

MARCH 2011

For the second year running we have had more than a taste of real winter, with December being officially recognised as the coldest in 100 years. On the 20th, the garden thermometer was showing -12 deg C at 9am, only rising to -5 by midday!



It was around this time that we were invaded by a small army of Blackbirds, at least two dozen, who busied themselves stripping the last Darcy Spice apples from our ancient tree. Most, if not all of these, will have been migrants from the continent. They were joined by about half a dozen Fieldfares, both up aloft in the tree and clearing them up on the ground, where they left an unholy mess for us to walk into! On 23rd. Dec we saw a flock of 40 Skylarks, on a field beside the Gestingthorpe road. Like the blackbirds, these will have been winter migrants. On 18th Jan. four Buzzards made a fine sight, soaring high over Little Dean Spinney, with the bright sun picking out their markings brilliantly.

An unusual sighting by some friends at Brettenham, a white Stoat or Ermine. In colder parts of Britain where snow lays all winter through, Stoats moult into a white coat in winter, which makes them far less visible against the snow. Our stoats usually remain brown. It's thought that the early snow and severe cold triggered off the change in this individual. It's very unusual around here, but not unheard of. Strange also, to think that the fur which has trimmed the robes of our sovereigns and peers of the realm for centuries, should come from our humble little rabbit hunter.



Another interesting sight was down on the Stour at Rodbridge. We were watching a Cormorant diving for fish, after three or four dives it surfaced with a large Pike clamped in its beak. We had fleeting views of it with the fish, which was clearly too large for the bird to swallow, as it splashed around in it's struggle. Eventually it gave up the attempt, but whether or not the pike survived its ordeal, we couldn't tell.

With that prolonged spell of Arctic weather, fears were being voiced about the effect that it would have on our wildlife. Fortunately, since the end of December the winter has been far more temperate, giving the more vulnerable birds and animals a chance to recover.

With the increasing amount of light pollution that we get nowadays, stargazing is not as easy as it was when I was a kid. I particularly remember Christmas-time, when by tradition we always spent Boxing Day evening with an aunt and uncle, who lived just opposite the old chapel in Bulmer Street. Stepping out of that cosy little thatched cottage into the icy blackness was something of a rude awakening. Then the long, seemingly endless walk back up to Upper Houses, when I can remember being mesmerised by those countless pin-pricks of light, twinkling through the black void of space, with the broad swathe of the Milky Way arching overhead. Dad would point out the Pole Star and the Plough, which, apart from Orion, is the only constellation that I can readily name. But at times a shooting star would streak across, usually appearing as a thin streak of light, disappearing as abruptly as it appeared. But last December, returning home after dark, a really bright streak of light hurtled vertically down. This shooting star, or meteorite appeared to leave a wider streak, as it plummeted into the earth, seemingly just behind the Street. I'm sure that it must have buried itself in the field behind us, whereas the vast majority of meteorites burn up in the atmosphere and never reach the earth's surface. This was on 15th Dec. It would have been from the Geminid Meteor shower, which always occurs in mid December and can produce as many as 120 meteors per hour at its peak.

New Years Day saw the Sudbury Flora Group's traditional winter meeting, when we search for

any plants actually in flower. This year we met in Bulmer and concentrated on the Avenue, Churchyard and Meadow. After December's weather, I doubted if we would find any at all, but we actually clocked up 13 species. Most were plants, which will literally flower in any month of the year, such as Dead nettles, Groundsel and Chickweed. But two, Red Campion and Yarrow, were survivors from last Autumn, probably protected from December's extreme cold by a thick layer of snow. By contrast, we covered the same area on 1st Jan 2003 when we hurriedly amassed a total of 22 species flowering, as we dodged between some heavy, squally showers.

The Churchyard also provided the first genuine spring flowers, on Feb 9th. As expected, one was a Lesser Celandine, the second, a Bulbous Buttercup, standing up proudly behind the War Memorial, was well in advance, not normally daring to show its bright petals before early April.



I mentioned in December about our fruitless journey to try and catch up on the flock of waxwings in Melford, but although we are still waiting to catch a glimpse of one, I'm pleased to report that they have now been seen in Bulmer. At the end of January Rachel Duncan, who lives at the lower end of Church

Road, phoned to say that she had spotted one in her garden. Moreover the next day she encountered a small flock of them perched in an ash tree, beside the footpath from Jenkin's Farm to the Upper Houses Lane.

The end of January always brings the RSPB Big Garden Bird-watch. We clocked up a few more species than usual, much helped by two Bullfinches and a Sparrow hawk, which turned up within the allotted hour. Despite a good number of different species, the numbers of commoner birds were down, with only 1 Robin, 1 Starling, 1 Collared Dove, 1 House Sparrow, 1 Goldfinch, 2 Great Tits and 2 Blackbirds. Chaffinches were the only birds to buck the trend, with 9 individuals.



Something to look out for in the coming year, a really spectacular spider which has only recently moved onto our area, the Wasp Spider. The body is about 3/4 of an inch long and has bands of startling vivid yellow and black bands. Its preferred habitat is rough grassland, where it constructs large webs. One of its main items of prey is grasshoppers. Last year there were scores on a meadow at Alphamstone, so I am sure that they must have made it to Bulmer by now.

JUNE 2011

It must be a measure of the extremes of climate that we have endured during the past year, that I am starting this column with yet another account of record-breaking weather.

I've been chatting to my old mate Brian Ambrose, from Sudbury. He has been keeping weather records for over forty years. In January and February this year he had a total of 123mm of rain, but from 1st March until 26th May he only recorded 13mm in total. Brian compared this with the big drought year of 1976, when for the same periods his figures were 55 mm and 50mm respectively. The drought of '76 dragged on until 26th Aug, but between then and the end of the year we were deluged with a staggering 330mm of rain. This spring has now been officially recognised as the driest on record, but what a relief it was in the third week of June, when a

couple of heavy deluges saw the water-butts overflowing and a green tint returning to the lawn!

After last December's freeze up and a more normal Jan. and Feb, the early flowers, such as Celandine & Cherry Plum were slow to show, but from the end of March on, things changed. April saw a mini heat wave and from then on most plants were early rather than late, with temperatures topping 26 deg C on the 23rd (that's 80 F in old money). This almost tropical heat certainly hastened the bud burst. I cannot recall a year when all woods and hedges were in full leaf by the end of April, at least a couple of weeks early. Only a few Ash trees remained bare. Most flowers were early, with Bluebells being past their best by the end of the month. The premature warmth certainly suited the early butterflies. Brimstone, Holly Blue and especially Orange Tip turning up in really good numbers.

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

Last winter visitors, Redwing 13th Mar, Siskin 28th Mar, Fieldfare 30th Mar (3rd Apr) Brambling 4th Apr.

First Spring visitors, Chiffchaff 2nd Apr (28th Mar) Blackcap 2nd Apr (18 Apr) Swallow 3rd Apr (16th Apr) Cuckoo 23rd Apr (25th Apr) Whitethroat 28th Apr (20th Apr) Swift 2nd May (30th Apr) House Martin 1st May (1st May). We do seem to have heard a Cuckoo and have seen House Martins more frequently this year. The martins must be nesting somewhere in the Street and are no doubt having to travel further to get a supply of mud for their nest, with everywhere so parched.

We have a Wren that nesting under our summerhouse roof. The picture is of a nest in the same spot, a few years ago.



On 21st March a herd of about 25 Fallow Deer raced across the fields towards Heaven Wood having been startled by some dogs. On the Hedingham road, the number of Roe Deer being hit by cars has led to a request that deer warning signs be erected.

It may seem a bit bizarre, but road kills are a good indicator of the status of our local mammal populations, especially the nocturnal ones. Extraordinarily, in the first week of May, two Badgers and a Fox were killed between Bulmer Street cross roads and Dogs Pit corner, which I would think is more like the average for a normal year than just one week. But I'm sure that this indicates a healthy population of both, some might say too healthy. Rabbits, of course, are the most commonly encountered victims, along with the odd Grey Squirrel. I'm sure that we don't see as many flattened Hedgehogs as in the past, which points to a drop in their population. Their inbred defensive mechanism of rolling up into a ball when threatened, doesn't exactly provide a lot of protection against our speeding wheels and must make them the most vulnerable creature to venture onto our roads. I certainly don't think that there's any reason to rejoice because we see less of them killed on our roads, it just reflects a drop in their numbers.



It may not be coincidental that as the road toll of Hedgehogs decreases, those of Badgers are on the increase. By and large, the hedgehog's coat of spiky armour serves it very well in protecting it from would-be predators, but not from the badger. With their massively strong forepaws, armed with very long, steel-like claws (see photograph) they can unroll a hedgehog to expose the little creatures' soft underbelly, and there's dinner. These strong claws can also dig through rock hard soil to open up wasp and bumble bee's nests. My

neighbour Bill had this very thing happen to a bumblebee's under his front hedge, just a few of weeks ago, showing that Badgers are active in Bulmer Street.

There's no doubt that certain animals and birds have a higher degree of "road sense" than others. On the couple of occasions that I have had to screech to a halt to avoid a Badger, it seems that they are quite oblivious of any danger approaching; they just bumble along, ignoring all else. On the other hand, Foxes are far more likely to dart into the nearest hedge. The one bird, which seems almost as vulnerable as the hedgehog, is the Pheasant. At times they seem to wilfully throw themselves to their fate under our wheels, their squashed carcasses being all too common a sight. These make easy pickings for the scavenging Magpies and Carrion Crows. Now, these are birds that appear to have developed a very acute road sense, often feeding until the last fraction of a second, before niftily hopping aside or winging their way out of danger.

There's a large pond in the valley below Goldingham Hall. Up to about ten years ago, in early March, this used to be the gathering point for hundreds of Toads that had made their way there with one object in mind, to mate. Their croaking made an almost musical sound and could be heard from quite some distance. As well as the toads, there were always a goodly number of frogs, also intent on spawning. I visited this March, but not so much as a single croak met my ears and we found only one little clump of frogspawn, with no toad spawn at all.

There were some interesting bird sightings around Bulmer Street over the past little while. I have twice watched a Red Kite soaring over, the huge wingspan and forked tail of this magnificent raptor, made it easy to identify.

Dean Byford told me he was sure that he had seen a Goshawk down on the footpath. He said that it had caught a Jay and had flown off with this sizeable bird with little effort. I was a little sceptical at first, but Dean was at one time into falconry and would certainly recognise a Goshawk if he saw one.

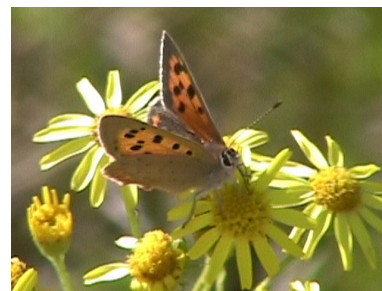
Another bird, this time not positively identified, had me puzzled. I had sighted this large brownish bird, some way down the field. It quickly disappeared into the crop, but despite watching for over an hour, failed to see it again. A near neighbour, Roger Collorick also saw it. My first thought was that it was possibly a Hen Harrier, but it did look a bit owl like and having compared notes with Roger, decided that it was probably a Short Eared Owl.

These birds nest in the more northerly parts of Britain, usually on open moorland. In winter they often turn up on our coastal marshes such as Old Hall Marshes near Tollesbury.

SEPTEMBER 2011

I had resolved not to start these diary notes with yet more weather comments but the amazing extremes we have experienced over the past months put paid to that idea. The coldest December for 100 years, an April heat wave, the driest spring on record, and now the summer months of June, July and August officially recognised as the coldest ever recorded. What a roller coaster!

The overall effect was that most plants were flowering and fruiting earlier than usual, but also many things grew much taller, including our hollyhock. This eventually grew to 14 ft, enjoying its moment of fame in the "East Anglian". In the wild garden the teasels rocketed upwards, only to be mown down by a fierce summer gale. Late summer has seen the unusual second flowering of several wild flowers, including primroses, Beaked Hawksbeard and Common Vetch. The conditions seemed to favour the growth of ragwort this year; the Small Copper butterfly is pictured on its yellow flowers.



Ashley Cooper got in touch to tell me about a very large and strangely malformed thistle growing on his land. It turned out to be a Spear Thistle. Normally they grow as branched stems, but this huge specimen was growing in a dense bush. The most unusual thing about it was its main stem, which gave the impression that it was formed of many stems fused together side by side. This may not be the case, but the stem is ridged, giving this impression. (See photo) At the base it was about four inches (10 cm) wide and an inch thick. Side branches coming off the stem appeared to be normal. This condition in a plant is known as fasciation. This can be caused by a number of different things, a bacterium, virus or frost damage to the growing shoot.



A few weeks later I came across a Common Mallow, which showed a similarly malformed stem, also pictured.

Over the years we have all been enthralled by the epic journeys of the likes of Raleigh, Scot, Livingstone and the like. I witnessed a mini feat of daring exploration right here in my own garden. A Cinnabar moth caterpillar was heading across our lawn, with all the determination and single mindedness of a true explorer. Thinking that it was trying to reach another

of its food plants, I decided to give it a helping hand by transferring it to a fine Ragwort plant growing by our patio. But was it grateful? Not a bit, having attached itself to a leaf and hanging there for about 15 seconds, it promptly rolled itself into a ball and plummeted down on to bounce on a paving slab. Thence started the second leg of its already rudely interrupted travels.



It set off across the scorching paving slabs at a fair old lick, covering about 6 yds, in less than 5 minutes. No mean feat for a creature with such minuscule legs! Having reached the Bungalow, it scaled the wall to disappear into the gap under the plaster overhang. Here it will probably pupate, passing the winter as a chrysalis, to emerge



as a colourful red and grey moth next spring.

Irene Dickinson, phoned to say that they had seen a white swallow over their paddock. I went to look for it, but it didn't show itself again, albinism is not very common in birds, but another friend reported a white swallow in Bury St. Edmunds, could it have been the same bird? Margaret Mills tells me that the swallows, which regularly nest in their garage, have reared a second brood this year, which they haven't managed to do for 3 or 4 years, which is encouraging.

I've had a couple of disturbing reports of House Martins nests falling down complete with nestlings. In both cases the houses concerned have had the fascia and soffit boards clad with plastic. It seems that the tops of their mud nests don't adhere to the plastic as well as they did to the old wooden ones.

This is the time of year that I enter into hostilities with the dreaded White Poplar. Its leaves lay in wait, mocking me from the road verge, every one looking just like a scrap of discarded tissue, scattered along the Sudbury road at Kitchen Hill. The number of times I've been fooled by them, parking the car and getting out the litter-picking gear, only to be confronted by these attractive leaves, almost pure white on their undersides, a very well named tree.

Little Dean Spinney Anyone who has taken a stroll around our village conservation area recently, may have noticed that at long last I have labelled some of the plants growing up there, to add interest for visitors.

As many of you know, almost all of the trees, shrubs and flowers that have been introduced to the site, come from seed or seedlings collected from within the boundaries of the Village, which is good conservation practice. The importance of this is that it helps to conserve the genetic strain of plants local to the Bulmer area. Although any plant or tree growing in Bulmer will appear pretty well identical to one growing several miles away, it will in fact have characteristics, albeit microscopic, which will show it to be unique to our area.

Fortunately there is not too much work to be done to keep the site in reasonable order and I would like to thank Dennis, George and Jim for turning up so willingly to help whenever asked. Also to Chris, who very kindly runs her mower over the paths to keep them open.

Children's Watchgroup For the September meeting we visited Goldingham Hall, where Ashley Cooper had kindly set up his moth trap overnight. Yellow Underwing,

Brimstone and Emerald were among the 40 odd moths that were caught. After this we pond dipped in one of the farm ponds, fishing out Water Scorpion, Diving beetles, one Newt and a couple of tiny fish. October meeting: Sun. 9th, at Arger Fen nature reserve, Assington, searching for fungi and minibeasts.

DECEMBER 2011



This beautifully seasonal picture of a frost encrusted teasel head, was taken by Jess Davies. You may remember her striking wildlife photographs on the back of the last "What's On".

What Jess probably doesn't know, is that there may be a secret hidden within that frost bejewelled seed head. There is a moth, rejoicing in the impossible name of *Endotheria gentianaeae*, which lays its eggs inside teasel heads. Until a few years ago, this was considered uncommon, as the moth is not attracted to the light of moth traps and was therefore under recorded. However, someone thought of cutting into random teasel heads to look for the larvae. Surprise, surprise! it was found to be present in most locations where teasels grow. We have discovered them in Bulmer.

There has been a swarm of insect related matters this Autumn. Quite a few people in the village have had their homes invaded by a plague of flies.

Some of these were the usual house fly, *Musca domestica*, but most were cluster flies, which belong to the blowfly family. They have an unusual lifestyle, being parasitic on earthworms. They lay their eggs alongside worm burrows, when hatched; the fly larvae enter the wormholes and infest the worms. This usually results in the death of the worm. In autumn, the adult flies invade our houses, seeking a warm place to spend the winter, little dears.



A strange little fly waved at us from our window, only about half an inch long, with a broad dark band round the edge of each wing. (See picture) It appeared to be signalling in semaphore, waving first one wing and then the other. Appropriately this is known as a wing-waving fly and apparently is quite common, although I don't recall seeing one before.

Although we weren't plagued with wasps this summer, we have had an unusually large number of queen wasps turning up around the home and garden lately, as Wendy found out to her cost when she dived her hand into a bundle of cloth, only to grasp a queen which, although drowsy, was awake enough to administer a painful injection!

Cleaning out our Blue Tit's nest box I was amazed to find the shells of hundreds and hundreds of earwigs. At first I thought them to be the remains of the blue tit's meals, but closer inspection showed them all to be complete even down to their pincers. The answer, I discovered, is that earwigs take a year from hatching to grow into adults. As they grow, they shed their skins a total of five times and these empty skins are what I found. The tits didn't vacate the nest box till the end of June, so they had accumulated there in less than four months.

Dates of the comings and goings of migrant birds in and around Bulmer. Last years dates in brackets.

Summer migrants, last dates recorded by me: - Swift 11th Aug (3rd Aug)
Whitethroat 11Sept. (22nd.Sept), House Martin 11th. Oct. (5th. Oct.), Swallow 15th. Sept. (7th. Oct.) Chiffchaff 24th Sept. (8th.Oct), Autumn migrants, first dates: - Redwing 10th.Oct. (11th. Oct.), Fieldfare 23.Oct (20th.Oct).

Another couple of notable bird records, on October 14th we had an extraordinary number of Goldfinches around. A flock of about 20 were in the garden, when another flock flew round which must have been at least 40 strong. Then, during November we twice had Lesser Redpoll feeding off seed-heads on our silver birch, four of them on the second visit. One of our smallest finches, they are very acrobatic, often hanging upside down to get at their food, as Blue Tits do.

A bit of excitement - A Sparrow Hawk chased a small bird into our fruit cage, which managed to dodge it's would be killer and make its escape. The hawk was not so lucky, becoming well entangled in the netting. Donning thick leather gloves, I managed with difficulty; to disentangle it's menacing beak and death dealing talons from the thin nylon mesh. Most of this time it had one of it's talons clamped firmly on my finger. Even through the thick leather I could feel it's vice-like grip. Safely enclosed in my hands, it was marvellous to be able to study the bird at such close quarters. Those eyes, bright yellow, fiercely defiant, with a cold-blooded stare, which pierced through you with all the intensity of a laser! They must put the fear of God into any small bird unlucky enough to take their fancy. Opening my hands, the bird rocketed off, speeding away down the field, scattering a few wood pigeons in its wake.



Weeding the strawberry bed, I was a bit taken aback, when a small frog launched itself on to my hand. Surprisingly it made itself quite at home there. I called Wendy to go and get the camcorder. The frog was still sitting there quite happily when she arrived, at least a couple of minutes later, with the camera. Hence the picture of one contented frog! A smallish bird, which hurtled down vertically to our pond, startled me spooking a pigeon, which took off in a fluster. Equally startled, the smaller bird aborted it's landing and sped away, revealing itself to be a

Snipe. A most unexpected visitor, and such a fleeting glimpse, as it vanished as dashingly as it had appeared.

Taking a walk beyond Upper houses, towards the Brickyard, we came across a sizeable flock of birds, feeding on a field that has been left as winter stubble, instead of being ploughed in. Fifty

or more Skylarks got up, mixed in with about 25 Linnets and a few Meadow Pipits. Other people have reported flocks of Yellowhammers, Greenfinches and Chaffinches around the same field. This field has been left unploughed by farmer Ashley Cooper as part of the environmental stewardship scheme, which he has introduced to the farm. This stubble field will provide food throughout the winter for a host of small birds. Ashley is delighted that it has worked so well.