might have been the quite rare white admiral butterfly. It disappeared behind an inaccessible clump of brambles. Having exhausted our patience, after several minutes someone threw a stick and succeeded in flushing out the uncooperative butterfly. For a split second it was there, then in a whirr of wings, it was whipped away in the clutches of a large dragonfly (probably an Emperor) Having been patiently waiting to see what it was, we all quite spontaneously burst out laughing, despite the mini tragedy played out in front of us. We never did find out what it was!

On 5th December we took the bus to Gestingthorpe and walked back home across the footpaths. With the exception of dozens of Pheasants and partridges and a nice little flock of Goldfinches, we saw very few birds until we crossed into Bulmer near Gallows Green. No sooner were we playing at home, so to speak, than there were birds everywhere (am I partisan, or what?) A buzzard was the first that greeted us. Then a Heron and Six Pied Wagtails on the field edge. Further up on the field beside Deal Nursery, about sixty Golden Plover were feeding with a few Lapwings and Common gulls. Golden Plovers are winter visitors to this area, nesting further north in upland Britain, or further north in Iceland or Northern Europe.

Little Dean Spinney update.

In September George Millins again surveyed the site for Common Lizards and found no less than fifteen juveniles, a mixture of this year and last years young, but strangely enough, no adults. None the less, a very good result.

A Path Through Fresh Seasons

I'm pleased to say that my DVD is now available and is selling well. It contains a wide range of local wildlife subjects, including flowers, fungi, birds, butterflies, mammals, snakes, lizards and

even dragons and damsels! Filmed over the past five years, 1 hour 20 minutes long. The profit will be split between St. Andrews Church, St Nicholas Hospice and the Wildlife Trust. Available, price £9 from Peter Rowe.