

Mike's Musings: environment and conservation

Late summer early autumn 2012

The weather reports for August and September

The weather reports, which are a regular feature on this page on the village website, are a brief summary as the writer was not in West Berks for extensive periods of the two months and therefore was not in a position to maintain his weather diary.

August was a quieter and drier month than the dismal weeks of supposedly high summer in June and July. Except for the middle of the month when there was a very warm period with temperatures in the mid to high 20s, it was generally rather cool with few sunny days. September, to the point that this Musings was compiled, rewarded us with late summer settled, dry and sunny weather early in the month with temperatures in the mid twenties during the day. However, clear skies in the early morning and evening yielded thermometer recordings in single figures, an indication of the coming winter. Overnight, especially in rural areas on high ground, the temperatures were almost low enough for grass frost to occur.

Introductory note

Two topics in a previous Musings are revisited to offer a different viewpoint. The first, covering the inauguration of the Canal and River Trust (CRT), is necessary as the writer was admonished by a member of staff of the Trust for asserting that commercial objectives would be the prime consideration rather than wildlife ones.

The second topic commented on the proposal to undertake a study of the predation by Buzzards of game birds on shooting estates to establish whether the numbers of this predator should be controlled. The line taken in that piece was in favour of the Buzzards in concluding that the abandonment of the project was welcome. The inference was drawn that the claims by the shooting estates of the magnitude of the losses of game birds was exaggerated and the whole ethos of this activity was questioned. A more considered appraisal by identifying the benefits conferred by shooting estates is warranted.

First, however, the opportunity is taken to counter some misconceptions about a tiny rodent that rivals the Hazel Dormouse in the affections of those who love vulnerable and attractive small mammals.

Is the Harvest Mouse's habitat really only found in cereal fields?

The choice of this topic was prompted by a recent article by Martha Meek and Simone Bullion In *British Wildlife** on the status of the Harvest Mouse (*Micromys minutus*); some material is drawn from their article. In children's books on UK mammals and magazines, even today, this mouse is almost always depicted in illustrations on the ear of a corn stem.

As farming in West Berks consists predominantly of arable crops, one would expect Harvest Mice to be relatively common. Indeed, elderly farmers and their workers recall that in the immediate post-war period when harvesting methods were ideal for small rodents to thrive, these creatures were abundant in southern and eastern England. Modern arable harvesting practices are not conducive for Harvest Mice to

maintain their numbers. In these so-called formerly suitable habitats, populations of this animal have declined massively.. They are rarely discovered in our area; indeed they are now listed as a Biodiversity Action Plan species.

An interesting outcome of Meek's and Bullion's study in Suffolk, which is characterised by intensive arable agriculture, is that cereal fields are not widely populated by the Harvest Mouse, notwithstanding the environmental stewardship schemes that a significant number of farmers had adopted. The authors established that there were a variety of habitats in which the mice are found, The animals appeared to favour areas containing tall grasses and /or wetland plants which gave them cover and food sources, especially in winter. If two or more types of millet (maize) crops are grown, they provided the food that supports significant numbers of mice. Evidence of colonisation of habitats was secured in the Suffolk survey by locating Harvest Mice nests, particularly in areas occupied by barn Owls (*Tyto alba*) in whose pellets the bones of the mice were found. Ten different types of habitats were identified as possibly suitable for the rodents to thrive. However, an important factor in supporting the number of mice was the existence of wildlife corridors (termed connectivity by the authors) both within and between likely habitats. In Suffolk the many rivers and their wetland areas are associated with six of the suitable sites. Indeed, most nests found in the survey were in wetlands consisting of estuaries, fenland and grazing marsh. Clearly, these marginal kinds of habitat are not subjected to intensive farming and contain a greater proportion of natural unimproved sites. These features have existed for many years and accordingly have supported Harvest Mice populations over several centuries.

Harvest Mice are adaptive and mobile and once they colonise suitable habitat will breed freely. Notable examples of colonisation are game and wild bird sites (see the final topic below on the benefits of such habitats). The principal finding of the Suffolk study is that the mice are widespread in wetland sites, which belies the traditional notion that these rodents are only found in cereal fields.

What are the implications of these results for the mouse in West Berks? It would appear that the Harvest Mouse will continue to be scarce in the more upland terrain in our area and its arable fields. Potential habitats exist in the Kennet valley and along its tributaries, in the Thatcham reed beds and on Greenham Common. The key to the expansion of this rodent is the creation of appropriate wildlife corridors. The 'Living Landscape' project on Greenham Common has as its core the plan to create such corridors, examined in a past Musings. Also, even on intensively managed farms, the introduction of field margins sown with suitable seed-bearing plants and grasses would encourage colonisation by these attractive and delightful mammals.

* Volume 23, Number 6, August 2012, pp. 419-423.

The Canal and River Trust topic (CRT) revisited

As it is now structured as a charity, the CRT is committed to developing small-scale projects to make a positive contribution to enhancing the canal and river environment falling under its control for people and wildlife. In addition to appealing for funds to achieve the projects' objectives, it wishes to recruit volunteers to assist them in the work involved. Some examples of the CRT's approach are given on its website.+

These include the creation of wildlife habitats and provision of informal recreation sites, tackling water pollution to allow fish to survive, what to see on its canals and rivers, the control or elimination of alien species of mammals, water creatures, and plants and the introduction of nature watches.

The sums asked for each project already selected are relatively modest, a few thousand pounds at most. The locations chosen are quite widespread geographically. On the Kennet and Avon (KA) canal that runs through West Berks, there are no really local sites earmarked. One is the restoration of an orchard on the Caen Hillside, near Devizes and another is the plan to 'transform' (CRT's word) the towpaths around Bath. A project that may conceivably include the Hungerford to Kintbury area is to provide shelter and food sources for Glow-worms, Hedgehogs, Lizards, Otters and Water Voles and to revitalise hedges.

Given that the inland waterways are extensive, over 2,000 miles in total, the number of projects planned is quite small. Whether they actually are proceeded with depends crucially on the funds and volunteers being acquired. The CRT's environmental and conservation objectives are admirable, but it remains to be seen if they are achieved.

+ Simply Google 'Canal and River Trust' and the first website listed on screen is the CRT home page. Below this are web pages on the Trust's environmental projects.

The wildlife benefits of shooting estates

Shooting estates, and in general their farming practices, provide suitable habitats in the form of cover, shelter and food and, to an extent, freedom from mammal predation, particularly foxes, mink and rats. By and large, gamekeepers, especially those on our local estates who set an exemplary standard, do have regard for the conservation of wildlife and abide by the law not to harm protected birds of prey (corvid species with certain exceptions such as Choughs, are not covered). Many estates enter environmental schemes, for example stewardship projects, by developing grass field margins, mixtures of seed-bearing plants and conservation headlands, including small copses.

It is not only farmland wild birds that benefit from shooting estates, mammals can thrive, particularly Hares, Hedgehogs, Bank and Short-tailed voles, Shrews and Hazel Dormice, where suitable woodland trees are present.

What the future holds for birds of prey is increasingly a concern. There is the issue of Hen Harriers on Grouse-shooting estates and it is being argued that the incredible success of the Red Kite re-introduction and the recovery of Buzzards and Peregrine Falcons will create problems of over-population with consequences not only for their survival but also of their prey. Moreover, mammal species, especially Polecats and Otters may also cause problems as they spread across the country into areas they have not inhabited for many decades.

The compiler welcomes comments on the content of this page; he can be contacted at: mikesmusings@btinternet.com