

MARCH 2013

In early December we had a build up of lapwings feeding on the backfield. Starting with just a dozen, the numbers built up until the middle of the month, when a count revealed 295 birds. By then we had entered a period of very severe weather and they were finding it very difficult to feed, the frozen ground too hard for them to penetrate in their search for worms and other invertebrates, but they still stayed on. When a sudden thaw came, they still stayed around, but spread themselves thinly over surrounding fields.

The lapwings were often joined by black headed and common gulls during the day, in fact the gulls are not above stealing a meal off the lapwings, ambushing them as soon as they extract a hard won worm from the soil. This usually resulted in an aerial chase, the lapwing twisting and turning, with the gull in hot pursuit. I think that the lapwing often managed to swallow the worm in flight, but if it landed with it, the gull usually gained its ill gotten prize.

The frost having departed, we seemed to have nothing but rain up till Christmas, with everywhere waterlogged. At the end of the month we walked across to Belchamp, the brook was right up to the underside of the little bridge, and the meadow on the other side half under water.

On New Years Day our plant group met for our traditional plant survey at Melford. This year we recorded 29 different species actually flowering, more than any other year so far. The showiest was the Winter heliotrope, one of the few we found that should actually be on flower at this time of year. This was growing on The Green, in front of Melford Hall.

Having had Lapwings thronging to the back field in December, January saw a large mixed flock of Fieldfares and starlings, about 400 and 200 respectively, with the odd redwing dotted amongst them. Another bird, which spent a lot of time foraging in the field, was a buzzard. I guessed that it was feeding on worms etc, small morsels for a large raptor. Graham Martin, who said that he often had a buzzard picking up worms behind him as he was ploughing the fields of Goldingham Hall, confirmed my guess. He said they did him a favour, as they scared off the gulls, which otherwise white-washed the tractor cab! Another raptor, although somewhat smaller than a buzzard, which has also been supplementing its diet with worms, is a female kestrel. It favours perching high on one of the little oaks just down the field. From there, it sails down on to the field to snatch up its prey. Kestrels have got incredibly keen eyesight and can spot anything moving, however small.

A fair amount of earthmoving has been carried out on the building plot next to us. As a result of this soil upheaval, the moles that had been living there for years have become evacuees. Unfortunately they have sought asylum on our front lawn, which has more escape tunnels than Colditz! When you look at a mole it's a real digging machine, the front feet are just like shovels, shown in the picture.

The snow in January alerted me to the presence of a rabbit in the back garden. I followed its tracks to a hitherto unnoticed hole in the fence, which I promptly blocked. The fields stretching across to the Belchamp Valley always betray the presence of any birds or animals, as they are thrown into stark relief against the blanket of snow. This is when one can usually pick out two or three hares with the telescope, but this time I only spotted one hare, despite looking for them three or four times. I hope this is not a sign that their numbers are dwindling.

Walking up North Street (Sudbury) on 31st. Jan, I was pulled up in my tracks by some wonderful music -- no, not the accordion playing busker -- but the sweet unmistakeable fluting of a blackbird. My ears led me into the North Street Parade and there he was perched on a rooftop, singing with real gusto. Normally if you are lucky enough to hear one at all this early in the year, it will usually be the more subdued sub song, a sort of practice session. It was a glorious reminder that Spring is around the corner, (somewhere).

On an awful afternoon in February the children's Wildlife Watch Group met outside the Mill Hotel. It was wet and miserably cold, but the one youngster, plus grandma, who did turn up were treated to an unforgettable sight. On the edge of the mill pool, just yards from where people and dogs were passing, was a kingfisher. As we watched, it plunged in to return with a sizeable fish. This it proceeded to thrash against a post, before attempting to swallow it. The fish just wouldn't go down, so it repeated the tenderisation process but still without success. That little bird must have spent 3 or 4 minutes doing this before it finally managed to swallow it's catch. It then retired to an overhanging willow, where I managed to get this picture.

More good sightings in February were three siskins on our bird feeder on the 16th, 17th & 28th. One was a male in full breeding plumage, a mixture of bright green and almost jet-black.

I thought Spring had sprung, when Wendy & daughter Caroline reported a few celandines in flower by the side of the Upper Houses Lane on the 3rd. March. Now nearly three weeks later, I realise that I was somewhat in error about Spring, it has definitely un-sprung, to icy January! The picture is Wendy's watercolour.

To end, I must plug the latest compilation of my Grandfather Philip "Tulip" Rowe's writings. "Tulip's Flora" contains his observations on the flowers, plants and trees that he found growing in the fields and woods of Bulmer in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He describes the use of plants and their fruits in the cottage kitchens, to supplement the often-meagre diets and the age-old herbal remedies. The multiple uses of various timbers in manufacturing items for both domestic and agricultural use, is another topic. Copies of "Tulip's Flora" at £7.50 can be purchased from this website by emailing info@bulmerhistory.co.uk
(The book is also illustrated with 14 colour prints of Wendy's excellent Flora paintings).

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### **JUNE 2013**

"If the oak before the ash then we will only have a splash, if the ash before the oak we will surely have a soak." I have always debunked this old saying, not because of it's forecasting accuracy, but because in my experience, the oak leaves always appear before the ash! This year however I am having to eat my words, as many ash trees did beat the oaks into leaf, mainly because the oaks were held back by the abnormally cold Spring.

Despite the cold start, the wildflowers of our woods and roadsides have really excelled themselves this year. Celandines showed themselves particularly well, positively shining out from many road verges, for once not hidden by the normally taller grass, the cold having retarded its growth. Primroses, cowslips and bluebells put on equally fine displays. Blackthorn bushes have been white with blossom, as have all the garden fruit trees. Maybe the unending rain of last year boosted this year's blossom, a little consolation for what we had put up with last year. All of our Spring flowers have appeared much later than usual, in many cases by a month or more. Not surprising, in what has been the coldest spring for well over thirty years. I also expected the arrival of our migrant birds would be equally late, some were, but surprisingly others actually appeared a little earlier. Dates of my first sightings are as follows, *last years dates in brackets*. :  
- Chiffchaff 14th April (11th March), Swallow 14th April (19th April), House Martin 18th April (10<sup>th</sup> May), Blackcap 22nd April (22nd April) Whitethroat 28th April, (early May), Cuckoo 29th April (3rd May) Swift 9th May (27<sup>th</sup> April) From here in Bulmer Street, we have heard a Cuckoo calling far more often than we have for several years, which is encouraging.

We were surprised to see a stoat running around the garden in April, a first for us. It was clearly on the hunt, as we do occasionally get the odd rabbit finding its way through our fence from the field, where the rabbit population appears to be flourishing.

Another predator we were watching in, or rather over, the garden, was a kestrel. It was hovering practically motionless above us, as if suspended by an invisible string, but suddenly folded its wings and dived earthwards at tremendous speed. It had seen a greenfinch and clearly had designs on adding it to the menu. The greenfinch had other ideas, dodging off to escape by the narrowest of margins. The greenfinch was luckier than a chaffinch, which was caught by a male sparrow-hawk, when the snow was on the ground in late March. My picture shows the hawk with its victim's feathers scattered around it. That's all it did leave, there was not a scrap left of the chaffinch except those few feathers. Like most birds of prey, the indigestible parts of the hawk's meal did not pass right through its digestive system, but were coughed up in little pellets. Analysis of these makes it possible to see what species of bird they have been feeding on.



In April, Eve Wenborne told me that they often saw a barn owl, hunting over the fields at the end of Bulmer Street, towards Upper Houses. On one occasion they saw two, hopefully a pair.

However, after what was one of the most successful breeding years ever last year, barn owls appear to be having a really rough time of it this year, with many being found dead along the Stour valley. The hard and prolonged winter is being blamed for a shortage of their prey, or the owl's ability to find it in very unfavourable conditions.

Alan Dixey told me of a Jay, which has been joining the other birds where they put out food, just outside their window and becoming quite a regular. Alan had noticed that it was a bit unsteady when on the ground. He saw it trying to hold down a crust to get a better stab at it, when it almost fell over. It wasn't till then that he could see that it only had one leg! Jays, like magpies, are usually very wary birds. We did once have a young one in the garden, which allowed me to get close enough to get a couple of pictures, but was obviously ignoring parental advice about the dangers of humans and hadn't yet learnt the hard way. This has put me in mind of another member of the crow family, a tame Magpie that resided in Bulmer Street back in the late 1940s. It was owned (if owned was the right word) by Lawrence and Gertie Coe. Like many tame birds of its kind, this semi free flying bird had learnt to imitate human speech. It was famed for sitting on its perch in the garden and calling out greetings to anyone passing, allegedly causing an unsuspecting cyclist to come a cropper in their surprise! Alas, it got its comeuppance, it was probably trying to drink from the rain water butt, where it was found drowned.

Last year we were taken by surprise when a Partridge reared a dozen or so chicks right under our noses, without our suspecting them of even being there.



On 17th April, a loud quacking emanating from our front hedge, revealed a mallard duck, enticing a few downy little ducklings from the nest, where she had patiently incubated them, within a few feet of our drive. So nature has hoodwinked us yet again! We didn't see the disappearance of the mother duck and her little brood, but they ended up on the pond just up the road, hiding in the reeds. However, a mallard's nest in the garden of Jenkins Farm caused Margaret and Ken Mills to wonder what was going on, it contained two duck eggs and two pheasant eggs! A while after this, on BBC Spring Watch, a viewer told of bit of a contretemps between a hen pheasant and a mallard over the duck's nest. The pheasant was repelled, but then laid an egg alongside and disappeared! Even stranger, the duck then manoeuvred the egg into its own clutch, most peculiar. Could this have been what happened at Jenkins? Unfortunately, Ken told me later that their nest was robbed, probably by a crow.

## SEPTEMBER 2013

Summer's all but gone, but isn't it great that this year we've actually had some real summer weather to rejoice in, a real butterfly summer. Whilst the butterflies have revelling in the dry sunny days, other, less welcome insects have suffered. None of us complained about the almost complete lack of greenflies and other aphids, but aphid predators such as ladybirds and hover flies were deprived of their main food source and were equally scarce. Another irritation (literally) that we were spared, were the thunder flies, I did see a few one late July day, but mercifully that was all we had to endure this year.

Most of the commoner butterflies have done really well, especially small tortoiseshells and the peacocks; our buddleia has been alive with them under the hot sun. We've also seen the odd migrants, like painted ladies, and one lone-clouded yellow, a butterfly, which you can go years without seeing.



Moths have been equally abundant, as we found in mid July. We held a children's Wildlife Watch Group meeting at Goldingham Hall, where Ashley Cooper had very kindly set his moth trap overnight. The catch was amazing. We found no fewer than six different species of hawkmoths, of all shapes and sizes: -, privet, poplar, eyed, pine, small elephant and large elephant hawkmoths. The last two moths, so named because their caterpillars resemble elephant's trunks, are truly exquisite. They are coloured a delicate pink interspersed with a rich cinnamon, incredibly striking. Their caterpillars, with monster false eyespots, can sometimes be found on fuchsias. The privet hawk is Britain's largest moth and like the large elephant, one of the commoner of our hawkmoths. Apart from these, there were many other species of moth, a real bumper catch.

The mating pair of privet hawkmoths pictured, were discovered by Alan Dixey in his garden. I had another somewhat unexpected encounter with a privet hawk at home. A magpie was feeding enthusiastically on something on our lawn. Through binoculars, I could see that it was snacking on the hawkmoth. The bird spent quite a while picking it about, seemingly sorting out certain parts and discarding others, which I suppose were distasteful to it. The pair in Alan's garden would certainly have made easy pickings for any bird, sitting there boldly in full view.

It's always exciting for me to add a new bird to the garden list, but an addition in late June was nothing to celebrate. A young nuthatch killed itself against our window, I have only rarely seen one in the village before and to me this was a tragedy. In early September, Irene Dickinson called with another sad little window casualty. We identified this as a young willow warbler. These incredibly beautiful and delicate little birds often appear in gardens at this time of the year, when they are moving around preparing to migrate. It's amazing to think that such tiny birds, weighing not a lot more than a 20p piece, fly thousands of miles to spend the winter in the south of Africa before returning to us in the Spring.

There was marked absence of blackbirds in our garden during August, & September. Our rowan tree was still sporting a good show of red berries, whereas in most years the blackbirds strip them as soon as they start to change colour. One that we did must have spent 10 minutes or more feeding on the lawn, on what looked to be nothing but grass. Closer inspection showed that it was actually picking up ants.

Orchids have been good this year. On the verge of Church road 7 pyramidal orchids flowered in July, they have gradually increased since the first one bloomed there 6 or 7 years back. There was a fine show of bee orchids a little earlier, beside the Upper Houses to Lower Houses footpath, close on 200 blooms I believe.



Many people will have heard or read in the media about the desperate plight of the Turtle dove in Britain. For me, if hearing the first cuckoo or sighting the first swallow confirms that Spring has at last arrived, then high Summer was always epitomised by the soft, soothing purr of the turtle dove. This sublime sound would float across to us from the tall elms around the old stack-yard behind Griggs barn (now Suffolk Hall) Now all we hear is the monotonous, monosyllabic call of that somewhat dowdier relative of the turtle dove, the collared dove. Like those huge elms, the turtle dove seems to have disappeared as a breeding bird in Bulmer. The last one to stay around us, spent most of the Summer trying to get off with a female collared dove, without of course, any success! This was getting on for ten years ago. Nationally, its population has now dropped by 80% since 1995. This cataclysmic decline is attributed to a range of different factors including habitat loss, in particular, weedy field margins. The eradication of arable weeds such as goosefoot, chickweed and knotgrass from the edges of intensively managed farmland, has in many places deprived the turtle dove of what is, apparently, one of its vital food sources. It appears that the seeds of these, and other arable weeds form an essential part of their diet, especially when feeding their young. Add to this the persecution they suffer on their migration routes across southern Europe from trigger-happy hunters, and it is easy to see why their numbers have plummeted. I would be interested to hear from anyone who has seen or heard a turtle dove in Bulmer this year.

Thanks to all those who have taken the trouble to get in touch to tell me of your various sightings and discoveries.

### DECEMBER 2013

Hasn't there been a real glut of fruits and nuts this Year? Our few trees produced bumper crops of plums, cherries and apples. In the countryside hazel nuts, conkers, sweet chestnuts, sloes, rose hips, haws and acorns have all added to an overflowing larder to help feed our wildlife in the leaner months to come. On a walk in Maplestead we picked up over three pounds of sweet chestnuts in just a few minutes. We discovered that the microwave provided a brilliant and fast way of cooking them. Perhaps not as pleasing as the good old traditional way of roasting them on an open fire, but it saves getting your fingers burnt!

There was a really good show of mushrooms and other fungi in October and November. In Parsons Wood there was a most impressive "fairy ring" about 20 ft across, of large funnel caps. Even more impressive is the fly agaric, with white spots on a bright red cap, which can be up to 9ins across, the sort that a pixie or an elf would feel at home on.



Edible species such as field mushrooms; common parasols, wood blewits and shaggy inkcaps provided us with tasty additions to several meals.

One thing, which was very noticeable, despite our long run of "proper" Summer, everything was two or three weeks later ripening than usual. This was due to the extremely late Spring, when the abnormal cold held back the flowering of all trees, putting them back by as much as three weeks. The leaves were equally late in appearing, which in turn delayed the appearance of the small caterpillars, which are essential for feeding the young blue and great tits etc. Many of these hatched around their usual dates. As a consequence some young broods perished, the parent birds not finding enough food to keep them alive.

As usual, here are my dates for the comings and goings of migrant birds in and around Bulmer. Last years dates in brackets.

*Summer migrants, last dates* recorded by me: - Swift 3rd Aug. (5<sup>th</sup> Aug.) House Martin 23rd.Sept (29<sup>th</sup> Sept.) Swallow 18th.Oct. (5th.Oct.) Chiffchaff 7th Oct (14 Oct) Blackcap 19th Sept. (14<sup>th</sup> Oct.) Willow Warbler 4<sup>th</sup> . Sept.

*Autumn migrants, first dates:* - Fieldfare 14<sup>th</sup> Oct (27<sup>th</sup> Oct) Redwing 26th. Oct.(20<sup>th</sup> Nov) On 23rd Sept. about 90 swallows were lined up on the electric wires at the back of The Street.

Along with them 4 or 5 house martins were perched and at least 1 sand martin, not often seen around here. The 2 swallows seen on 18th. Oct. were late stragglers.

On 1st October I spotted a carrion crow mobbing a large brownish bird, I fully expected it to be one of the local buzzards, but in fact it was a red kite, still something of a rarity around here. I was amused to watch the antics of a carrion crow with a very large chunk of bread out in the back field. It had obviously eaten it's fill, because tearing off another chunk, it hopped a few yards and buried it. It repeated this feat several times before flying off, leaving something for a rainy day. On another occasion a crow had a whole slice to itself. Now, he was clearly "the boss crow", as another one hoping to get a share was very firmly rebuffed whenever it approached. All was not lost however, as each time this happened the "boss" took his prize a bit further away. It's subordinate soon cottoned on to the fact that each time this happened there were always a few scraps left behind, which it eagerly pecked up.



Walking in Twinstead we came across a little egret that had attracted the unwelcome attention of a couple of magpies. This small white heron was perched in a small alder tree and the magpies had clearly decided that it's presence was an affront to them. The assailants hopped in and out of the branches around the egret, cackling and thrusting their beaks towards it. To my surprise the egret sat there quite placidly and practically ignored the would be bullies, occasionally just pointing it's dagger like beak towards them. Surprisingly this mild response seemed to somewhat throw the magpies, and after a couple of

minutes they admitted defeat and flew off.

Another bird to visit the garden this Autumn was a grey wagtail. This bird is anything but dowdy, the grey being restricted to it's back and the top of it's head, whilst the lower parts are a bright yellow, with a black bib on it's throat. The more usual wagtail to see is the pied wagtail, a dapper little black and white bird. These are usually seen just singly or in pairs, but in December over 30 were feeding in company with around 20 meadow pipits on the rape field behind Upper Houses.

We survived the Late October gale relatively unscathed in The Street, but the Tye had more damage, presumably because it's on higher ground. However in the Belchamp valley several cricket bat willows were broken off or bent at right angles about 3 or 4ft above the ground. A sad loss for the grower who has been tending and protecting them for 15 years or so.

The only remaining little ivy covered ash pollard in the Upper Houses lane was split in half, revealing that it was completely hollow, leaving only half of the poor old veteran still standing. This tree was a link with my boyhood, sixty odd years ago my cousin Robin and I had used it as a hideout. Up amongst the heavily ivy screened branches we were invisible to all! This, together with other dens, was all part of the Wild West fantasy world that we lived in, roaming freely across the Griggs Farm acres.

***The Seasons Greetings, to everyone.***

