

MARCH 2018



A couple of very wet days towards the end of January Resulted in the Belchamp water meadows being transformed into a lake, with Belchamp Walter church reflected in it's shallow waters. About a dozen mallards were glorying in their vastly enlarged watery domain and double that number of Black headed gulls were treating it as their own inland sea. The Brook was so high that it was right up to the underside of the wooden bridge, a muddy, swirling torrent at least 6 feet above its usual level. An enjoyable, if a somewhat squelchy walk.

We have had sugar beet growing on the field behind us in Bulmer Street for the first time since we moved in 45 years ago. As a kid I remember the very labour intensive cultivation and harvesting of this crop. From the hand hoeing to thinning out the young beet, second hoeing for weeds, then on the harvesting, when the workers would have an old sack tied around their

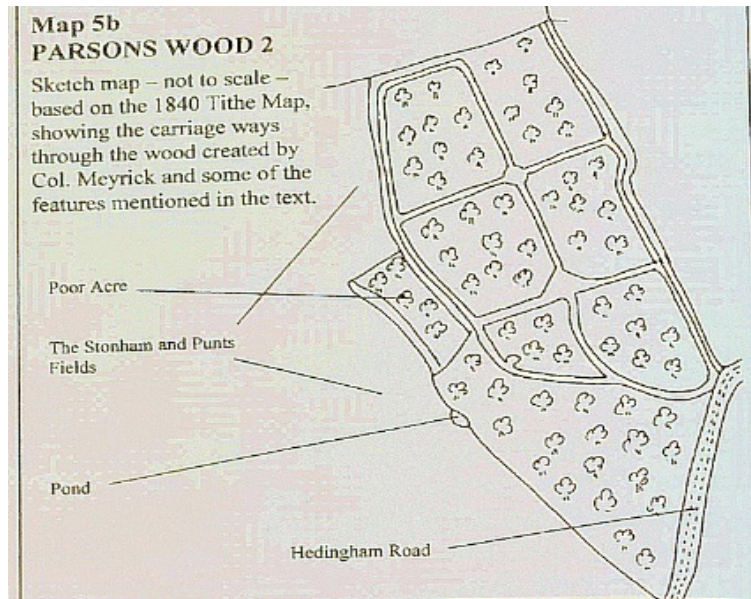


middle to ward off worst of the mud and muck. The beet were pulled by hand, banged together to knock the clods off, the green tops cut off with a special "beet hook", thrown on to small heaps across the field, hand loaded into a trailer using a "beet fork", tipped out and then again hand loaded into the lorry for shipment to the Sugar Beet Factory. What a contrast today, no thinning out necessary, the 30 acre field was cleared by the harvester in less than two days, the beet then loaded on to a juggernaut lorry by a truly monster loader, that would do justice to any Sci Fi film. The progress of the harvester across the field was heralded by a blizzard of gulls, looking to swoop down on any worms or other invertebrates disturbed from the soil, before they landed behind the machine, scrabbling and quarrelling with a few dozen of their kind over whatever food morsels were uncovered. The gulls were a mixture of common and black headed gulls (although the latter don't get their black heads until spring arrives)



The harvester had one unexpected aerial attendant, a buzzard which hovered for a minute or so right above the machine. Although I never saw it land to grab any choice morsels, it unexpectedly veered off from over the machine and flew into our garden, providing a good photo opportunity by perching in the silver birch, left.

Parsons Wood provided us with a sheltered walk in in mid-February, in the hope that we might find some early primroses in flower, but we drew a blank. For those who don't know the wood, it is on the right of the road from Bulmer Tye to the Brickfields. An ancient wood, until recent years it had been in a sadly neglected state, but is now being better cared for. The map shows the wood in about 1840, when Col. Meyrick of the Auberies owned it and shows carriage ways used for pleasure drives by the occupants of the "Big House". Notice "Poor Acre" a small



area, which tradition has it, was set aside for the use of the poor of the parish to collect firewood etc. The wood is now split between two owners, Poor Acre is in the half now being restored by its new owner Peter, who acquired the wood four or five years ago. We chanced on him and chatted about the wood and how he is progressing with the coppicing work. Coppicing is the ancient management of woodland which involves having well-spaced trees grown for mature timber, beneath which an understorey of smaller, multiple stemmed trees, usually hazel, are grown and harvested for use in a variety of trades such as thatching and of course fire wood. The woodland is split up into coppice compartments, and these are cut in a yearly rotation, so that each year there will be one compartment ready for cropping. In a long neglected wood like Parsons Wood, coppicing often brings back flowering plants, such as primroses, wood anemones and orchids which may still exist, having survived either as seed or semi dormant plants. Having coppice at different stages of growth throughout the wood also encourages a wider range of nesting songbirds, even nightingale, if you're lucky. Peter has so far created 5 compartments, each one fenced against foraging deer and rabbits, which would quickly nibble off the shoots of the young coppice when they sprout in the spring. He plans to divide the wood into about 8 compartments. Under the planning system, this Bulmer wood is under a blanket tree protection order but it is being restored back to a much more habitat and wildlife friendly state under an agreement with the Forestry Commission, who have to licence all the work. Whilst talking to Peter he pointed out a couple of grey(English) partridges which he often sees there, these are quite a rarity nowadays, but are possibly from introduced stock released elsewhere. The large coveys of partridges common on our Bulmer fields are Red legged, or French partridges, first introduced in East Anglia in the 1770s for sporting purposes. The grey partridges we saw were in one of newly coppiced areas. They certainly wouldn't have been in the wood before the coppice was cut.



The same applied to a brown hare which scuttled away, almost from beneath our feet. We also surprised 3 roe deer, which bounded away from one of the un-coppiced areas. *I should point out that the wood is of course private property and we only go there with permission.*

March, in like a lion, out like a lamb. This year "In like a polar bear" would be more descriptive, anybody taking any bets on what it will go out like? Thank goodness the Artic extremes didn't last too long. It did bring a few more birds to the feeders, including these long tailed tits. Despite the snow storm, the little flock actually stayed for all of 7 or 8 minutes, instead of their usual fleeting visits.

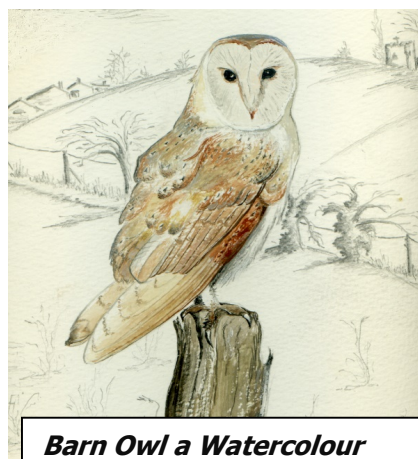
JUNE 2018



Several people got in touch to ask about little brown birds visiting their bird feeders. These were lesser redpolls, which have a red patch on their forehead. We had an influx of them in the latter end of winter. They were coming regularly to our Niger feeder from early February through to April. Quite acrobatic little birds they will hang onto feeders at all angles, much the same as blue tits do. They are members of the finch family, their natural food are the seeds of trees such as birch and alder. Although they nest in some parts of the British Isles, we see them here as winter migrants.

On the basis that "one swallow doesn't make a summer", I was delighted when two skimmed low across the field behind us on April 19th, a feeling reinforced half an hour later when a couple of orange tip butterflies fluttered across the sun drenched garden. Surely we were putting that long winter behind us at last. A somewhat forlorn hope, ten days later we were shivering in or raincoats on a day of heavy rain driven by near gale force winds and the thermometer never venturing above 5 degrees C. Then a week later the temperature touched 27 C. and so our weather roller-coaster ride into spring continued! Anyone who watched the first episode of "Springwatch" will have seen how late spring has been this year. Taken from statistics from all over Britain, it would appear that on average most flowering plants were some three to four weeks late in blooming. Despite, or perhaps because of this, the spring flowers have excelled themselves again this year, from primroses and bluebells, to dandelions and cuckoopints (wild arum) . Dandelions especially. Walking down the footpath behind Bulmer Street, there was a veritable flare path of dandelions lighting the way down into the Belchamp Valley.

The 10th of April proved to be a day of birds of prey. About 8 o'clock a male sparrow hawk had secured a small bird for its breakfast and was devouring it just a few yards from the kitchen window. Having had a reasonable meal, it flew onto the fence where it rested for a good ten minutes. Later a kestrel, hovering a little way down the field suddenly dived like a stone, but straightway lifted off again, whatever it had targeted having eluded capture. That evening just before dusk, we walked down the footpath towards Belchamp. Half way down we met our neighbour Paul returning with his two dogs. He told us he had seen a barn owl several times down there, both morning and evening. Whenever he saw it, it always flew up the hedge line towards the Street. We had only walked on a couple of hundred yards further on when the owl floated passed us, but on the other side of the hedge. As Paul had said, it headed up towards the Street before we lost sight of it in the twilight. I had hopes that it had become a resident, but neither I nor Paul saw it after that evening. About a fortnight before this, the same hedgerow presented me with a real surprise, a sudden movement on the path in front of us revealed a common lizard. These are creatures that don't tend to spread around all that quickly so there may have been a population of them there for years. Despite having walked there countless



Barn Owl a Watercolour

times before, this was the first one I had ever seen. So have I been a little blind, or have they colonised the area relatively recently?

I've noticed more brown hares out on the fields behind us of late. These are the fields between the Street and Heaven Wood. One day in early May there were six chasing around in front of the wood. They appeared to be paired off and were obviously mad May hares ! Looking it up I found out that they will breed through the spring and summer, and can have three or four broods. Apart from these six hares, there was another pair about 400 yds from them. So that's eight in relatively close proximity. But eight hares pales into insignificance compared with the thirty odd rabbits I counted on about a 50yd stretch of hedgerow beside Deal Nursery. Well -- they do breed like rabbits !

Over 25 years ago I bought my first camcorder, keen to record some of our local wildlife. I was very lucky to track down a nightingale singing in a copse close to the Belchamp Brook, thanks to a tip off from Ashley Cooper. On my first couple of visits the master songster remained well hidden, but on my third third early morning visit, it came out into the open and I shot about five minutes of it singing full on. Watching the film recently I was struck by two other birds which could be heard singing incessantly in the background, apart from the nightingale itself. One was a cuckoo and the other a turtle dove. That nightingale was the last one that I have heard or seen in our immediate area. Cuckoos are now very thin on the ground, I have only once heard one in Bulmer so far this year. As for the turtle dove, I fear that their gentle purring, a sublime and iconic sound of high summer, has sadly become a mere memory in Bulmer.

I'm afraid there is not a lot to cheer about when it comes to other of our summer migrants. I Scanned through the British Trust for Ornithology's population graphs, looking particularly at the species which occur, or have occurred in Bulmer. With the exception of the chiffchaff and blackcap (going up) and the whitethroat (stable), swifts, swallows, house martins, nightingales, turtle doves and cuckoos are all declining. The last two very steeply.



We came to this Crab, or flower Spider on a walk along the field edge close to the Belchamp Brook. Sitting in wait on a flower head they pounce on unsuspecting insects, unlike most spiders, they don't use a web to catch their prey. Here it has caught a large fly, but they will happily take bees as well.

SEPTEMBER 2018

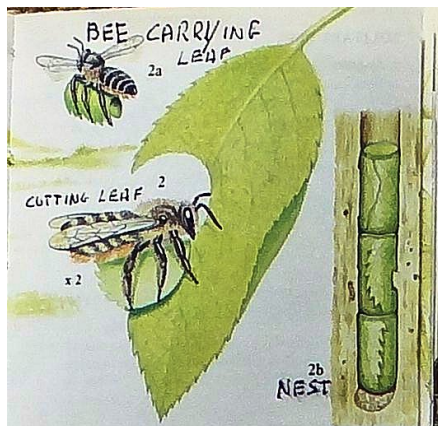
I knew that I hadn't been drinking and yes ----- this was still good old England, so what could explain the extraordinary sight that presented itself just over the hedge. Hopping quite happily along the field in the twilight was a wallaby! Nearly caused me to run into the verge of that winding lane in the outback of Foxearth. I later discovered that this was not the first sighting of a wallaby in that area, someone else had spotted one last Autumn. More recently one in the Braintree area made news in the "Sun". That one was thought to have escaped from a traveling carnival, according to the Essex Wildlife Trust. Ross Bentley reported our local sightings in the East Anglian and added that there are a few places in Britain where wallabies are actually breeding in the wild, having escaped from wildlife parks. On the Isle of

Man there is a colony of about 100 of them, could we be seeing the start a local population ? The wildlife Trust thinks this Is not very likely, but who knows.

I f spotting the wallaby caused me to wonder if I had suddenly been transported to Australia, a recent encounter with a much larger mammal suggested that we had pitched up in India ! Spouses Vale, the Suffolk Wildlife Trust's reserve in Assington, has a very boggy meadow, lying on either side of a little stream. Although in the past it was occasionally grazed by sheep, we used to joke that water buffalo would be more at home there. We were quite taken aback on a recent visit, looking over the gate we found our stare being returned somewhat menacingly by the couple of thick set black beasts you can see in the picture.



Life is full of little surprises, finding that the end of our garden hose was blocked, I poked a wire down and brought out a mass of compacted leaves. I then noticed that all the leaves had ben cut into neat semicircles, it was then that the penny dropped ----- a leaf cutter bee had decided to build its nest down that conveniently sized hole. The "nest" is constructed of



individual little cells, fashioned from the leaf fragments. Each of these is stocked with pollen and a single egg is laid in it. There must have been at least fifteen of these cells in the hose, but of course in clearing the hose I had unfortunately destroyed them all. Normally when the eggs hatch, the grubs feed on the supply of pollen, before pupating. When the young bee hatches it emerges from the entrance hole. The clever part of this is that the bee from the last egg laid will be the first to hatch, clearing the way for the next hatchling and so on. I was once lucky enough to watch a leaf cutter bee cutting out a leaf segment from a rose leaf. The whole process only took a few seconds, including rolling it up and grasping it between its legs

and fly off.

For about 10 years now I have been monitoring the pyramidal orchids that grow on the verge of Church Road about a third of the way up between the Village Hall and the School. This year there were 36 flowering, a couple less than there were last year. Up until this year their numbers had been increasing exponentially, but due no doubt to the heatwave and drought, this year saw a check in their expansion.

P yramidal orchids are relatively common compared with another orchid that we sought out in Groton Wood, (another SWT reserve) around the middle of August. This is the violet helleborine, We had timed our visit to coincide with its flowering, but again the heat had brought them on early and the first ones we found had gone to seed, but fortunately there was just one that was still in full flower and as you can see from my picture it is quite an exotic bloom. It was about 18" tall



but they will grow up to a meter, according to the books. It is unusual in that it prefers to grow in deep shade, where there is little competition from other plants.

A nother rarity that we found recently is Greater Dodder, a fascinating plant growing on the bank of the Stour at Stoke-by-Nayland. This is a parasite which lives on stinging nettles, the seeds of which can live for years. They germinate fist in the soil, but then its roots penetrate the stem of its host. Once firmly established in the nettle stem, the roots in the ground die right off, leaving the dodder entirely dependent on the nettle for its sustenance. It's flowers



you can see in the picture with the shoot of the dodder winding around the stem of the nettle. It doesn't have any leaves, just the flowers. Eventually it kills the nettle and in doing so brings about

its own end, but of course by then it will have produced seed.

Up till about 30 years ago pretty well every year we would see three different species of birds passing through on their spring and autumn migration. These were the wheatear, whinchat and black redstart, the last of which is a bit of a rarity. It must be at least 10 years since I have seen any of these in the village, but this autumn I spotted a wheatear near Upper Houses and our garden was visited by a common redstart, a bird I have only recorded once before in Bulmer.

Peter Rowe



WHEATEAR *Watercolour by Wendy*

DECEMBER 2018



There have been some strange happenings with some of our plants and trees this autumn. This is probably as a result of the somewhat extreme weather conditions we have faced this year, from late frosts to heatwaves, drought and even the odd deluge. In a couple of places this autumn I have seen dog roses in flower whilst bearing rosy red rosehips, months later than their normal flowering back in May. But the most striking and unusual sight was a horse chestnut tree in full bloom just down from the crossroads in Bulmer Street at Blackhouse Farm. One half of the tree was festooned with the wonderful candelabra like flowers, which again were 4 or 5 months behind their usual flowering time. I expect that they did flower earlier, and this was a second flush of blossom.

Many people have noticed that the fieldfares and redwings have been late arriving this autumn. Not only were they late, but are still very low in numbers. I expect as the winter progresses their numbers will build up, with more birds flying in from the continent.

Foxearth Meadows, an established nature reserve beside the river Stour at has been taken over by taken over by "A Rocha" a group who are known as "Christians in Conservation". They have owned the site for over a year now, and are doing great works in clearing some of the almost impassable paths and installing a new board walk which makes this often waterlogged site accessible even when flooded. The reserve was originally created and managed by the late Keith Morris, specifically to attract dragonflies and damselflies, in which he was greatly successful. 21 different species having been recorded there by A Rocha. Of course the reserve benefits many other forms of wildlife, especially birds which like damp habitats, such as reed bunting and reed warbler. At a "bio blitz" day held there back in the summer, bird ringer Peter Dywer recaptured a reed warbler (pictured) that he had ringed there in 2017. Since then this small bird



would have flown to and from southern Africa to return to exactly the same spot. At the end of October we walked dry shod over the board walk on a gloriously warm sunny day. Sunning themselves on the board walk were a couple of common darter dragonflies, still active despite the fact that we were almost into November. One of them took off to continue it's sun bathing on Wendy's hat ! From one end of the site a path leads you along the old railway track towards Melford. On the bank there is a bank of dry chalky soil where some interesting plants grow, including lesser calamint, burnet saxifrage and mouse eared hawkweed. There is also reindeer moss which is actually a lichen. Two small copper butterflies were warming up on the bank, two bright little jewels, shining orange in the sunshine.

Back in September a hazel growing close to our bungalow was well laden with nuts, as was a walnut in our neighbour's garden. Surprisingly, given this easily available food source we haven't seen any grey squirrels stocking up for winter as we have often in the past. However other creatures were more than pleased to help themselves. I had watched a carrion crow out in the field hacking away at something with its powerful beak before eating it. It wasn't till it flew to the walnut tree to break off another nut that I realised what it had got. Then a great spotted woodpecker arrived in the hazel and managed to wrest off a nut before flying off with its prize.

It appears that we have another bird species to add for the village. David Bevan phoned to tell me that he has heard and seen a raven in the belt of woodland between Kitchen Farm and the Auberies. In fact he thinks there may have been two and wonders if they may even have bred. I was telling of this to a one of my neighbours who had a similar tale to relate. Out on a walk she had met ex Bulmer resident David Sayers, he told her that he had seen



one near Brakey Hill, the little wood beside the footpath from Lower Houses to the Tye. I wasn't altogether surprised at hearing about these birds, ravens have been occasionally seen in eastern England and this year a pair actually nested somewhere in east Suffolk. The last time a pair bred in Suffolk was about 1880 according to the reports. I had also seen and heard one a couple of years back at Alphamstone. They have a very distinctive call, something like a carrion crow, but much louder and deeper, they are also much larger than the crow. In fact they are the largest of the crow family.

In early November we visited Sherwood forest to see the Major Oak, a huge ancient tree, which is estimated to be between 800 and 1050 years old. The trunk has a girth of 33ft, an estimated weight of 23 tons and a branch spread of 92 feet, making it the biggest oak in Britain. Legend has it that it was Robin Hood's hideaway. One of the theories as to how it came to grow to be such a huge tree is that three or four



saplings started to grow very close to each other and then fused together. It has a multi chambered hollow interior which supports this idea. As you can see many of the branches are propped up without this support I'm sure that many of them would have fallen by now.



We have several ancient pollards in Bulmer. A particularly large one on Smeetham Hall Farm must almost have equalled the Major Oak, at least in girth, but sadly it has now lost one side of the trunk I believe. The picture shows the late Mr Bunny Hyde Parker with his dogs beside the Monster tree around 1989

Wishing one and all a Happy Christmas and New Year - Peter Rowe