

Mike's Musings: environment and conservation

Midwinter 2012/2013

The weather reports for December and January

There was quite a contrast between the two months' weather with December being largely mild, except for a few below zero temperatures overnight at the beginning before many wet and breezy days occurred later in the month. January was much drier and colder until the last week of the month when there were appreciable falls of snow with overnight frosts followed by gale-force winds and rain.

December 2012

At the beginning of the month there were days with bright periods and light north/northwest winds. Overnight temperatures fell to minus two or three Celsius in the first week, but there were a couple of wet days when 10 mms. (0.39ins.) of rain fell. It was then dry until the 13th after which the wet weather really set in, it raining every day, except for the 17th and 18th and Christmas day, until the 31st. Remarkably, for the time of the year, it was exceptionally mild with day temperatures in double figures over the Christmas break when there were south to southwest winds.

It rained on 19 days with the heaviest falls being on the 14th, 19th, and 29th. The total rainfall for the month was 128.75mms. (5 ins.), above the average for December.

January 2013

New Year's Day was marked by a light wind and a beautifully clear blue sky; there was even warmth in the sun as it reached 12 degrees Celsius! It was back to an anti-cyclonic gloom for the next ten days, but it was largely dry. It became cooler after the 10th of the month with slightly below zero temperatures overnight. After dire warnings by the meteorological pundits, winter did indeed arrive on the 18th with the eastern and north eastern regions and Scotland suffering heavy falls of snow. In West Berks we got away quite lightly with just over 10 cms. late in the evening and overnight between the 18th and 19th. After a brief respite there was a further slight fall of 2cms. late on the 22nd into the 23rd. A slow thaw followed with temperatures holding up just above freezing. Finally over the nights of the 25th and on the 26th there was heavy rain; 18 mms. (0.7 ins.) and 9 mms. (0.35 ins.) respectively, which cleared nearly all traces of the snow. Actually during the day on the 26th there was at last a sunny and settled day. Over the last week of the month it rained every day with very strong winds when 50.75 mms.(2 ins.) of rain fell.

Introductory note

During the winter months of December and January, attention in this musings is concentrated initially on the welfare of wildlife, namely birds, rather than wider environmental and conservation issues. As birds are very visible, especially if we feed them, then it is worth reminding readers how we can help their survival. Staying on the subject of birds, there is a report on a seasonally topical story that lifts the spirits. Then some observations on how we have coped locally with the winter are offered.

The musings ends on a somewhat more serious note. The issue of neonicotinoid pesticides is still news and so an update on the current position on the continuing use of the chemicals and the effects of them on insect populations is called for.

Keeping the birds alive in winter

Caring for birds has been mentioned in previous mid winter musings. However, during hard weather it is particularly important to feed them and provide for their other needs in order for them to survive. Bird food can be bought from garden centres but if purchased in small quantities from such sources is quite expensive. On two counts it is more economic to use specialist mail order stockists or shops that deal in animal and bird foods. First, the quality of the foods is usually guaranteed to be toxin free (for example peanuts) and, secondly, it is possible to buy in bulk and so obtain a cheaper rate per kilogram.

For birds to survive cold winter nights, it is essential to provide high-energy foods with plenty of fat content. Ready-made fat balls are available that most often are packaged in plastic net bags. If this is the case, it is especially important to remove such packaging as if hung as bought birds can catch their feet in the netting severely injuring themselves in trying to break free and perish if they are trapped for any length of time. A good way of offering fat balls is to buy a wire container designed to take them. However, it is not difficult to make fat balls by buying a kilogram block of lard, costing less than a pound. It should be melted slightly and mixed-bird food worked into it and then moulded into a ball. An alternative approach, and a good container for the mixture, is to fill a half coconut shell. Hang the fat balls or mixture from a branch of a tree near a refuge, for example an evergreen hedge so that small birds feel more secure. Other foods with a high fat content to offer birds are peanuts (must not be salted) and sunflower seeds. The latter are normally supplied in two forms, either whole in the shell or as what is known as sunflower hearts if shelled. Sunflower hearts are a little more expensive but there are more seeds per kilo, and of course there is no wastage and mess of shells discarded by the birds.

Other nutritious foods are dried fruit, and apples and pears (cut in quarters), plums (stoned), bacon rind (best cut into manageable little pieces), cheese, cooked, unsalted, rice, porridge oats (should be offered dry) and fruit cake. Fruit that is somewhat over-ripe is perfectly acceptable; even meat. Remove any food that is going mouldy. It is best not to offer bread. Although birds readily eat it, there is almost no nutritional value in it, and if too much is eaten dry it has detrimental impact on the birds' digestive system.

Birds welcome a variety of foods, but it should be borne in mind that the needs of more specialised feeding species should be met. Some foods now on the market of note are live and dry mealworms, nyjer seed (requires a special feeder), finch seed, robin mixes and cereals.

A crucial lifesaver in winter is water, especially when puddles, ponds and slow running small streams freeze. Not only do birds need a drink but they also wish to bathe to keep their feathers in good shape. When stone or concrete birdbaths are frozen they are likely to be shattered in trying to remove ice. A better arrangement is to use an old dustbin lid or the cover of a large plastic container upended and supported on bricks. Remove the water before it freezes, especially overnight, and refill it the following day with tepid water. Repeat the process if the water looks like freezing during the day. Do not put antifreeze or even screen-washing liquid in the water as even a small amount will kill the birds.

To prevent harming birds, particularly exposing them to the risk of salmonella poisoning, remember to keep feeders and bird-tables clean, using water and soap rather than detergents, a liquid soap containing a mild disinfectant is ideal. There are disinfectants on the market produced specifically for animals and birds that can be used. It is a sound idea to rinse feeders in hot water and allow them to dry before reinstalling them on feeder poles or hanging them from tree branches.

Avoid, if possible, taking feeders into the house. Ideally, they should be cleaned outside using utensils solely for the purpose and wearing rubber gloves. Always wash your hands after handling feeders and likewise any dead birds found in the garden.

.A mistletoe bonanza in the future?

Mistletoe grows parasitically on the branches of trees. There has been a long term relationship between it and the Mistle Thrush (hence its name) for which the plant's berry is one of its favourite foods. Until recent years, Mistletoe has had little appeal for other birds. However, now there is one species, a small warbler, which has taken a liking to the plant's berries. It is a bird that started to overwinter in the UK a few decades ago and is a most melodious songster sometimes confused with the Nightingale. It often nests in our gardens and also certainly comes to feeders quite frequently in the winter.

The bird in question is becoming quite common and is a dainty and attractive one and is aptly named the Blackcap. Well, to be precise, the male has this feature whereas the female has a chestnut brown cap. The eating habit of a Blackcap, when feeding on Mistletoe, is to discard the seeds, often with its feet. Understandably,

when it flies off some seeds are carried with it and accordingly it disperses them. The upshot is that Mistletoe is spreading from its stronghold in the west of England to eastern and midland counties. Therefore, with the worrying decline of the Mistle Thrush, it is apparent that the Blackcap is increasingly not only fulfilling the role of maintaining the growth of Mistletoe but assisting its spread to a much wider area of the country.

How wildlife coped with winter locally

Generally, despite almost a week of cold weather and snow lying on the ground, it has so far not been a too arduous time for wildlife. Small ground mammals do not suffer unduly unless there are hard frosts. They can find food under the snow and as hole-dwelling creatures will survive. The critical factor is for species that feed on worms and under-soil bugs is whether or not they can dig through the frozen surface ground.

Birds have been fortunate also, particularly as there have still been berries, nuts and seeds available. This has been confirmed by the winter immigrants that have come to the UK from Europe. This winter there have been tremendous in-migrations of Waxwings and Redwings with a large number of sightings of the former species locally, for example feeding on berries near the filling station at the junction of the A 338 and A4 in Hungerford. There has also been a significant influx of Fieldfares that favour fields in West Woodhay area and either side of the Wallingtons Road leading to St. Cassians in Kintbury and along the Inglewood Road. Often it is possible to find Both Fieldfares and Redwings foraging together. Other migrants from the north have been spotted in gardens, for example Bramblings, Lesser Redpolls and Siskins. Of course later in the winter the foods mentioned above will have all been consumed and then birds can have a hard time until well into the spring.

Yet another visit to the neonicotinoid pesticides (NPs) issue

In the high summer and autumn 2012 Musings, the alleged impact of nerve-agent pesticides was examined. It was reported that there was evidence from a number of research projects of the adverse effect of such pesticides on honey bees, bumblebees and other insects. The results of the studies suggest that insects become disorientated when foraging for nectar so impairing their ability to locate their hive or nest again. This contributes to the decline and eventual demise of the colony.

The NPs issue is not going away and despite bans on their use in a number of countries referred to in the earlier Musings, no action has yet been taken by DEFRA to review its position of not suspending the employment of such pesticides. Perhaps reflecting complacency by the government, Lord Moynihan has, as recently as the 10th of January this year, raised concerns over the impact of NPs on bee populations in a House of Lords debate*. However, a possibly more sinister development has come to the attention of the writer of this Musings. This is a comment by the American Bird Conservancy (ABC)+ to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) of evidence of the adverse effect on birds of NPs.

Yet another dimension in the debate on NPs is the action of an organisation that is countering the demands by environmental and conservation bodies for these pesticides to be banned. The Humboldt Forum for Food and Agriculture (HFFA),

(financed by companies that manufacture NPs) asserts that if they were to be no longer available to farmers the European Union (EU) agricultural economy could suffer a loss as great as 4.5 billion (bn.) Euros per year. Over a five year period the HFFA estimates that the loss could be 17bn. Euros and result in a reduction of 50,000 jobs. It argues that the application of NPs increases crop revenues by 2bn. Euros and reduces costs by 1bn. Euros a year.

The response by conservation bodies was one of scepticism as to the reliability of the HFFAs predictions, understandably, given that the chemical industries have a vested interest in putting forward the benefits of their products. It is apparent that this debate is going to be protracted. Certainly, at the moment there is not a strong indication that NPs are likely to be withdrawn.

*House of Lords: *Hansard* (Citation HL Deb, 10 January, 2013, C308)
+American Bird Association *Pesticide and Toxic Chemicals News/ Pesticide and Toxic Chemical News Guide*, 3 December, 2012

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