

Mike's Musings: environment and conservation

Midwinter 2013/2014

The weather reports for December and January

So far this winter it has been unseasonably mild with mainly south westerly and westerly winds that have brought almost continuous and severe Atlantic depressions with often very strong winds and heavy rainfall. Combined with extremely high spring tides these storms have wreaked havoc along coasts of western Scotland, Wales and the southern and eastern England. West Berks largely escaped the worst of the wind damage and flooding that affected the coastal locations.

There were only a few days when the wind and rain abated and it was sunny during the day followed by clear skies overnight and grass frost. Towards the end of January these colder nights gave rise to fog that persisted until midday. Over both December and January daytime temperatures were well above the expected average of five degrees Celsius; indeed on several days they were twice that.

December

The month began with dry, quiet and mild days. There were only 0.4 mms. of rain over the first two weeks. However, the 15th signalled what became an exceptionally wet period lasting until the end of the month, apart from three slightly more settled days over the Christmas holiday after one heavy shower on the 24th and another overnight on the 26th. The heaviest rain was on the 22nd and 23rd when 55mms. (more than two inches) was recorded in 24 hours.

It rained on 16 days, the total for the month being a millimetre under 155.0 (6.1 ins). This was well above the average.

January

In many respects the month was similar to December, but in reverse, as far as rainfall and wind was concerned in that the heaviest amounts occurred in the first two weeks. Indeed the weather was quite remarkable because there were only two completely dry days, an almost unheard phenomenon. The most significant differences between the two months were that, in West Berks at least, the winds were less strong, mainly from a southwest/ westerly quarter.

The total rainfall for the month was even greater than that for December, certainly a figure that should go into the record books. The amount that fell locally was 211.25mms. (8.32 ins) more than twice the normal average for January. This is astounding as it indicates that in our area over a quarter of its average annual rainfall has occurred in just one month. The Meteorological Office has stated that it was the wettest January since records began in 1910.

How wildlife responded to the midwinter weather

The largely mild weather reported on above prompted birds to start their yearly cycle of breeding earlier than normal, at least with respect to males beginning to claim their territories through song and showing signs of attempting to pair with females. Similarly, plants have also emerged and developed earlier than usual.

In the previous Musings a brief reference was made to male members of the 'Turdis' family, namely Blackbirds and Song Thrushes, beginning to utter a few notes of their territorial songs. They have now been joined by a number of other species that were not expected to start singing until mid or late February and early March. In fact Song Thrushes are now in full flow with their striking and strident repertoire of notes, often mimicking the songs of other birds and even human sounds. However, surprisingly, Blackbirds, particularly in our area, have become rather quiet again.

Mistle Thrushes are also prominent songsters. Well, song is not a particularly apt word to describe the announcement of their territories. The song is somewhat monotonous and half hearted, very often produced from the top of a tall tree in windy weather, hence they being dubbed 'Storm Cocks'. Other birds, common in gardens, are now singing, such as Chaffinches, Greenfinches, Goldfinches, Great Tits, Wrens, and of course, Robins, whose plaintive winter song has been superseded by their more cheerful spring one.

It is also clear that larger birds, for example, Jackdaws, Crows, Rooks and Ravens and even Buzzards have paired up and begun to repair last year's nests. For two common species it is difficult to tell when they start to claim territories through song. House Sparrows chatter constantly and nearly always congregate in quite sizeable numbers, while Wood Pigeons are continually vocal for long periods and appear to breed all year round.

Plants, particularly flowering ones, have been exceptionally early. The Snowdrops are currently a splendid sight, especially at Inglewood and in St.Mary's Churchyard in Kintbury. Surprisingly, the odd Cowslip is in flower and also Daffodil. Additionally, there are signs that grass is growing and the leaves of some garden shrubs are more than just buds. The flower buds of some shrubs, for instance Lilac and Magnolia, look as though will come out very soon.

To what extent do people engage with the natural environment

In a report published by Natural England* regarding the well-being people derive in their relationship with the natural environment, some interesting results emerged. For example, a mean score of 7.7 (out of a possible maximum of 10) was recorded, even if no visits were made, that respondents were glad natural places existed. Part-time workers, those with no children at home, the retired and persons with disabilities rated wildlife activity worthwhile. The highest scores (between 8.2 and 8.5) were related to people who walk, cycle, are members of environmental organisations, do voluntary work and those going outdoors every day.

*<http://tinyurl.com/pa74x28>

Brief updates on current rural issues

- ***Neonicotinoids pesticides debate***

In several Musings between 2012 and 2013 references were made to field trials, as opposed to laboratory research, in the UK on these pesticides, the results of which would determine whether or not the government would suspend their use (the EU banned three of them for three years in 2013).

It has transpired that the European Food Standards Agency (EFSA) has stated that the field trials were flawed because they were confined to oilseed rape and that the sample of UK crop growing conditions was too small. So it appears the trials results would not be an appropriate basis for reaching a decision on a ban of the said pesticides.

- ***The Badger Cull+***

The compiler of this Musings is hesitant to get too embroiled here in the arguments for or against a cull of badgers to reduce the incidence of Bovine TB. Proceeding with a nationwide cull depends on the outcome of the pilot trial ones being conducted in Gloucestershire and Somerset. Because the percentage of badgers culled in these trials were, respectively, less than 30% in the former and 60% in the latter, a time extension to complete them was granted. In effect the removal of at least 70% of the estimated population of badgers was not achieved. At the moment the pilot trials have not been completed

So, currently, there is no evidence as a base for proceeding or not with the full cull, Irrespective of the findings in the pilot trials. It is beginning to look as if no satisfactory result will be accomplished either for those in favour of the cull or for those against it. Would vaccination of both badgers and cattle be the answer?
+Berks Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) *Wildlife News*, October, 2013

- ***Ash die back***

Some welcome news on the fear that we shall lose all our native Ash trees has emerged. It has been found that in a study over 10 years in a National Trust woodland in Somerset, only 10% of 6,000 Ash trees showed signs of suffering from the disease.

"<http://livingashproject.org.uk>

- ***Straw burning is on the agenda again#***

Sue Everett, in her Conservation news slot in *British Wildlife* on crop rotations that favour wildlife, indicated that the Association of Independent Crop Consultants (AICC) has proposed the re-introduction of straw burning to deal with, among other pests, the problem of Black Grass, the eradication of which is increasingly resistant to pesticides. Countering this proposal, she reported that a not insignificant number of farmers advocate the solution to such a problem lies in returning to traditional crop rotational farming practices.

For the sake of wildlife one hopes such a solution prevails. Straw burning, apart from creating problems of air pollution and toxic fumes harmful to humans, has a very detrimental effect on the natural environment and wildlife, especially reducing biodiversity.

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