

Mike's musings: environment and conservation

High summer 2014

Weather in June and July

June

The month was quite a dry one with below expected average rainfall. Temperatures were in the high teens in the first week, rising to the low to mid twenties by the 7th, only falling away again in the last week. There were relatively small amounts of rain on the 3rd and 4th and 6th and 7th, but it was then dry until the 13th when there was a vigorous thunderstorm during which 15mms. of rain fell. The only other appreciable rainfall was on the 28th the amount being 10.5 mms. It rained on nine days, the total amounting to 48.5 mms. (1.91 ins.).

July

High summer truly arrived this month with daytime temperatures into the mid twenties during the first two weeks in which the rainfall was very low. The 17th and 18th were the hottest days of the year locally, with the writer's daytime maxi/min thermometer readings hitting 29.5 and 28.0 respectively. Overnight on both these dates there were quite severe thunderstorms with heavy bursts of rain which did not last long. Similar rainstorms occurred during the day on the 19th. Night temperatures were in excess of 15 C on a number of occasions in the first half of the month, it also being uncomfortably humid. It was drier on the 20th but somewhat cloudy. The largely fine, dry and warm weather persisted until the end of the month, although temperatures dipped a little on some days as it became cloudier in the afternoons. Yet again, West Berks did not suffer the awful storms that hit the London area and Sussex. There was one short thunderstorm after lunch on the 25th yielding a paltry 3.5mms., with no further rain falling in the month. It rained on only six days, the total for the whole of July being 27.0mms. (slightly over an inch).

A remarkable summer

Following the mild wet winter and quite warm April and May giving plants the perfect conditions to thrive, has meant that trees, shrubs and flowers have bloomed and their berries, fruit and seeds matured much earlier. For example, horse chestnut 'conkers', crab apples and black and elder berries were almost fully formed by late June. Likewise, hawthorn and rowan berries were red so much earlier than usual.

The fine dry weather has encouraged resident species of birds, such as blackbirds, dunnocks, finches, robins and thrushes to rear second broods and even third ones are likely. Similarly, summer visitors, for instance, house martins and swallows certainly appear to be incubating eggs again after their first fledglings had left the nest. Earlier raised chicks are mostly independent now, but often continue to attempt to beg food from their parents. Young birds are still relying on parental feeding, particularly bull, gold and green finches, which tend to be more secretive, but can be heard calling the adults from hedges and thickets to attract their attention. Blue, great and long-tailed tits, dunnocks, robins, sparrow and starling youngster are more conspicuous, often congregating in gardens around feeders and in open spaces, begging for food.

Despite all this activity it is a rather saddening thought that the summer is on the wane as birdsong falls into silence. Gone are the wonderful dawn and dusk choruses of spring and early summer. There are no more summer migrants' songs from the likes of blackcaps, garden, willow, reed and sedge warblers, whitethroats, cuckoos and turtle doves (last two birds becoming rarer and rarer). The nightingales made for Africa before the end of June, now being followed by cuckoos. Apart from a few snatches of the glorious and melodious song uttered by blackbirds and odd call notes of mistle and song thrushes, it will not be until the New Year that the thrush family will be vocal again. Nevertheless, some comfort is brought by robins, which are rehearsing their somewhat plaintive autumn and winter song, and the explosive and rapid 56 note (all within the space of a second or so) of the wrens; a phenomenal feat.

However, what is especially disturbing are the signs of autumn now being manifested; can one believe it in July! In the extremely hot and dry weather conditions, which have persisted for quite a long time, birches are shedding leaves that have already turned brown while on the tree. Likewise, the leaves of the horse chestnuts, between Hungerford and Kintbury and by Kintbury Station and the Whitebeams adjacent to the writer's house have been falling for almost a month.

Good news of the revival of barn owls

Barn owls in the UK are almost in the most northerly habitat they are able to tolerate. The birds' origins are essentially the warmer and drier climes of Southern Europe, Middle-east and North-Africa where they are more at home. Two main factors determine their breeding success in this country. One is the weather, particularly the impact of cold and wet winters and early springs on the birds' survival rates. The other is the availability and abundance of prey, also partially affected by the weather. It was, indeed, the adverse weather conditions that resulted in there virtually being no records of breeding having occurred in 2013, after a moderately successful year in 2012.

Ornithologists grimly predicted that after the 2013 breeding debacle, it would take ten years or more for the specie's numbers to recover. Astoundingly, the pessimists' expectations were proved to be wrong. Evidence locally* from the inspection of over 100 nesting boxes in the Pang Valley, including those placed in the Hungerford and Kintbury areas, indicates that 2014 is likely to be a record breeding year for barn owls in the district, especially if the fine weather persists and the owls rear second broods.

This remarkable outcome has occurred because of the mild 2013-2014 winter and warm early spring that led to an explosion of the field vole population, the barn owls' principal food source (see the last snippet below). Moreover, it enabled the owls, themselves, to achieve a peak breeding condition earlier than usual.

*John Dellow, writing in the Newbury District Ornithological Club's (NDOC's) *Field Views*, Apl.-June issue, p.4, presenting the results of the West Berks Countryside Society's annual count of young in Barn Owl nesting boxes.

Snippets

- Foxes: are they more closely related to dogs than cats? Unlike dogs they have two physical features that connect them to the feline species. Firstly,

they are able to retract their claws as cats do which dogs cannot. Secondly, though the pupils of their eyes are round like a dog's in a poor light and at night, they contract vertically as a cat's do when the light is bright.

- Except when breeding in holes or on ledges under the eaves, preferably in old buildings, from which they can easily launch themselves into flight, swifts virtually spend the whole of their lives on the wing, mostly either feeding, or sleeping in layers of warm air, often at some height. Should they unfortunately become grounded, it is extremely difficult for them to take off again and will therefore almost certainly perish.
- Raptors, particularly kestrels, harriers and barn owls, are able to catch rodents, field voles being a favoured food, by following by sight the ultra violet light tracks left by their prey.

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