

MARCH 2019



We might have been nature watching but I have the feeling that these fallow deer in Deal Nursery were definitely people watching!

We often see little groups of crows or rooks feeding on the distant fields behind Bulmer Street, but rarely do I pay much attention to them. For whatever reason I scanned a little flock of what turned out to be carrion crows about half a mile distant in front of Heaven Wood. As I watched through the binoculars I saw something lighter coloured moving amongst the crows. Turning to the more powerful telescope, this lighter being revealed itself to be a buzzard. It was clearly feeding on something ---- probably a dead rabbit, tearing off and swallowing chunks of it and obviously having a really good tuck in. The crows, about twenty of them, were milling round and doing their level best to get a share of the buzzard's prize, continually darting in hoping to snatch a morsel. The large raptor was having none of this however and the threat of that vicious beak was enough to put the would-be robbers into rapid retreat. Even though it was outnumbered about twenty to one, I didn't see one crow succeed in getting past the defences, they certainly treated the buzzard with the greatest respect.

It set me thinking of two similar situations involving carrion crows in the past. The first was when half a dozen crows were trying to muscle in on a lesser black backed gull. Again the crows were the underdogs and had zero success. The second incident involved two carrion crows and a sparrowhawk. Here the boot was on the other foot. The sparrowhawk had caught a wood pigeon --- bigger if anything than itself and quite a prize. The crows kept up a constant campaign of harassment and although the hawk did manage to devour a few mouthfuls of its prey, it eventually succumbed to the pressure, and flew off to leave the crows with their ill-gotten gain.

Our plant group's traditional New Year's Day flower survey was held in Bulmer this year. We covered Coes Meadow and the old churchyard. Amazingly we found 29 species of wild plants actually in flower, which equalled our previous record count over the 20 years or so that we

have been venturing out at the New Year. These flowers included burnet saxifrage, cut leaved cranesbill, red campion, creeping and meadow buttercups, prickly and smooth sow thistles, smooth hawksbeard, annual mercury, red and white deadnettle. Quite an interesting selection, the majority of which were found in the churchyard.

Recently we were looking at a row of ash trees growing along a field hedge and noticing that some of them had a really heavy crop of ash keys (the winged seeds pictured right) whilst others were quite bare. What was the reason for this? I checked it out and as I suspected, found that most ash trees are either male or female, the female of course being the one which produces the seeds. There will however be the odd tree that is both male and female, the male and female flowers being borne on separate branches.



Unusually then, ash together with maple can be either *dioecious*, where any one tree has either all male or all female flowers, or *monoecious* (meaning that both sexes occur on an individual tree) Following on from this I checked to see which category a few of our other native trees were in. *Dioecious trees* :- ash, holly, maple, poplar, willow, yew. *Monoecious trees* :- alder, birch, elm, hornbeam, oak, blackthorn, hawthorn.



This has been a good winter for waxwings. These showy birds migrate here from the northern continent, in some years there are very few of them, but this year they have been turning up in considerable numbers.

Allen Burbidge struck lucky when he spotted a flock of about 30 at Borley in early February. The one pictured was feeding on our Darcy Spice apples, in December 2012, which was a one-off occasion for us.

A barn owl has been fairly regularly seen around the Goldingham and Smeetham Hall fields behind Bulmer Street by various people. We walked down there one late February evening but drew a blank. It was after one of those ridiculous, almost hot days that we enjoyed. What we did see were three bats, no doubt after some of the insects brought out by the earlier warmth. But in truth an early warm spell like that can be bad news for wildlife, especially those species like the bats which have hibernated through the winter. The cold spell which followed will have come with as much of a shock to them as it did to us, but they can't turn up the heating, or go to the freezer when they find that their normal sources of food are just not there.

Apparently bumblebees were out too early this year, being out before their food plants were in full bloom, according to a speaker from the Bumblebee Conservation Trust talking at Lavenham earlier this month. This was a talk full of information and fascinating insights into the life of these welcome visitors to our gardens. There are 250 different species worldwide 25 of which are in Britain. They are believed to have evolved in the Himalayas, eventually spreading to Europe and Britain. He compared them with honey bees, which will have upwards of 50,000 bees in a hive whereas Bumblebees will only have between 50 and 500 in

a nest. Between the 25 species of bumblebees their tongue lengths vary between 6 mm and 22 mm. This means that some of them can reach the nectar from flowers with deep trumpets, like foxgloves, which honey bees can't reach as their tongues are too short at only 6mm. Another quite mind blowing fact is that when in flight, the friction created by its wings generates a positive electrostatic charge, this makes the whole insect "alive". When it visits a flower, the flower of course is rooted in the soil and is in effect "earthed" and carries a negative charge. Of course the pollen grains in the flower have a negative charge. Positive attracts negative and vice versa. When a bee visits a flower to collect pollen, much of the pollen will jump over to the bumblebee and stick to its hairy coat. The attraction works both ways of course and some of the pollen grains that the bee had already collected from other flowers, will hop across to this new flower, thereby cross-pollinating it, which is just what the flower needs to set its seeds. Oh the wonders of nature!

JUNE 2019

One very welcome sound which we heard for several days in late April early May was that of a cuckoo, calling from down in the Belchamp Valley. My neighbours Dean and Sarah heard it first on 21st April, they had already beaten me seeing their first swallow on the 16th and again with their first swift on 5th May. Pleased to hear from Ed Nevard that they have had five house martins nesting on their house again this year.



It's been a good spring for butterflies; early on I saw an extraordinary battle between a small tortoiseshell and a peacock. They spiralled round and round each other, getting higher and higher, before gliding gently back down. Strange that two different species should be in conflict with each other, the only thing they had to fight over was their right to be in that space. Others that have done well are brimstones, orange tips and in particular the much smaller holly blues, which have had their best showing for years. Their first brood of their caterpillars feed on holly, but the holly blues on the wing now will lay their eggs on ivy, which the caterpillars will feed on when hatched.

One of the delights of the merry month of May are our hedgerows and road verges bedecked with the filigree flowers of cow parsley, or as we locals know it sheep's parsley. It's not surprising that our local name for this plant differs from the more generally accepted name of cow parsley. According to Geoffrey Grigson's book "The Englishman's Flora", there are no fewer than 57 different names used for it in various parts of the British Isles. Stephen our son-in-law from Leicestershire, knows it as keck. Queen Anne's Lace is another widely used and far more poetic name. Cow parsley is our commonest member of the Umbellifer family and the first one to come into flower. It is followed by a succession of other plants in the family, first and foremost Hog weed, which locally goes by the delightful name of cow mumble. This is a taller and much sturdier plant, and incidentally was the only one which we would feed to our tame rabbits. As the summer progresses other umbellifers can be found in Bulmer, firstly rough chervil, which bursts into flower just as cow parsley is fading and setting

it's seed. Upright hedge parsley and stone parsley flower from July onwards. The latter has an extraordinarily pungent scent, described as a mixture of cloves and petrol. Not that common, I found it growing in Blacksmiths Lane a couple of years ago. In these mid-summer months, hemlock, the tallest of them all, can be found growing in damp situations, such as beside Belchamp Brook. This is notorious as being deadly poisonous. Famously (or infamously!) Socrates the Greek Philosopher took a potion containing hemlock after being condemned to death. It is, like many poisonous plants used in pharmaceuticals. The last umbellifer to come into flower is burnet-saxifrage, unbelievably we found this in flower on New Year's day in Bulmer churchyard.

That chronicles the umbellifers that you are likely to see through the spring and summer in Bulmer. There is one other, which was relatively common when I was a kid. This is the pignut, ground nuts to us. We used to dig up the little tubers, which had a pleasantly nutty flavour, not unlike a sweet chestnut. It is a plant of more open woodland and ancient grassland. It grew in Osborn's Meadow, a little wildlife paradise at upper Houses which went under the bulldozer and plough, along with many others in the early 1950s. Pignut still grows sparsely in Parsons Wood, but this may be the only site in Bulmer now. It is thought that the old nursery rhyme

"Here we go gathering nuts in May" could be referring to the pig nut, May being time of year when its tasty little tubers can be found.



Mention of Osborn's Meadow brings back one childhood memory which will be with me always. I use to hide in a corner of the overgrown hedge and watch a barn owl, which regularly patrolled up and down the tussocky grassland searching for rodents. On this particular evening it made a close pass and right before me plummeted down to rise a moment later with a small mammal grasped in its talons. In early June I felt a distinct sense of *déjà vu*, when a small group of us were entranced by a kestrel hovering only about 20 yards from us. It hung practically motionless on the breeze, only occasionally giving the slightest twitch to its wings or tail to maintain its position, eyes scanning the ground. A lightning dive earthwards at incredible speed, a small bird rocketing to its escape in the undergrowth and we thought that was that. But seconds later the falcon lifted off clutching a less fortunate bird in its talons. Again something that will be fixed amongst the other little cameos that the mind chooses to store, and at times conjure up.



Earlier in the year there were good numbers of hares on the fields in front of Heaven Wood. On March 2nd there were six, in two threesomes, a little bit of "boxing" was going on from time to time, but for the most part they seemed content to just lie at rest. One always thinks of hares as animals of the open fields, but they quite like open woodland. The one pictured was having its wash and brush up in a grassy ride in Parsons wood in May.

Staying with mammals, It's often rewarding to see what animals run across in front of the car when driving after dark. I've seen most things from tiny shrews to deer, but coming back late from Stowmarket, was taken aback to have an otter shoot across and scramble up a bank just outside Monks Eleigh,



Watch out for the pyramidal orchids flowering from mid-June and into July on the verge of Church Road, halfway between the Village Hall and the School. Their numbers have steadily increased over the 10 years or more that they have been there. With luck you might also find the odd bee orchid (right), although these are now getting a little swamped by the taller vegetation.



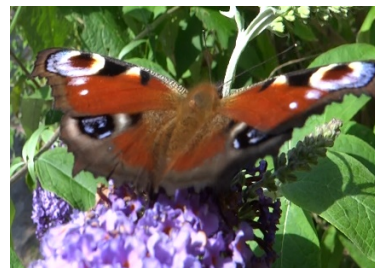
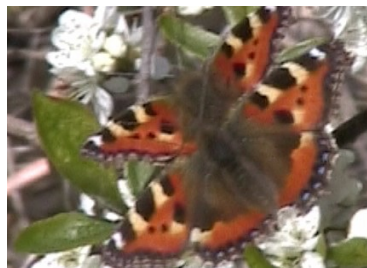
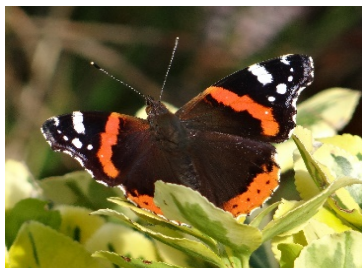
SEPTEMBER 2019

Driving home from Sudbury in early July, I was startled by a buzzard which took off from the verge only a few yards in front of the car, causing me to brake and swerve. The odd thing was that it was clutching a sizeable bunch of greenery. Had it snatched this up with an item of food? it was a bit late in the year for nest building. Looking it up I found the latter was probably nearer the mark. Apparently buzzards have the odd habit of adding fresh greenery to the nest as long as the young are still using it. Perhaps the equivalent of a chap going home with a bunch of flowers after too long an absence. About a month earlier on the same road a stoat crossed in front of us and on our return journey it, or another of its clan ran in front of us again in exactly the same spot. Alas the trip was attempted too many times, a couple of days later a sad little flattened body was lying on the tarmac.



Painted Lady watercolour by Wendy

I enthused in the last "What's On" about how good the spring had been for butterflies, like the brimstone, orange tip and holly blue. The summer has been similarly kind towards these delightful winged gems. The most noticeable have probably been the painted ladies. These are migratory and have good and bad years as far as reaching us goes. They travel amazing distances. The first brood hatch early in the year in North Africa, many of these will migrate north, to have another brood in Spain or southern France. Some of these will continue north, to finish up in our gardens and in particular on the buddleias. Here they will be competing with the "locals", peacocks, red admirals and small tortoiseshells for the nectar. It is believed that some painted ladies make the trip from Africa in one hop, being carried here on strong upper atmosphere airstreams, and also that they may even make a return migration south at the end of the summer.

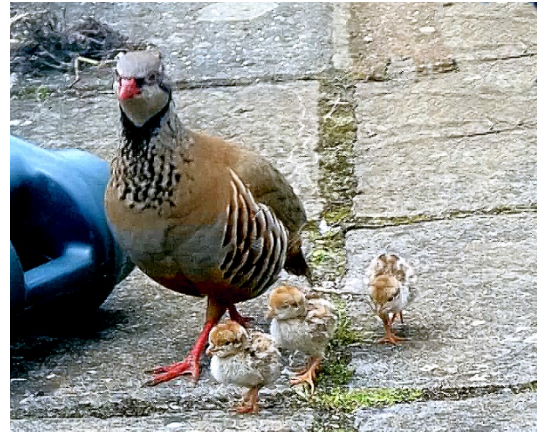


Red Admiral Small Tortoiseshells Peacock

I am always amazed at some of the unusual places that plants will sometime take root and grow. **Looking down** right in the middle of Roy's car park, some greenery was just poking out from one of the rainwater gulleys. It was a healthy example of a harts tongue fern, really flourishing in the permanently damp and partially shaded position. **Looking up** in North Street Parade there was a rape plant bearing a good crop of seed, eking out an existence in the rainwater gutter above on of the shops.

An interesting and somewhat puzzling little episode was passed on to me by Margaret Mills. She saw what appeared to be a young woodpigeon, dead on her lawn. Another one was standing there seemingly watching it. Then extraordinarily it went and stood on top of the dead bird. Meaning to clear away the dead bird, but forgetting, the next morning she saw the adult again sitting on the dead bird. A couple of other reports demonstrate what we have gained in the way of wildlife over the last 10-15 years or so. Dean and Sarah saw a *pair* of red kites in the Belchamp Valley, which probably indicates breeding locally. Steve Morgan told me of spotting an otter with two cubs in the Stour from Ballingdon Bridge. Both of these sightings are signs of the re-colonisation of the kite and otter over the last few years, together of course with the buzzard.

On the 17th June the number of birds in our garden was given an unexpected boost. Looking out onto our patio, I was suddenly aware of about 10 little balls of fluff running around --- recently hatched red legged partridge chicks. Their mother was gently calling them tryin to lead them into cover. A very attentive mother, she had obviously hatched her brood in a nest hidden somewhere in the wild section of our garden (which is most of it!) A couple of days later, she stood her ground in a great show of bravado, as I had to free one of the chicks that had become entangled in the netting of the vegetable cage. Coming close she scolded me for interfering with one of her offspring, and showed little fear of me as I gently released her wayward offspring. The last I saw of them was a couple of days later, when I was pleased to see that there were still 9 chicks with her.



The Attentive mother and three of her chicks



In May and June we often saw brightly coloured red and dark metallic blue cinnabar moths in the garden. These moths more normally lay their eggs on ragwort, but as we have none in the garden, they



were laying their eggs on groundsel, a well-known garden weed which is a much, much smaller plant, only reaching about 8 or 9 inches high. When the caterpillars hatched, they very quickly reduced the groundsel to little more than skeletons. We often found the striking black and yellow striped caterpillars marching along in quest of another groundsel to munch on! Like ragwort groundsel contains a harmful toxin, The caterpillars, obviously immune to this, ingest the poison and become toxic to other creatures themselves. The black and yellow stripes are a warning to any other creatures, **eat me at your peril !** A good example of protective colouration

Every year when the corn on the field behind us is ripe, we get invaded by a host of house sparrows. These use our hedge and trees to shelter in, between carrying out mass raids on the standing crop. At one time this year I counted well over 50 birds in the flock.



Did anyone look for the pyramidal orchids flowering beside Church Road that I mentioned in the June Nature Diary. They flowered outstandingly this year, from less than 40 blooms last year they jumped up to almost 80 this.

DECEMBER 2019

I doubt if anyone can remember a wetter autumn than we have been "blessed" with this year. Up until about mid-September, the ground water levels were getting worryingly low. We certainly had several months of below average rainfall. But then having had some much welcome rain, it just didn't know when to stop and by mid-October a lot of fields were waterlogged. As a result many farms haven't managed to get the seed their winter sown crops into the ground. By now (end Nov) with the rain still threatening and the ground unlikely to dry out enough, the sowing may have to wait till the spring. One puzzling thing is that the water levels at the Suffolk Wildlife Trust Cornard Mere nature reserve, are well *below* normal for this time of the year. The water there is still below the level of the overflow ditch, which drains into the Stour. Where is the water going? Presumably it's draining through the peaty soil and topping up the underground aquafer, which suggests that despite the saturated topsoil, the lower subsoil is still absorbing more water.

COMMON PARASOLS

One result of all this rain, mixed with some warmer days, was an incredible flush of fungi of all species which suddenly sprouted up. The parasols were particularly prominent, looking just as their name suggests with some caps approaching a foot across, on a tall slender stem. They seemed to pop up everywhere. Excellent to eat, we put a particularly large one on top of a pizza, it sealed the rest of the topping in nicely! Field



ARTISTS FUNGI IN THE AVENUE

mushrooms were similarly plentiful, especially on the wide conservation headlands which have been sown with grass and wildflower mixes. In one location they came up so thickly that they literally made a mound of caps, with the more recently sprouted mushrooms pushing up underneath those that had emerged a couple of days or so earlier. They often grow close, but I can honestly say that I have never seen them in such heaps before.

There is one little group of bracket fungi that I'm sure many people from Bulmer Street will have noticed. At the base of the fourth lime tree on the right at the bottom of the avenue leading up to the church, are several Artists Fungi..... not a good omen

for the tree. These fungi are brackets that can last for years and get their name from their underside, which is white. It can literally be used to produce works of art. When its surface is rubbed or scratched it changes from its light colour to dark brown, meaning that lines, shading and all manner of illustrations can be etched upon the fungus itself and is permanent. The fungi season has stretched well into November and about the middle of the month we visited Groton Wood, with members of the Sudbury Watch Group, the junior section of the Suffolk Wildlife Trust. After having woefully low numbers of children attending our meetings of late, we were much heartened when no fewer than sixteen turned up, plus parents. Children just love being set the challenge of searching for things, and in no time their baskets and plastic containers were holding an almost bewildering array of all shapes and sizes of various fungi. Those which we identified included clouded agaric, penny bun, sulphur tuft, blewits, parasols and funnel caps. We thought that one youngster had found a real rarity, a zoned rosette. But alas, it proved after consulting with Neil Mahler the Suffolk Fungi recorder, that it was the commonly found Turkey Tail, growing in an unusual rosette formation, which none of us had seen before.



TURKEY TAIL GROWING IN UNUSUAL ROSETTE FORMATION

A great spotted woodpecker was on our runner beans. I could see that it was reaching over and was pecking at something. After it had gone, I found that it had been getting at the beans in a dried out pod. A few weeks later it was breaking off hazel nuts from our nut stub, then taking them to our apple tree. Here it wedged them into the bark to hold them firm, before opening them with its powerful dagger like beak, right.



WOODPECKER WITH HAZEL NUT



In early October I spotted a red kite over "Missinmere" (the name of the field behind Bulmer Street). As I watched, a carrion crow dived towards it, intent on giving it a warm welcome. Although much bigger than the crow, the kite totally outmanoeuvred its attacker. It then turned the tables and harried the crow, making two of three close passes, it's long



CARRION CROW AND KITE

wings practically brushing the crow. I couldn't help thinking that the big bird of prey was really relishing this chance to show off its superior aerial skills. No bones were broken in that encounter, but there was real menace in an incident that I saw a couple of weeks later beside the Stour Estuary at Mistley :- Lots of birds were feeding out on the exposed mud, redshank, black tailed godwit, dunlin and shelduck among them. But there were also gulls, closer in, which I'm afraid to admit I don't always pay as much attention to as I should. By luck, I was filming the general scene when I was aware that there was a commotion amongst the gulls closer to me. Two gulls were having something of a struggle. One, a large bird in juvenile plumage, had got hold of a much smaller gull by the wing and was trying to force it down. The struggle continued for a minute or more before the smaller gull managed to escape, had it not, murder would have been committed that sunny afternoon! Thanks to a more gull savvy birdwatcher who also saw the assault, I learned that the attacker was a greater black backed gull, the biggest of our gulls which are notorious killers. It was in third year plumage (it's 4 years before they get full adult plumage) and that its intent was definitely to make a meal of the adult black headed gull that it had grabbed.

To end the year on a happier and more seasonal note, double snowdrops at Upper Houses. The original bulbs, planted by my grandmother about 140 ago when a young girl. ***The season's greetings to everyone***

