

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

### **Late summer 2013**

#### **Weather:**

##### *August*

Overall the month epitomised what has become the best summer for several years that began in the previous month (with a slight disruption in the last week when it rained on the 29<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> of July). The month started with a daytime temperature of over 30 degrees Celsius and the warm and sunny weather continued with the thermometer recording figures in the low to mid twenties until the 31<sup>st</sup>. There were light falls of rain between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> and on the 8<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>. However, the total for the month was well below the average; it being 21.75mms. (0.85 ins.). After south west winds until the 6<sup>th</sup>, the direction reverted to a northerly quarter as has occurred for long periods this year, with the exception of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> to the 23<sup>rd</sup> when southerly winds were recorded.

##### *September*

It was fine and warm with temperatures in the high twenties between the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> of the month. There was an unsettled period until 17<sup>th</sup>, but apart from the 13<sup>th</sup>, when a 20 mms. (1.1 ins.) downpour occurred during the day, the rain fell mostly overnight; it was heavy on the 17<sup>th</sup> when 17 mms. (0.67 ins.) fell. Temperatures were in the high teens from the 18<sup>th</sup>, the mornings being cloudy, but bright periods set in the afternoons. Fog was quite thick on the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> and was slow to clear; however, on the latter day the temperature was over 20 degrees Celsius in the afternoon. The weather became more unsettled during the last week of the month but locally the rain forecast hardly materialised. Indeed, there continued to be periods of warm sunshine except on the 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>. Over the whole of September it rained on 16 days, giving a total rainfall of 71.6 mms. (2.82 ins.).

#### **How has nature reacted to the summer and early autumn, locally**

As reported in a Musings earlier this year, naturalists were wondering when spring would arrive as flowers, shrubs and trees were respectively very late in coming into bloom and leaf. For birds in particular, the breeding season began as usual as they paired up, built nests and laid eggs but this activity was abruptly brought to a halt by wet and windy weather. For early breeding species, such as the thrush family, it became difficult for the parents to find food for themselves, let alone their offspring. There were a number of instances where newly hatched chicks perished either through becoming chilled by the adverse weather conditions or by starvation. In some cases the adult birds simply abandoned the nest and their young.

How different it became as the superb summer established itself. Species that are capable of having two, three or even four broods in a good year actually did so this breeding season. For example, Blackbirds, Song Thrushes and Robins certainly have already fledged three broods, and, far from heading south to Africa, House Martins and Swallows are still very much in evidence. Indeed, as this Musings is being compiled, House Martins have been observed feeding recently fledged young.

It has been an excellent year for insects. There have been large numbers of bumblebees and hoverflies which are still seen in fields, gardens and hedgerows busy collecting nectar and pollen. For the first time for several years flies have been

more numerous. Entomologists have reported that it has been a good year for both indigenous butterflies and moths and migrants from the continent, such as the Painted Lady butterfly, and, after a number of years absence, the Clouded Yellow. On sunny days this late in September, Brimstone, Holly Blue, Large White, Peacock, Red Admiral, Speckled Wood and Tortoiseshell butterflies are still quite often seen. It is also more like experiences in the past to see scores of moths in the evenings and at night. Many older people remember the days when the bodies of insects, especially night-flying ones, plastered their car windscreens and front number plates.

Yet another feature of this late summer/early autumn has been that are few signs of the leaves of shrubs and trees turning yellow to brown and falling. Birch and Elder are two of the first deciduous species to signal autumn, but currently their leaves are predominantly green. Admittedly, quite a significant proportion of the leaves of the Horse Chestnut are already brown, but this is the outcome of an affliction it has suffered for several years. Many species of trees, Ash, Beech, Hawthorn, Hazel and Oak for example, continue to look fresh and green. Summer bedding flowers continue to thrive and are still attracting insects.

It is a moot point as to how much longer the relatively dry and bright weather will persist. Moreover, the daytime and overnight temperatures have remained above average for this time of the year.

### **A brief look at environmental issues with local implications**

#### ***Pollution of the upper river Kennet***

In late June a pesticide polluted the river Kennet between Marlborough and Hungerford, a distance of approximately eight miles. It was fed into the river through the sewage works near the town from an unknown source. The chemical, *Chlorpyrifos*, is highly toxic and it was posited by the Environmental Agency (EA) that as little as two teaspoonfuls could have killed the water-based invertebrates, for example fresh water shellfish and insects on which fish feed. It also caused algae to bloom which smothered water plants, also a source of food for fish and insects, thus creating the danger that these creatures would starve.

Because of its high toxicity it is not certain whether the chemical concerned will be banned as a pesticide. Fortunately, it is possible that the river will recover naturally and indeed there are signs that this is the case. The algae have begun to clear from the river. However, to speed up the process, volunteers have been collecting the healthy species unaffected by the pesticide from other stretches of the river to re-stock the polluted section.

#### **Update on changes in the structure of England's environmental QUANGOS\***

Earlier in the year it was noted in Musings that there was a possibility of the government merging the EA (mainly concerned with the management of rivers, flood control and coastal erosion) and Natural England (NE) principally charged with safeguarding the rural natural environment and wildlife. While there are overlaps in the remit and function of these two bodies, their priorities are different. To the relief of voluntary bodies, such as the wildlife trusts, and national bird, insects and flora organisations, the idea of the merger has been dropped, so the EA and NE will remain as separate entities.

A simultaneous review of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) decided to retain it, also confirming that it would remain as an independent organisation.

Similarly, really arising out of the uproar when it was proposed that the Forestry Commission (FC) would be dismantled and the national forests sold off to the private sector, the FC has been retained together with the Forest Services (FS). A slightly disturbing feature of the new FC structure is the possibility of both it and the FS being incorporated into DEFRA (Department of Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs), and furthermore, a new FC being created, or at least reformed and placed under ministerial control. Moreover, DEFRA itself is under pressure to reduce its support for the rural environment and conservation as its budget has again been reduced by 10%. It does not take much imagination to realise that what is instituted at central government level regarding the EA, NE and FC holds implications for land use and the wildlife in West Berks, given the local canal and river system and woodland, for instance the nearby Savernake Forest under the control of the FC.

*\*Quasi autonomous non governmental organisations*

### **Hedges are in the news again**

The question has arisen again, in correspondence in the national press, of safeguarding hedges and regulating their management. What concerns environmentalists and wildlife and conservation bodies is the timing and frequency of hedge management. While it is widely acknowledged that no trimming should take place in summer, but be confined to the winter months between November and February, it is now being advocated that even during these months management is not necessarily acceptable.

It is argued that many invertebrates overwinter in hedges and therefore there is no safe period for them to be cut. Also, another point made which resonates with concerns that might well apply to the West Berks locality, is that arable farmers tend to cut field and roadside hedges as soon as crops have been harvested in July and August. Of course doing so is absolutely the wrong time to trim. Furthermore, cutting hedges by arable farmers is often done on an annual basis. Accordingly, there would be no food, in the form of berries for overwintering creatures. The advice is to adopt a three year cycle and indeed carry out hedge husbandry on one third of the total hedges only each year owned or under the occupiers' control.

### **Postscript on neonicotinoid pesticides (NPs)**

The chemical companies marketing NPs have challenged the European Union (EU) directive to suspend for two years three of their NP products by endeavouring to get the ban rescinded. As far as the UK is concerned, if given the freedom to act as they wished, the ban would be lifted, as DEFRA does not consider the case for suspension has not unequivocally been made. Interestingly, the EU has criticised the UK's current field trials on NPs designed to test the effects on insects as being scientifically unsound, so that the results, especially if it is found there is no adverse impact, would be viewed as invalid.

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