

MARCH 2016

After what has been the mildest winter ever recorded, Spring certainly sprung early everywhere, with some daffodils flowering before we even got into the New Year. In the hedgerows and woods primroses were full out by the middle of January, whereas in a cold spring, they don't peep out much before early April. The Daffodils shown above are flowering in Deal Nursery (better known to many as the bluebell wood), half way between Upper Houses and the Brickyard. While I am normally very much against non native flowers being planted in the wild, these ones do have a special meaning. They were planted there in the mid 1950s by Arthur Day in memory of Connie, his first wife, who tragically died after a Calor Gas



explosion in their home at Hill Top Farm, Upper Houses. Arthur, together with his father farmed the 100 or so acres of Hill Top Farm, which included Deal Nursery Mr Day bought the land in the early 1930s. All small fields by today's standards. Most of them came from the Goldingham Hall estate, but at least one, and Deal Nursery itself, had belonged to Jenkins Farm on Bulmer Tye. This created a new farm and an old cottage at Upper Houses became Hilltop Farmhouse. This was demolished around 1970 and is where "Leycroft" now stands. Today the land just one big field, is now part of Hill Farm Gestingthorpe and is known as "Days field".

The flowers weren't alone in emerging in advance of their normal seasons. Worryingly, any hibernating mammals, such as hedgehogs, dormice and bats are likely to wake and venture forth in search for food, which as likely as not just won't be there for them. On 18th Feb, a bright almost warm day we walked over to Belchamp Walter and I was amazed to see a bat flittering over the meadows, against the backdrop of the church. Hopefully it was finding some flying insects, but we didn't notice any. I spent a neck breaking five minutes trying to capture some video of it as it twisted and turned above us. Although I captured both the bat and the view I must confess to merging the two shots!



In the Dec. What's On I mentioned that we had had a few lesser redpolls in the garden. I was quite pleased with that, but I was almost shocked when about the middle of January, Hugh Owen got in touch to say that he had seen a flock of about 100 of them feeding on a patch of game feed halfway down Sandy Lane. Going down there a couple of days later we saw getting on for thirty of them, seemingly very restive, continually moving between the crop and the electric wires which cross the field. It won't be long now before they return to their breeding areas further north. Another bird that appears to have been more plentiful than in most years, is the goldcrest. On 8th January during a short walk from Henny Ryes along the old lane, we saw seven altogether, four in a little group which also included long tailed and blue tits and three more singly. Apart from these we have had one in the garden, and others at Lower Houses, Little Dean Spinney and in Parsons Wood. Those with good hearing can pick up their high pitched calls

but to my ears they don't utter a sound !

Ashley Cooper reports that hardly a day passes when he, or someone else on the farm doesn't see a barn owl, another welcome piece of news.

Throughout most of the winter we have often had a large mixed flock of Rooks and Jackdaws feeding on the field behind Bulmer Street. The picture shows the flock and a close-up of one of



the rooks, it's huge beak looks almost out of proportion to the rest of the bird. The rooks usually well outnumber their smaller relatives, although the din jackdaws kick up can give the reverse impression. With their sharp "jack" calls, they certainly announce their presence. The flock is at their most impressive on wild, windy days. The whole flock seems to delight in stunt flying, especially the jackdaws. They throw themselves about in the turbulent air, corkscrewing and spiralling, swooping and stalling as if competing in some avian aerobic Olympics. Although the birds

came right up to our hedge, they never ventured into the garden, until that is this afternoon. I had only just finished this passage when, to my amazement, I saw two of the rooks somehow clinging to our hanging bird feeders. They just about managed to keep their balance, with much wing flapping and tail fanning, before one gave up, leaving it's mate to extract sunflower seeds very gently from the small opening, with the very tip of it's beak.

When the corvid flock was missing from the field, they were often replaced (surprise surprise!) by wood pigeons. Of course, wood pigeons don't excite much, but on 28th December a flock took off en masse and streamed over our heads. Well they might, I did a double take when I looked up, from amongst the pigeons burst a peregrine falcon! Only a fleeting glimpse, but quite unmistakable. This supreme predator is being seen more and more in the area. It is renowned for it's speed, capable of reaching 200 mph when in a dive. At Lavenham a pair have been seen regularly on the 141 feet tall church tower. A nesting platform has been placed on the top of the tower in the hope that they may stay and nest.

Cleaning out a bird box that I had neglected to do for a couple of years, I found as I expected two nests one on top of the other, but sandwiched between them was a cache of about a dozen hazel nuts. Obviously a wood mouse or a vole had laid up a winter store. But as only a couple of them were opened I guess the little animal didn't survive for long to enjoy the fruits of it's carefully planned housekeeping.

Now we're into March, it seems that winter is making up a little for having given us a miss earlier on, with several cold and cheerless days. But at least we can look forward to warmer and longer days, which can't be that far around the corner.

JUNE 2016



Nature has a tendency to make you eat your own words ----- back in March I was predicting a really early Spring. Things were well advanced, but then winter seemed to regain it's rule for the best part of a couple of months and having reached June we are still shivering ! Most of March and April served up colder weather than we had in

December and January. Nature stood full on the brakes and the hitherto sprint towards spring was reduced to a crawl. However, in just two days in early May we were rocketed into midsummer, however briefly. This brought forth a throng of butterflies brimstones, small tortoiseshells, orange tips and peacocks, which had all been grounded during the extended "blackthorn winter". There certainly was a fantastic show of blossom on the blackthorn, with whole hedges frothing with masses of pure white little flowers. Predictably, however, just a week later we were shivering again!

We walked along Brundon Lane and around the Sudbury Common Lands in mid April, it was one of the few sunny days we had that month. The air was full of birdsong, blackbirds, a song thrush, blackcaps, chiffchaffs and even a willow warbler, a really spring-like day. There had been a really heavy rainfall the day before, which had caused the river to rise sharply, A pair of swans had a nest which they had built too low for safety sake and the pen (female), although still sitting on the nest was desperately trying to build it higher, dragging in great masses of waterweed and trampling it around the nest edge. Whether there were eggs in it or not I couldn't see, but it wasn't a happy situation for the birds

From the wildlife angle, a tour round a 150-acre solar farm didn't rate highly in my expectations. This was on the old Stradishall airfield, adjacent to Highpoint Prison.

This tract of land was managed by the MOD fairly sympathetically towards wildlife, with the planting of little groups of trees and creation of a few ponds etc. Since then the land has been taken back into private ownership and is being managed in a similarly wildlife friendly manner. Despite being set on high ground, the site is hardly visible from any of the surrounding roads, so isn't too much of a blot on the landscape. Grass grows well under and between the 8000 panels and this is grazed by sheep, so giving a dual use of the land. We were told that the installation was capable of generating enough power to supply three quarters of the energy needs of a town the size of Haverhill.

The morning started well, getting out of the car we were serenaded by a chorus of birdsong, most noticeably that of willow warblers. Although really quite common in Bulmer twenty or so years ago, today you would be very lucky to hear sweet little song, tumbling softly down the scale. As we travelled round the site by tractor and trailer and on foot we heard several of them from different locations. Other birds we saw included reed buntings, yellowhammers, linnets, whitethroats, blackcaps etc.

An interesting morning, but the best moment of the day came on the way home, when we stopped at a wood near Hawkedon. Looking to catch a glimpse of a small bird, which had disappeared into the trees, I suddenly realised that a tawny owl was sitting like a statue just a few yards into the wood.

Dozing the day away with one eye half open, it had obviously seen us, but was relying on it's natural camouflage to escape notice. I was quite pleased with the picture I managed to capture.



Travelling through the back lanes around Shimpling, I was suddenly aware of a dark mass on a field in the middle distance. Slowing the car, I did a double take as I could make out that it was a very large herd of deer. The binoculars revealed fallow deer, we counted over a hundred, by far the greatest number I have ever seen anywhere in our area. In such numbers I would think they must be a real problem to farmers and are really bad news for the ancient woodlands around there. In Bulmer we sometimes see fallow deer, usually in the Belchamp Valley, but not in those sort of numbers, maybe up to fifteen or so. Apart from these there are a few roe deer here, they are usually to be

found in the area around Parsons Wood and Deal Nursery.

We poked our noses into the northern half of Parsons Wood in early May, to see how Peter O'Brien was getting on with his coppicing work. We found him and his brother busy, putting up an electric deer and rabbit fence around the coppice area he had cut down during the winter. Rabbits and deer always are always drawn to the succulent leaves of young coppice, especially hazel and ash and without the fence the young shoots would soon be nibbled off. Once protected the fresh growth will race ahead and can grow to six or seven feet in the first year. Peter explained that fencing off compartments within the wood rather than fencing off the whole wood, allowed the deer and other animals into parts of the wood, rather than keeping them out altogether. Certainly ground flora of the wood is benefiting from his management, there was a good show of early purple orchids, some primroses were still hanging on and one damp section had a carpet of the white flowers of wood sorrel. There were also a mass of bluebells towards the edge of the wood, but it has been a marvellous year for them everywhere.



Having left the wood we went home via Little Dean Spinney and were delighted to count six common lizards on one of the log habitat piles. The one in the picture has lost the tip of its Tail and is actually half way through shedding its skin. If you look closely you can see the old skin hanging on its back. The lizards were introduced to the site eleven years ago by

George Millins, who had rescued them from Sudbury construction sites. He also released slow worms, but sadly there hasn't been one seen for five or six years.

SEPTEMBER 2016

Nature has a tendency to make you eat your own words..... That's how I started the June Diary and blow me down if I don't have start with another retraction of something I also mentioned in June. This time I do so with pleasure, I had reported that the slow worms had sadly disappeared from Little Dean Spinney conservation site, where they were introduced 11 years ago . Not having seen one for 5 or 6 years, I was convinced that they had died out. So I was amazed and delighted when in early July, I found a shiny gold slow worm beneath one of the "tin" refuges. 10 days later it was there again, this time curled up with a sizeable grass snake. This indicates that there is still a viable breeding population on the site.



We enjoyed a privileged glimpse into the lives of a pair of song thrushes in June, they having decided to build their nest in a cotoneaster less than a yard from our lounge window. A particularly wise choice for them, as they were well sheltered from the numerous deluges we were "blessed" with towards the end of the month. By that time the young birds were pretty well fully feathered, small replicas of their parents. During this couple of weeks I was videoing some of the comings and goings of the old birds, as they stuffed their 3 chicks with evermore earthworms, extracted in quantity from our rain drenched lawn. In a dry spell, when worms retreat well below the surface, they would probably

have struggled to find enough food, but this year they were in the land of plenty. Quite late in the evening of 4th July the first youngster left the nest, the other two hopped out the next day around noon. One of these was noticeably smaller than the others, clearly it was getting pushed to the back of the food queue by its stronger siblings. One thing which did strike me about the young thrushes, was that their plumage was pretty well identical to their parents. This is unusual,

as in most other species the youngsters are quite dowdy --- robins, goldfinches, chaffinches, starlings and blackbirds, for example. This undoubtedly helps to keep them hidden from would-be predators. But young blackbirds are often mistaken for thrushes, having quite speckled breasts. This helps both young blackbirds and thrushes by breaking up their outline, and blending into the background when hiding in undergrowth.

If new life was celebrated in the garden with the success of the thrushes raising their brood, sudden death was the drama played out a few weeks later. A young sparrow hawk was perched on our rose arch busily plucking a small bird, possibly a greenfinch. It was having difficulty in maintaining its balance on top of the arch and a couple of times lurched downwards madly flapping its wings to regain its perch, but clinging on very tightly to its prey, steadying itself it began to eat. The small bird was easy pickings for this sparrow hawk, but one tackled a much larger quarry in Sandy & Allen Burbidge's garden, an adult woodpigeon. Sandy's picture of their hawk is on the left, the woodpigeon is bigger than the hawk. A female sparrow hawk will tackle a woodpigeon, whereas the smaller male goes for lighter quarry.



Exactly ten years ago a single pyramidal orchid threw up a flower on the road verge between the Village Hall and the School. Over that decade I have watched their numbers steadily increase. By 2014 there were 14 of them and this year they have actually doubled that, a thriving population. There have been bee orchids flowering on the same stretch of verge for about 25 years, but they are slowly declining as the trees and hedge gradually shade them out.

On the whole, it's been an indifferent summer for butterflies. Our buddleias are usually besieged with small tortoiseshells and peacocks throughout their flowering season, but we hardly had a tortoiseshell before the flowers were mostly over, when there was a sudden flush of them towards the end of August. Peacocks and red admirals have been quite scarce. On the other hand Meadow browns, gatekeepers and ringlets occurred in about average numbers and the last week in August brought forth hosts of speckled woods. There is a marked difference in the lifecycles of these two groups of butterflies. The caterpillars of last four mentioned all feed on various species of grass and they hibernate through the winter as caterpillars, whereas the food-plant of the caterpillars of the first three butterflies is stinging nettle, but they hibernate as mature butterflies. It seems probable that the mild wet winter favoured the grass eaters and didn't suit the nettle feeders. Certainly if the hibernating butterflies were awakened in the winter, they would have struggled to have found any source of energy giving nectar and the subsequent cold spring would have been another blow for them.

Every August we usually get a large flock of house sparrows descend on our back garden. Whilst they swamp the bird feeder and rob the garden to some extent, their main target is the ripening cereal crop on the field behind us. This year the flock was about 30 strong. There were far more young birds than adults, thronging together in our hedge, before going as a small cloud of rustling feathers to drop into the crop.



One of the more unlikely edible fungi is a bracket fungi, the *chicken of the woods*. This will grow on a variety of hardwood trees, especially oak. Really attractive, a tier of knobby lobes pale lemon in colour,

sometimes flushed pink. This seems a good year for it, we have seen several specimens. A particularly fine one was growing on the massive oak pollard which stands in front of Hill Farm Gestingthorpe, shown with a close up of the fungi above. I had always been curious to try one, to our surprise it really did have a slight chicken flavour and moreover the texture was very similar. One of the best "wild mushrooms we have tasted. But I suppose the dreaded health and safety should come in here and I have to stress that before trying any fungi you must be certain that you have identified it correctly. There is an old saying that ---- "You can eat absolutely any wild fungi that you can find"---- "**but some of them you can only eat once !** *Bon appetite*

DECEMBER 2016

We seem to live in a world of clever acronyms, buzz words and catch phrases and have come to accept them as the "norm"

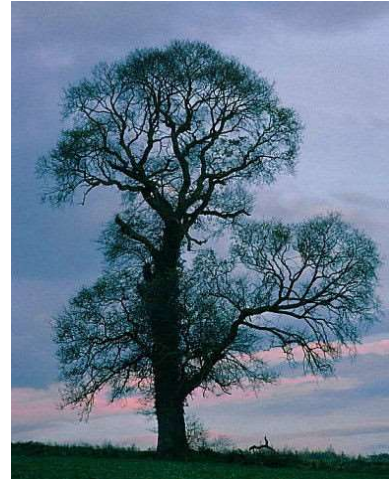
I was though, a little taken aback when my old friend Robin Ford introduced "Shifting Baseline Syndrome" into a talk he gave to the Lavenham Naturalists group !

A somewhat curious phrase -- but one which explains how our idea of what is the "norm" in all manner of things, will alter over the years. For example, before Dutch elm disease ravaged our countryside and robbed our landscape of some truly magnificent trees, a mention of elms would have conjured up a picture in our mind's eye of a row of these mighty giants standing sentinel along our hedgerows. Thirty odd years on, and what do we visualise now ?.... an often scruffy hedge (but still an important Natural habitat), invariably including some branches dying off, as they become

mature enough for the bark to crack and let in the beetle, which carries the deadly fungal spores. So our perception of "elm" may have moved from stately tree to scruffy hedge.

This is particularly relevant to me because, as a child, one of the defining features of our home at Upper Houses was a group of towering elms just across the field in front of us, one I would think approaching 90 feet tall. I could look across to these every morning without even venturing out of bed. One of my ambitions was to climb this giant, but having no side branches for the first 15ft or so, it always defeated me. But another elm closer to home, a mere sixty footer, was easy game. In 1953 (Coronation Year) I climbed up and fixed a Union Jack to the very topmost branch, swaying about alarmingly in those precariously thin branches.

To return to shifting baselines, some of my own personal lifetime ones are :- from much smaller fields with the occasional pasture with bullocks or sheep grazing... to the huge purely arable fields of today from harvest fields being cut by the binder, and of shocks (or stooks) where the sheaves were stood up to finish ripening, often, in those days before herbicides, with thistle down blowing from their tops.....to fields with not a weed in sight (black grass excepted !) and being harvested in a matter of hours by our modern day monsters.... from turtle doves and cuckoos calling almost continuously from the hedgerows and huge mixed flocks of house sparrows, chaffinches, greenfinches, linnets etc. Often 400 birds or more feeding on the winter stubbles..... to the turtle dove and cuckoo becoming rarities and any flock of sparrows and finches numbering over 50 or 60, being quite notable.



I could go on.

We had a real surprise visit by a couple of snipe in October. Wendy noticed them first, a little way down the lawn. They often thrust their long beaks into the turf, no doubt seeking worms. They ambled their way down to the field gate where they seemed quite happy. A dog suddenly trotted along the footpath, within a few feet of them, the birds must have seen it but remained quite unperturbed. However it was a different tale



when the dog's owner appeared, the snipe rocketed upwards and sped away. These birds coincided with the reported influx of snipe migrating in from northern Europe, helped by some strong easterlies. Several different species were coming over at the same time, especially redwings, the next day a couple of small flocks of them winged their way past. Just a week later we saw our first fieldfares, with about 60 of them feeding out on the field. We had an amazing 20 minutes of bird watching in the garden on Nov 14th, in that time counting 18 different species. Most of course were garden regulars, various tits a robin, goldfinches, Blackbird etc, three were occasionals, long tailed tits, song thrush & green woodpecker, but two are what I would regard as garden rarities, goldcrest and meadow pipit. However a day later there were getting on for 100 pippitss feeding on the field just behind us.



Last edition I showed a picture of "chicken of the woods" a large edible fungus growing on an oak tree. Recently We discovered another monster fungi, growing in a cricket bat willow plantation beside the Belchamp Brook. I spotted it from some distance, not believing at first what it was, because of it's size. Growing from the ground, close to a large heap of wood ash, it was about 2 feet in diameter and dome shaped, with masses of contorted gelatinous "petals" for want of a

better word. Looking it up at home I discovered that it was the cauliflower fungus, also known as the brain fungus. It seems to be regarded as something of a delicacy, but this one was way past it's sell by date, so there were no culinary adventures.

The autumn colours this year have been truly stunning. The deep bronzes of the oaks and the bright yellows of maples, making a rich tapestry spread across the valley behind us in Bulmer Street. Particularly so one evening when the colours were intensified by low sunlight flooding across the fields.

