

Mike's Musings: environment and conservation

Late autumn and early winter

Weather October and November

October

The month was largely marked by unsettled weather, except for calmer and dry days between the 6th and the 10th. For the remainder of the month there were blustery winds from the South-west or West, interspersed with gentler North-west breezes. It was relatively mild for the time of the year. Overall, the weather was very wet, there being only five completely dry days or nights. There was rain, even if it was only light, on 26 days. The great storm on Monday 28th, referred to as the St. Jude Day tornado, warnings of which were prophesised days in advance of its arrival, did indeed yield torrential rain and horrendous hurricane-force winds. In the event West Berks escaped the worst of the onslaught which caused havoc on the southern coastal counties. These areas suffered extensive structural damage to buildings and many hundreds of trees were felled and quite a number of vehicles were crushed.

The total rainfall for October was 143mms. (5.63 ins.), that was considerably above the average expected. There was only one night when there was a below zero reading on the thermometer.

November

In the early part of the month to the 11th, the wet and breezy weather of October persisted, but with much more variable winds from a South-west/North-west quarter. From then on the winds abated even more and were from a North-easterly direction. It became much cooler, especially overnight, when clear skies gave rise to the first real grass frosts in the second week. After the 12th of the month daytime temperatures reverted to their seasonal average and the weather was drier with quite pleasant sunny periods. In the last week high pressure settled over the Southern half of the country with light North-east breezes and sunny days. The 30th was a very sunny day until the late afternoon and the month ended with an overnight frost with a below zero, minus 0.8C temperature.

The rainfall, in contrast to October, was below average with 13 wet days when, apart from the 3rd of the month when 19.5 mms. (0.77ins.) fell, the daily amounts were modest. The total rainfall for the month was 63.5 mms. (2.5 ins.).

Out and about in the Inkpen and Kintbury area in October and November

A superb autumn

In the previous Musings it was asserted that autumn had hardly begun with many species of shrubs and trees retaining their green appearance. As this piece is being written there is very little indication of autumn turning into winter. The mild and damp weather has prolonged what the Americans aptly call 'The Fall', namely the period when trees in particular hold on to their leaves as they change colour. Because of its largely calcareous soils, West Berks is blessed with many Beech trees which currently, when the sun emerges, are a glorious spectacle of yellow, gold and russet with no sign of their leaves dropping. Almost as attractive, and not entirely overshadowed by the Beech, are the Oaks. If we had more Acers, that are almost

scarlet now in New England, there would be no need to incur the expense of flying to the US to enjoy the Fall.

It is also amazing that insects are still active. Bumblebees, Hoverflies and species of Butterflies, such as Peacocks, Large Whites, Red Admirals and Speckled Woods are frequently seen. Remarkably, even clouds of midges have been observed, even when it has been raining. Furthermore, this autumn has been an extremely good one for fungi. And, not to be outdone, some flowering shrubs, such as Fuchsias and some Roses are still in bloom. Moreover, other plants, normally blooming in spring, for example Camellia and Magnolia are already showing flower buds.

What birds to look and listen for locally in early winter

For birds the late autumn can be confusing time and this year it is certainly so. Above average day temperatures, often with bright periods, have encouraged males to attempt to establish territories and occasionally utter snatches of song. The writer heard the unusual sound of a Blackbird doing just this in the last week of November. The species of the thrush family most likely to start singing in the autumn are the Mistle and Song Thrush as they are known to reclaim their territories with the intention of nesting as early as late January. Other members of the family, which are vocal now, Fieldfares and Redwings, are currently arriving to over-winter in the UK. They come from Central Europe and Scandinavia to avoid the harsher weather there. As their name implies, Fieldfares forage on arable farmed land and pastures and constantly communicate with each other as they feed. They are commonly seen in the Inkpen, West Woodhay and Kintbury areas.

Redwings, so named because of the flash of scarlet seen on the under-wing and flank as they fly off, are attracted by berries and hips. They will come into gardens and compete with their Blackbird, Mistle and Song Thrush cousins for food. Very often Redwings will congregate in tall trees, one favourite local haunt being in those along the Inglewood road west of Kintbury. They twitter constantly rather like House Sparrows in a hedge.

Though not yet seen this year in West Berks, Waxwings have already arrived in the UK and may well move South and Westward in large numbers if the winter weather in Northern Europe deteriorates. They are also a berry eating species thus increasing the competition for food faced by resident thrushes.

Other birds to watch for in West Berks as they arrive from the continent for the winter are the many Chaffinches and Starlings. The former are rather like Fieldfares in their habit of foraging collectively in fields. Many hundreds of them have been seen in the past in the fields to the west of Inkpen Common. The population of Starlings located in Kintbury normally roost on the roof, flagpole and weather vane of St. Mary's Church. The vast numbers coming in from Europe are a magnificent spectacle in places such as the Somerset levels as it gets dark. Except for a sizable contingent that gathers in Thatcham, by the railway station, there are no similar sized congregations locally. However, a small 'murmuration' of two to three hundred starlings can sometimes be seen as dusk approaches over the trees beyond the fields to the South of Irish Hill.

At this time of the year Golden Plover come south for the winter and usually choose a location near Hungerford at Sanham or Kintbury in the fields east of Irish Hill Road to gather, forage and roost. A flock of 150 or so occasionally put on a marvellous show by flying around for a considerable time before alighting to feed. They almost resemble, admittedly in fewer numbers, the Knots which collect in their hundreds of thousands in the Wash during winter months and put on an incredible display. In their winter plumage Golden Plover are similar to Knots and as they wheel away from the observer there is a flash of white as they expose their under wings and bellies. They are a delight to watch.

Lastly, to return to the subject of birds establishing territories and being vocal in late autumn, most nights Tawny Owls can be heard as they pair up. The 'toowhit toowoo' of the male and the answering 'yip yip' of the female are characteristic sounds. 'Tawnies' are quite common in West Berks and on clear, still, nights one is almost certain to hear them as their calls carry a long way.

Management changes to nature reserves in West Berks

On the 6th January 2014 nine commons and reserves, currently under the control of West Berks Council, will be handed over to The Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) to undertake the day to day management under a 50 year lease agreement. Likewise, the Nature Discovery Centre (NDC) in Thatcham will be operated by the Trust. The sites are:

- Bucklebury Common (privately owned)
- Greenham and Crookham Commons
- Padworth Common
- Snelsmore Common
- Wokefield Common (privately owned)
- Audrey's Meadow
- Hosehill Lake
- Paices Wood (privately owned)
- Thatcham Reedbeds

Some West Berks staff (those in the NDC) and many volunteers will join those in BBOWT. The Berks BBOWT staff at Maidenhead will work closely with local communities in instituting management plans for the sites. This arrangement will be integrated within the Living Landscapes Project (LLP) centred on Greenham Common. The LLP aims to link sites across the wider West Berks countryside to facilitate the movement of wildlife and its expansion.+

+ The LLP will be examined in more in detail in a later Musings

The compiler of Musings welcomes readers' comments on what is presented above
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