

MARCH 2021



THE BACHELOR FIVE

In January we came across this little group of fallow deer near Upper Houses. It seems to be an all bachelor party and caused me to wonder why they were apart from the bigger herd which we see from time to time and may number 20 or more animals. Looking it up I discovered that bucks often form small groups outside of the rutting season. The rut is in the Autumn between mid-Sept and early November. The young, usually just one, are born in June / July. Of the two other deer species that we have in Bulmer, the roe deer keep together throughout the year in smaller groups of about half a dozen. They rut in July/Aug. Unusually, they have a delayed gestation period and don't give birth till the next May /Jun, usually twins. This is only about a month before their next rut starts. Our third deer, the muntjac, will sometimes be seen in family groups, but are more usually seen singly. They can breed and give birth

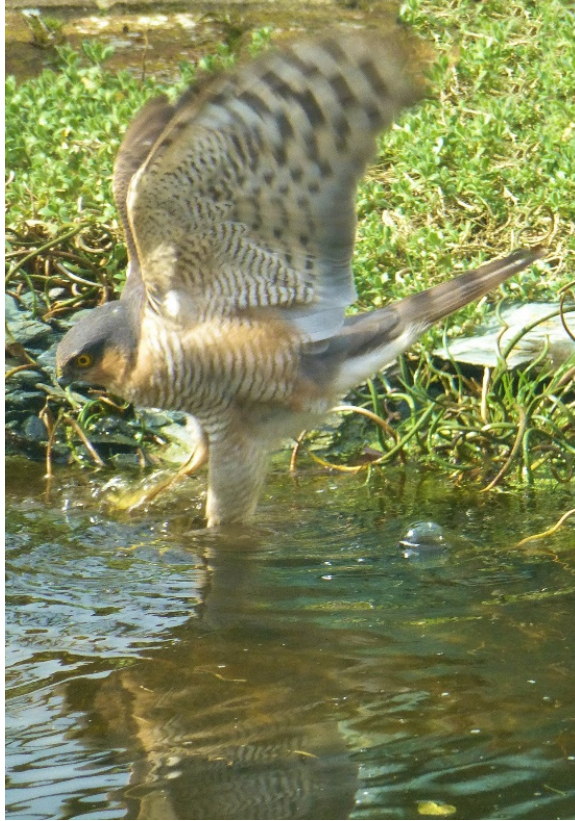


throughout the year, usually to just one fawn. I can't remember another year when I have had to wait so long to see my first butterfly of the spring. Perhaps I had been going around with my eyes closed! I was though delighted, when a pristine brimstone floated across the garden on the 29th March, closely followed by a peacock. Later that day we saw at least half a dozen of both species, as we took a walk in the Belchamp Valley. It was the start of the mini heat wave that we enjoyed at the very end of the month. The view, from just over the little footbridge, out across the sheep dotted water meadow and up towards Belchamp Walter church, was quite stunning, enhanced all the more by the warm sunshine.

Back in January, seeing a redwing apparently feeding on the bare branches of our birch tree, I was puzzled as to what it was actually taking. Taking a closer look I could see that it was in fact drinking the dew drops



which had formed on the tips of the twigs. The next day it was the turn of another



member of the thrush family, a fieldfare, to set me another conundrum. It was feeding on the berries of our rowan tree. As it took them, some it swallowed straight away, but others it shook it sharply, before either eating them or tossing them aside. Again watching carefully, I could see that some of the berries came off cleanly, whereas others had a length of stalk attached, it was this that the bird was trying to shake off before either eating or discarding it.

Allen Burbidge sent me this great picture of a male sparrow hawk, which came and bathed in their garden pond a couple of times.

Our Plant Group's traditional New Year's Day survey couldn't be held of course because of the Covid restrictions, but we decided to go out

individually and combine our results. Wendy and I chose to see what wild plants we could find actually on flower in Bulmer Churchyard . We found a total of 19, including meadow and creeping buttercup, annual nettle, white and red dead nettle, ragwort, field speedwell and catsear. This email from Graham Patrick sums up our group efforts..... "Had it been a competition, Meg and family at Finningham would have been the clear winners with 40 species, followed by Babs and myself at Acton Wildlife Site + churchyard (21); Peter and Wendy at Bulmer churchyard (19) and Robin at Hadleigh (town, churchyard and riverside walk) with 16. Total different species = 60." Surprisingly out of the 60 species we recorded between us, there were

only 5 species which were found on each of our four sites.



CELANDINES

The celandines have put on a good show this year, their sunshine yellow flowers brightening up many of our tired winter road verges and promising brighter and warmer days to come

JUNE 2021

Our plant group carried out a survey in Parsons Wood this (so called) spring by arrangement with the owner Peter O'Brien, who is managing the wood for woodland products, including firewood. By opening up the floor of the wood he has really breathed fresh life and variety into it, with several coppiced areas at different stages of development. The air was full of birdsong and there were good patches of wood anemone and primroses scattered throughout the wood. A section of the wood called Poor Acre, was thick with bluebells. Tradition has it that Poor Acre was where the poor of Bulmer of long gone times were allowed to collect firewood. Parsons (more correctly Parsonage) Wood, is what is classed as ancient woodland. To qualify to earn this venerable title, a wood must have been in existence since 1600 or earlier, possibly even going back to the original wildwood which clothed our country before our early ancestors began eating their way into it to clear land for their first crops. Although ancient maps are one sure way of establishing whether a wood can be classed as ancient or not, just as reliable a pointer is to study what tree and plant species are growing there. There is a list of what are known as indicator species of trees and more importantly smaller plants growing within the wood, which varies with geographical area and soil type. In our area trees such as Midland hawthorn and small leaved lime are among the trees, both occur in Parsons Wood, where oak is the predominant tree. Of the indicator flowers and plants, wood anemone, early purple orchid, wood sorrel, pignut and a few others can be found in the wood. Rarer indicator species such as greater butterfly orchid, fly orchid and a weird looking plant, herb Paris all occur in other woods in the Sudbury area. Herb Paris was recorded from Goldingham Hall Wood which was grubbed out in the mid-1940s. This wood stood between the road from Bulmer Street to Gestingthorpe, and New Barn (the old barn in the middle of the fields).

The flowers of some of the ancient woodland indicators mentioned above



It has been another good spring for blackthorn blossom and coming as it did when we were



subjected to the very cold, if dry April, It certainly lived up to the old name of "blackthorn winter"! Some of the hedges behind Bulmer Street were white with myriads of their simple little flowers. However, whether or not they will be able to produce any sloes is doubtful, given that there were some quite severe frosts when the flowers were out. Our Victoria plum suffered badly from the frost and is bearing only a handful of embryo plums.

I have been fortunate in spotting quite a variety of birds of prey over the last couple of months. Going back a few years, you could only reckon on seeing sparrow hawk and kestrel, now on a regular basis you can add buzzard and red kite, but I added two more in the third week of May, Hobby and marsh harrier. I have occasionally seen a hobby over the years, but the marsh harrier came as a surprise, it flew out of the Belchamp valley to disappear in the Gestingthorpe direction. They are birds which only normally occur in coastal areas, where they frequent reed beds. You may have seen them on "Spring Watch" recently, when they had a camera on a nest. Our garden pond got so overwhelmed with various aquatic plants last winter, we had a big clear out. A little too good as it turned out because although I left some plants in, they were treated as fodder by a couple of mallards, which left the pond totally bare. Later on the duck made a nest in the top of one of hollow brick piers of the garden wall, of all places! In the first week of May she hatched off the little brood of ducklings. One unexpected side of this extra thorough pond clean, was that, in effect, it created a new pond, with a big area of water unobstructed by plant growth. This meant that it wasn't attractive to many dragon fly



species..... except one, a very handsome creature, the broad bodied chaser. The male, shown here, is quite stunning with an electric blue abdomen and yellow marginal spots. These particular dragonflies are attracted to new ponds and we had them for the first couple of years that we had the pond, but thereafter only very rarely. Robin Ford, who has a great knowledge of dragonflies and their like, had suggested, after I told him of our denuded pond, that we would probably get broad bodied chasers back, and he was spot on!

SEPTEMBER 2021

I was chatting to Marion, one of our neighbours and she told me that she had occasionally seen toads lately, albeit if one of them was squashed on the road at the top of Upper Houses lane! We haven't had one in our garden for several years. They seemed to have disappeared, as our frogs have. Let's hope they are making some sort of a comeback. On the subject of road casualties, there appear to be a lot less carcasses of dead birds and mammals laying around than in the past. I can't believe that rabbits pheasants and pigeons have suddenly developed better road sense, and certainly there are no less of them around, especially the last two. So just what is happening? Although I haven't actually seen this happen myself, I'm pretty sure the



Buzzard on our silver birch

answer lies with the growing numbers of buzzards and also red kites in the area. They are both quite capable of carrying off sizeable corpses, taking them away to feed on them away from the dangers of the roads and thereby removing the evidence. Although magpies and carrion crows have always taken advantage of these free meals laying on the road, neither of them are equipped with the strong talons of the buzzards and kites ,

or have the strength to fly off with sizeable prey, so the roads were left littered with their left over meals.



The rugby scrum on the lawn

In the last issue I mentioned the plant survey that our group had carried out in Parsons Wood. At the time we were beaten as to the exact identity of one particular plant that we found. We knew that it was a member of the hypericum (St John's-wort) family, and was either trailing St Johns-wort or slender St Johns-wort, but had yet to come into flower. In August we

revisited the wood, and found a few flowers still on it. It proved to be slender St Johns- wort (*Hypericum pulchrum*), quite an uncommon plant. We have only ever found it in one other location, out of all the hundreds of different sites that we have surveyed over the years. This is in Assington Thicks In Suffolk, where it grows quite profusely. In north Essex it was

recorded in a few scattered locations in Jermyn's Flora of Essex (1974) But Terry Tarpley's Flora of NE Essex (1990) states that most of Jermyn's records were not re-found and had probably disappeared under the plough---



Pyramidal Orchid

So those we found in Parsons

Wood are quite rare survivals. I counted the pyramidal orchids flowering in Church Road, as I do each July and was pleased to count 84 flower heads, continuing the steady increase in numbers of the past few years. For one day in September the garden came alive with birds----- House sparrows in particular, about twenty of them, over half of them young birds, some still begging for food which their parents took from our feeders. There were blue and great tits and a brief visit from a party of long tailed tits. Most noticeable though were the warblers, there were two lesser whitethroats, a pristine male blackcap and at least four chiffchaffs which were constantly chasing each other around, but often flying after one of the sparrows or a blue or great tit. Of course this is the time of year when all of our summer migrant birds are on the move, preparing for their return migration. On another day the lawn as invaded by at least a hundred starlings which arrived en masse, constantly probing the turf in their frantic search for earth worms and other invertebrates. They found something special in one small corner and a real rugby scrum erupted with the birds jostling each other to get a share of whatever it was they had found.

But on 18th Sept. I had a really unexpected visitor to the bird feeder, a tree sparrow. It was a young bird which causes me to wonder whether it came from a nest in our area, although being fully fledged it could have flown from further afield. It's the first one I've seen in the garden in the almost 50 years that we have lived here. I used to see a few , way back in the 1950s at Upper Houses and even had a pair nest in a tit nest box one year. Since those years their numbers have crashed and they have become real rarities. The main distinguishing feature, which is very noticeable, is the black spot in the middle of a white cheek. This instantly sets it apart from the house sparrow.

Although I kept an eye out for it over the next few days, it never reappeared. September certainly came up trumps weatherwise. After the long run of cloudy, cool and depressing days in August, it was great to bask in the warm autumnal sunshine. If it weren't for the thought of the impending winter months taking the edge off of it, it would definitely be my favourite time of year.



The tree sparrow on our feeder



Wendy's painting of autumn fruits shows off some of the natural delights to be found in the season's hedgerows.