

Mike's Musings: environment and conservation

Late autumn/early winter 2014

Weather October and November

October

The month bore some resemblance to that in 2013, being mild, wet and quite windy at times. This year October was mainly cloudy, although somewhat unseasonally mild with winds largely from a SW/NW quarter. There was no 'Indian Summer' with quite warm days and chilly nights and grass frosts as has occurred very often in the past. There were 19 rainy days as opposed to 21 in 2013 and the total rainfall was 92.3mms. (3.77ins.) compared with 143mms. (5.84 ins.) in 2013. On the majority of wet days the rainfall was only a few mms; the heaviest amounts of rain were on the 13th of the month (17mms.) and 15th (11mms.).

November

Somewhat surprisingly, given the serious flooding last year with 14 rain days, the month was much wetter. It rained on 24 days, yielding 104.8 mms. (4.28 ins.) compared with 63.5mms. (2.5 ins) in 2013. Apart from a grass frost overnight between the 23rd and 24th when the temperature was minus two Celsius locally, there were no other cold nights.

As in October there were few fine days. It was often very dull with a light drizzle or heavier rain in the morning and occasionally brief bright periods in the afternoon. Sunday the 23rd was about the only fully sunny and warm day in the month. As in October, the month was again exceptionally mild.

Another untypical late autumn

As stated in the weather report above, the season has been remarkably similar to the one experienced in 2013. Indeed, this mild autumn has prolonged the length of the leaf fall. Even now, notwithstanding that the birch, chestnut, hawthorn, hazel, hornbeam, maple, poplar, sycamore and white beam trees have almost completely shed their foliage where they are situated in quite exposed areas, in contrast beech, lime and oaks have retained some green leaves and certainly hung on to their brown, yellowing and red ones. The show by beeches has been as spectacular as last year. On Hungerford Common the trees bordering it are currently a splendid sight.

Surprisingly, there are instances of flowers associated more with early spring showing shoots, such as lesser celandine and daffodil, and even blooming now, for example polyanthus and primrose. In gardens some summer bedding plants survived until the first frost of November.

Birds have also been fooled by the mild weather and are showing signs of pairing off and some common species have uttered territorial calls. The writer of this musings has heard snatches of songs from blackbirds, chaffinches, dunnocks, great tits and song and mistle thrushes during sunny periods. Male blackbirds have actually been sparring with each other since the beginning of November. Two winter visitors have

already arrived. There are redwings in the hedges and trees seeking the last of the berries, but it is not unknown for them to frequent gardens to raid the berries of cotoneaster and pyracantha shrubs. They also tend to congregate in tall trees bordering fields and roads. Fieldfares can also be seen in fields, but there seem to be fewer numbers than their redwing 'cousins'. Should December be much colder, smaller birds can be expected to visit garden feeders, for instance brambling, redpoll and siskin.

Except for flies, gnats, midges and moths, the wet weather has deterred insects, especially overwintering butterflies, from flying on brighter days. There have been few opportunities of seeing species commonly seen at this time of the year, for example brimstone, peacock, red admiral, tortoiseshell and white.

Local ancient oak trees

Recently ancient trees have been in the news as claims have been made by residents from several parts of the country that the oldest tree is located in their area. It may be a coincidence that Peter Marren, living in Ramsbury, who has an extensive knowledge of a number of forms of wildlife, has chosen to write an article in *British Wildlife** about the old oaks in Savernake Forest; interestingly he notes that 'nake' means 'oak'. This piece is largely drawn from Peter's article with a view of encouraging readers to explore and discover these ancient trees.

Savernake is about 1,100 hectares in size, in an area of roughly 4x 3 kilometres, situated south of the A4 east of Marlborough. It is a privately owned forest managed by the Forestry Commission.

Apparently, there are 46 oak trees in the forest which have a girth (circumference of the main trunk) of more than six metres; 18 of that number have a girth exceeding seven metres. Most of these specimens are located in the western part of Savernake. Peter states that 20 of the most attractive oaks have been given names and are signposted, several since 2006. However, he is at pains to point out that it is not that easy to find the designated oaks.

These oaks are more than 300 years old and a few may be as ancient as 1,000 years. The signposted trees have some delightful names that for some reflect their appearance—Amity, Big Belly, that has also been called the Decanter and Pot-belly oak (with a girth of 11 metres, which makes it the largest in Savernake, and may even be one of the oldest in England), Cathedral/Monarch, Dukes Vaunt or Dukes Font, King of Limbs, Spiral, Spider, Queen, True Braydon and Turkey. Some names were given to other oaks by Jack Oliver and Joan Davies when they examined the trees in 2006, for example, Old Paunchy, White Road, Crockmere and Slingsby.

The Forestry Commission has undertaken to care for these ancient oaks to ensure, as far as it is able, their preservation for as long as possible, given that eventually the trees will die. Accordingly, it has trimmed adjacent trees and cleared undergrowth to create dapple shaded areas around each designated oak. This action will entail ongoing management by means of periodic maintenance of such surrounds.

While Peter has emphasised that it will be difficult to locate each old oak, requiring a protracted effort, a map was produced of the forest by Peter Noble in 2007 which can be accessed online+; he has also prepared a paper version, costing £1, which can be obtained from the White Horse bookshop, situated on the High Street in Marlborough.

*Peter Marren, The Ancient Oaks of Savernake Forest, *British Wildlife*, Vol.25, No.7. June, 2014, pp 305-313. The journal can be located online and it is possible to access past individual articles.

+sites.goggle.com/site/peternobletalks/mapping; another guide to the named trees can be found on the Wiltshire Walks website: www.wiltshirewalks.co.uk- follow the link to Savernake Forest

Snippets

- Badgers are the prey of dogs other than the Jack Russell. One such animal is the dachshund which was originally used to hunt such prey and indeed gave this breed its name; 'dachs' is the German for badger and 'hund' of course means dog or hound.
- Still considering dogs, in the past the name commonly given to one's pet was 'Fido' , meaning 'faithful'.
- Very few ducks actually quack. The mallard, both male and female, is normally the only duck regularly doing so. Indeed, other species of male ducks are often silent. The calls of ducks actually tend to consist of squeaks, whistles, brays, growls, chirps and grunts. An exception is the beautiful, quiet and soothing call of the male eider, a truly regal looking duck, which is a delight to hear.