

MARCH 2017

Bulmer hit the headlines on the birding websites in January. Some of you may have noticed several cars parked in Sandy Lane and observed a few figures dotted around armed with telescopes and long lenses. Yes, you could say that there was a "twitch" on. The object of their quest was a hooded crow. Very closely related to our common carrion crow, it has a markedly different appearance, black head and wings, but with a light grey body, very much a two tone bird, unlike the undertaker black of our carrion crow. They are more normally found in the north



of Britain, and only rarely come this far south, especially inland. This one has attached itself to the large flock of rooks and jackdaws that are always to be seen in the locality. Hugh Owen had the honour of seeing the bird first on Christmas Eve, from Sandy Lane. Later Allen Burbidge had it easy, watching in comfort from his bedroom window! I saw it a little later at long range perched with a load of rooks on the line of trees the further side of the field. It seems to be a long stayer, as I saw it again on February 3rd, but at no closer range, so the picture is from the internet. Whilst we were waiting, in vain hope of getting a closer look at the crow, we did have some super close up views of a mixed flock of fieldfares and redwings, which came almost up to the car. These "winter thrushes" which invade our shores, come mainly from the Scandinavian countries.

Like our song thrush and mistle thrush they feed on a wide range of different items. On the fields, they are digging out worms and other invertebrates, but are equally fond of berries and fruit. It always amazes me to see thrushes gobbling down sloes, which can have quite a sizeable stone in them, bearing in mind the fact that each one has to pass through it's intestinal track! Size-wise, the redwing is about the same as our song thrush and the fieldfare around that of the mistle thrush. When it comes to song, we only hear their contact calls, as they don't sing properly until they have migrated back to



their breeding grounds. I've got to say though, that I was most disappointed when I first heard a redwing's song in Norway several years ago. I was expecting to hear something akin to the tuneful sound of our song thrush, but the redwing's song is limited to a constantly repeated three syllable, rather scratchy phrase Left. Three fieldfares & a redwing close to the car in Sandy Lane.

We have had a couple of sightings of a herd of around 10 fallow deer over on the Smeetham Hall fields in front of Heaven Wood. The first time they were grazing in the lee of the wood. Through the 'scope I could only pick out one obvious buck. It was sporting just one fine showpiece antler -- the other was missing. Was it shed naturally, or had it been lost in some epic battle with one of his rivals back in the Autumn rut?

Like most Fallow deer in our area these have very dark coats, unlike those with attractive dappled light coats to be seen in the parkland of some of our stately homes. They can be regarded as having the more typical colouration, but according to the books, they can vary anywhere from black, red and brown, through to pure white. A couple of weeks later, this time for only a fleeting moment, the herd was going hell for leather, strung out like racehorses as they tore across the view, disappearing and reappearing between gaps in the intervening hedges, before vanishing through the last hedge on to the Goldingham Hall lands.

Age and decay has finally caught up with the fine old horse chestnut tree, which for countless years has stood sentinel at the entrance to the churchyard from Church Meadow. Seeking to discover just how old the tree was, I had a go at counting the annual rings of the stump, but they weren't all that clearly defined and I arrived at a minimum of 160 years, possibly up to 180. This would point to the tree being planted around the time the old school was being built on the edge of the meadow, a very handy conker source for the young pupils, probably including my great grandfather David Rowe.

I have one amusing memory of this tree from when I attended the old school. At that time the meadow was known as "School Meadow", an idyllic playground for us all.

The tree had a large branch which came out horizontally over the boundary wall and by standing on the wall, it was a doddle to climb up into the tree. Two of the older boys, who had already moved on to the Modern Sec. at Sudbury, were playing truant. However the formidable Mr Bolt, school attendance officer, was out to catch them. They had taken refuge, well hidden by the leaves high in the chestnut tree. To no avail however, and having been spotted by their eagle eyed pursuer, jumped down from the tree, each carrying a well leaved branch in an attempt to conceal their identity. They ran like hares towards the Village Hall, hotly pursued by old Bolt, with us younger kids streaming along behind enjoying the chase! I don't think he caught them, but no doubt they paid for it later.

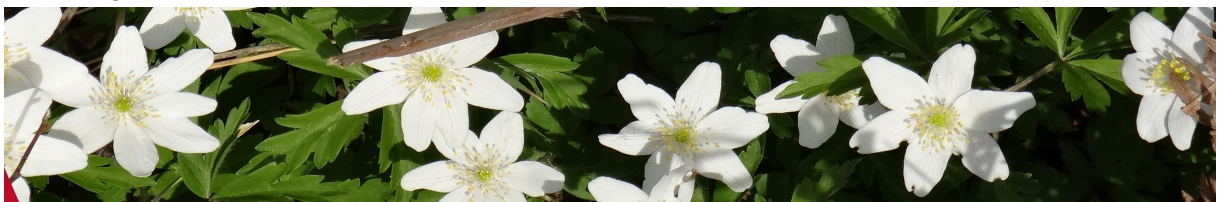
Looking at a rape crop on a field that had been well grazed by woodpigeons, despite lifelike scarecrows and gas guns, brought it home what a battle with nature farmers sometimes have to wage. Pigeons don't do much damage to cereal crops, but beside the estuary of the Stour at Bradfield near Manningtree, the farmer had a different challenge. It was puzzling to see an old Land Rover two

tractors and a digger apparently stranded in the middle of a long wheat field about 400 yards apart. A chance meeting with the farmer solved the mystery. His wheat wasn't plagued by pigeons, but by Brent geese, which winter on the estuary. He seemed to think that the geese, seeing the tractors etc. would keep off thinking that humans were around, but I personally doubt it. Right: Brent geese, a watercolour by Wendy



Well, it won't be long before the spring flowers will be brightening up our walks, although last year many of the primroses had already been out since early January.

Enjoy The Spring !
PETER ROWE



Wood anemones – silver stars on a woodland floor

JUNE 2017



*Viewed from behind
Bulmer Street.*

*St Andrews
Andrews tower is
framed by the
frothy white flowers
of the blackthorn
and the fresh
green, confetti like
seeds of the elm*

One of the real joys of spring is watching our countryside gradually coming back to life after the long drag of winter, as the natural world gears up for another round of regeneration and new birth. Although some traces of this awakening have to be carefully sought out, others can take our senses by storm. The wealth of bird song from gardens and hedgerows Those same hedges bursting out into leaf, or in the case of the blackthorn, abruptly turning white.

This has been a particularly good spring for blossom and one of the most prolific has been on the elm. The flower itself is hardly noticeable, as it comes in February and is much the same colour as the twigs. The revelation came around mid April when the seeds developed and whole trees and some hedgerows have been decked with the bright green seed capsules, often in amazingly thick bunches.

Wildlife corridors are one of the many ideas and concepts of conservation these days. Basically they are the means of joining up isolated pockets of important habitat, to help wildlife move between these scattered areas, which ensures healthier populations. In Cockfield, Bradfield Woods and Bulls Wood, about mile and a half apart, are being connected by a mixture of newly planted and existing ancient hedgerows across the intervening arable fields. This is principally to enable dormice, which occur in both these woods to be able to intermingle and thereby increase the gene pool. Otherwise continued in-breeding reduces the health and vigour of the animals. Of course many other creatures will benefit from the enhanced habitat.

Abandoned railway lines create good natural corridors, an example is the stretch of old Bury line, between Long Melford and Lavenham. This touches the edge of Lineage Wood, which is a rich reservoir of rare and uncommon plants. Many of these, such as common spotted orchid, yellow-wort, woolly thistle, twyblade and fairy flax are steadily spreading along the railway walk towards Lavenham, especially favouring the steep banks of the old cutting.

Along a kilometre length of this same walk, we carry out a monthly bird survey. It often amazes me, when in some months we record well over thirty different species. This seems in excess of what I would expect to find along a similar stretch of similar habitat, such as say, the wilder, but more fragmented areas of the Belchamp Valley. This started me wondering if the "corridor effect" could even have a bearing on the number of bird species to be found, despite their obvious ease of mobility.

Our changing view. In the space of a couple of weeks at the end of April, the field behind Bulmer Street along with several others, has been transformed from a fresh spring green to an overall light brown, more redolent of autumn or winter, deliberately sprayed off. Not as I at first thought as the result of some monumental agricultural disaster, but another facet in the array of ever more diverse cultivation techniques employed on today's farms. This is known as 'No Till' technique, where ground disturbance is kept to an absolute minimum to encourage a build up of organic matter, 'Cover crops' are sown immediately after harvest to prevent any residual nitrogen from leaching away and also to increase organic matter. The 'cover crop' is then sprayed off before drilling new seed directly into the soil.

I gleaned the following details from various sources.

Examples of cover crops can include mixtures including mustard, phaecilia, linseed, black oats, vetches, beans and oil radish. This is a really interesting, new 'ecologically minded' form of modern farming--albeit one that still depends on chemical input--but with much less diesel being used than with conventional or organic, arable farming. Needless to say the rows of the now dead cover crop are perfectly straight, thanks to the satellite navigation system guiding the tractor. In some ways harking back to an older respect for the land.



These latest developments in agriculture set me thinking about the multitude of changes I have seen over the decades since I was a kid. Up until the early 1950's, although mechanisation was going on apace, and working horses all but disappeared, some of the age old traditions and conventions of the horse era were still in the mind-set of some farmers and farmworkers.

One example was that, as a matter of pride, all the furrows of a ploughed field should be as "straight as a gun barrel". This was achieved by the unerringly straight eye of the ploughman. As he coaxed his horses or steered his tractor across the field to open that critical first furrow. He was aiming at a couple of skilfully sited marker sticks that he had placed on the far headland.

The corn would be drilled with the same precision, perfectly straight and with no misses (areas that the seed drill had left a gap unsown). Woe betides any worker who had a kink in his furrows or a bare patch where the drill had missed. He would suffer unmerciful leg pulling from his mates. "Reckon old Fred spent too long supping in the Blackbirds b'fore he set to work on that there feld !"

The field behind us with its dead straight, satellite guided crop rows, after spraying off.

These old traditions soon died off, along with the workers who practiced them with so much pride. Kinks and missed were no longer viewed with the same distain.

The cool N.E. winds of late April and early May meant that butterfly days were thin on the ground. But a walk in the Belchamp Valley on May 7th produced about a dozen orange tips, plus the odd brimstone, green veined white, peacock and speckled wood. What surprised me most though were three newly emerged azure damselflies.

On the bird front, Tony Minter has had a lesser spotted woodpecker down at the Brickyard and red kites have been seen several times in the area. Spring migrants tended to be a little earlier than average, with blackcap and chiffchaffs in good numbers. Sadly I've heard only one cuckoo calling in Bulmer, even if I did hear it from over the border, whilst admiring the bluebells in Wiggery Wood Gestingthorpe!

It's been another exceptional year for bluebells and as several people have commented, they appear to be a more intense colour than usual. It must be a blue spring, germander speedwell has excelled itself, with it's diminutive intense blue flowers carpeting many areas of rough grassland and waste ground.

SEPTEMBER 2017

A delightful encounter near Upper Houses, a roe deer and fawn. The mother eyed us warily at a safe distance from their vantage point among the ears of wheat, before bounding away to safety across the ripening crop.

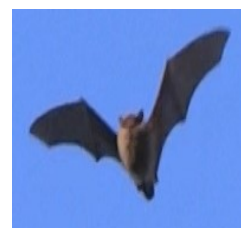


We also had some amazing views of bats at home towards the end of July. We were



sitting close to our patio doors in the near dark twilight, suddenly a bat swooped and almost hit the glass only a couple of

feet away from us. That was the start of a fascinating 10 minutes, they continued their jittering flights across the garden silhouetted sharply against the fading evening sky, frequently coming in close. They were particularly attracted to the buddleia bush a couple of yards from our viewpoint, fluttering and dodging their way between the spiky flower heads. On three occasions a bat actually hovered practically touching a flower, almost certainly snatching up an insect or small moth in the process.



I'm pleased to say that the colony of pyramidal orchids growing on the Church Road verge is thriving, producing more flower heads year on year. Last year the count was 28, increasing this year to 38, a really welcome sight.

In early June we walked through Goldingham Hall and over to the meadows beside the Belchamp Brook. A cuckoo was calling practically all the time, indeed I think there may have been two of them, it was like going back twenty years or more, when the valley would resound daylong with that glorious and unmistakable sound of spring.

On one of those very wet days we have "enjoyed" from time to time, a woodpigeon was luxuriating in it's own exclusive bath, a large puddle on the flat roof of our garage. It was flopped out in the puddle, whilst holding one wing aloft to allow the deluge to soak into it's under-wing feathers. After a while it repeated the procedure with the other wing, clearly revelling in it.

Gardening is always a bit of a struggle against some of our less welcome wild visitors. I found that my beetroot were being nibbled. Having seen the damning evidence of tiny teeth marks, I set a couple of good old fashioned mouse traps. But I wasn't prepared for one capture, a slug! But to tell the whole story, over a few days I caught several field mice, but was puzzled to see that their bodies were covered in slime and moreover, they had been partially eaten. Often the peanut bait had disappeared without the trap being sprung. Then one morning I caught the slug! It was one of those very large spotted ones, a leopard slug. Looking them up, I found that they are in fact the gardeners friend, feeding only on rotting vegetable matter, and more importantly other species of slug. It went on to say that they will also feed on dead animals, so there we have it, a carnivorous slug. I should add that the beetroot were growing in a garden cage, ruling out the chance of catching any birds.

We have another low garden cage covered with butterfly netting which is a bit less secure, to keep both the large and small white butterflies from depositing their eggs on the brassicas. These of course hatch out to become ravenous caterpillars, which can reduce any member of the cabbage family to a skeleton in double quick time. But my netting is obviously not fine enough to keep out the cabbage moth, as their caterpillars sometimes appear on the leaves, but not in huge numbers.

Occasionally a small bird somehow or other finds its way in. This rarely happens, but oddly the one bird, which has done this more than any other, is the common whitethroat, one of our summer migrants. Last year I remember having to release one on a couple of occasions and exactly the same has again happened this year, they are clearly escapologists in reverse !

Margaret Mills told me of an amusing encounter between a young pheasant chick and an adult moorhen in her garden. The young pheasant was approached aggressively by the moorhen, which was more than twice its size. The moorhen lunged towards the smaller bird, which stood its ground and challenged the moorhen, which turned tail and fled!

The mix of very wet days in August, interspersed luckily with a few hot and more seasonal days, promoted the early fruiting of several species of our fungi. One species we found growing near Deal Nursery was the Prince, *Agaricus augustus*, which we had never found before. Looking it up, we found that they are quite uncommon. Quite large, the cap was covered in brown scales and about 6 inches across. As it is described as one of the finest edible mushrooms, we of course had to try one and found it had an excellent full mushroom flavour.

To go to the other extreme the fungi pictured left is the notorious Death Cap, far and away the most poisonous mushroom to be found in the British Isles and really is quite lethal. These specimens were growing in Henny Back Road, Alphamstone.

One noticeable thing about this summer has been the horse chestnut trees appearing to go into autumn early, with their leaves dying and turning to a rusty brown. The actual cause of this is however, that they are being attacked by the larva of a tiny moth, the horse chestnut leaf miner. This is just what they do ----- mine into the leaf, not to eat the leaf itself, but to tap into the sap channels within it. These leaves go brown and withered. After a while the larvae pupate, eventually emerging as adult moths. Once mated the females lay their eggs on the untouched leaves higher up the tree to start the cycle over again. The last generation of moths hibernate through the winter in the leaf litter beneath the trees. In the spring they will emerge to start it all over again. These little pests only arrived in Britain in the early 2000s and have spread quite rapidly. Despite the devastating appearance, little damage is done to the tree itself because it happens quite late in the growing season, according to the experts.

During a walk close to the Belchamp Brook at the end of August, we were lucky enough to see some clouded yellow butterflies. These strong flying butterflies migrate over from the continent somewhat spasmodically; it's 3 or 4 years since I had seen one. They are an orangey yellow and always stand out, always on the move and usually reluctant to settle. But these four or five butterflies were feeding on a strip of flowering red clover. They must have liked the spot, as they were still there 3 days later. Anthony Hyde Parker tells me that he grows Lucerne in his conservation margins at Smeetham Hall, specifically to attract clouded yellows, as this is the food plant of their caterpillars. He has had them breeding there in previous years, so this could be the source of the ones that we saw.

DECEMBER 2017

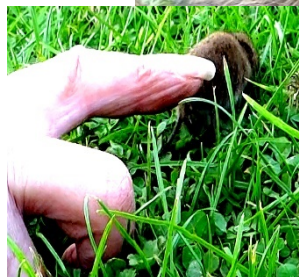


It's 30 years now since the great October hurricane of 1987. We found some unexpected remnants of the havoc it created only recently. Last year Suffolk Wildlife Trust acquired an additional parcel of land to extend their Spouses Vale Nature Reserve, which will be managed to create natural heathland, returning it to what it had been a couple of hundred years ago. Standing within the area is an elongated copse about 100 yds. across and composed mostly of English oak and the introduced Turkey oak, growing closely together resulting in somewhat gangly trees. Obviously left untouched since the hurricane, getting through the sprawling mass of dozens of fallen trees and brambles proved to be a bit of a challenge, but there was an underlying pattern to it all. All the fallen trunks lay to exactly the same orientation, SW to NE, most of them long dead and shrouded with cascades of moss. Some of the trees however had retained enough of their roots to continue growing in their prostrate position. This has produced an unusual effect, the original branches, suddenly found themselves pointing skywards, some of which have developed into sizeable trees, by now well over 30 ft. tall. With as many as eight new trees coming from one fallen trunk, the effect is of short, dead straight

lines of trees spaced at random throughout the wood, as pictured left. So the pattern within the woodland created by that great October storm could endure for a century or more.

Our migrant thrushes, fieldfares and redwings have been very late arriving this autumn. I usually reckon to have seen both species on the fields and in the hedges behind us before the end of October, but it was 8th November before I spotted my first local fieldfares and very few then and I am still waiting for a redwing (end Nov.) Speaking to others, it seems that it is the same everywhere. No one has come up with a good reason as to why they should be so late, but by the time you read this they will hopefully have turned up in their usual numbers. Red Kites have been quite regularly seen, Ed Nevard had this interesting sighting. "One circled low over our heap of Horse muck a couple of times, before heading off in the Auberies direction". I reckon it must have liked the aroma!

We had an amusing 10 minutes watching a young field vole at the bottom of our garden; it was feeding on the cloverleaves in the grass. Less than a couple of inches long, it was only about half grown. With camera in hand, I stealthily crept up to it to get its portrait! I needn't have worried about spooking it; it soon became clear that it was quite oblivious Wendy to stroke Wendy's finger.



to our being there and unbelievably, allowed it. You can judge it's size in the small picture by I thought at first that it must have been sick, but it ran around very nimbly when it was disturbed, but made no attempt to flee or hide.

Looking at one of our taller roses in September I was surprised to find that the uppermost leaves had been reduced to a skeletal spray of bare twigs. Looking more closely I found an array of half eaten leaves and on them the culprits, a seething mass of tiny caterpillars, all busily chomping away. These, I found out were the larvae of the rose sawfly, which was new to me. Gooseberry sawfly, yes, sometimes stripping our bushes almost bare of leaves, although strangely it never seemed to affect the fruit.



September the 12th was a sunny, but very windy day, which produced a good array of butterflies in the more sheltered spots. On our walk from Henny Ryes there were many small heaths, two pristine small coppers, gleaming like amber jewels as they spread out their delicate wings in the warm sunlight. Several red admirals, some feasting on the sweet nectar of over ripe blackberries, as was a comma which Wendy almost touched as she garnered a few of the glistening purple berries for ourselves.

October the 5th was a similar day ----- but the wind was too bitter for any self-respecting butterfly to venture out. But surprisingly Little Dean Spinney had a little corner, which was a small oasis of summer warmth. There were five different species of butterfly abroad ----



small blue, small copper, red admiral, and a comma which was "mobbed" by a large white, *right*.