

Mike's Musings: environment and conservation

Late winter/early spring 2014

The weather reports for February and March

February

The month was marked by quite chilly days, with mostly SW/NW winds. It was also a wet month as it rained on 22 days. The heaviest falls occurred on the 5th and 6th (45.0 mms.) and the 11th to the 14th (31.0mms.). There were sunny periods on a few days with temperatures above the seasonal average; they achieved double figures on the 2nd, 10th, 14th, 16th-18th, 21st-22nd and 25th.

The total rainfall for the month was 154.15mms. (6 ins.) Even though the month is traditionally known as 'February fill-dyke' (one of the wettest each year) it did not match the torrents of December and January this winter that resulted in the incredible and extended floods across England and Wales. However, the amount of rain in the month added to the flooding in the form of groundwater that fed into low-lying land and rivers, particularly as underground aquifers were already full.

March

The month's weather, certainly until the 20th to the 28th, was very different from the previous three months. There were cold nights on the 2nd to the 4th when below zero temperatures were recorded. Apart from significant rainfall on the 2nd (17.0mms.), it was a dry month until the 20th, when two showery days occurred. As in February, there were a number of warm days. Indeed, on the 29th and 30th it was exceptionally warm for the time of the year as temperatures of 19 and 20 degrees Celsius respectively were experienced. Over the whole of March there were 16 days when temperatures were well into double figures.

It rained on eight days in the month, the total being 34.5 mms. (1.36ins.). This amount was well below the expected average for March.

An early spring; is this good for wildlife?

In the previous Musings it was noted for January, a relatively mild month this year, given that it was still winter, there were many signs that nature was already awakening. The notion continued to be relevant to February and March with respect to trees, shrubs, plants, animals and birds. The media, especially the newspapers, have been having a field day with their nature correspondents' articles and claims by readers in the letters pages of how early flowering plants have been blossoming, resident and summer migrant birds singing and nesting, hibernating mammals emerging and others already active having young.

It is birds that attract our attention most as naturally they are more visible and vocal than other forms of wildlife. Of the resident species-blackbirds, chaffinches, collared doves, greenfinches, mistle and song thrushes, robins, blue and great tits, wood pigeons and wrens are the most noticeable because they frequent and breed in our gardens, hedgerows, parks, along the borders of canals and rivers and even churchyards.

However, when it comes identifying the calls and songs of resident birds, the majority of people are not very competent. In a survey early this year, conducted via the BBC's *Gardeners' World* magazine, which yielded 1650 responses, it was revealed that of the commonest garden birds, while 55% recognised a Wood Pigeon's call, only 11% could identify a Blue Tit's song. Of three other familiar birds the percentage of respondents who correctly identified their song was Blackbird (32%), House Sparrow (30%) and Robin (25%). The editor of the magazine asserted that the songs of many other common birds were not recognised; very likely because, she added, we humans seem to be less aware of the natural environment in which we live.

The first bird summer visitors have started to arrive, but most of them will not be here until well into April. For example, the Cuckoo is usually expected in the second or third week of the month. The Chiffchaff, one of the earliest migrants, has been uttering its onomatopoeic call (it can hardly be termed a song) on Inkpen Common for quite a number of days. Some migrants stay to breed locally but many are simply pausing for a while in passing through to their nesting destinations further north. The Blackcap is 'tuning up' so to speak but it may be a resident bird as this species has been overwintering in the UK for many years; It frequently visits bird feeders in gardens. Soon the Garden and Willow Warbler and Whitethroat will be heard on Inkpen Common, while along the Kennet and Avon canal and River Kennet the Reed and Sedge Warbler will be quite common, although neither are often seen as they secret themselves in the reeds bordering such water courses. Mallards have bred early this year and their ducklings are already sizeable. Not so the Coot and Moorhen which still seem to be pairing up and building their nests. It will be almost May before there is the possibility of hearing or perceiving a Nightingale.

It is to be hoped that there will not be a sudden late cold spell of weather in April as this could have a disastrous effect on animals and birds. In the past there have been reports of hedgehogs, largely nocturnal creatures, emerging from hibernation only to succumb because of overnight frosts. The young of some species of birds are also susceptible to cold and wet conditions, especially when food relied on by parents to feed their young become scarce. For example, this is the case with species dependent on the larvae of or adult insects.

The Demise of 'Ratty'?

Water Voles are under threat of extinction in many parts of the UK. Consequently, wildlife trusts have launched projects, supported by the Environment Agency and Canals and Rivers Trust in an effort to halt the decline in their numbers. Very recently the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust has initiated a fund-raising campaign in an endeavour to save this much-loved animal.

The causes of the decline are principally habitat loss, reduced funding to organisations already involved in projects to maintain and increase water vole numbers where they still exist, adverse weather conditions recently and, above all, predation by the American Mink. The prevalence of mink is largely due to their escape from farms in which they were reared for the fur trade and their deliberate and misguided release from such farms by animal rights activists.

The population of water voles has been estimated to have declined by a fifth in the four years between 2007 and 2011 compared with the previous four years. The worst affected areas are the south-east, south west and north-west. It is vital that conservation initiatives are undertaken to reintroduce them where they are currently absent, by creating new habitats and controlling mink.

There are sites, particularly in Kent, Berks, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Wilts where water voles are thriving. However, these locations are somewhat isolated so what is required is to connect these to facilitate the expansion of their populations between them, mainly because it is desirable to widen the gene pool. Overall, it is necessary to monitor continuously the stock of water voles countrywide to assess whether the initiatives taken are being successful.

We are indeed both fortunate and privileged in West Berks, particularly in the Hungerford and Kintbury area, because we have suitable watercourses virtually devoid of mink to maintain viable populations of these delightful creatures. They are shy animals so one must move slowly and quietly to catch a glimpse of them. Very often it is the 'plop' heard as they enter the water from their holes in the banks that it is confirmed they are around. One of the best places to see them clearly is to use binoculars to observe them at a distance on the water weed of the River Dunn at Freemans Marsh in Hungerford.

Some snippets on wildlife

- Given their reputation for wisdom in literature, the collective noun for owls should be 'A University of' or 'Academy of'. It is called, however, 'A Parliament of Owls'. This is not, perhaps, the most appropriate term
- Harvest mice make two nests from grass or cereal stalks. One is for rearing their young but the other, nearer the ground, is for food storage and sleeping.
- Blue tit nestlings need 1,000 insects a day for them to survive and fledge. Both parents are kept busy almost from dawn to dusk to satisfy such voracious appetites; they must be exhausted by the end of the day.

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