

MARCH 2009

Pigeonholed. The field behind Bulmer Street is growing rape this year. In late October it was lush with the speedily growing crop. Then came the wood pigeons --- hundreds of them. By the middle of January huge swathes of the field had been reduced to nothing much more than stalks. At times there must have been upwards of five hundred pigeons feeding on the rapidly disappearing crop, despite the gas operated bird scarers. As one wit commented "It's good of the farmers to advertise their crops, the birds only have to hear bird scarers going off and they head straight for the field!". Although some of these marauders may have been "Bulmer residents", the vast majority of them would have been migrants from further north, be it Britain or Europe. There is no doubt about it, this plentiful supply of winter feed will ensure that they go into the breeding season in good fettle, which will result in still more of these airborne raiders returning next winter. There is a theory that, up north, due to the wet autumn not as much rape was sown as usual, so that more pigeons have been forced to come further south.

Winter flowers. We've certainly had a long drawn out winter this year and it was mid January before there were any noticeable signs of spring. A few snowdrops here and there with just the odd hazel catkin out. Whereas, most years you can find the odd nut stub sporting a full show of dancing, fluffy, "lamb's tails" at the turn of the New Year. Another early starter is the celandine, the odd flower can often be found in mid January, but this year it was 26th February before one ventured out, close beside the Upper Houses lane. At Upper Houses, I always look for one little patch of *double snowdrops*. My mother first showed me them, when I was a youngster. They can be seen growing beside the driveway of "Leycroft". My grandmother planted them there, when she was a schoolgirl, in the 1870s. Her family lived in an old thatched cottage, which then occupied the site. Each spring, quite unfailingly, this little self-renewing patch of history pops up to rekindle some fond memories of my dear old granny.

Freezing feathers. On January 9th, we awoke to see all the trees covered in hoar frost. Had we been blessed with sunshine that freezing morn, the trees would have made a magical, glistening wonderland. But we were condemned to damp, dull, dreary fog, and an all-encompassing gloom. In the garden, around 8am, some seven or eight blackbirds were feeding. One of these displayed a very strange, mottled plumage. Part albino? -- Not a bit, this poor bird was covered, like the trees, with hoar frost, it's tail in particular. A closer look at it's companions, revealed two more birds with a light dusting of frost. I suppose that they had roosted where they were exposed to the damp, freezing atmosphere. Over half an hour later, their feathers still glistened with frost. This caused me to ponder on the efficiency of feathers as thermal insulation. One might have expected the tail feathers to have remained frozen, but those patches on their backs? Surely the birds' body warmth would work through and melt these ice crystals. But no, they remained frozen, a good example of natural thermal technology.

Bulmer's Treescape. Time to look forward now, to the days not far around the corner, when our hedgerow trees will, one by one, erupt into a dozen subtle shades of green. However, winter is the time to fully appreciate the essential character and structure of our trees. The graceful symmetry of the birch, with it's delicate tracery of slender branches and gleaming white trunk. The ash is less showy than the birch, it's thicker twigs bear stubby black buds, and the trunk is a uniform grey, but still a very handsome tree. The upward thrusting horse chestnut, whose upper branches sometimes send down a cascade of thinner branches, to touch ground and even take root. Lost now, are the proud elms, tall and billowing, often with a forest of epicormic growth masking the lower part of the trunk. Until the onslaught of Dutch elm disease a few decades ago, they were the defining feature of much of our Bulmer landscape, adding their special character, to so many of our hedgerows. Another tree, never very common, is the black poplar. Invariably growing close to water and usually leaning, these can be truly massive trees, always sporting large burrs, bark covered woody excrescences, which grow out from the deeply furrowed trunk. Of course the grandest of our trees is the mature oak. With it's reassuringly massive trunk and sturdy upper limbs spreading out to support a mini forest of twiggy, criss crossed branches.

Silhouetted against a winter sky, these veterans often display scars from some ancient battle with the elements. The old oak on Church Meadow lost huge limbs in the 1947 tornado, (when we kids in the old Bulmer school, were huddled under our desks for safety, together with our infant teacher, Miss Hunter!) I think you can still see the evidence on the tree. The Church Meadow oak is probably around 200 years old, but is a mere teenager compared with at least one other in the village.



What is almost certainly the largest and oldest tree in Bulmer is a pollarded oak. At least 500 yrs old. It stands close to the Belchamp Brook in one of the Smeetham Hall fields. The photograph above shows Anthony Hyde Parker's father, the late Bunny Hyde Parker, standing in front of this monster tree, in the mid 1970s. Since the photograph, it has lost the two large branches on the right. (Photo kindly supplied by Anthony Hyde Parker)

Dotted around our ancient hedgerows, are more pollards, all relics of the farming practices of yester-year. (Since the demise of all the mature elms, these are invariably oaks).

A pollard is a tree that has been cut off about 8 -10ft. from its base, above the height that cattle or other animals could reach to feed on the new shoots. A new crop of branches grows from this point to be harvested for firewood, or useful rough timber, every 15 -20 years. This very much extends the natural life of the tree, provided that the pollarding is carried out at reasonably regular intervals.

The problem now, however, is that there has been no economic reason to continue pollarding these trees for donkey's years, and most of our Bulmer pollards are top heavy, with huge branches. The weight of these branches is often too much for the trunk to carry, especially if it is hollow. Sooner or later, either the big branches will shear off, or worse, the trunk itself will split open, leading to the demise of the tree.

Off with her head! There is a remarkable group of pollard oaks in Bradgate Park Leicestershire. A ruined mansion in the park was once the home of Lady Jane Grey. When she was beheaded in 1554, all the oak trees in the park had their heads taken off, either in protest, or out of respect. Either way, many of these ancient trees are still standing, most of them hollow. With some of these, you can walk right *inside* the trunk. The remarkable thing about one or two of these, is that bark actually grows on the inside of the hollow trunk having grown round the broken edge.



Hopefully we can now look forward to some warmer weather and the joy of discovering a few more Spring flowers, like these primroses.

JUNE 2009

GOOD RECOVERY

I mentioned in the March issue how Wood Pigeons had reduced the rape crop behind The Street to not much more than skeletal plants. I may be wrong, but judging by the mass of flowers that were produced in early May, the crop hasn't suffered that much. As soon as the flowers appear, they seem to attract smaller birds, Green Finches, House Sparrows, Chaffinches and the like. I suppose that they must be after the insects, which are drawn to the flowers. Later on they will be feeding on the rape seed itself. Gazing across the flowering rape one morning in late April, we spotted a Barn Owl hunting along the hedgerows. We saw it several mornings after that, a distant white shape, floating gently over the landscape, but appearing to darken as it flew lower, to be silhouetted against the blazing yellow rape flowers. We have had a pair of Bullfinches in the garden several times this Spring, the cock was very striking, with its bright tomato chest contrasting with a jet black head. However, they are not good news for the stone fruit crop, they specialise in feeding on the flower buds of any member of the plum tribe. Blackthorn is their food in the wild, and any thick blackthorn hedge is a good place to find them. We have often seen a pair in the Slade, along the Gestingthorpe road, where there is a great thicket of blackthorn.

Comings and goings My recorded dates for the departure and arrival of our migrant birds in or close to Bulmer, last years dates in brackets. Last winter visitors, Fieldfare 28th Mar. (28th Mar.) Redwing 20th Mar. Siskin 5th Apr. We only saw one Brambling 8th Mar. A scarcer winter visitor, seen by Brenda opposite us, was a Waxwing, there was however a flock of these colourful birds feeding on berries around the Focus store in Sudbury, for quite a long period. First Spring visitors, Swallow 8th Apr. (17th Apr.) Chiffchaff 15th Apr. (11th Apr.) Blackcap 15th Apr. (11th. Apr.) Whitethroat 28th Apr (28th Apr.) Lesser Whitethroat 15th Apr. Cuckoo 27th Apr (23rd Apr) Swift 27th Apr. (3rd. May) House Martin 7th May (28th Apr.) Not much pattern here, but most are within a week of last year's dates.

Space heating? Back in February we parked in Roys car park at about 5 pm. I was amazed to see a host of Pied Wagtails running about between the parked cars. I counted about forty, before I realised that a couple of trees, close to the store, were bristling with many more wagtails. Altogether, there were about 180 of these dapper little black and white birds. Apparently, Pied Wagtails choose to roost around supermarkets, one theory is that they are drawn to the warmth given out by the store's ventilation system.

Less to crow about The Carrion Crow has been resuming its battle with the Village Hall door. Mistaking it's own reflection for a rival crow, it attacks the glass and makes an unholy mess on the doorstep. (First reported in last September's What's On) This has been countered again with the time honoured piece of black plastic tastefully arranged to blank out it's reflection. This time, however, it's not working. Clearly the crow must judge that it's rival is hiding behind the plastic! One or two smaller birds have also caught on to the fashion. In Bulmer Street I watched a Chaffinch fluttering frantically at a car mirror, occasionally diving round to the back of the mirror in a vain attempt to get to grips it's phantom adversary. Apparently the bird is very persistent and Barbara Rawlins tells me that she now folds her mirror inwards to foil this flighty fighter, which otherwise makes a mess down the side of her car. Some Vicar's Orchard folks have met with the same problem, again with a Chaffinch, are we breeding a new generation of avian vandals in the village?



What's in a name? Love it or hate it, you can't ignore Sheep's Parsley (*Anthriscus Sylvestris*). Appearing almost overnight in late April and May, it graces our roadsides with a mass of frothy white flowers, but often masking oncoming vehicles, to add to the perils of using our local by-ways. I have used its local name "Sheep's Parsley". Jenny Raymond asked me why one of her friends insisted that it should be "Cow Parsley". Believe it or not, I discovered there are over fifty different local names recorded in Britain for this plant. Some of the more interesting ones include, Adders meat, and Gypsy Curtains (Somerset) Devils Oatmeal (Surrey) Dog Parsley (Herts.) Kedlock (Derbs.) Moonlight (Wilts.) Queen Anne's Lace (in many counties) but Cow Parsley is used in most wild flower books.

Painted Ladies The third week of May saw a great influx of these colourful butterflies all over the country. They came up from southern Europe and North Africa, some even turning up in Iceland. We had five on one flowering bush in the garden on the 25th, but most just kept fluttering on, towards some unknown goal.



2006 was the last time that we had such an invasion. Later on we will get the offspring of the ones, which lingered here long enough to breed. They lay their eggs on thistles. It was another good spring for OrangeTip butterflies, they lay their eggs on the flower heads of Garlic Mustard (Jack by the hedge) I've been watching the progress of some in the garden, from pure white egg to caterpillar, which grows very slowly, by mid June it was about an inch long. It will spend the winter as a chrysalis, to emerge next spring as an adult butterfly.



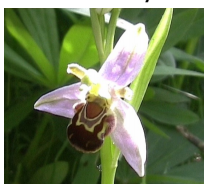
I'm always pleased when folks tell me about their sightings or ask for help in identifying some plant or creature they have seen. Chris, from Upper Houses, was lucky enough to see a Red Kite over Parson's Wood. She commented on its forked tail and was impressed by its size (wing span about 5ft 6ins.) Jenny phoned to tell me she had heard her first Cuckoo. Sadly, very few cuckoos have been calling this year, yet another of our migrant birds that is causing concern.



Rob and Dee asked us to look at some flower spikes, growing down the back footpath, which they thought might have been an unusual orchid. They were in fact the flowers of Common Broomrape (seen left), an interesting plant, often mistaken for orchids. They are parasitic plants, which grow on the roots of clover. They haven't any real leaves, just tiny scales, as they don't rely on photosynthesis to get their nourishment. They just "borrow" their food from their host plant. A little further down the footpath, though, someone else



found one Pyramidal Orchid (seen right) in flower.



Another Pyramidal is flowering beside Church road. There was a good show of Bee Orchids (seen left), beside the footpath between Upper and Lower Houses. It does seem to be a good year for orchids, let's hope it's a good omen for the summer to come.

SEPTEMBER 2009

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH ANNOUNCEMENT

Bulmer has been gripped by an outbreak of inter gang warfare and systematic vandalism. Perpetrated by the same lawless groups, this unwelcome development is causing concern throughout the village. Some of the residents of Vicars Orchard had a somewhat rude awakening in the early hours back in July. John Battersby was roused by some loud screaming coming from the front of his bungalow; he said he'd never heard such an awful row. Looking out, he saw two gang members embroiled in a fearsome fight.

Meanwhile, at our end of The Street, two people have had parts of their gardens churned up, not to mention being used as a toilet. Going back to Vicars Orchard, the commotion went on for over 10 minutes, chasing around several of John's neighbour's gardens as well. He described the two ruffians as being thickset, with striking hairstyles of black and white stripes and was about two and a half feet long. I think this was a territorial battle between badgers from two rival setts, or a battle between two males, to determine which one was "top dog". Certainly there was no mistaking their handiwork in Maudie's and Jim's gardens, on opposite sides of Bulmer Street. Jim also found one of their "latrine pits" against his garden fence, this is the way that badgers mark their territory, and is always a giveaway.



Aggressive behaviour is not confined to the mammal kingdom, on one of those occasional mornings when the garden is thronged with birds; we had amongst the usual array of tits and finches, a chiffchaff. For whatever reason, this tiny warbler took exception to a particular great tit. Other great tits were allowed to go to and fro from the feeder without harm or hindrance, but as soon as this one bird took to the air, it was harried incessantly by the chiffchaff. It followed it so closely that it often hit the bigger bird and once or twice knocked it off the feeder. Our own very aggressive robin, led me to noticing a much less common member of the thrush family in the garden, a redstart. The same shape and size as a robin, this bird was on migration, from further north, to spend it's winter in Africa. Clearly, our robin only saw it as another robin and wasted no time in giving it it's marching orders from his domain, chasing the poor thing all over the garden. There is also the still rarer black redstart. Strangely enough, until about a dozen or so years ago, we used to have almost annual sightings of these, passing through on their spring and autumn migrations.



The insect world provided this next example of aggressive behaviour. In the garden a brave, but foolhardy small tortoiseshell butterfly, had set its sights on a brown hawk dragonfly. The dragonfly, one of our largest, was flying rather erratically around the pond. On several occasions, the small tortoiseshell took off in hot pursuit of it, crazy, and lucky not to end up as a mid morning snack for the dragonfly, whose superior flying skills could easily have turned the table on it's floppy winged tormentor. But this has been a super year for most of our butterfly species, as I mentioned in June's "What's On", we had good numbers of the early spring butterflies and the invasion of the painted ladies at the end of May. Since then, as the summer has progressed,

the meadow browns, large and Essex skippers, gatekeepers, speckled woods, red admirals and common blues, have all been around in good numbers.



Bunnies from heaven. Ivan Cansell related the following to me. He had parked up at Butlers Hall, to go into one of his farm buildings. Walking away from his car, he heard a “thump, thump” from behind him. Turning back to investigate he saw, cowering by the back wheel of the car, a half grown Rabbit, obviously badly injured. Examining the car, he found mud and some of the rabbit’s fur on top of the car and on the boot lid. One big hop for a bunny? He might have thought so, but looking up from the car he saw a buzzard flying away. Clearly, this large bird of prey had bombed Ivan’s car with its intended snack. One can only suppose that the rabbit had kicked hard enough to release itself from the bird’s talons. Unless it was dropped intentionally, with the aim of stunning the rabbit to make it less difficult to handle? Ivan did the right thing and put the poor little creature out of its misery.



We have a large honeysuckle in the garden, a bit of a mixed blessing; it needs severe pruning from time to time to stop it from smothering everything else around it. But when in flower it looks fantastic, it’s perfume, superior to any Paris creation, wafting out to all corners of the garden. After the flowers, come masses of bright red berries, which are a great attraction to a host of different birds.

We counted 10 different species of birds using the bush in half an hour one morning. Not all were taking the berries, but the Blackbirds and the Whitethroats were, both eating the berry whole. I was especially pleased to see a cock Bullfinch seeking them out. These brightly coloured finches didn’t swallow the berry whole, they were only interested in the seed inside, totally discarding the pulpy red flesh. Needless to say within a couple of weeks the berries had all gone, by this time the blackbirds had turned their attention to our rowan, to rob us of these as well!

Cock Bullfinch – painted by Wendy Rowe



The common lizards introduced to Little Dean Spinney four years ago, appear to have had another successful year. George Millins surveyed the site for them on 14th August and thinks there were at least six hatches, judging by the distribution and number of juveniles that he found. They are not without their nemies, however.

About a month ago, we had parked near the Mere, in Little Cornard. A blackbird was hopping frantically about, jumping and twisting and turning, and constantly pecking at something on the ground. Whatever it was trying to eat was pretty active; binoculars disclosed it to be a lizard, which was trying to escape after each debilitating peck. I got out of the car. All that remained of the lizard was the end of its tail, which they have the ability to shed at will. This sometimes helps them to escape from tricky situations, but not this one. The tail twitched and squirmed around for about a minute after the bird had made off with its prey.



Peter Fulcher reported a dead polecat ferret, or possibly a genuine wild polecat, which he found in the entrance to the field next to Parsonage Wood on the Bulmer Brick Yard side. It is presumed that a vehicle hit it. Polecats have been extinct in this area for maybe hundreds of years. In 1982 some were reintroduced into Hertfordshire from wild stock. Since then two have been found dead in Essex, the last one near Thaxted in 2002. The body has been taken away for positive

identification, which, because the polecat and polecat ferret are so closely related, now involves a DNA test. If this turns out to be a genuine wild polecat, it will be only the third record for Essex.

DECEMBER 2009 10 years on

How this first decade of the millennium has sped by, each year clocking up it's own little highlights. Below is a selection of what I have noted down over those years, in my "nature diary".

I started keeping this in 2001. This was the year that work was started on Little Dean Spinney. A survey at the time revealed that there were 57 species of wild plants and 11 species of native trees already growing on the site.

May 2002 - A cock Ring Ouzel "the mountain blackbird", paused in its migration to perch on a little ash tree just down the field. It would have been heading for the uplands of northern Britain. It is identical to our blackbird, except for a splendid white crescent across its chest.

Mar 2003 - A female Stonechat, sitting on the name board of Little Dean Spinney.

Feb 2004 - Over at Lavenham, 9 hares, having a right old "free for all" Sparring and boxing, going off on mad chases all over the field, only to return into a sprawling rugby scrum again! We must have been entertained by their antics for the best part of 15 minutes.

Jul 2005 - Our Conservation site, Little Dean Spinney, was selected as being an ideal release site for lizards and slow - worms, that had been rescued from construction sites. So far 11 lizards and 4 slow-worms have been released onto the site. Three log piles were built to provide basking spots for the lizards and small sheets of tin, laid flat, make good places for the slow-worms to hide. We already have grass snakes living there.



Mar 2006 - My first sighting of a Little Egret in the village. 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, where I came across this one. As soon as the Egret disappeared, a largish bird glided into view, a Barn Owl, the first I had personally seen in the village for the better part of 25 years. A very memorable few minutes.

May 2007 - I was awakened quite early, by some loud "cuckoos" obviously very close at hand. Clearly, the cuckoo was just behind our boundary trees, in our neighbour Maudie's garden. Unfortunately I turned my attention to a carrion crow, which was mobbing a buzzard, quite close at hand. By this time the cuckoo, which was still calling merrily away, had perched on our garden weather vane, in full view. Needless to say, it took off down the field before I could even focus the camera on it. If it hadn't have been for that damned buzzard!.....

Mar 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. This was an unusually large flock of linnets, members of the finch family. Although they are British birds, the likelihood is that this flock were winter migrants.

And now for two entries from the last couple of months.

Sun. 8th Nov. 2009 - Very surprised to see that a pack of hounds were meeting over on the other side of the Belchamp Valley, presumably drag hunting. The hounds and mounted followers disappeared in the direction of the Rookery Farm. In that area they must have startled a herd of Fallow Deer, because only a few minutes later, this herd came streaming across the fields from Heaven wood, on Smeetham Hall land. Heading at first for Bulmer Street, but then pouring through a gap in the hedge to emerge in the next field, to disappear from our view as they crossed the Goldingham Hall drive. They made a fine sight, never pausing in their headlong rush. There were about 20 of them, all without antlers, except for one stag, which brought up the rear, who was sporting a fine set of headgear.

18th Dec. 2009 - Snow everywhere, garden full of birds, Tits, Chaffinches, Goldfinches, Blackbirds, Fieldfares, Starlings, Robins, Dunnocks all looking for an easy meal from the bird feeders or the remaining berries and apples on the trees and a Green Woodpecker digging away to get at the lawn under the snow.

A pair of Mistle Thrushes have taken ownership of my neighbour Bill's pyracanthas, which are heavy with berries. If any other member of the thrush family, Blackbird, Fieldfare or Song Thrush, dare to approach these bounteous shrubs, they are very speedily repulsed and sent scurrying back to our side of the fence!