

MARCH 2012



Jess Davies took this fine study of a Roe Deer trotting proudly across a Bulmer field.

Our plant group held its traditional New Year's Day survey, this year at Little Cornard. We found 23 species of wild flower actually in bloom, including Red and White Dead Nettles, Red Campion, Primrose and Rough Chervil. Last year when we met in Bulmer, we only recorded 13 species in flower, but of course that was after we had suffered the coldest December on record. What a contrast this year. Apart from the heavy snow and Arctic temperatures of early February, this has been a remarkably mild winter. A practically frost free

December provided two out of season "firsts" for us: - a perfectly good field mushroom, found on Christmas Eve and later still, a succulent tomato picked from our unheated mini greenhouse in late January. Not delicacies you can bank on finding so late in a normal winter.

Two notable birds of prey turned up in mid January. Close to "New Barn" on Goldingham Hall's land, Graham Martin had good views of what was almost certainly a Hen Harrier; his quite detailed description of it seemed spot on. On 22nd Jan, I could hardly believe my eyes, when a Peregrine Falcon cruised across the backfield, no more than about 50 yards off. Later on I was told of another Peregrine catching and eating a Wood Pigeon over at Foxearth, in late December. It's very unusual for either of these birds to be seen in our more agricultural landscape, but they do turn up on the marshlands around our coasts. Both the Hen Harrier and the Peregrine are much persecuted, particularly on Grouse moors, where they are seen as a threat to the game birds. Peregrines chicks are also stolen from nests for use in falconry. The RSPB bring several prosecutions each year for a number of these crimes.

We had a cock Pheasant behaving very strangely in the garden the other day. It rushed around head down, tail as stiff as a poker, scuttling around the plots in a most frenzied manner, blustering into anything that was in its course. It was careering around for a good couple of minutes, criss-crossing the ground at considerable speed, frequently bashing into things. Eventually it calmed down and settled down by the fence. Whether it was being tormented by some parasite, or was suffering from a sudden brainstorm is anyone's guess, but it was most strange behaviour. A cock Reed Bunting paid a brief visit to the garden the other day, which is a first for us, as far as I can recall. We are sighting Buzzards from home more and more frequently. Several times in the last month we have seen a couple, soaring effortlessly over, with hardly a wing beat.



I'm never too sorry to see the back of January and February. For me, spring burst forth (or was I being over optimistic) on the 11th of March. It was a gloriously warm sunny afternoon and we took the Watch Group children to Rodbridge. One of the first things to greet us was the song of a Chiffchaff, the first of our returning summer migrants. We had great views of it as it hunted for flies in a pussy willow, which was buzzing with honeybees and the odd bumblebee. Watching a Long Tailed Tit

collecting lichen, we followed it to a bramble thicket, where we spotted its nest, about half built. The nest is a masterpiece of camouflage; the outside covered with lichen, woven in with moss and entwined with spider webs and hair, and then lined with hundreds and hundreds of feathers. Let's hope we have a few more such days to look forward to!

JUNE 2012

Residents of St Andrews Rise are keeping a weather eye open for the appearance of baby buggies and nappies in the neighbourhood, following the appearance of a certain bird. Yes --- the stork has visited!

To be precise, it was a White Stork. It turned up out of the blue (metaphorically speaking, as it was lashing down with rain at the time) on May 10th; I saw it very briefly in flight. Black and white, with long outstretched neck and long legs trailing behind, clearly something quite special. Fighting it's way against one of those violent deluges that we have suffered only too often this



year, it disappeared into the gloom, gone for good, as far as I knew, leaving me with only a fleeting and tantalising image, glimpsed through the rain spattered window. I was desperately racking my brain to figure out just what it could be. Unbelievably, the question was answered twenty minutes later, when Wendy spotted it on a chimney just across the road. This was late afternoon and there it stayed, quite unabashed by us amateur twitchers gawping up at it. It roosted there overnight, but had left by 5.30 the next morning. I later found out that it had been spotted at Felsham the day before and after leaving Bulmer turned up at

Dunmow and then near to St Albans. A bird of that size is not easy to miss! White Storks only rarely turn up in this country, but there have been a few more than usual reported this year. In fact another one was reported near Melford in early June.

They spend the winter in southern Africa and migrate north to nest in some parts of Holland, Germany and further east. Obviously it entered the wrong post code into it's sat-nav.

The early spring flowers were in bloom for much longer than usual, due beyond doubt, to the cold wet weather we have had to endure. Primroses, Bluebells and Cowslips all hung on far longer than in a normal year (whatever that is). In the fields the rape crop was flowering for the best part of two months.

There seems to have been many more fields of rape than usual this year. The view from Bulmer Street showed a patchwork of startlingly yellow fields stretching to the horizon. The field behind us was one of them. I was surprised with the number of birds that used the field, especially after it had come into flower. I don't know whether it is the flower buds they are feeding on, or insects, perhaps both. One of the first I noticed was a cock Reed Bunting, then a pair of Linnets, but the birds that surprised me the most, were Dunnocks (otherwise known as Hedge Sparrows or locally as "Hedgybetts"). These birds, more usually flitting around in the garden, seemed to really revel in it, often going way out into middle of the field. Indeed I did wonder if they may even have nested under that blazing yellow canopy. The field also proved a happy hunting ground for Blackbirds seeking out worms. Again they preferred going way out into the field to forage, before speeding back with a wriggling beak full, to their nest in our front hedge. After the flowers had gone the seed eating birds turned their attention to the seedpods, Goldfinches, Linnets, and Greenfinches etc. So in part, rape appears to be fairly bird friendly crop, to some species at least. For birds of the open fields such as Skylarks and Partridges, it is very much the opposite.

Despite the fact that we were little bothered by wasps last summer, I am amazed at the number of queen wasps abroad this spring. Hearing much buzzing coming from a large cotoneaster in May, I fully expected to find bumble and honey bees -- but no, they were all queen wasps, well over twenty of them. I've never seen so many in one location before. Each one of these has the potential to establish a new colony, if only a quarter of them succeed, we could be in for a plague of them this summer.



But talking of wasps, appearances can be very deceptive, look at this picture by Jess Davies, what do you think this insect is? Most likely you will guess wasp or hornet, but it's not, it's a harmless moth, pretending to be a something more threatening. Whereas most moths rely on camouflage to hide them from would-be predators, the Hornet Clearwing Moth relies on the warning colouration of black and yellow, with partly transparent wings which have heavy orange veining, it's whole appearance shouts out "I am a dangerous creature, touch me at your peril, I can sting!" Jess was lucky enough to have it hatch out in their garden. She told me "They lay their eggs at the base of a poplar tree, (we have about 5 poplars in the garden) and the larvae then feed just below the surface of the bark above or below the ground, then burrow their way out of the bark and the moths emerge close to the ground"

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 18th March (30th Mar).

First Spring visitors, Chiffchaff 11th Mar. (2nd Apr), Blackcap 22 Apr. (2nd Apr), Swallow 19 Apr. (3rd Apr), Cuckoo 3 May (23rd Apr), Swift 27th Apr (2nd May) and House Martin 10th May (1st May).

One bird that appear to be much scarcer this year are Whitethroats, until this year I have always regarded their population as fairly stable. This year I am seeing them far less frequently.



Every now and again Wendy has the urge to take the scissors to my hair, to tidy up what little there is of it. She placed some of these precious clippings on the garden, knowing the birds were nest building, and lo and behold, a Goldfinch fluttered down and made off with a generous beak full of my treasured locks. Sometimes I use my head to help bird-life! I hope it keeps their youngsters warmer than it did my head.

I started this diary with a surprise bird, the stork, and I am ending with another surprising for us. Today, 20th June, this Red Legged Partridge hatched off her brood right under our noses in the garden; we were totally unaware of them until I spotted the fluffy little chicks running about on our front lawn. The parent then led them into Bill's garden next door, where I caught up with them with the camera.

SEPTEMBER 2012



In the last What's On, I showed Jess Davies picture of the Hornet Clearwing Moth.

Since then we have encountered another clearwing, the Red Belted Clearwing Moth, rather a strange looking creature. Wendy found it in a hedge at Alphamstone. Less than three-quarters of an inch long, we were convinced that it was some kind of fly, before we looked more carefully.

With the days shortening, hinting menacingly of the short, dark days of winter just around the corner, one can't help wondering if we have really had a summer at all. Let's hope for an old fashioned "Indian Summer", to make amends for the sunny days that we have been starved of. The weather certainly hasn't suited many of the insect tribe, except perhaps those like mosquitoes, which delight in breeding in static water. There's been no lack of puddles and stagnant pools for them to lay their eggs in, bringing about an increase in the number of mosquito bites being treated, according to the media. Blackfly is another that seems to have flourished; our cherry tree was poisoned with them at the end of July. These Blackfly are "farmed" by ants, which collect the sweet honeydew, which the Blackfly exude. Not only this, the ants actually move some of the Blackfly on to fresh plant growths to start up fresh colonies of them to increase their supply of honey dew. This resulted in more Blackfly infestation, which in turn led to an explosion in the numbers of their number one predators, Ladybirds. I counted over thirty larvae of the Seven Spot Ladybird in one small area.

Butterflies have been badly hit by the miserable weather, only the likes of Orange Tip and Brimstone, which emerge early in the year, have appeared in anything like normal numbers. The Blues, Skippers and Browns have all suffered a big drop in numbers. Things have looked up in the past couple of weeks, with Speckled Woods, Small Coppers and Red Admirals turning up in reasonable numbers.

However, in late July we spotted some butterflies flitting about in the very top of some oak trees in Deal Nursery. Binoculars revealed them to be Purple Hairstreaks, not that common, but often overlooked as they only seldom come down from the canopy to be noticed.



Tony Minter tells me that they also get them in oaks around the Brickyard, which is not far from where we saw them. But then, the Brickyard is a haven for all manner of wildlife.



Most importantly, it seems to be a hotspot for Spotted Flycatchers, which are causing great concern as their numbers are plummeting nationally. No less than four pairs nested around the yard this year (The bird pictured nested in Sandy and Allen Burbidge's garden a few years ago). We were also shown one of the three Treecreepers nests, which they had discovered. Across the road from the Brickyard, beside the track to Butlers Hall was a fine patch of Harebells. On the adjoining field Corn Marigold and Vipers Bugloss were in flower. These are native to the site, but seed has introduced the Corn Cockle and Cornflower that could also be seen.

Talking to a beekeeper from Lamarsh and expecting to have to commiserate with her about her honey crop, (having assumed that the miserable weather would have hampered the bees in their search for nectar). I was astounded when she assured me that they had produced a bumper crop. She put this down to the fact that the cool wet weather had delayed, but also extended the flowering season of practically all plants, which meant that whenever the weather was suitable for the bees to be abroad, there was always a good selection of nectar bearing flowers close at hand for them. Certainly the oil seed rape was in flower for weeks longer than normally.

Bulmer History had a most enjoyable and interesting visit to Daws Hall nature reserve in June. There was a very fleeting glimpse of a Badger for a couple of the party, but it obviously didn't like the look of us and disappeared for longer than our Patience endured! A couple of weeks later, Sarah who had guided us around phoned to ask if Wendy and I would like to go on a

Badger watch. We turned up on an unsettled evening, with rain threatening. It was comfortable enough sitting in the Plastic stacking chairs --- but then it started to rain, and how! We did see the Badgers; indeed a young one was scoffing peanuts practically under our feet. In all we saw five of them, three adults and two young. Quite an unforgettable experience, especially as we were literally sitting in water, I have only been wetter in a bath.

We thought that we were in for a good crop of cobnuts, but the local Grey Squirrels had other ideas. The one pictured had just buried a nut in the lawn. Talking of nuts, Hazel nuts weren't the nuts referred to in the old jingle "Here we go gatherin g nuts in May". This was not just a nonsense rhyme, but probably referred to the underground tubers of the Pig Nut, an Umbellifer, they still grows in Parsons Wood. As kids, we used to dig them up. They had a sweet, earthy taste. It was good to find a large patch of them still growing when we surveyed the wood last summer, as they are far from common now. Another rarely found plant we discovered flowering there, is Slender St. Johnswort. Lily of the Valley was the flower that we were really hoping to find in the wood, they were certainly surviving there up to the 1950s, but we had no luck in our search. Anyone with memories of them?



Last Weekend we had an afternoon of "threes", when we decided to go and seek out some blackberries

By the side of Brakey Hill we found some plump, juicy beauties. We were busily picking these, when we were aware of some loud mewing coming from the wood. Looking up we spied three Buzzards circling overhead. On Little Dean Spinney three Comma Butterflies were feasting on the juice of some over ripe blackberries and when we arrived home, discovered that we had picked just three pounds of fruit.

DECEMBER 2012



The season's greetings to all! The first snow of the winter provided this sparkling vision in a corner of the garden.

We seem to have been plagued by field mice this autumn. The first signs were when we took up our beetroot crop, the top of each one had been nibbled, some hollowed right out. Later on, Wendy wasn't at all amused to find a row of holes where she had planted some crocus bulbs, only a couple of days before, every one had disappeared, except for the husks. This plague of mice probably explained why we have twice spotted a weasel in the last few days; I hope it gets fat

on our tormentors!

You may recall a couple of years ago the otter, which raided a fishpond in Bulmer Street. I'm very sad to have to report that a large dog otter was killed on the road, close to the end of the Goldingham Hall drive. I wonder if it could have been the same one. Nick Oliver came and picked up the carcass, which will be sent to an Environment Agency lab in Cardiff for analysis. Apparently, amongst other things, they test the DNA, to see if it was descended from an animal



released in one of the re-introduction schemes, or whether it came from a wild population from further afield which has spread back into the area.

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 5th Aug. (11th Aug)

Whitethroat 15th Sept. (11th Sept.) House Martin 29th Sept. (11th Oct.)

Swallow 5th Oct. (15th Sept.) Chiffchaff 14th Oct. (24th Sept.) Blackcap 14th Oct.

Autumn migrants, first dates: - Fieldfare 27th Oct (23rd Oct) Redwing 20th Nov. (10th Oct.) Both Fieldfares and Redwings were later turning up this year, and initially, both in smaller numbers than usual.

In late September we had a couple of chiffchaffs that seemed intent on terrorising each other and all the other small birds in the garden, despite the fact that they were the smaller birds. A great tit, chaffinch and a greenfinch were all chased in flight, as they ventured out to get to the bird feeder, somewhat puzzling behaviour. Equally odd behaviour from a rook feeding in a flock on the backfield. It picked up a stick, about 18 inches long and an inch in diameter flew up about ten feet and then dropped it. It then repeated the performance. Whatever the object of the exercise was, it was clearly intentional. It brought to mind some seabirds, which have been seen to drop shellfish from a height on to rocks to break open the shell, but a stick? At least it must have known what it was doing! Mentioning seabirds, we occasionally get a lone cormorant fly over, seemingly as much at home up our river valleys as they are on the coast. But I really couldn't believe my eyes when, on 16th October, no less than eleven winged their way across, heading out towards Belchamp Otten. Then they veered off to the left, disappearing towards Little Yeldham.



The last week of November saw a marvellous late flush of fungi appearing. Like this funnel cap.

One species in particular, the wood blewit, were abnormally plentiful. This is one of our favourite edible mushrooms. Their lilac coloration, though, is off-putting to some people. We think the flavour is superior to cultivated mushrooms. The strange thing about them is that they seem resistant to frost, whereas most other species go to mush, they withstand being frozen solid and still remain perfect.

As usual for early December, the remaining apples on our Darcy Spice tree are being targeted by a small army of blackbirds, at least twenty of them, plus a couple of Fieldfares. There were continual skirmishes between the blackbirds; two were having a real battle. One, looking to escape it's rival, flew straight into the open garage and with an almighty crash broke it's neck against the garage window, right beside where I was working, poor thing!

A couple of days after the blackbird met it's untimely end, we were hosts to some very colourful birds. Three waxwings, which tucked into the apples with great abandon for the half hour that they stayed. Long enough for me to get some good pictures. These exotic looking birds have arrived in large numbers from the continent this winter, worth looking out for especially on berry bearing shrubs.



Sorry to end on a gloomy note, but as most people are now

aware, our native ash trees are facing a serious threat. The ash die-back disease, *Chalara fraxinea*, seems to have broken out in pockets spread widely across the country. Caused by a fungal disease, it can spread rapidly, as the spores of the fungi are airborne. One of the first places the disease was confirmed in this area was at Hullbacks, a 40-acre field that joined up the Arger Fen and Spouses Vale Nature reserves at Assington. Now, this field was left to revert to woodland naturally, from the seeds that blew on to it from the surrounding hedges. Unbelievably, seedling ashes sprouted up like cress, all over the field. Now 4 or 5 years old, there must be a quarter of a million or more, without exaggeration. As the site is over three quarters of a mile from the nearest road, it was obvious the disease had arrived through the air. It kills the tree in more or less the same manner as the Dutch elm disease kills the elms, by blocking the sap channels and thereby starving the tree of its life-giving nutrients. It is likely to spread faster than Dutch elm disease, as the latter depended on the fungal spores being carried by a beetle, whereas airborne spores can be blown scores of miles in no time at all. Whereas most fungal diseases tend to attack damaged trees, the ash disease appears to attack young trees or new growth, which made the new woodland on Hullbacks particularly vulnerable. One of the hopes is that some strains of ash may be resistant to the disease and on a site like Hullbacks, with its countless young trees, any that survive could be the start of a new generation of disease resistant trees. As yet we have no disease recorded in Bulmer, we can only hope that things won't turn out as badly as many of us are predicting.