

Mike's musings: environment and conservation

Spring 2014

Weather: April and May

Overall the spring was quite mild with above average temperatures. In both months there were periods of dry and sunny days, such as over the Easter weekend in April and in the middle of May. Unsettled weather with substantial rainfall occurred towards the end of April and in the first 10 days of May. In our area there were fewer windy days and heavy showers than in the south-east and south-west.

April

Until the third week of the month, with the exception for small amounts of rainfall between the 5th and 7th, the weather was dry until the 19th when it became unsettled until its end. It rained on 14 days, but on only two, the 20th and 25th, were falls heavy, being 14mms. (0.55 of an inch) and 25.5mms. (almost exactly an inch) respectively. The total rainfall for the month was 104.25mms. (4.1ins.).

May

The month was characterised by quite a number of warm days, significantly above the average expected, with temperatures in the high teens and on several days creeping into the low twenties, especially over the seven days of the 15th to the 20th. It was a drier month than April and even on days when heavy showers occurred there were bright periods, it feeling comfortably warm when the sun emerged from behind the clouds. The rainfall amounts on wet days were only a few millimetres. There were 17 rainy days, the total for the month being 78.75mms. (3.1ins.)

A 'white spring'

It has been a superb spring this year, far exceeding the modest expectations that it would be better than the very cold one of 2013. As reported in the previous Musings, the mild February and March encouraged birds to start breeding, plants to emerge and blossom and shrubs and trees to come into leaf, a number of which produce flowers.

What has been most striking has been how white this spring has appeared to be. Starting with the tremendous show of snowdrops, the blackthorns followed with a similar spectacle and then the hawthorns, which were simply weighed down with a mass of blossoms on each tree. Almost simultaneously, the rowans were decked with their dainty blooms. Equally, the white-candled chestnut trees and finally elders added to the white show. However, what has been and continues to be so dazzling, outshining all these white blooming species, is, for the first time in many, many years, the cow parsley bordering the roads and lanes of the area. Especially worthy of note are the thousands upon thousands lining both sides of the A4 between Marsh Benham, west of Newbury, and the turning into Kintbury. It is truly a magnificent sight which the writer has never observed before in the four decades of living in West Berks.

Another display that has been stunningly beautiful, but of a different hue, again not seen for many a year, is the veritable carpet of buttercups on Hungerford Common. This phenomenon is not confined to that location. Anyone caring to look out of the

window if on a train travelling between Paddington and Hungerford would see many fields so covered, especially west of Reading and the fields adjacent to the line at Theale. Their almost golden colours have been much more attractive than the rather garish yellow of oilseed rape crops in local farmers' fields.

The summer migrant birds likely to be seen in the area have settled in. It was a delight to welcome back the swifts that nest in the older properties in the centre of Kintbury, albeit some time after the arrival of the house martins and swallows. Along the river Kennet and the canal the blackcaps, reed, sedge and willow warblers are in full song. Also a relatively new bird call now heard locally is that of the red kites which begins with a buzzard-like mew, followed by three short notes somewhat like a whistle. In addition to a number nesting in the Inkpen area, a pair of red kites is now breeding in a copse near Kintbury. We are fortunate too that cuckoos are still heard and seen in West Berks.

However, it is the blackbirds, supported by song thrushes, which are the supreme songsters of spring and summer; they have dominated the dawn and dusk choruses. There seem to be greater numbers of these two species this year and they truly epitomise the spirit of the mid-year season. Lastly, the chaffinches (see 'snippets' below) greenfinches, dunnocks and robins should not be omitted from the list of songsters.

The 2013-2014 floods: implications for wildlife conservation of their future prevention

Whilst acknowledging the impact of the immensely heavy rainfall over the 2013-2014 winter in Newbury, West Berks largely escaped the horrendous affect it had on southern England in the Somerset Levels and further east along the river Thames and coastal areas bordering the Channel. What was disturbing about the reaction to the possible causes of the flooding was the nature of the accusations made as to who was responsible, rather than what.

One significant allegation was that schemes being introduced, especially on the Somerset Levels, were to blame. These schemes are what is termed 'catchment-based flood mitigation' and they are designed to create wetlands and vegetation (ecological restoration) which hold water back from rushing into water courses via existing drainage systems. The method is to allow flood water to be released more slowly. Critiques of such schemes argued, mistakenly, that they have been introduced simply to benefit wildlife and have no flood prevention function thus exacerbating the severity and prolonging the impact of the flooding.

Countering this misguided notion there have been quite a number of causes of the flooding espoused. Changes in land use, detrimental farming practise, sanctioning housing development on flood plains, the creation of canalised water and drainage systems, peat excavation that lower land levels and rising sea levels. However, government spending cuts, that included almost halving the Environmental Agency's (EA) funding (the body responsible for managing flood control), have been an important contributory factor to aggravating the flooding that occurred.+

In a thoughtfully considered and perceptive article in her regular 'Conservation news' section,* Sue Everett, a local ecologist and sustainability consultant,

comprehensively restores a balance to what has been an extremely acrimonious debate. The brief examination above, does not do full justice to Sue's discussion of the issues.

+A local example of what the EA can achieve, if it has the requisite resources, is the Jubilee River project, which has successfully eliminated the threat of flooding in Maidenhead; the scheme is well worth visiting.

* *British Wildlife*, Vol.25, No.4, April, 2014, pp 294-296

Snippets

- It has been asserted by birders that the chaffinch's song, if it can be termed as such, can be interpreted as representing in sound the actions of a bowler in the game of cricket. The 'churring-like' first phase has been likened to the run- up to the crease by the bowler and the 'flourish' at the end as the delivery of the ball. There is, however, some variation in the chaffinches' first phase utterances, as the birds have what might be described as distinctive regional accents. In some locations the first phase is longer, suggesting that the bowler is a pace one. Occasionally, chaffinches do not include the 'flourish' implying that the bowler fails to release the ball at the crease or drops it!
- In recent years, brambles (of which there are over 200 species) have increasingly colonised nature reserves, particularly heathland ones, the bane of conservationists' lives who manage them. This is certainly the case on Inkpen Common on which the plant threatens to overwhelm efforts to restore the coverage of heather. The problem has arisen because the introduction of grazing, that was successful in eliminating Purple Moor Grass, among other invasive species, which threatened to choke off the heather. This has encouraged the spread of brambles which are an extremely vigorous species the shoots of which root very easily.
- There has been a steady increase in the numbers of polecats that hitherto were largely confined to western areas of England and Wales. The spread eastwards is confirmed by the evidence arising from sightings of road kills of them. This animal is not actually a cat. It is a member of the Mustelid family, so named from the Latin for weasel. Close relatives of the polecat are pine martens, otters, skunks, stoats and weasels. It is the wild equivalent of the domestic ferret.
- Jackdaws, with the exception of the Chough, are the smallest of the Corvid family. They are delightfully cheerful birds as they perform their aerobatics, seemingly endlessly chattering (described as 'Chackering') to each other. With their greyish head and blue eyes they are easily distinguishable from their nearest relatives. They have a penchant for nesting in chimneys and this gives rise to the threat of causing a fire as they need to block the pot with sticks to complete nest.

The compiler welcomes comments; email: mikesmusing@btinternet.com