

## MARCH 2015

Our plant group's traditional New Years day survey, in Boxford this year, found 22 wild flowers actually in bloom. Quite a good count, but we didn't expect to find a rarity amongst them. In the churchyard was a yellow flowering strawberry. This was introduced into Britain from Asia, in the early 1800s and has now become naturalised. It is only recorded in 5 other sites in Suffolk, according to the "Flora of Suffolk".

Celandines, always good heralds of Spring, haven't been as plentiful this year, but It's a good year for primroses and they seem to be a little earlier than usual, some showing at the beginning of March.



We're often lazy bird watchers, choosing somewhere where we can watch in comfort from the car. One good spot, is nearly under the Orwell Bridge. Here you can often see various waders and wild fowl out in the estuary. Recently, we had really close views of a flock of wigeon, Despite the fact that they nest right up in the wild Arctic, they seem almost tame, hence their approach to the car.

We had an interesting 10 minutes watching deer on a field near Parsons Wood in January. We noticed the roe deer first, four of them craning their necks to better view us, before bobbing away across the field, their white bums shining out in the fading light. They stopped and regrouped further on, standing in a sort of cross, each one facing out, like points of the compass. As they stood there, eight fallow deer galloped into view from the other end of the field. They then ran straight towards the other deer, which took flight in front of them.

Certainly the roe deer were in no mind to tolerate the fallows, which left me wondering if the feeling was mutual. Were the fallows trying to join the roes, or were they indeed chasing them off?

The field of oilseed rape behind Bulmer Street has attracted hoards of wood pigeons over the winter and many areas have been eaten bare. Apparently the pigeon numbers have risen by about 150% over the past few years and this has been attributed to the vast acreages of rape now grown, which feeds them well all winter long. This is in contrast to all other farmland birds which sadly, are in steady decline, according to the British Trust for Ornithology. This trend is only bucked on the odd farms which have more favourable habitats, such as those that are in one of the higher level environmental stewardship schemes, such as Goldingham Hall.

### Living history



Two ancient oak pollards stand beside the old lane leading from Upper Houses to the Brickyard, just past where the bridleway goes left, towards Bulmer Tye. These ivy clad trees once stood either side of the entrance to the old barn, as can be seen in the 1930 picture below, (from

*Barn near Hilltop Farm, beside the lane that led to Deal Nursery. 1930,*

Bob Hawksley's "Snapshots"). Inset is a photograph of the two trees today, taken from the same spot. The barn was completely demolished by a January gale, in the early 1980s. As kids, we used to play in there, a great place for hide and seek. Arthur Day used to kid us on that it was haunted, which we sort of half believed! In the fifties, Jenkins' farm bullocks were often housed in the barn and corn or straw stacks stood in the barn yard. Indeed, the last corn stack I can remember being built in Bulmer was here, in about 1956 or '57. By then combines were in general use and there were no longer sheaves of corn to store for threshing later on in the year. The amount of straw and spilt grain laying around the stacks always attracted scores of birds, such as house sparrows, chaffinches, greenfinches and especially turtle doves. From inside the barn, I could watch them unseen, through one of the many knot holes or gaps in the decaying weatherboards. I even attempted to photograph them once, laying for hours outside in the straw with a Kodak box brownie at the ready. What a disappointment, when I picked up the developed prints from Wardmans the Chemists. All my efforts produced were some blurred pictures of grass that had poked up in front of the lens! If only turtle doves were as common today as they were then, sadly they have now all but disappeared from Bulmer.

The old barn had a lot more to its history than just bullocks and straw stacks; it had actually been moved to this site sometime between 1808 and 1840. Having previously stood at Georges Farm, further along the old lane, about half way to the Brickyard. Judging by it's construction, it would have originally been built there around 1700.

Moving a timber framed barn, was relatively straightforward, albeit a major undertaking. All of the main timbers of the walls and roof were held together by mortise and tenon type joints, secured with wooden pegs, without nails. By simply knocking the pegs out, the framework could be dismantled and then rebuilt, rather like a Mecanno set. My grandfather Philip "Tulip" Rowe recalled his father and uncle telling him, that as children, they used to play with "the barn bits", off-cuts of wood left over after the barn was reconstructed.

More remarkable than the moving, were other memories passed down about Georges Farm.

Smallpox was often rife in the 1700s, all too often incurable. Given its remote location, the old farmhouse had been used to house smallpox victims, as a sort of isolation hospital at one time. One wonders just how and by whom it had been organised.



Grandson Timothy and his parents were late arriving last Friday, after long delays on the A14. But great excitement on the road between Gestingthorpe and Bulmer compensated, good views of a badger near Hill Farm and then a barn owl, which flew alongside the car at Lower Houses. Tim was well pleased and made me guess what they had seen, though he wasn't impressed when I suggested an aardvark.

## **JUNE 2015**

### **BULMER HIT AND RUN INCIDENT**

Two residents of Bulmer were the unfortunate victims of a double hit and run accident recently. The vehicles involved have yet to be traced.

I stopped to see what I could do for the casualties, who were lying on either side of the road. A cock pheasant on one side and what looked like its brown coloured mate on the other. However closer inspection showed this second bird to be a buzzard. The pheasant had undoubtedly met its

end first. Later, the Buzzard gratefully accepting some easy pickings, tucked into this tasty serving of game, only to fall victim to a four wheeled predator!

I've had several people contact me about bird sightings recently.

A red kite was spotted by several people and excited their interest enough for one two to of them get in touch, and then came the first sightings of swallow and swifts etc. All of course very local, but this following account, came from a little further afield. An email from Maureen & Tony Dixey, only recently moved to New Zealand, made fascinating reading :-

"Hello Peter and Wendy, I'm sure you know by now where we are etc. but I thought I'd give you some information on the wildlife where we live.

There is nothing in the garden yet, only some grass that has gone brown in the heat.

The first bird we saw was a thrush, followed by blackbirds and sparrows. Just over our fence is a huge sand dune with brambles on, there were loads of swallows but they seem to have gone, I have no idea where they go to from here. We sometimes see a falcon cruising over, I presume looking for food. At the back of the dune it's farmland with cows on, on that land there are loads of Pukeko they are a bird almost as big as a pheasant, they are bright blue with red on their heads and red legs and feet and a white rear end.



The most interesting thing we had was the Monarch butterfly, they are quite big and they lay their eggs on a swan plant, the caterpillars are stripy and no birds seem to touch them, the best bit was the chrysalis, it was lime green and sealed up with gold dots. They are very common and everybody makes sure they have swan plants in the garden, but it's brilliant for children to see the caterpillar curl up into the chrysalis and then to see it come out as the butterfly."

The British birds that they mention, prompted me to look up some facts about their introduction into New Zealand. Although some birds, such as thrushes, were taken there simply because the new emigrants were missing our British songbirds, far more were introduced to deal with the insect pests which had multiplied rapidly following the rapid expansion of agriculture and horticulture. This backfired spectacularly, most of these introductions were in the 1860s & 70s. However by 1900, chaffinches, house sparrows, yellowhammers, greenfinches and several others were all regarded as serious pests to cereal farmers. Surprisingly, even rooks were released and these still present a problem today.

The introduction of birds or animals into countries such as New Zealand where they have no natural predators is almost invariably a recipe for disaster, if the conditions suit them well enough they will speedily multiply. Add to this the likelihood that some of them will be carrying diseases and possibly parasites, that may prove devastating to the endemic fauna and flora of their newly adopted home and it soon becomes clear how risky such introductions can be.

In my March Diary notes I commented on how few celandine flowers had appeared this spring. It turned out that they were just abnormally late and by early April they were brightening up the verges in their usual profusion. The general consensus is that the majority of our wild flowers have appeared later than usual. Oddly though, primroses were about two weeks early and many oak trees had sprung into leaf in the third week of April, extraordinarily early. A truly strange start to Spring.



We were very privileged only a couple of days ago, to be taken to a wood in South Suffolk, where two rare orchids can be found. The first we came across was the fly orchid, a small flower similar to the bee orchid, but resembling a flattened fly, rather than a bee. The second we were shown, was the very showy greater butterfly orchid, pictured above. The other pleasure in that wood was the constant song of a couple of Willow warblers.

Many bird watchers have been commenting on the later arrival of some of our migrants this year, like the plants it's been a strange start to the year, possibly because of the very indifferent May weather we have had.

Although we saw and heard a cuckoo a couple of times along the Belchamp valley during the 2nd week of May, since then they have been silent or more likely just not there. Blackcaps and chiffchaffs seem to be singing in something like their usual numbers, but whitethroats seem very thin on the ground. Although the number of swifts we get over Bulmer Street look about the same as usual, house martins and swallows are depressingly scarce. Ten minutes on 25th May seemed to buck this trend, almost like old times again, with swallows skimming down to drink at the pond, the swifts overhead, but now accompanied by house martins. Fifteen or twenty years ago it would have been a regular sight from the garden every day, but alas no longer. I was however heartened, when Janet Nevard told me that they had several martins nests under the eaves of their house and swallows nesting in their stable again this year.



The northern half of Parsons Wood has been taken in hand by the new owner, who has been carrying out some much needed coppicing over the last couple of years. It is certainly well over 60 years since the understory was cut. Already the extra light he has let into these areas is encouraging the woodland flowers. We found about 35 flowering spikes of early purple orchid, nice to know they are still there, I remember them when I roamed the wood as a youngster. There was also a carpet of town hall clock, a diminutive plant of wet habitats which has four tiny flowers at the top of its stem, arranged like the clock faces around a clock tower. Primrose and wood sorrel also plentiful, but the unexpected find was one plant of sanicle, a member of the carrot family, which has multiple little pom-pom flower heads, which is very uncommon in this area.

We had a near mid air collision over the garden, I had scared a couple of mallard, which winged off low over the gate. At the same instant, a female sparrow hawk sped up the hedge at right angles to the ducks and had to swerve sharply to miss them. Had the hawk wanted to, it could have easily grabbed the nearest duck. I think though it would have been too big for it to manage, not exactly a "sitting" duck, but an easy target!

Let's hope the weather bucks up a little from now on, so that we can all enjoy some sun, and entice out some of the summer butterflies, they have been very thin on the ground so far.

## SEPTEMBER 2015



Walking round "Green Lane", a couple of roe deer stags startled us, suddenly popping into view only a few yards in front of us. It soon became clear that they were too intent in sorting out their own domestic squabbles to pay any heed to us. They reared up, one seemingly doing a somersault over the other and then galloping off, hotly pursued by its adversary. It wasn't however admitting defeat, as it charged back to start another battle, this time they clashed antlers and another chase began. After that they seemed intent on rushing around first one in pursuit and then the other,

almost taking it in turn to be the aggressor. During this couple of minutes of highly charged activity, one ran almost up to where we stood, but still ignored our presence. By the time I had got the camera out, all I managed to capture was an out of focus shot of the action. This is shown in the background of the picture of one of the Stags above. I was surprised that they were rutting at this time of year, but looking it up discovered that their rut did indeed start around late July.

Blink and you'll miss it! That was the order of the day. "**Kingfisher**" Wendy yelled, pointing at our pond. By the time I had come to my senses, all I glimpsed was a vivid blue flash, as it sped off between the trees. Not surprising that it didn't stop, as there are no fish in the pond, just newts, dragonfly larvae and the occasional frog.

A few weeks later, it was "**come quick, look up there**" Another surprise sighting, five grey wagtails on the roof. By the time I got there, there were only two, and then they all flew off to who knows where.

To the uninitiated any bird prefixed with grey, would be presumed to be dull in colour; however this bird is anything but. It is one of the yellow wagtails. A slate grey, right enough on its back, but a beautiful pastel yellow on its breast and flanks.



I have never seen so much dust, as was thrown up when the oil seed rape was harvested on the field behind us in Bulmer Street. A great cloud of dust totally enveloped the combine, and we were rushing round, shutting all the windows, the prevailing wind threatening us with a liberal coating from the grey cloud rapidly approaching. Then, emerging from the blizzard of dust, a fox came trotting leisurely and quite calmly along the field edge, having been flushed out of the standing crop by the wheeled monster's approach. That made the second fox I had seen in a couple of weeks.

I was fascinated by the antics of young, but almost full sized fox and a hare on the one of the fields behind us. The hare seemed to know that it wasn't in any imminent danger, seemingly playing with the fox, almost inviting it to give chase, just doing enough to keep a couple of strides in front, jinking this way or that, but never bothering to make a clean escape from its would-be predator. Eventually the fox gave up the chase and both animals made off in opposite directions.

We have been lucky this spring and summer to have had a pair of song thrushes around the garden. We had been watching the young being fed by their parents around the middle of July. Going out one morning, I saw one of the youngsters sitting forlornly on the path, seemingly unafraid and ignoring me. Only then did I notice that it was sitting close to the body of its dead

parent, quite a tear jerking scene. I guess the old bird had probably flown into our window. The young bird was probably capable of fending for itself and I was a little relieved to see the other parent, perched on our roof.

### **Living History**



On 1st July our plant group surveyed a meadow beside Heaven Wood on Smeetham Hall Farm. Getting on for 100 years ago, my grandfather, Philip "Tulip" Rowe described this meadow as being "as steep as the roof of a house". Because of this very steep slope, it has never been ploughed, and as a consequence, is one of the few remnants of ancient grassland surviving in Bulmer. Philip mentions a thistle growing there, which "blooms just above the ground". This is the dwarf thistle, which requires a chalk soil. It still flourishes there today, but we were too early to see it in bloom. This mini

escarpment cuts into the chalk underlying the land and gives rise to other chalk loving plants such as common rockrose and salad burnet, which like the dwarf thistle, are uncommon in our area and can be considered as "living history", being survivals from a bygone era.

The valley at this point, being far from any road or footpath, seems quite remote, only visited by those whose business leads them there. One such was the late Fred Hunt, who was stockman/gamekeeper at Smeetham Hall. Fred was a true countryman in every sense of the word and knew all the secrets of that hidden corner of Bulmer. Thirty odd years ago he took me over to that steep meadow, to see something rather special.

Telling me to wait by the hedge, he strode through the gate, to check on a small herd of bullocks grazing there. Instantly, they all came to meet him, but tagging along behind them, quite unbelievably, was a red deer stag. Apparently the animal had attached itself to the herd and had been there for several weeks and had got quite used to him. Fred had no idea where it had come from, and the nearest red deer to us are in Thetford Forrest, but they are known to roam far abroad. Similarly, although a common enough sight nowadays, he told me of a buzzard that had taken up residence there around the same time, which had stayed for most of one summer. In those days a buzzard a real rarity in East Anglia.

### **Belligerent blackbirds**

My sister Jean phoned to tell me of a couple of very aggressive blackbirds in her garden, which constantly attacked any wood pigeons that dared to land on her lawn. The next day we called and witnessed this extraordinary behaviour ourselves. A pigeon landed on the lawn, within half a minute it was buzzed by the hen blackbird. After a couple of attacks the cock joined in. The beleaguered pigeon, after ducking away from several attacks, deciding that discretion was the better part of valour, sought refuge in the ivy covered pear tree. I'm not sure what was going on here, I suspect the blackbirds had young close by, either in a nest, or hidden in the shrubs, but pigeons are no threat whatsoever to them, and hardly compete for the same food.

The sky has been full of house martins and swallows today (18th Sept) by far the most I have seen all summer. Undoubtedly they are on the move south to warmer climes.

## **SEPTEMBER 2015**

What an incredibly mild, if somewhat unsettled autumn we have had. To underline the point, on 31st October, having our grandson plus parents staying the weekend, we spent the latter end of the morning playing cricket on Walton-On-The-Naze beach, in beautiful warm sunshine! Shortly after noon however, we had to make a strategic retreat in front of the swiftly rising tide! This gave granddad a chance to set up the telescope and to show Timothy some of the birdlife at the

Naze end of the coast. Small flocks of Brent geese were making their way N to S along the coast. These are winter visitors to these shores, largely black birds, with a white collar and rump. These can often be seen grazing on coastal grasslands and sometimes on nearby wheat fields. A graceful grey plover caught our eye, still in its full breeding plumage. Very striking, with a coal black face and breast contrasting strongly with its silvery white mantle. This finery soon disappears as it moults into its far more sober winter plumage. Like the Brent geese, they nest up in northern Russia and fly thousands of miles to come and spend the winter in our milder climate.



Although you have to go to the coast to see grey plovers, there are two other members of the plover family which sometimes drop in to feed on our local fields, the golden plover and the lapwing. Neither of them turn up that often, but the ones you are most likely to see are Lapwings (also known as the green plover, or pewee, take your pick!) Although at a distance the lapwing appears to be black and white, a closer view will reveal the black to be a beautiful metallic green, with highlights of burnished bronze. It carries a fine crest on its head, which on a windy day, can make it look as if it's having a bad hair day!, as shown on Wendy's watercolour.

The golden plover is a gold and black version of the grey plover when it's in breeding plumage, but mostly just a quiet sandy colour in winter, when they occasionally visit our fields.

We were swept by blustery gales on 17th November, the tail end of hurricane Barney. Returning home about 10 at night we had to stop a few times to move the odd wheelie bin and small branch out of the road, also a young woodpigeon which sat unharmed but dazzled, in the middle of the road.

The first and so far only frost of the winter was on 21st of October, when we awoke to minus 3 degrees and all the tender plants in the garden were reduced to a soggy mess.

Maybe the prolonged mild spell both here and on the continent, was the cause of our winter migrant birds arriving later than usual. The first redwing turned up on the 21st. Oct., which is about an average date for them, but I have only seen one other since.

A small flock of fieldfares appeared on 6th. Nov., but it wasn't till the end of the month that saw a good flock of getting on for 100 of them near Finch Hill

Similarly Hugh Owen, has remarked how these autumn migrants have been thin on the ground so far. In his garden great spotted woodpeckers appear daily as do plenty of tits and a song thrush has been singing. The December temperatures so far have been way above average and this probably explains why some birds are starting to sing. Remarkably we heard a robin singing at 10 pm by street light over at Hadleigh recently. Also of course many wildflowers are still blooming.

A couple of birds that we don't often see in the garden have turned up recently, lesser redpolls, feeding on the seeds of our birch tree and a meadow pipit, which perched briefly on one of the top branches. Birch seeds are dispersed by the wind. Although quite tiny themselves, they have a little wing on each side. We had a lot of them stuck all over our window, looking just like little insects, complete with two feelers. They fooled us for a start and it was a while before I cottoned on to what they were. These little aerial capsules can travel a long way on a strong wind, which is why birch is one of the first trees to colonise waste ground, especially on the sandier soils.





It's been another great year for autumn nuts, berries and fruit. Most hedgerows have been heavy with hips & haws and also spindleberries. These in particular have put on a great show. Each spindle berry is divided into four sugar pink, spherical lobes. The pink casing eventually splits open, to reveal a startlingly orange fruit, inside of which is the seed. One of nature's more unsettling colour combinations! The berries are poisonous to man, but apparently highly nutritious and are eaten by some birds and, although I have never seen it myself.

Although mild, we certainly had our share of dark, damp days around the middle of December. One such was Sunday 13th, but despite the overall gloom, the garden was absolutely pulsating with birdlife. Goldfinches galore --- 5 on the feeders and another 9 on the ground, clearing up all the dropped seed which showered down from above, goldfinches are very messy eaters. Apart from these there were chaffinches, great tits, collared doves, greenfinches, a dunnock, wren, robin and house sparrows. Five blackbirds were feeding on the remaining apples on our Darcy Spice tree and were joined by a lone fieldfare. About half a dozen blue tits were on the roof carefully going through the clumps of moss growing on the tiles. At first I thought they were searching for insects, but watching closely I could see that what they were taking were the spore capsules of the moss, no bigger than pinheads. The same afternoon we took the Wildlife Watchgroup for a walk around the Sudbury Water Meadows. Plenty of gulls and mallards for the children to see, but nothing to create much excitement until later on, a kingfisher shot into view to perch about 10ft above the river, on an ancient hawthorn. From this vantage point it made a couple of sorties, diving in without success, but on the third attempt returned with a shiny wriggling fish of considerable size, more than half the length of the bird. All five children had a good view of all this going on, before the bird sped off downstream to enjoy its prize away from our prying eyes. A satisfying end to a murky afternoon.



Well, that's it for 2015, **Happy New Year** to everyone!