

MARCH 2010

Well, I'll bet no one's complaining that we "*haven't had a proper winter this year!*" But those of us who are long enough in the tooth to remember prolonged winters of 1947 and '63, will be more than grateful that this year hasn't matched up to those two years of truly Arctic conditions. In each of those two big freeze ups, the mercury in the thermometers hardly ventured above zero during those icebound months of January and February. The effect on wildlife was truly devastating, especially the smaller birds. There was a report of 20 or so Wrens, found dead up in a nest box, where they had all huddled up together to try to keep warm. Their numbers decreased noticeably in the following few years, before they gradually built up their numbers again. Many other birds took a hammering as well, particularly those water birds that find their food under the water (whether fish or submerged vegetation) as all the rivers and watercourses were covered by ice thick enough to skate on. Kingfishers and Herons had a very hard time, mostly having to resort to moving down to the estuaries, where there was at least some clear water.

This year, we have had the odd milder spell, which gives the wildlife a chance to recuperate for a few days. Birds then have a chance to re-fuel and not deplete still further their body fat, which they build up in earlier months, to help them survive the winter. Fieldfares are a good example of this, as soon as the frost loses its grip on the soil, they will be out on the fields, wheedling out the odd worm or slug from the now softened ground amongst the blades of the winter sown cereals. They were feeding on the field behind us recently, but seemed very wary, the whole flock taking to the air, to line the electric wires or crowd together in the crown of one of the oaks. Once they burst off the field in a frenzy and looking up I saw a Sparrow-hawk wheeling round, the cause of their panic.

All birds panicked the next day, when a couple of the Army's Apache helicopters hovered at zero feet only a couple of hundred yards behind Bulmer Street! The Wood Pigeons did a sort of bomb burst, hurtling out to all point of the compass in their haste to escape from these monster robotic birds.

Settling back on the field, the Fieldfares had an unwelcome companion, a lone Black Headed Gull. This gull had cottoned on to the fact that it was quite easy for it to mug the Fieldfares, whenever they had dug up a tasty morsel and rob it of its food. In the short while that I watched, it purloined a couple of juicy worms from the unlucky thrushes. A few days later, a Magpie turned the tables on another gull, which had procured a sizeable chunk of crust from some generous person. The gull needed to settle somewhere free from interruption, to hack this into gull sized portions, but as soon as it settled down to do so, the Magpie barged in and put it to flight. It chased it all around the neighbourhood gardens, never allowing it to settle for more than a second. This went on for three or four minutes, before they disappeared over the rooftops, the gull still hanging on to its prize, the magpie in hot pursuit!

We did the RSPB Garden Bird Watch on 31st Jan. We only recorded 11 species in the hour, but did include a pair of Bullfinches. After the hour's watching had been completed, we had a Goldcrest bathing in the pond, another unusual species for us. We're getting very few birds on our feeders of late; I think they have discovered a better restaurant in someone else's garden! There have been a few other unusual sightings over the last few months, on Christmas Eve we had two Snipe fly across the garden and on 9th Jan a Woodcock. Allen Burbidge had a Little Egret visit his pond, while Nena Harding reported two Tree Sparrows on her feeders for a couple of days in Jan.

These are now quite rare, having suffered a steep decline in numbers over the last 20 years or so. Although, checking them out, I did discover that they have been making a bit of a comeback recently, so, fingers crossed, we may be seeing more of them in the future.



Wintertime, with its bare trees, often brings to light birds nests that had gone unnoticed during the summer. One that was disclosed this year was on the huge chestnut tree that stands just inside the Churchyard.



It has some long trailing branches, which cascade down in tiers. Last year, at the extremity of one of these, a Goldfinch managed to secure its nest. To say that this was a somewhat precarious site to choose is something of an understatement. These slender twigs are very much at the mercy of the winds and one can imagine the nest swaying and rocking quite violently in a fresh breeze. Believe it or not, they often site their nests in that sort of precarious position that was my clue to the identity of its builder. Obviously the birds don't suffer from seasickness. It may still be there, if you look

carefully, on the south side of the tree.

Have you noticed, like us, that we are getting far more ladybirds hibernating indoors these last couple of winters? The majority of these will be the alien Harlequin Ladybirds, which have rapidly spread to Britain from the Continent, over the past four or five years. They are a little larger than our native ladybirds, come in an amazing combination of patterns and colours, and are definitely here to stay.

Our first snowdrops didn't pop their heads up in our border until the 1st of Feb this year, about a month late by my reckoning. We did find a tiny coltsfoot flower just opening on 20th Feb, but had found no celandines out by that date, when they are usually starting to put in an appearance. I certainly can't wait for the better weather to turn up and to be able to lounge around in the sun, amid Spring flowers, birdsong and butterflies. Ah well -- no harm in dreaming.....



JUNE 2010

Starting to write this on 9th May with the outside temperature more in keeping with winter, which seems par for the course so far this year, except for a few gloriously warm days in April. The 22nd of Feb. was an extraordinary day. The diary records "6.30am. raining hard, 7.30 really heavy snow, huge flakes drifting down, stopped by noon, 2" laying snow. Snowing again at 3pm. quickly turned to rain, laying snow gone by 5, still pouring rain, bitterly cold!" Predictably it's been a very late Spring, most of the flowers being about 3 weeks later than usual, but many showing in very good numbers. On Little Dean Spinney the Cowslips made a good splash of colour, despite many of them losing their heads to the rabbits. Bluebells in Deal Nursery (between Upper Houses & the Brickyard) is better than I can ever remember seeing them.

I usually regard Rooks as birds that feed almost exclusively in open fields and grassland. Watching about 40 feeding just down the backfield, I noticed that half a dozen of them were scrambling about and fighting over something low down in the hedge. Laying in the hedge bottom, is a decaying casualty of the Dutch elm disease. This old stump has reached the stage where it falls apart at the slightest touch. It certainly couldn't withstand those probing beaks, which are designed for heavy duty earth moving when the occasion demands. They were clearly seeking out the grubs and insects that burrow inside the rotting wood and judging by the amount of squabbling going on between them, they must have found a plentiful supply.

On 24th March we had an amazing 34 Buff Tailed Bumblebees, and 2 Red Tailed on our small clump of heathers. The early spring butterflies were out in good numbers on the few warm days that we did have, several Brimstones came through our garden, but it is the Orange Tips, which have really done well. I saw my first ones on 24th April. In May I found their eggs, about 3mm long, on the flower heads of garlic mustard, otherwise known as "Jack by the Hedge" which is their favourite food plant.



In the March edition I wrote about the Goldfinches nest

precariously attached to the end of the branch of the Chestnut tree in the churchyard. Towards the end of April, a pair of these little charmers was just outside the window. One of them was pecking vigorously at a large cobweb, I assumed that it was targeting a spider, but then it became clear that it was actually collecting the cobwebs. It did cause me to wonder if they use these silken strands to bond their nest together, this could explain how the nest at the end of the branch withstood all the battering it received in the winter gales.

Comings and goings

The dates I have recorded for migrant birds in or close to Bulmer, last years dates in brackets.

Last winter visitors;

Fieldfare 3rd April (28th Mar.) **First Spring visitors;** Swallow 16th Apr. (8th Apr.) Blackcap 21st Apr. (15th. Apr.)

Whitethroat 20th Apr (28th Apr.) Cuckoo 25th Apr. (27th Apr.) Swift 30th Apr. (27th Apr.) House Martin 1st May (7th May).

Although 16th Apr. was my first Swallow, Tom and Irene Dickinson had them around from the beginning of the month. Sadly they found one of these birds dead in mid April. On it's leg was a ring, which they passed on to me. I reported the number on the ring to The British Trust for Ornithology. At the end of May they sent the following," Swallow, sex unknown, ringed in the nest at Broom, Nr Biggleswade, Beds. on 8th Aug 2007". So it had made three return trips to southern Africa, before meeting it's end in Bulmer. As for the Cuckoo, I have only heard it from here about three times so far.

Of rarer birds, back in March, my neighbour at "Wheelwrights" reported a Peregrine Falcon, I thought I saw one on 15th March, but my sighting was too fleeting for me to be certain. Other than that, several people have reported seeing a Kite over the area, they're turning up more and more often it seems.

In early May a pair of Blackbirds were kicking up a commotion at the end of the garden. They were mobbing a Magpie, really giving it the works, but despite all their harassing the Magpie was still intent on holding it's ground and not budging. Going down to investigate, my worst fears were confirmed. The Magpie had fled, but laying on the lawn was the body of an almost fully grown young Blackbird, with it's breast torn open. We have many more Magpies around than we used to, far too many.

A delicate little wild flower has established itself on the verge of the lane leading up to Upper Houses. Common Fumitory, which belongs to the Corydalis family. I first noticed it two years ago, when it was just a single plant, last year it had spread a little, but this year it was scattered along about ten yards of the bank. Although small, viewed in close up, it's a most attractive little flower.





The dull thud on our patio door raised the worst of my fears, and looking outside spotted a female Bullfinch huddled up against the wall. Picking it up, it lay seemingly lifeless in my hand, but then blinked it's eyes a couple of times, so there was some hope. Gradually it perked up, then after about 10 minutes in my hand and having obligingly posed for the camera, it fluttered off into a bush.

Little Dean Spinney update

I mentioned above the rabbit damage to the cowslips, it has now been decided to put rabbit netting around three areas to give some of the more interesting plants a fighting chance of coming into flower. Because several people had complained of others letting their dogs run free on the site, I erected fresh signs requesting that dogs be kept on leads. Unfortunately, someone who obviously has no regard for wildlife and little sense of social responsibility has seen fit to tear one of the signs down. On a happier note, I was relieved to find a Slowworm recently, as I had feared that they had died out after being released there about 5 years ago. The Common Lizards, introduced at the same time, are doing quite well.

Stop press - June 11th

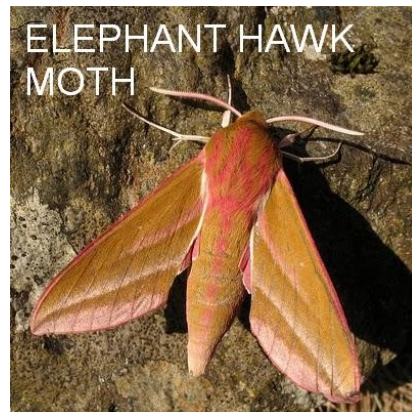
Once or twice over the past few days, we've had the pleasure of watching a Barn Owl. It's been hunting along the bottom hedge of the field behind Bulmer Street and further over towards Heaven Wood.

SEPTEMBER 2010

Despite the gloriously warm July & early August we have enjoyed, it hasn't been an outstanding year for the summer butterflies. After a good showing of Orange Tips and Brimstones in the early spring, the summer failed to come up to expectations.

Only Small Tortoiseshells and Small Whites appeared to buck the trend, Red Admiral, Peacock, Meadow Brown, Speckled Wood, Gatekeeper and Common Blue were all somewhat scarcer than usual. Last year we had a real invasion of Painted Ladies, which migrated here from southern Europe in there thousands, this year I have seen just three individuals.

It's been a poor summer for butterflies; moths seemed to have fared better, if the night of 10th July was anything to go by. A friend kindly loaned us a moth trap and having warned our neighbour that we would be turning night into day, we switched on the very bright light and left it to shine on through the small hours. The catch was simply amazing when we came to release them in the morning, we must have had three or four hundred in all. Most of these were small "brown Jobs" but we also had some truly magnificent hawk Moths and other larger moths. An incredible six Elephant Hawks, which are a beautiful mixture of cinnamon and pink, two Privet Hawks, and a Poplar Hawk Moth. Other colourful moths included: - Angleshades, Brimstone, Small Emerald, Swallow tail and the Buff Tip, which when at rest is superbly camouflaged. They look so much like a piece of broken twig that we had to touch one to be convinced that it was a moth.





I've been scratching my head over the feeding habits of our little mafia of about 25 House Sparrows. Each year I have to cover up the beetroot, as these little scoundrels invariably shred the leaves. This year they actually attacked the fleece to get at the leaves, and stripped any leaves that dared to peep out. But, just 5 yards away and grown from the same seed, is a second row, which I neglected to cover. These they totally ignored, despite the fact that they were still busily attempting to breach the defences of the protected row. Is it that they never once sampled the second row and just didn't recognise them?

In Bulmer you never know what drama or dark tragedy may visit your very doorstep.

Back in the summer, Carolyn Munro had a close encounter with nature in the raw. Hearing high-pitched screams coming from outside the cottage, she looked out to see an agitated group of Sparrows flee from the front of the house. Opening the door, right there at her feet a Stoat was giving the coup de grace to a rabbit, by sinking its chisel-like teeth deep into its victim's neck. The stoat shot off into the hedge. Watching from indoors, Carolyn said that after a while the stoat returned to drag its prize away down the front path and right across the road to the Coe's Meadow side, abandoning it in the road a couple of times, as traffic sped through. Apparently it struggled to get the rabbit up onto the high grass verge. Not being able to carry the rabbit up this miniature cliff, it finally succeeded by mounting the bank, reaching over from the top and hauling it up that way, before disappearing with it into the thick hedge. Stoats are becoming ever more common with the increase in the rabbit population, but this one certainly chose an unusually public place to attack its quarry.

I have never regarded myself in any respects as a "twitcher", but if a rare bird turns up close to home, I'm as eager as the next to get a glimpse of it. In mid June all the serious bird Watchers mobiles were directing them to the old Bush Boak Allen factory site at Long Melford, where a Marsh Warbler had turned up. We joined half a dozen others to get a look at this brownish warbler, almost identical to a reed warbler, but with a much more varied song.

Talking of rarities, Coe's Meadow pond had its very own rarity, around the same time. Flowering at the shallow end were many plants of Great Yellow Cress. It is only listed at two other sites in N.E. Essex, one near Mistley and the other around Abberton Reservoir, so this makes a third site for the area. The seed probably lay dormant in the soil, until being disturbed by the creation of the pond. Four other plants scarce to our area have come to light over the past year or so in the village, all on Smeetham Hall lands. The first, Hounds Tongue is usually a plant of dry, stony ground. The other three favour a chalky soil and were found on a very steep meadow (so steep that it has never been ploughed) My grandfather Philip "Tulip" Rowe writing in the 1930s mentions "on a pasture as steep as the roof of a house -- a kind of thistle that bloom like a boar thistle, but has no stalk, for the flower heads are in the grass with long narrow leaves and some very sharp spikes" This is undoubtedly a description of the Dwarf Thistle, which I was delighted to find still flowering there, together with two other chalk loving species, Common Rock Rose and Salad Burnet both rare for our area. However, Salad Burnet was sown in the wild flower mix on Coe's Meadow, but of course cannot be classed as native to that area, as it has been introduced there.

Another summer has sped past, and we have to bid farewell to our summer migrant birds. We seemed to have had a migrant's leaving party in the garden the other day, a male Blackcap was perched on our wild rose, two Whitethroats were in the larch tree, a Chiffchaff was chasing



around with a couple of our Blue Tits and overhead Swallows and House Martins were hawking for insects, quite a collection. It won't be long now before the Fieldfare and Redwings arrive, to herald the onset of winter. They should be well provided for this year, judging by the heavy crop of Sloes and Hawthorn berries weighing down the hedges.

DECEMBER 2010

What a glorious array of Autumn colours we had shining out from our woods and hedgerows this year. Most people seem to agree that they are the finest we have enjoyed for several years. From here, the Belchamp Valley was aglow with a patchwork of subtle colours. From the russets, yellows, and oranges of the Poplars, Willows, Maples and odd Elms, to the almost startling reds and pinks of Wild Cherry and Dogwood. All too soon, these multicoloured leaves were banished by the first frosts and winter gales, leaving only the Oaks, clad with foliage that shaded from palest green to a deep, mellow rust. These remaining trees contrasted dramatically against the dazzling cloak of that late November snowfall. At closer range some of the hedges glowed with the glossy red berries of Hawthorn and Dog Rose, advertising themselves to the birds and small mammals that will seek them out in the harsher months to follow. The Blackberries hung on late; we picked some beauties on Oct. 21st.

Another thing that we treated ourselves to were some wild mushrooms, having very carefully checked their true identity. Firstly Common Parasol, a tall, usually quite large mushroom, with a good flavour and then Wood Blewits, also known as blue stalks, which have a very delicate flavour, or are rather tasteless, according to how discerning your palate is (or so I'm told!)

Dates of the comings and goings of migrant birds in and around Bulmer. Last year's dates in brackets.

Summer migrants, last dates recorded by me: - Swift 3rd Aug. (27th Aug.); Blackcap 20th Sept. (6th Sept.); Whitethroat 22nd Sept. (21st Sept);

House Martin 5th Oct. (17th Sept.); Swallow 7th Oct. (4th Oct); Chiffchaff 8th Oct. (8th Oct)

Autumn migrants, first dates: - Redwing 11th Oct. (13th Oct); Fieldfare 20th Oct (27th Oct).

A few other bird sightings from this Autumn's diary: - 20th Sept. about 12 Mistle Thrushes flew across, usually only seen in ones or twos. 22nd Sept. 3 Buzzards over Brakey Hills, have been seen several times this Summer, I think they must have nested close to the area.

23rd Sept. A hobby flew over towards Goldingham Hall. 15th Nov. Flock of about 50 Skylarks on the backfield. On the butterfly front, a Brimstone in Bulmer Street on 10th Oct. very late record, the second brood are usually on the wing in August. Really out of season were two Cowslips flowering on Little Dean Spinney on 18th Nov. Can't decide whether they were very early or late!

Never underestimate nature. In early November, Moira Germaine who lives a stones throw from us in Bulmer Street contacted me. Something was raiding her fishpond and had been taking her magnificent Coy Carp, over a period of weeks. They were put in there over twenty years ago when only small, by her late husband, Dan (a local GP) and were his pride and joy. From over thirty, the numbers had plummeted till there now were only four left. The morning before she had found three laying close by, one half eaten but the other two barely touched. Needless to say it was devastating for her to see the fish being so wantonly attacked. It clearly wasn't a Heron, as the pond was well netted and these fish were far too big for a Heron to have hauled out. My other suspect was a Mink.

I contacted Nick Oliver, who is a very knowledgeable, hands on, conservationist and naturalist.

He inspected the remains of the fish, and was in no doubt that the culprit was an Otter and thought that it would be back after the remaining fish. My joy at the discovery of this still rare mammal right here in the middle of Bulmer, was somewhat tempered by the distress and worry it was causing Moira. I was very surprised that an Otter would be operating so far from a main river, but Nick assured us that they would travel large distances overland to get to stocked

ponds. Otters have a very acute sense of smell and he believes that they can actually smell out a pond that contains fish. He was often called out on behalf of Suffolk Wildlife Trust, to find similar situations where large fish were being taken. He doubted if there was a pond in Suffolk that was not within the range of an otter. As fencing the pond would have been near impossible, Nick suggested that she found someone with a secure pond to take them, which by the end of the day, she had arranged. Moira, who is Scottish and a great nature lover, was very stoical about it "Fancy that, I'd never have believed it, an Otter right here in my own garden. I know they had my fish, but I do love the wee beasties!" Nick Oliver, who kindly allowed me to reproduce it, took the photograph of the otter in a local river.



My neighbour Bill has a freestanding pyracantha bush in his garden. Kept tightly pruned, in the autumn it is always thickly covered with red berries. This year I noticed that it had a clearly cut band of berries around the middle, but the top and bottom of the bush was bare and I must say looked quite attractive. At first I thought that Bill had trimmed them off for effect, until I saw a Woodpigeon arrive on the top. Craning over, it was attempting to reach down to snaffle up any berries within its reach. At the same time another pigeon arrived on the ground and was stretching up for all it was worth to reach the berries above it's head, leaving an untouched band of berries around the bush. What they had done was to create the equivalent of a double browse line. To explain, a browse line is created when grazing animals eat away at the lower branches of any tree or hedgerow in their field. This leaves a clearly cut line around the trees or hedges, below which any new branches will be quickly eaten off, showing just how far up the animals can reach. Browse lines aren't restricted to just cattle and horses, on Little Dean Spinney I have noticed where Rabbits have left exactly the same effect on the bramble thickets. Some of our woodland will show a browse line created by deer, especially where culling is not carried out and the deer population builds up beyond reasonable numbers.



I hope, by the time you are reading this that temperatures will have returned to some sort of December "norm". Its Mid afternoon on Dec. 3rd and outside the thermometer stands at -3 C. under a dull, leaden sky, with thick snow underfoot. Had we any sun today, I'm sure it would have been an awfully pretty scene.... as it is, it's just pretty awful! All the birds and animals must be finding it a struggle to survive. A couple of nights ago I switched on the outside light, to see if it was still snowing, it was, but that was not all, across the frozen pond came a Fox. It searched hither and thither, and then spent a long while snuffling in the snow underneath the bird feeder. Earlier we had hung up some fat and the fox had probably scented some of the scraps that the birds had dropped.

10th Dec Suddenly milder, but not for long, according to the forecasters we're in a mini interglacial, which will last for all of 3 days. We've been on a wild goose chase today, or more exactly a wild Waxwing chase at Long Melford. Dave Carter saw 70 there yesterday and sent me this super picture that he took, but we didn't see so much as a feather today! Will we get a white Christmas? Or will the weather gremlins do a smart U turn and send us a mini heat wave. Whatever we have in store, can I wish everyone a very happy Christmas and good fortune for the New Year.

