

Mike's Musings: environment and conservation

Midwinter 2011-2012

The weather in December 2011 and January 2012

December

There were eight days in the middle of the month on which slight overnight frosts occurred. Otherwise, the month was relatively mild with rain falling on 18 days but in small amounts, apart from the 16th when 16.00 mms. (0.63ins.) fell. It was yet another month in which the winds were from a west to north quarter, with the exception of five days when it was from a south-westerly direction. The total rainfall was 81.15 mms. (3.2ins.), that was below the average for December.

January

As in December, there were very strong winds from the west to north quarter at the beginning of the month with heavy but not prolonged showers. The weather was mild in the second week but somewhat unsettled with brisk winds occurring. As high pressure set in between the 13th and 18th gentler breezes were accompanied by a colder spell with frosts, giving lows of minus 5.8 Celsius over the night of the 13th/14th, minus 5.2 over the night of the 16th/17th and minus 5.8 again overnight of the 17th/18th. However, temperatures were above freezing during the day. It was milder and more unsettled again between the 19th and 27th with light falls of rain in showery conditions. Temperatures were quite low both day and night from the 28th and there was a smattering of snow overnight between the 29th and 30th when the thermometer was just above freezing. The month ended with dry and sunny conditions, but fresh east winds with a chill factor of minus 4.

The rainfall was quite heavy between the 2nd and 5th and over the whole month there were 14 rain days, but the amounts were almost miniscule on five of those days. The total amount of rain for the month was 41.65 mms. (1.8ins.), well below the average for January

A false start to spring?

Despite dire warnings in the last week of January of cold air sweeping in from Siberia to give four weeks of bitterly cold and truly wintery weather, in the south-east of England, at the time of writing this report, there was no sign of it. The upshot of the mild autumn and midwinter has resulted in the season being more like an early spring. It was apparent that birds and plants had decided that this was so at the end of December as song thrushes began to declare their territories from the tops of trees, male blackbirds and robins were sparring with each other, chaffinches were pairing off and rooks were gathering nesting material. The snowdrops and daffodils

and some cherry trees were in full flower early, as were polyanthus, and tulip leaves were two or three inches above the soil by mid January. There were also many leaf and flower buds appearing on shrubs in gardens.

It would be a tragedy if winter reasserted itself if the birds start to lay eggs and even produce young because then the emergence of natural food resources would be curtailed. Moreover, some food sources specifically for fledged birds may not be available anyway; ie. the expected synchronisation of rearing the chicks and a suitable food supply does not occur. Hibernating mammals, such as dormice and hedgehogs emerging early, would perish if the ground became frost-bound. Snow would badly affect creatures, like hares, which would be unable to forage.

Caring for wildlife on nature reserves during the breeding season: can visitors, dog walkers in particular, act as volunteer wardens?

An early start to the breeding season and subsequently its full onset at the beginning of March and continuation until August, raises the question of safeguarding wildlife, birds especially, susceptible to disturbance by visitors on our local nature reserves. This is an issue of some concern that has led to an initiative at Greenham Common that could be introduced elsewhere in West Berks.

Greenham Common arrangements

It has come to the writer's attention, via Jacky Akam who is involved in the 'Living Landscapes' project at Greenham, that over the last two summers zones have been designated to which access has been regulated. There were three such zones:

- In green ones people were able to roam freely, dog walkers being requested to keep their animals under control at all the times
- In amber zones they were required to remain on designated paths and keep dogs on a lead
- There was no access allowed to red zones

To succeed in maintaining the regime four volunteer wardens patrolled the Common all day throughout the breeding season from the 1st of March to the 31st of July. These wardens were available to inform people of the restrictions, but also engage them in informal discussions on what wildlife they should be able to see and hear. Notice boards have been erected on which weekly reports are posted on what wildlife has been seen. The scheme has been considered a success.

Inkpen Common

Inkpen Common is a fraction of the size of Greenham, but is also highly valued by local people as a piece of Berks' heathland. It would be very beneficial to the Common's wildlife if a warden scheme similar to that at Greenham could be

instituted, albeit on a much more modest scale. Presently, because of its small size of about 12 hectares (circa 30 acres), disturbance of its wildlife is exceedingly acute, becoming more so in recent years, and thus militates against it supporting the variety of birdlife found at Greenham. Indeed some species that did breed on Inkpen Common, such as grasshopper warbler, linnet, nightingale, reed bunting, woodcock and yellowhammer are no longer seen or heard there. While accepting that some bird species are declining nationally, the species identified above are still present in localities nearby.

The Friends of Inkpen Common (FOIC) have worked ceaselessly to improve the heathland character of the Common. It has the potential to attract some of the species of note moving steadily westward from similar habitats; for example, dartford and wood warblers, woodlark, tree pipit, and possibly even nightjar. Sadly, the hope of their colonisation of the Common is very unlikely as matters stand. It is, regrettably, largely dog walkers who are responsible for most of the disturbance. Despite the request on the permanent interpretation boards at the main entrances to the common and the clear and prominent notices at all access points during the breeding season to keep dogs on a short lead at all times, dog owners choose to ignore wildlife interests and allow their animals to run free everywhere on the Common.

While recognising that the Common is a village recreational amenity, it is first and foremost (as a Site of Special Scientific Interest) a nature reserve. If a warden scheme like the one at Greenham could be devised and operated it would be possible to enforce the 'on leads' requirement. It is also certainly feasible to identify and signpost key sensitive sites on the Common as red zones that visitors should avoid entering between March and August. Maybe dog walkers could be persuaded to become volunteer wardens and thus police themselves.

Water: a consumption, environmental and conservation issue

The worldwide problem

Consumption of water, like that of energy, is increasing rapidly globally. In the UK, each of us uses, on average, 100 litres a day in the home. However, additionally nearly every product we buy involves a 'water footprint'. Consider food, for example. The rearing of livestock for meat includes not only what the animals drink but also the growing of their feed and the processes of marketing the derived product. The production of one kilogram of beef entails the consumption of over 15,000 litres of water. Other instances of food and drink production can be cited. It takes 1,000 litres of water to create a kilogram of breakfast cereal, 175 litres for a pint of beer and 150 litres to grow and market a quarter litre of coffee. Take clothing: producing the basic material; making the garment and distributing it to the customer involves a need for tens of thousands of litres of water. Taking account of our domestic uses and all the

products we acquire, including imports from abroad, means that in the UK we each register a total 'water footprint' of 3,000 litres a day. It has been estimated that 2,000 litres of that total is water consumed in foreign countries for the production of their exports to the UK. In many cases the countries involved suffer droughts and water shortages that their population can ill-afford to bear.

The local problem

The accepted wisdom in the UK is that we inhabit a country which has no water supply problems. However, there are quite marked regional variations in the amount of rainfall and availability of water each year. The West Country, Wales, North West and Western Scotland have considerably more rainfall and usually have a surfeit of water, whereas in the South East and East Anglia there are often droughts and water shortages. Here, in Central Southern England, since March last year, as shown in the Musings reports on the weather every other month, the area has suffered incredibly low rainfall. This has persisted into this year as indicated above which is now beginning to raise speculation that there will be water shortages and therefore water supply restrictions in the coming summer.

Locally, the rivers Kennet, Lambourn and Pang are currently experiencing exceptionally low flows, the last two virtually drying up completely in the recent past. Surprisingly too, an almost unprecedented event, was the closing in the autumn of the navigation of the Kennet and Avon canal from west of Hungerford to Dreweatts lock east of Kintbury because of insufficient water. The shortage was reputedly compounded by a boater leaving paddles open on one of the locks in the stretch of the canal concerned.

An important factor in the occurrence of low flows in the local rivers has been the extraction of 20 million litres of water per day by Thames Water (TW), for both domestic and commercial consumption, from the underground aquifers that feed them. In addition licences have been granted for extraction directly from the rivers for agriculture. In the light of the amount of water required for livestock and crops identified in the first paragraph of this section, such extraction is very likely to be substantial. It is regrettable that the practice by TW continues despite their being ordered to stop it, the reason being that the Environmental Agency (EA) refuses to pay the £10 million compensation that the water utility should receive for ceasing the operation.

The extraction of water and the impasse between TW and the EA is a travesty for the environment of the three rivers and the conservation of both their aquatic and land-based fauna and flora bordering them. Moreover, the amenity value of the rivers is impaired for fishing and informal recreation by residents in the area and visitors.

A note on feeding birds and animals in winter

Do provide:

- Water (for drinking and bathing)
- Peanuts (from a reputable source; aflatoxin free)
- Sunflower seeds (ideally hearts)
- Fruit, fresh and dried (the latter slightly moistened)
- Mealworms (live or dried)
- Cake or plain biscuits (broken up)
- Porridge oats (dry)

Do NOT offer:

- Food with added salt (such food is toxic to birds and some animals)
- Milk (all birds and most animals are lactose intolerant)
- Large-sized foods
- Bread in large quantities (it has little nutritional value and contains salt)

The writer welcomes comments on the above observations and ideas for topics that can be covered in the future mikesmusings@btinternet.com