

## MARCH 2020

As I write this, we are getting to the end of February and as far as I know not a flake of snow has fallen in Bulmer this winter. So, in what is still the unlikely event of us not seeing any snow this year, I thought I should recall some of the hard winters of the past, in case you forget what that white stuff looks like! (well I was almost right!) The first really snowbound winter I can recall was 1947. I was in the infants class at the old Bulmer School, which stood just to the southeast of the church on the edge of School Meadow, (now Church Meadow) and under the wing of Miss Hunter the Infant Teacher. Upper Houses where we lived, was cut off from the Street for a couple of weeks. The walk to school was a great adventure; There were huge ice bubbles to jump on and smash, at times deeper than the top of my wellies, super slides where the wind had blown the snow off the icy road and then towering snowdrifts to tunnel into. Added to the snow was the intense cold. The school milk rations froze up every day, and our 1/3 pt. milk bottles were thawed out around the "slow but sure" coke fuelled Tortoise Stove, our classroom heater. The big freeze went on well into March, but when the thaw came, it came with a vengeance. A really warm airstream accompanied by heavy rain, speedily saw off the snow, but with the ground still frozen, the water could only run straight off the top of the fields and there were floods everywhere. Upper Houses was cut



*Lawerence Coe's lorry stuck between Bulmer and Gestingthorpe, 1950s*

of from Bulmer Street by a broad ribbon of brown swirling water, which snaked its way along the little valley towards Lower Houses, where the two cottages beside the road were flooded. I remember setting out for school, and much to my delight having to turn back when faced by that muddy torrent

Ballingdon Street was also flooded and with practically all workers either walking or biking to their workplace, a lorry was ferrying them in and out of Sudbury. The next big snow up I recall was about 1955 or 1956, not so long lasting, but a really heavy snowfall. Upper Houses was cut off again, but Ken Day decided he could clear a way through by charging the drifts at speed with his International tractor. After much charging and reversing, he succeeded in his mission, it was great fun----- I should know I was sitting on the mudguard all the time, no tractor cabs in that time of course, health and safety? --- well never mind. .



Left views around Upper Houses 1963. Above the Upper Houses milk delivery by Caroline & Wendy, 1982.



**Coe's Meadow in the early 1980s. Note the fine old Cedar tree to the right of the Dower House. For many years the house was always known as "The Cedars"**

Moving on, the 1963 winter was almost a match for 1947. Of course all outside work was halted by the severe frost and I, in common with the majority of building trade workers was "stood off" and went on the "dole". It was about mid-March before it warmed up enough for outside work to restart. To get back up to date, the old saying "February fill dyke black or white" has certainly lived up to its name this year, with ditches full to brimming and the fields heavily waterlogged, definitely black, not white.

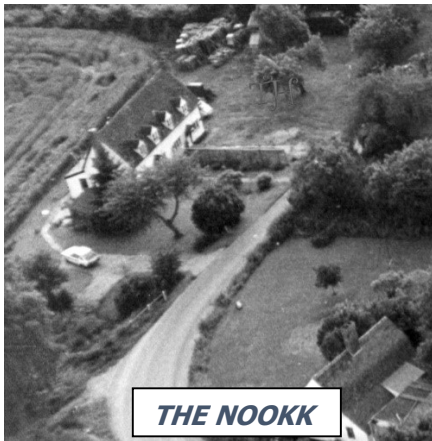
A brown blob in a distant field, which I expected to be a hare, turned out to be a buzzard, when viewed through the 'scope. As I watched, it threw back its head time after time, obviously calling, although of course I couldn't hear it. About five minutes later, it was still there on its own, still calling. However its persistence paid off because a couple of minutes later it was joined by another one, presumably its mate. We quite often have a couple of carrion crows on the back field, but a few days before I saw the buzzards there was just a lone crow. To my surprise a heron flew in and landed a few yards from it and then strolled slowly past the crow, going quite close as it passed. Strangely neither bird seemed to pay any heed of the other. A barn owl, or maybe owls have been seen by many people in the village of late. Even I saw one, sitting on a stump in the hedge half way between Finch Hill and the crossroads Tina from Vicars Orchard showed me a nice little video clip she took of one in Smeetham Hall Lane, it had just caught a small rodent and lifted off with

We have hardly any catkins on our hazel this year, you can literally count them on the fingers of one hand. This follows an autumn when it was incredibly heavily laden with nuts. I think the tree must have completely exhausted itself in producing the bumper crop and is having a year off. A heavy crop of seeds nuts or berries can sometimes be an omen that the tree is sickly or on the way out. Certainly it is the case with elm trees, on several occasions in the past I have noticed that if an elm tree flowers and seeds heavily in the spring, as sure as eggs the effects of Dutch elm disease would become apparent in the tree later that year. Everyone loves to see a kingfisher, something special no matter how many times you have seen one before. This one perched in front of the hide at Lackford Lakes, a popular spot for people to go to see them. Years ago a young lad worked for us. We were working close to a small stream in



Gestingthorpe, I suddenly spotted a kingfisher perched in the hedge ---- "Look Darren a kingfisher!" ---- "What, that little bird ?, it's been there all morning", came the disinterested reply. Well *nearly* everyone loves to see a kingfisher!

## JUNE 2020



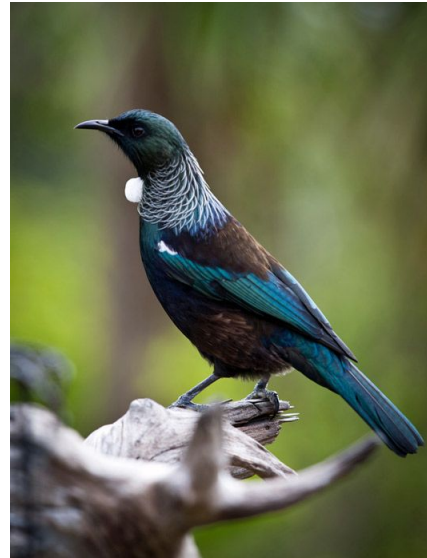
The details of the various snowbound winters that I wrote about in the last diary, brought an unexpected response from the other side of the world. I mentioned how when the big thaw came in the early spring of 1947, the low lying cottages at Lower Houses were flooded out. Maureen Dixey emailed from New Zealand. "Reading your piece about the 1947 thaw, we lived in "The Nook" at that time, I obviously don't remember it as I was only one at the time but I have heard about it. I apparently was handed across the road to Mrs Martin who lived

opposite, Dad was probably at work

and my Grandad, Olly Raymond came down on his bike to help. My Mum was a city girl, she came from Portsmouth, she never did like the country much and I think a muddy field coming straight through your house

didn't help that at all !" Maureen went on to talk of the birdlife in their garden

"We spend a lot of time watching some birds called New Zealand Tui we



have three that come to the nectar feeder that Tony made, they have quite

different personalities, one is quite nasty tempered, and one is so nervous it splashes the sugar water everywhere as it keeps turning it's head round. The Tui (right) is quite a big bird, bigger than a blackbird, at first glance it is black, but close up it has some amazing blues, greens and purple feathers with a whitish collar and a bunch of white feathers under it's beak, hence it's nickname "the reverend bird" Our other nectar feeders are the Wax eye/ Silver eye a very small bird with a green back and pink belly and a silver ring around its eyes"

Certainly different to anything we are likely to see here in our Bulmer gardens, although as many of you know, we are getting bird sightings here that a few years ago we would have thought impossible. We were still in bed one morning in mid-April, when I was astonished to see a red kite hovering about 10 yards away, which then landed just inside the field behind us, it was carrying something in one of its talons. Of course I scrambled to get the camera, but it had disappeared before I got back. Then about 40 minutes later, a raven flew across. Around that time we were seeing kites once or twice a week (but never that close) and we have seen ravens 4 or 5 times through the winter. I think both these birds hang out in the Belchamp Valley and one of our neighbours had reported seeing a pair of red kites over there. I also watched a pair, soaring way up till the eyes lost them against the bright sky. Ravens are known to have nested along the Stour Valley somewhere between Sudbury and

Bures. Whereas the red kites have been reintroduced to one or two selected sites in England, the raven, as far as I know, has started to appear here under its own volition from the far west and Wales. Other creatures are making their way into our area from the west, polecats are occurring more and more often in the area. However there is a snag here, they will interbreed with feral ferrets. Ashley Cooper took pictures of one killed on the road, which we sent to be identified, but the reply came back that it displayed more features of ferret than polecat and was a hybrid between the two.

On 21<sup>st</sup> April we went into Parsons Wood looking for early purple orchids, and found 4 flower spikes, less than in many years. Bird-wise we had 3 blackcaps and a chiffchaff singing, but as we were making our way out of the wood I heard a song which puzzled me, a high pitched trill, not very loud but a sweet sound, not in any way harsh. I located the bird up amongst the oak leaves. About the size of a chiffchaff, obviously a warbler, but only in silhouette as the sun was almost directly behind it. Although I had guessed what it probably was, I wasn't a hundred percent certain until I got home and found a recording of it singing, a wood warbler. This is quite an uncommon passage migrant and we were lucky to drop onto it.

Whether it was because of the mild winter or not there have been an exceptional number of brown hares spotted on the Goldingham and Smeetham Hall fields this spring. David Munroe told me he saw twelve sitting and laying around in just one field on the edge of the Belchamp Valley. Barn owls have also been showing well, with several people reporting their sightings.

Owls may be wise old birds, but surely this barn owl could see that this perch was here to welcome weary walkers and not for those having the luxury of flight. I doubt if this one has ever walked more than half a dozen yards a yard in its life ! Tina Morley captured this picture just along the road from Lower Houses .



A stone's throw from where the owl was photographed, I discovered an alien invader making itself at home beside the road. It is Alexanders, a

robust plant of the umbellifer family. This plant was originally introduced into Britain by the Romans who used the root and stems for food, apparently a use that carried on up to the early 1800s. It would be nice to think that it had survived in Bulmer since Roman times, but not so. It does make you wonder though just how the seed found its way here. It survives on some historical sites, the nearest one to us is on the Castle mound at Clare. Generally though it is found on coastal sites, where it is so dominant it crowds out the less vigorous native plants, and is therefore regarded as something of a pest. There were several days around late April when we heard a cuckoo calling from the Belchamp direction and swallows could often be seen skimming over the young corn, such welcome sounds and sights of spring. It's

been a good spring for butterflies, with brimstones, orange tips and small tortoiseshells all appearing in good numbers. But a friend of ours from Kelvedon put all of these all in the shade. Last autumn she discovered the caterpillar of a swallowtail butterfly on a plant of fennel on her allotment. It is the European one, which occasionally occurs here. It is less fussy than our British one as to what it will eat, so finds it easier to survive here once it has crossed the channel and the mild winter probably helped. Lindsey watched it turn into a chrysalis and eventually hatch into this beautiful creature happily sitting on her hand!



Nature has been getting its own back on me. My neighbour Paul has several times almost bumped into a badger just outside our back gates. I then discovered a sizeable hole under my gate, which like an idiot I ignored. Knowing that my broad beans would be ready a for first taste I was surprised to see that they had been part flattened, as if by a strong wind. But no wind damage this, the badger(s?) must certainly have enjoyed its feast and left me with just five smallish pods. Needless to say, I shut the stable door after the

horse had bolted and blocked up the hole. A couple of days later they had a go at it again, but incredibly they were digging from the garden side of the gate. I knew they could get in from the road if they wanted, so I figured they must now be trying to create a badger highway through the garden! I'll have to put up some road signs.

## SEPTEMBER 2020

### *Reed Bunting*

Love it or hate it, you can't ignore a field of rape, with its blindingly intense yellow flowers and the heady aroma of the pollen, followed later by that rotten cabbage smell of the dying plants, all in all a real assault on the senses. Once the seed has formed and a variety of insects move in, it's a great attraction to birds, relishing an easily gathered beak-full to take back to their chicks. In Early June we walked along the edge of one of the Hill Farm rape fields, not far from the Brickyard. I was amazed at the variety of birds flying to and fro between the



crop and the hedge. Deciding that I would like to have a longer look to see just what birds were using the rape, about a week later we took a picnic and watched from the end of this couple of hundred yards of hedge. Somewhere close to us a song thrush was singing with gusto, a couple of dunnocks were in and out of the crop, as was a cock blackbird. Half way down the hedge a pair of whitethroats and two linnets were busily going out into the crop

and returning with food, obviously feeding young. Getting towards the far end, another pair of whitethroats, and past them a pair each of Yellowhammers and perhaps the most surprising species, reed buntings. That's at least seven pairs of birds nesting in that relatively short length of hedge and all mainly dependent on the rape crop for their sustenance.



Another blaze of colour on show in mid-June was a field of poppies just past Upper Houses, practically the whole field was a sea of crimson. The photo can't do justice to it in black and white, go to the online version to view it in colour.



Two of the three lizards on the log pool.

I was pleased to hear from Richard Haypo that they occasionally see a common Lizard, as they are carrying out their management work on Little Dean Spinney. They were introduced there about 18 years ago, rescued from development sites in Sudbury, so there is obviously a viable population of them surviving there. Also good to read in the last "What's Going On" about the lizard that Rob Wright spotted near the footpath going down to Belchamp Brook. Three of four years ago I found one closer to the Bulmer Street end of the

footpath. Recently I came across 3 juveniles basking in the sun on a large log right down in the valley about a third of a mile to the west of Rob's sighting. This could mean that there is a population of these little reptiles spread along the wild area which borders that stretch of the Belchamp Brook and right back up the ancient hedgerow towards Bulmer Street. It is this sort of linear habitat that is so important to wildlife in our arable countryside. It acts as a connecting corridor for creatures and indeed in some cases plants, to spread along and either colonise a fresh area, or to meet up with another population, thereby adding new blood to both groups by widening the gene

Ashley Cooper tells me that he is researching into the work of early botanists in our locality, for a forthcoming book. As part of this he decided to plough through Gerard's Herbal, published in 1597, looking for any plants mentioned as having been found in our area. Ashley's email to me is a tribute to his patience and tenacity! .....  
**"I have just finished reading the 1300 page on-line version. The first 1000 pages contained occasional references to Dunmow, Colchester, Hedingham and Clare, but on page 1034, I was absolutely thrilled to find a reference.....to BULMER! The plant Gerard refers to is Melilot, to which he provides the Latin name Melilotus Germania. This is now**



Tall Melilot, a member of the pea family

**known as *Melilotus Altissimus*, (Tall Melilot) which was introduced into England before Tudor times from Europe--whilst *Melilotus Officinalis* (Ribbed Melilot) is apparently a nineteenth century import from America. --It is just incredibly exciting that among the places that Gerard mentions, (I would estimate about 1-200 in the whole of England), he should actually mention Bulmer! Have you or Robin recorded Melilot *Altissimus* in Bulmer?"** Luckily I noticed some melilot growing a few years ago, on the roadside between Bulmer Street and Gestingthorpe. It was close to the parish boundaries and sure enough I found it again this year, but still had to be sure that it was the Tall, and not the Ribbed Melilot. We had to wait for the seed to ripen before confirming the identification, the Tall has black seed and the Ribbed brown. The seed was **black**, proving that the plant that Gerard had recorded here over 400 years ago is still thriving here in Bulmer.



Spotted Flycatcher

Two Bulmer blackbirds have unwittingly supplied recycling opportunities in our gardens. Firstly, a robin built its nest inside an old blackbirds nest under the eaves of our shed and successfully raised two broods of young. Ken and Margaret's little recycler, was rather more unusual, a spotted flycatcher. The blackbirds nest reused here was just inside the wood shed opposite their kitchen window, from where they could enjoy watching the coming and goings of the birds. Flycatchers often have a favorite perch from where they wait to dart out and snatch up a passing fly, or indeed a bee. In this case the perch was on a small tree. They took exception to any creature that had the temerity to invade "their tree". One day Margaret and Ken saw a grey squirrel climb the tree, and were amazed to see one of the flycatchers literally chase it out of the tree and across their lawn to dive into some thick herbage. They said it was so funny to see the squirrel fleeing in terror from this comparatively tiny bird.

**Well I'll Be Badgered.** Some of you may recall from the last diary that I lost all my broad beans to a marauding badger, or badgers. Well, at least we did have *some* of our sweetcorn, but today I came across a scene of wanton destruction, half eaten cobs and uprooted plants. Instead of mining their way under the gate as before, this time they somehow broke through the wire netting, Ah well ..... back to the drawing board, or should I be waving the white flag !

**STOP PRESS**

Just had this raven on the field behind us this morning ( 17<sup>th</sup> Sep) Had seen them occasionally over the winter in flight, but never able to catch one on camera before



## DECEMBER 2020

We have had a noticeable absence of berry eating birds from our garden this autumn. One look at our rowan trees will confirm this. Whereas in some years I have known the berries to be stripped by thrushes and blackbirds as soon as they have reddened in early September, this year in the middle of December they still hang in thick clusters on the branches. Although I have seen a few fieldfares and redwings fly over, none have been attracted to our garden's offering. Most years a quick scan around the fields behind us would usually reveal a few fieldfares feeding on one or more of the fields, often accompanied by the odd redwing, I haven't seen any so far this year. However Ashley Cooper told me that a sizeable flock of fieldfares were feeding on hawthorn berries on some of his field hedges. He also mentioned that he had seen golden plovers out on one of his fields, which I was pleased to hear. The first Fieldfares I saw visit our rowan was on the 7<sup>th</sup> December and they spent more time squabbling amongst themselves than they did consuming the berries!



*Three fieldfares and a redwina*

There are many phrases and sayings involving birds and animals..... wise as an owl, blind as a bat, sly as a fox and I suppose, "pecking order" I saw a really practical illustration of the latter recently. There were half a dozen carrion crows gathered together at the bottom of the field out the back of us. Looking again I noticed a white blob amongst them. Getting out the 'scope, I found that the blob was the white head and breast of a lesser black backed gull. It was feeding on a piece of carrion, most likely the remains of a dead rabbit. As it fed, it was continually being approached by one or another of the crows, which were trying to muscle in on its meal. Although they were mob handed, It was quite clear that the crows were no match for the somewhat larger gull. Despite their superiority in numbers, for the most part the crows found themselves mere spectators and the gull must have regarded them as an irritation rather than a threat. As they tried to edge in, one threatening flash of the gulls murderous bill was enough to send them into retreat. I Didn't see the end of this piece of action, but 10 minutes later the crows were spread across the field and the gull nowhere to be seen, it had probably flown off with what remained of the rabbit. Several years ago I was witness to another similar happening, again in the middle of a field. On that occasion two carrion crows were intent on depriving a sparrowhawk of its woodpigeon prey. This time the crows had the upper hand, although the hawk did succeed in devouring some of its kill, it was several times bundled off the carcass. As the crows attacks grew bolder, the sparrowhawk was forced to relinquish its prize.

*Broom Hill field 4th Dec, The telescope revealed every dot on the snow to be a hare !*



*Lesser black back*



I occasionally spot a brown hare sitting or laying out on one of the distant Smeetham Hall fields. Now that the fields have greened up with the beginning of next years corn crop they are easier to pick out against the background than when the fields still had stubble on them, or were freshly cultivated. The unexpected blanket of snow which greeted us all on the 4<sup>th</sup> Dec. made an ideal backdrop for spotting anything out in the fields, but I couldn't believe the number of hares I managed locate on the two fields in front of Heaven Wood. There were no less



Broom Hill field 4<sup>th</sup> Dec. The telescope revealed every dot on the snow to be a hare!



than fourteen in one close knit group on Broom Hill and another group of six on Nearer Broad Field, with another couple further off. It seems that the snow encouraged them out into the open, as the next day when the snow had completely disappeared, despite searching hard I only found two and the corn is not high enough to hide them yet and indeed, I have seen very few since the snow. One can only assume that, for whatever reason, it was the snow that brought them all out, but goodness knows why. You would have thought that they would have been more likely to seek shelter than go out in the open. Unlike rabbits they don't make burrows, simply making "forms", slight depressions in the ground out in the fields.

I looked up some facts about brown hares on the Mammal Society web site. Whilst normally solitary animals, they will sometimes group up when feeding. They breed between February and September and can have up to four litters of young in one year. A litter may contain between two and four young, which are born fully furred and with their eyes open. The female comes to suckle them once a day and after a month they are capable of supporting themselves. The young suffer a high mortality rate, often being picked off by predators, especially foxes. You will notice I mentioned a couple of field names above, these were all come from "Bulmer Then and Now" published in 1979 and now available on the Bulmer web site.



***The Season's Greetings to One and All***