

## **Mike's Musings: Environment and conservation**

**Autumn 2011**

### **Weather in October and November**

Over the months of April to November, this year is turning out to be a quite unusual one as far as expected seasons, rainfall, sunshine and temperatures are concerned. After a dry, sunny and positively hot spring, the mid to late summer was cloudy, cool and occasionally windy, whereas October and November were relatively dry, sunny and warm. This observation is of course based on experience in our area (that has its own micro-climate, as meteorological records show) and bordering counties in the central south and the wider south-east. It is acknowledged that in the south-west, west and north England, and in Wales and Scotland, the weather in general was much wetter and windier over the same period.

It is already clear that it has been an unusually dry year in south/ south-east England. The environmental Agency has stated that groundwater reserves and reservoirs are quite low and that it will require above average rainfall over the winter to replenish them.

#### *October*

In this month, unlike the previous one, winds were from the south-east/south west quarter for 19 days. However, similar to September, it was again very dry overall. There were nine days when it rained, but the only significant falls were within the last week between the 24<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>. It was on one day only (27<sup>th</sup>) that there was substantial rain when almost half of that for all for the month occurred. There was a total rainfall of 34mms. (1.33ins.).

#### *November*

At the beginning of the month when 25 mms (almost an inch) of rain fell in the first 36 hours, it seemed as if November would be very wet. In the event this has not been so as the month ended up being almost as dry as October. Winds remained light, mostly from the south-east to westerly direction on most days, becoming north-westerly at the beginning of the last week of the month. Like October, it was relatively mild with daytime temperatures in the low to mid teens, more than twice the average expected. Even overnight, the thermometer stayed above five to six Celsius until the 27<sup>th</sup>/28<sup>th</sup>, when it fell to minus 3.5 celsius as the first real frost of the coming winter occurred. In the last three days of the month it remained mild and breezy in the afternoons after quiet mornings. There were relatively light falls of rain in daylight and overnight showers. It rained on 17 days and total rainfall for the month was exactly 50mms. (just under two inches).

## **Autumn in our area**

The mild, dry, largely sunny afternoons with light winds have delivered a prolonged and spectacular autumn. The trees retained their leaves until well into November, it being only in the last half of the month that the Beech trees in exposed places lost theirs. Bordering the A4 towards Marborough and in the avenues in Savernake Forest, the beech boughs still carried a fine array of golden leaves. In the whole area many Oak trees' leaves have hardly turned brown, let alone fall. It has been an incredible year for acorns. Where there are large Oaks together or along lanes or tracks, for example in West Woodhay or bordering the byway on the south side of Inkpen Common, the acorns are thick on the ground. This is good news for Jays and Squirrels in particular. In the hedgerows, berries can be seen in great profusion on Hawthorns, Holly and Rowan trees, while Blackthorn are heavy with sloes and Crab Apples with fruit. Briars have also yielded a good crop of hips. Such a feast of berries has already benefitted birds, for instance the Fieldfares and Redwings that have started coming south into England to escape the colder weather in the north and east of Europe. Should the winds become easterly and stronger, then we will very likely get an influx of Waxwings, the most vociferous strippers of berries.

There is the prospect of a bumper harvest of Beech mast that will attract birds like Bramblings and Siskins which also come south in the winter. It appears that the crop of Hazelnuts might be better this year, despite their usual predation by Squirrels when they are still green and far from ready to be eaten by us humans. Hopefully, there will be sufficient of these nuts left for small rodents such as Bank and Field Voles and Yellow-necked and Wood mice. Moreover, the report that there are possibly Dormice in Inkpen is welcome and these need Hazelnuts, a key element of their diet, to fatten up on before fully hibernating.

Naturally, notwithstanding weather folklore about the signs of either a mild or hard winter and, consequently, that our birds and mammals may have an easy or a difficult time, this year's autumnal bounty should enable them to survive the coming winter.

## **Where did all the birds go?**

Autumn is the time of the year when many householders start to think about resuming or increasing the variety and amount of food that they offer garden birds. However, those with a little more knowledge of avian behaviour are aware that the birds do not necessarily respond. Indeed, it rapidly becomes apparent that they are simply not present and consequently the food remains uneaten. Where did they have gone?

The national bodies, such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), and our local wildlife trust, the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT), have pointed out that if there is plenty of natural food available in the early autumn there is no need for them to come into gardens to take nuts and seeds. As indicated in the two sections above, life has been especially easy for birds that are endeavouring to build up their fat reserves for the coming winter.

In the light of this occurrence of absent birds this year, a useful hint is to continue to provide food, but only to half-fill the feeders and not replenish them until they are almost empty. This reduces the likelihood of the nuts, seeds etc. deteriorating, particularly in wet weather, and going mouldy that could be fatal for birds taking them. It is important that feeders are thoroughly cleaned regularly and also that fresh clean water is provided for them daily for them to drink and bathe in, especially in hard weather in which freezing temperatures occur overnight.

### **The plight of hedgehogs**

Notwithstanding recent reports in the national press, it is possible that many people are not necessarily aware that there has been a dramatic decline in the population of hedgehogs in the UK, including our area. It is not certain why the plight of these much-loved creatures, greatly valued by gardeners, has occurred, but it has been posited that it may be loss of their habitat and/or access to suitable sites. Help is at hand locally to try to halt and even reverse the decline in hedgehog numbers by finding or creating locations for them to settle into and introducing animals from elsewhere as they become available. There have been two references in the Inkpen parish bulletin this year of the initiative being taken in the village to do this as indicated below.

It is in autumn that hedgehogs look for somewhere to hibernate, such as a pile of leaves or logs or a dense hedge (they are aptly named) or even a garden shed or farm outbuilding if they are accessible. They are the only mammal, apart from the Dormouse, that fully does so over the winter. However, many are at risk of perishing when they do seek to hibernate. For example, if there is adverse weather that interferes with feeding, adult and young animals will be undernourished and underweight so do not have the reserves to survive. Similarly, young hogs that have been orphaned or abandoned for some reason, are likely to be too small to fend for themselves and/or have insufficient body fat. Occasionally, animals are injured by being attacked by natural predators or dogs. This is why a rescue centre has been set up in Thatcham to care for hedgehogs that suffer from such conditions, which can occur at any time in the year, although in autumn the numbers so suffering are more prevalent and their outlook for survival more perilous.

At the rescue centre, once the hedgehogs have achieved a minimum weight and grown larger, or have fully recovered from their injuries, they are ready to be released into the wild again. It is at this stage that the animals are discharged from the centre and distributed to suitable locations in West Berks. There is a base in Inkpen for the coordination of the release into specified areas that have been inhabited by hedgehogs in the past or where it is considered they will be able to thrive. Martine de Carvalho is the person in the village who carries out the releases. Should distressed hogs, particularly young ones, be come across in the village, then initially they can be handed to Martine. She can be contacted on 01488 668817 and she will give directions as how to find her. She is also very knowledgeable about encouraging the 'gardener's' friend into one's property and the most appropriate foods to do so and the provision of shelter for the winter.

### **Local landscape and wildlife issues**

We may be concerned by the implications of the proposed National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) reviewed in the previous musings (August/September 2011), but we do have ongoing local issues that are likely to have a significant impact on the local landscape and wildlife. Currently there is one example in Inkpen. A planning application for a large development of stables near the junction of Weavers Lane and Craven Road in Lower Green was submitted, but refused. However, the applicant is appealing against this refusal. Understandably, the parish council, local residents and individuals and bodies with an interest in wildlife locally consider that it is conceivable that the appeal might succeed and wish to ensure that this is not the case .

While a formidable report by a planning officer of West Berks Council argued for a refusal of planning permission, if further evidence can be provided to reinforce this report it adds weight to the argument for the appeal to fail. The principal concerns are the size of the development, the intrusive visual impact of a large building, which is out of keeping with the character of the village, and the adverse effect on both wildlife habitats and the fauna and flora that will be lost.

Details of the application and the reasons for its refusal can be obtained from the Inkpen Parish Clerk whose contact information can be found on the back page of the parish bulletin.