

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

### **High Summer 2013**

Weather June July

#### *June*

Except for six days when it blew from the south-east/south-west, the wind remained in a northerly quarter for the whole month. While temperatures reached the high teens and low twenties in the early part of the month, the nights were mostly clear and so were quite cool. It was not very much like summer as it was only over the last few days of the month that daytime temperatures rose to the mid twenties with longer sunny periods.

The rainfall was much lower than average with small amounts on each wet day. The total rainfall of 25.3 mms. (just about an inch)

#### *July*

The month was in almost complete contrast to what was expected after three really atrocious summers and also surprised the meteorologists in the first week, who initially had forecast an unsettled month. The much warmer weather started to occur on the 8<sup>th</sup>, but it was later in the month, with a reading of 29.5C on the 19<sup>th</sup> that the days become hot.

Despite announcing that the heat-wave was over on the weekend of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of the month with severe thunder storms and flooding in the south-east and Midlands, this was not the case locally which lived up to its reputation as being in a rain shadow, ie enjoying significantly less rainfall than further east and west. In the week ending on Saturday 27<sup>th</sup>, the temperature in the Inkpen and Kintbury area reached 32.7C on Tuesday the 23<sup>rd</sup>; on the 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>, after four mms. of rain overnight on the 24<sup>th</sup>, temperatures were 26C and on Saturday the 27<sup>th</sup> the thermometer recorded 27.4C.

So at last the weather redeemed itself and older people began recalling the incredible summer of 1976 when the dry and sunny period lasted from the beginning of June almost to the end of August, when there were many grass and heathland fires and lawns were completely brown. Younger villagers remember the summers of 2002 and 2006 but these were nowhere near as hot and prolonged as 1976. It must have been quite novel for some householders to experience lawns suffering from drought conditions and are still looking very parched, notwithstanding a significantly wet night on the 27<sup>th</sup> and torrential rain on the 29<sup>th</sup>.

The fine spell finally ended on the evening of Monday 29<sup>th</sup>, literally with a bang when 33mms. of rain fell in a violent thunder storm in just two hours. The weather was cooler and more unsettled over the last three days of the month. Apart from a small fall of rain on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, it was in the last week that the total rainfall of 53.25mms. (just over two inches) for the month accumulated.

### ***A note from the compiler of this page.***

*There has been much pessimism expressed by individuals and bodies involved in the environmental and conservation field following the publication recently of 'The State of Nature' a document that depressingly reports on the decline and threatened extinction of a significant proportion of fauna and flora in the UK and globally over the last five or so decades. It almost voices despair that anything can be done to reverse the trends. In this musings, while it is considered that such bad news needs to be acknowledged (see below) the writer considers that there many reasons for there to be a degree of optimism about the future preservation of the natural environment and conservation of wildlife. To counteract the bad news several initiatives already occurring are examined here that for a change convey good news for wildlife.*

### **How has wildlife coped with the hot weather?**

The short answer to the question posed in the heading of this section above is that birds and mammals in our gardens have coped quite well. This is certainly the case if they were given a little help by us humans.

As indicated in the previous Musings, it was apparent that many resident and summer migrant birds delayed their breeding in the cold spring, or, if they did make an attempt, they abandoned the task of rearing young because of the lack of suitable food. This was especially so for insectivorous species. Indeed, some migrants were very late in coming back to their traditional breeding sites. In Kintbury, it was considered at one stage that no swifts would return. Moreover, house martins and swallows were few in number. In the event the swifts, which normally leave the UK from around mid July, may well remain longer if the sunny weather persists as there are plenty of insects around at the moment

Once the warmer weather arrived the birds really got going and it is clear that many species are rearing their second or even third broods. The support given by us in hot weather by providing food, particularly for the adult birds, and ensuring they have clean water to drink and bathe in, is vital. Small mammals, such as mice, shrews, voles, squirrels stoats and weasels also need water to survive in drought conditions.

### **A note on helping insects to thrive and survive**

In a musings in 2012 a plea was made to angle one's gardening to provide pollen and nectar rich trees, shrubs and flowers in order attract insects. The colours insects favour are blue, purple, deep pink and red. While summer bedding plants, such as begonias, busy lilies and petunias contribute to benefitting insects, what can be described as their flower heads tend to be flat and not very deep and consequently are less attractive to a number of deep-probing species of bees and hoverflies and of course most butterflies. A prime example of a suitable flower, both in structure and colour is the foxglove. This of course is not a summer bedding plant, but brings this note to an important point to be made.

By the end of August and September summer plants are past their best and most likely have been removed from the garden. Accordingly, ensuring late flowering perennials are available would maintain insect life into the late autumn. Many insects remain active and need to forage to survive. Bumblebees and several butterflies can cope with quite cool and unsettled weather conditions. An underrated late flowering,

often hedge, plant that meets insects' needs is ivy. On a sunny day towards the end of November, the writer has observed scores of red admiral, peacock and tortoiseshell butterflies and hoverflies feeding on this plant.

National and local conservation bodies now offer advice on how to attract and care for insects in gardens. Moreover, garden centres, including local ones, have started to incorporate sections in their displays devoted specifically to plants that attract and support insect life.

### **The State of Nature report**

This publication, a kind of stocktaking of wildlife, was compiled by 25 organisations quite recently. The key findings are that, of the 3148 native wildlife species, 60% have declined since 1962. For nearly a third of these species the decline has been deemed to be severe. In what is termed a 'Watchlist Indicator' of conservation priority species, the decline has been nearly 80% since the early 1970s. The document identifies the factors determining trends in the rates of changes in the numbers of specific species. Overall, two shocking statistics are that that compared with 50 years ago there are 44 million fewer pairs of birds and that the number of butterflies has declined by 72%.

Also included in the report are details of the state and quality of habitats and the extent they are deteriorating. Over the five decades the loss of certain habitats has been dramatic: for example, 97% of flower meadows; 96% of coppiced woodland and 80% of lowland heathlands have disappeared.

The reaction by many commentators on the report are that the observations in it are a wake-up call for we humans to take immediate action to safeguard the natural environment and reverse the trends in the decline and loss of species. It is considered that the prescription emerging from the document is that this is our last chance to save nature and secure our own survival. Success depends on there being a radical change in our use of resources and lifestyles to save the planet

### **The good news?**

It is not all doom and gloom as there are instances of the restoration of existing and creation of habitats and reversal of species decline and the rescue of those threatened with extinction. Indeed, currently, there appears to be an acceleration of initiatives which increasingly are on a larger scale and more ambitious, not only nationally but also globally. It is these that demonstrate the direction 'The State of Nature' report implies action to redeem the present environmental and wildlife crisis faced should take.

In fact through the auspices of the RSPB the UK has been a leader in these initiatives. Some examples epitomise just what might be achieved, the:

- 'Giving Nature a Home' campaign that urges RSPB members and the public at large to cultivate their gardens in such a way as to provide a suitable habitat for a number of wildlife species;\*
- huge Forsinard 'Forest to Bog' project in The Flow Country in Scotland that represents 14% of the total RSPB reserves in the UK^;

- newly created Forth and Loch Lomond reserve, a joint project for which a management plan is currently being compiled<sup>^</sup>;
- UK Overseas Territories (UKOTS) project to reverse the decline in fauna and flora in Anguilla, Cayman , Gough, Henderson, Montserrat, and Tristan da Cunha<sup>^</sup>;
- safe vulture haven programme in India and Nepal to prevent the extinction of the birds poisoned by feeding on cattle carcasses contaminated by diclofenac used for clinical purposes on domestic livestock by vets<sup>^</sup>;
- Tropical Rainforest Unit work in the Gola Rainforest National Park in Sierra Leone and in Sumatra introducing a system to reduce the risk of fire in the Harapan Forest<sup>^</sup>;
- The Albatross Task Force (ATF) involved in experiments to prevent the drowning of many thousands of these beautiful and graceful birds being caused by the methods of line-fishing employed in southern seas<sup>^</sup>.

\*RSPB *Birds*, August –October, 2013, Vol. 24, No. 7, pp 53-65.

<sup>^</sup>RSPB *Impact* Summer 2013

The remarkable aspect of such initiatives, especially overseas, is the close relationship between the advisors, mainly from western countries, and local conservationist and citizens who are working together to benefit wildlife. Increasingly however, it is the people in countries, particularly in Africa, Asia and South America, that hitherto had little or no experience of caring for their natural environment and wildlife that are themselves instituting programmes to safeguard habitats and reverse declines in fauna and flora species, especially those under threat of extinction.

It is hoped that governments worldwide will take the lead by supporting, both politically and financially, the efforts by conservation bodies and communities to care for all environments, not just those of a fragile nature containing rare species. The 'State of Nature' report, though if focuses on the UK has global implications. It is critical that urgent action to safeguard natural environments and wildlife is an imperative.

*The compiler welcomes comments; email: [mikesmusings@btinternet.com](mailto:mikesmusings@btinternet.com)*