

Mike's Musings: Environment and Conservation

Early spring 2011

Weather in February and March

Both months were relatively dry and mild with the rainfall being significantly below average for central southern England. With high pressure dominating the weather, winds were light and very much from a northerly quarter. As is often the case in the winter months, the days were rather dull following foggy or misty mornings, although there were many occasions when skies cleared towards evening giving rise to below zero temperatures and ground frosts overnight. In the middle of March there were a number of days when there was hazy sunshine that imparted signs of spring.

It rained on 15 days in February and, with the exception of one dry day, there were small amounts of rain on the last 10 days of the month, the total being 65.4 mms. (2.6ins.). It certainly was not a 'February fill-dyke' this year. In March one would normally expect nearly 100mms. of rain, but in our area it rained only a few mms. at a time on seven days. The total rainfall at 23.5mms. (just under an inch) was actually lower than for southern England as a whole in which the total was 39.4mms.. It was the driest and sunniest March for several decades.

Signs of Spring

Flora

After a fine show of Snowdrops, equally as good as occurred last year, the Celadines, Aconites, Primroses were not far behind, despite the alternation of mild and cold days and nights throughout February and March. Wood Anemonies have also put on a good show this year at the same time as Dog's Tooth Mrecury that are abundant in local copses The Hazel catkins have also been magnificent, heralding the flower and leaf buds of our hedgerow trees, such as the Blackthorn and Hawthorn.

This year, thanks to the close grazing by the sheep that were put in the newly fence field to keep the growth of grass under control, the Crocuses in the BBOWT reserve off Pottery Lane, Inkpen, have been a delight. The number of blooms has been the largest since 2001 when the foot and mouth outbreak curtailed the grazing of the field, resulting in the sward becoming 'thatchy', ie thick and long, thus impeding for nine years the emergence of the plants and so reducing their numbers.

Fauna

The birds are telling us, through their behaviour and songs, that the breeding season has begun. For some time now we have been hearing the early territorial utterances of the male Great Tits, Robins and Song Thrushes. By mid March they were joined by Blackbirds, Chaffinches, Greenfinches, the drumming of Great Spotted Woodpeckers and the display flight and twittering of the Skylarks on the North Hampshire downs at Warbury and Combe gibbet and the fields bordering the road to St.Cassians (that the writer of this page had not experienced until this year). It will not be long now for the summer visitors to arrive, the Chiffchaff usually being the first on Inkpen Common; several were heard along the Kennet and Avon canal between Hungerford and Newbury at the end of the third week of March.

Moon watching

The advent of summer time and the lighter evenings as a result have lifted the spirits, even though a repetition of the late spring of last year has recurred. In the middle of March, as indicated above, high pressure settled over south-east England. There were clear skies in the evening, which afforded us superb views of the large rising new moon on the 19th when it had been at its closest to Earth for some time.

Exciting news

It is always a great pleasure to read Nicola Chester's 'Nature Notes' in the *Newbury Weekly News*. The issue for the week ending 25th March contained the marvellous news of the existence of one of the country's rarer mammals in the Inkpen Primary School grounds. A parent of the Wildlife Explorers Club at the school suggested that a grass ball, discovered in the playground, should be carefully opened by one of the pupils. To a gasp of surprise and delight of both adults and pupils, a Dormouse was found sleeping in the ball. After a photograph was taken of it, the creature was gently put in a secluded and secure place nearby to complete its winter hibernation.

A further note on publicly-owned forests

In the last musings the respective cases against and for selling off the forests owned by the Forestry Commission (FC) was briefly examined with the intention of returning to the issue after the consultation process had been completed. As may now be common knowledge, the consultation became redundant when the Prime Minister, David Cameron, unexpectedly announced that the proposed sell off was being abandoned. It therefore means that the issue no longer needs to be pursued at any length.

It was apparent that such had been the outrage by the various conservation bodies and the public at large that it led to the government changing its mind. It is not taking an anti coalition political stance on the issue to state that the government's intention to sell off the FC's holdings was rather too hastily undertaken for the implications of the disposal to be fully considered. It might be

concluded that the conservation sectors' and public's reaction, and indeed their well argued and sound reasons, were ultimately very persuasive. It is to the government's credit that it listened to and accepted their case and acted accordingly.

The environmental quality of watercourses

Reference has been made in previous musings of one of our local watercourses, namely the Kennet and Avon Canal, indicating its social amenity value and the recreational and wildlife benefits it confers. The governmental financial cut-backs has substantially reduced the budget of Department of the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and consequently the funding of one the bodies under its aegis, the Environmental Agency (EA), that is primarily responsible for rivers, surface water drainage, flood prevention and the construction of sea defences.

Concern is increasingly being expressed about the ability of the EA to maintain, let alone continuing to improve, river water quality and conserve wildlife. This is an issue of local concern as we have two important rivers running through the counties of Berks and Wilts. The Kennet is of particular interest to those living in the proximity of Hungerford, Kintbury and Newbury. No less important is the River Thames, into which the Kennet drains at Reading, that is near enough to be considered a local attraction.

The water quality of these two rivers, and clearly all the others in England and Wales, has a number of facets ranging over:

- aesthetic value, amenity and recreational provision;
- angling;
- conservation of water-based fauna and flora;
- control of invasive alien plant species;
- surface water drainage
- flood control
- prevention of pollution by discharges by agriculture and industry;
- supply of water by extraction from rivers for agricultural irrigation/watering of livestock, industrial production and domestic consumption;

Given these facets, in addition to the EA, other entities principally concerned with the state and water quality of rivers are the EU (European Water Framework Directive), Angling Trust and local associations, OFWAT (water regulatory body, Royal Agricultural Society and the wildlife trusts. There are a number of reports published by the bodies identified above that highlight the most important factor determining poor water quality as being the pollution of rivers by the discharge of nitrates from agricultural activity that also tends to generate algae blooms. The overall conclusion by the EA is that almost three quarters of rivers in England and Wales are failing to reach EU quality targets.

Neither the Thames nor Kennet come out well with respect water quality. In England the Thames was the worst and the Kennet was the next worst. The

Wye, Dart, Great Ouse and Wandle were considered the best. Regarding the Thames, a recent article by Michael McCarthy in the *Independent* (Friday 31st January, 2011) made two points that characterise, respectively, the pressure on the funding of conservation initiatives as a result of the public sector financial constraints and the uncertainty surrounding the viability of specific projects. He refers to the clean up of the Thames, which was defunct of virtually all wildlife within its tidal range of Kew upstream and the sea at Gravesend in the late 1950s. The cleaning up of the river began in the mid 1960s and to the amazement and delight of the people involved in its restoration, a salmon was discovered at Dartford in 1974. This led to the project, begun in 1979 (now by the EA), to reintroduce the salmon through a restocking programme that involved releasing young salmon (smolts) with the aim that they would find their way to the sea initially, and subsequently upstream in due time, to their former spawning grounds. This is where there is an interesting connection between the Thames and the Kennet as the latter is a tributary of the former and was a salmon spawning stream in the past.

It is 75 miles from the Thames estuary to 'Wilderness Water', the spawning ground on the Kennet between Kintbury and Newbury. This necessitated the construction of 37 fish ladders/passes in all, 17 of which are on the River Kennet. One local example can be seen on the Kennet and Avon Canal at the very spectacular weir at Benham, where an overspill from the canal into the River Kennet occurs. The river and the canal run in and out of each other between Reading and Hungerford at a number of places. Indeed, at one time, prior to the construction of the canal, the river was navigable between Newbury and Reading. This weir is about a half mile from Hamstead lock (no. 81) to the west at the midway point to Benham lock (no. 82). There is an interpretation board at the weir about the salmon project on the river Kennet.

Unfortunately, despite the efforts, at a cost of millions of pounds, to encourage the salmon to swim to Wilderness Water, the scheme has not been successful. Only one fish (in 2003) has been recorded at getting up to the spawning ground and back to the sea. Accordingly, though the cutbacks may have contributed to the decision, the project has been abandoned. Moreover, the loss of a substantial part of the EA's budget puts at risk the water quality of the rivers Thames and Kennet that will very likely decline rather than be improved. The upshot will be that salmon will definitely be deterred from venturing upstream to spawn in our locality as this particular species is very sensitive to pollution. Furthermore, of course, other forms of water wildlife that are equally sensitive to deteriorating water quality will suffer.