

Mike's Wildlife Musings: environment and conservation

Late winter/early spring 2013

Weather reports for February and March

There were no signs of an improvement in the local weather, it remaining like winter with unseasonably low temperatures hovering around zero during the day and down to minus three or four overnight until the Easter week. Very strong winds from Scandinavia persisted almost continuously throughout the two months giving rise to chill factors as high as minus five. Fortunately, West Berks largely escaped the heavy snow that occurred further east and north.

February

The month did not live up to its reputation of 'February fill-dyke' as, apart from the 9th and 10th when 19 mms. (0.75ins.) of rain fell, there were only small amounts on the nine days when it was wet. The total rainfall of 32.75 mms. (1.28ins.) was well below the expected average for February.

March

The month's weather was similar to that in February in the first week but then there were some quite wet days over the middle two weeks with notably, 29 mms. (1.14ins) on the 15th and 19 mms. (0.75ins.) after snow on the 17th. The days after that were drier, but bitterly cold and cloudy with strong easterly/north easterly winds, temperatures barely reaching one degree during the day. From the 28th to the end of the month, after very cold nights (the temperature fell to minus 5.4 celsius between the 30th and 31st), there were bright periods throughout the day after quite sunny starts.

Where is spring?

The expectation of the arrival of spring has been somewhat like waiting for Godot. It seemed still like mid-winter as Brambling, Lesser Redpolls, Siskins, Fieldfares and Redwings remained in the area until almost the end of March. In a normal spring they would have already moved north to their breeding haunts. The first day of the equinox was marked by a hard frost and fog with just a few short breaks in the clouds later.

The only signs of spring, apart from the blooming Daffodils, early Primroses and Celandines, were a couple of slightly warmer days in the first week of March when the resident birds -male Blackbirds, Chaffinches, Great Tits, Greenfinches, House Sparrows, Jackdaws, Rooks, Song Thrushes and Wood Pigeons- had been busily engaged in sparring with each other. Earlier one's spirits were lifted as the Song Thrushes and Great Tits commenced their full and strident territorial utterances. It was also a joy to hear, on one or two brighter days, a first Skylark overhead, in the fields between Inkpen and Kintbury, and the beautiful and melodious song of Blackbirds, who were joined by Chaffinches and Greenfinches vocally establishing their territories.

However, the pairing of male and female birds and the collection of nesting material by the early breeding species was cut short and territorial song silenced by the bitterly cold days almost to the end of March. It was only when the sun finally reappeared over the Easter weekend that the birds became active again. As this musings is being compiled spring is definitely on hold.

Two changes in the organisation and implementation of environmental policies

Introductory note

The writer of this page has been reluctant in the past to bring political and attendant economic factors into the examination of current environmental issues. However, given recent proposals to introduce radical changes in environmental policies in the UK, suggests that the outlook for wildlife and its conservation is as dismal as the weather over the last two months.

Unfortunately, it is increasingly becoming apparent that in times of austerity, and thus financial constraints, governments worldwide perceive at best there are trade-offs between economic policy objectives and environmental ones. At worst pursuing the attainment of the objectives of the latter are viewed as being of minor importance and therefore can be jettisoned. Political thinking in the UK is tending to lean towards the acceptance that in strengthened times economic goals are paramount.

Understandably, natural scientists and environmental bodies are appalled by this attitude. They argue that the natural environment underpins economic activity and cultural and social life. Many economists also subscribe to the arguments put forward by the scientists and environmentalists. Reflecting the context of their own subject, they assert that industries involved in maintaining and enhancing, (for example, the quality of the environment, improving the efficiency of the use of raw materials, developing energy saving devices and alternatives to fossil fuels and reducing pollution, particularly that causing global warming), are an essential element of an economy. Thus, what is known as 'the environmental industrial sector' is already making a significant contribution to economic growth.

Many individuals and organisations prominent in the field consider it to be vital to safeguard the natural environment, and its resources, as all aspects of human life depend on it. Accordingly, environmentalists insist that there should be an independent body which is outside the political arena to act as a 'watchdog' to monitor a government's actions that have an impact on the environment, wildlife and its conservation.

Two policy developments are discussed below. Firstly, the likely future role and structure of Natural England (NE), as the body responsible for environmental matters in England, and, secondly, changes in the European Union (EU) Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and how it will influence UK farmers' attitudes and willingness to participate in environmental management schemes. Following these two commentaries, other possibly threats to the natural environment and conservation are traced.

The current review of the government's environmental and conservation agencies in England

Great concern is being expressed by wildlife trusts and organisations, for example the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT), over proposals to change in future the arrangements for safeguarding the natural environment and wildlife, including the role of NE as the body ostensibly charged with acting independently of political interference and to give advice to the government on such matters. The independence of the NE goes back decades, when the original body, the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC), was set up. Its status has been guaranteed until now.

In late 2012 the Environmental Secretary (Owen Paterson) announced the review of the structures and roles of the Environmental Agency (EA), which is largely responsible for coastal and inland flood control and maintenance of rivers, and the NE. The stated aim of the review was a quasi political one of improving the efficiency of the services provided, achieve cost savings and to encourage economic growth. Moreover, included in the review was the suggestion that other agencies, for instance those in the private and volunteer

sectors, and public sector entities, notably the local authorities, could be employed to undertake some functions. Furthermore, it was conceived that the central government would be involved. Such a structure would almost certainly lead to the demise of NE, with perhaps the EA, under the aegis of the Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) taking over the environmental remit. It has been specifically indicated in the review statement that should the NE be retained, its aims will no longer be solely environmental and conservation ones, but primarily supporting and contributing to the government's policies and objectives. In short, it becomes a government department.

Consultation on the review closed on the 4th of February 2013. However, at the time of writing this musings no announcement has been made as to whether the government will proceed with its proposals.

Currently, NE is still actively adhering to its environmental agenda. Very recently (13 03 13) it incurred the wrath of the Medway Council in north Kent which had granted planning permission for an exceedingly large development, almost a new town, on ex military land. This area on the Hoo Peninsular, north of Chatham, supports more than 80 Nightingale breeding territories which NE promptly designated as one of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) meaning that it has a status that is legally binding on whoever owns it not to damage it. Effectively the development cannot proceed. An appeal has been lodged against the SSSI designation. Watch this space!!!!

Reduction of EU CAP funding

Perhaps of more importance than the restructuring of the UK environmental agencies has been the cut in the EU agriculture budget. Funding for agri-environmental measures is the largest source of finance for wildlife in the UK. Until now, around £520 million has been available for environmental stewardship, and other schemes, of which three quarters came via the CAP. In England alone, EU rural environmental funding covers 70% of farmland (6.5 million hectares) involving 60,000 farmers.

It is widely recognised that such measures have made an enormous contribution to combatting the adverse effects of the intensification of agriculture since the 1950s. However, crucially the schemes have actively safeguarded wildlife habitats, fauna (especially birds) and flora under threat of extinction and promoted biodiversity, as well as increased the number and variety of farmland species generally.

Not only will the recent reduction negotiated in the budget have an impact on the support given to agricultural output but inevitably environmental schemes will be curtailed. In the face of the problems cause by the weather on arable production, resulting in possible lower yields, increased energy and materials input costs, global food shortages and thus rising food prices, the nature of agricultural activity is very likely to change. It would be understandable if farmers and governments, and ultimately the EU, start to put more emphasis on increasing agricultural production rather than maintaining the attainment of environmental objectives.

The future for wildlife conservation is therefore becoming more uncertain. Only time will reveal what will happen to the balance between it and farming.

Additional threats to the protection of rural environments and wildlife conservation

The decreases in government expenditure in its endeavours to reduce overall national debt and eliminate budgetary (fiscal) deficits has wider ramifications than the two already identified. The central government has called on local authorities (LAs) to reduce their expenditure from their own revenues and it has cut periodic and annual grants to them that have led to the curtailment and closure of what is seen as inessential services; the response

by LAs has often been to view environmental projects as the most convenient and easiest to discontinue.

The central government's proposals to fund infrastructural projects as a means of stimulating economic growth and employment has included those, like the HS2 rail link from London to the North (now proceeding), road improvement schemes and large residential developments on greenfield sites. It is alleged that the first two programmes will have an adverse effect on four national parks, seven areas of outstanding natural beauty (AONBs), 39 SSSIs, three national nature reserves (NNRs), 54 ancient woodlands 230 nature reserves.

Yet another aspect of concern is the funding of organisations, most of which are registered charities, such as county wildlife trusts and local voluntary environmental societies, as well as national bodies, for example the RSPB and WWT. These entities rely on donations from the public at large. It has been estimated charitable giving has declined by over 25% in the last four years, thus impairing the ability of these bodies to fulfil their functions.

The outlook in the UK for the protection and enhancement of the quality of the natural environment and wildlife indeed looks bleak. What is so depressing is that the fundamental importance of the environment is not fully recognised by the political system. It appears that it is up to us, the general public, to convey to the powers that be the value we place on our natural resources. This was graphically demonstrated in 2011/12 when there was vehement opposition to the proposal that the national forests would be privatised. It was 'people power' that 'scotched' that monstrous idea.

Briefly, what are the implications locally of the agencies review, CAP budget cuts and other threats to the protection of rural environments? Given the topography, existing land uses and ownership, the answer is: they are not that significant. A fair proportion of the Berks, Hants and Wilts border countryside is steep-sided downland and therefore consists of permanent grassland, ideal for sheep. There are considerable areas of woodland and land in the broad valleys is almost fully cultivated for arable crops. There are some extensive estates and a number of large farms whose owners and occupiers have the financial resources to commit themselves to environmental projects. In effect they are not necessarily dependent on the agencies or external funds; although they would naturally take advantage of them if they are eligible to receive them.

The compiler of this page welcomes comments on what appears above: email: mikesmusings@btinternet.com