

## **Mike's musings: environment and conservation**

### **Late summer 2014**

#### **Weather August September**

##### **August**

Though it was quite warm over the first nine days, with temperatures in the low to mid-twenties, it was cooler for the rest of the month when the thermometer barely reached 20C. It was even cooler between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 27<sup>th</sup> when temperatures were confined to the mid teens. Winds were mostly from a south-west and westerly direction in the first two weeks, east to south-east in the third and north-west over the last few days of the month.

It was a relatively wet month in terms of the frequency and amount of rain. It rained on 17 days, there being heavy falls on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>. The total rainfall for the whole month was 86 mms. (3.4 ins.).

##### **September**

September was characterised by more summery weather than that experienced in August. The month was exceptionally dry as there was no rain until overnight on the 18<sup>th</sup> when a thunderstorm delivered 20 mms. (0.8 inch), a very welcome surprise for gardeners. It actually rained on only two days, giving a total for the month of 20.5 mms..

It was a somewhat untypical month for the weather patterns expected when high pressure prevails over the UK. Normally this brings cloudless skies and thus sunny and warm days, commonly referred to as an 'Indian Summer'. Certainly, in West Berks though they were warm, the days were often cloudy, only clearing towards evening. At this time of the year, mornings and evenings are usually chilly and overnight there is a danger of grass frosts occurring; this has not been the case. It was misty and even foggy over the last few days of the month, created because of the temperature inversions associated with high pressure weather conditions. Nevertheless, on the days when it was sunny from early morning it was quite hot, with temperatures in the low to mid twenties. The very light winds, mostly from the north-west/ north-east and east/south-east, contributed to a feeling that it was still summer.

#### **Late summer colours and sounds**

As the days passed, leading towards autumn, one would look forward to the spectacle of gloriously yellow then brown beech leaves, but not so attractive chestnut ones and the vivid red of maples to occur. However, birch trees, very common on the acid soils of Inkpen Common and the Great Plantation, produce much more subtle colours, the dainty leaves becoming a pale yellow, often falling and becoming brown on the ground. These features are becoming apparent now, although the dry weather during the last six weeks has meant that autumn has started much earlier than normally expected, as reported in the previous Musings (June /July 2014).

Cyclamen, a late flowering plant which tolerates dry soil and shade, is now beginning to bloom and will continue to do so until winter sets in. Another late flowering wildlife perennial is toadflax, whose striking yellow and orange petals brighten up dull days. They tend to border path and road verges, often backed by hedges. Rosebay and great willow herbs, like toadflax, are also seen in abundance in similar locations. They have now started to shed seed from their feathery seed-heads in the most gentle of breezes. Autumn is also the time when thistles thrive, producing conspicuous seed-heads which remain very much intact for quite a long time before their light and fluffy seeds drift away. One of the members of the scabious family, the teasel, has a most spectacular seed-head which is thistle-like; it is a particular favourite food source of goldfinches. Yet another late flowering plant is ivy. It attracts many insects, especially bees and butterflies. The buzzing of the former sounds

almost as if this insect is swarming it is so loud. The species of butterfly often seen feeding on ivy is the red admiral. It is not unusual for scores of these to be attracted to a single bush. Currently, red admirals can be seen on the ivy bordering the London-bound platform of Kintbury station.

Late summer is a relatively quiet time for birds, once the summer migrants have departed to warmer climes for the winter, notwithstanding that a few house martins and swallows are still around, as this Musings is being compiled, communicating with each other as they feed on the wing. The dry and warm weather has ensured that there are plenty of insects around on which the birds can build up their fat reserves prior to migrating.

All resident birds have virtually ceased territorial songs, resorting to simply using call notes to keep in touch with each other. The corvid family members, especially crows, jackdaws and rooks remain vocal nearly all year; jackdaws in particular, whose cheerful call notes are always a pleasure to hear. Wood pigeons, probably the most vocal of resident birds, also 'coo' continuously, indeed, seemingly never ceasing to breed. Two species of woodpeckers can always be heard locally. The green woodpecker's 'yaffle' is often heard in open fields as well as in woodland, in which the greater spotted one can also be heard uttering its sharp 'jip'.

Of the smaller birds which can still be heard now are the ubiquitous house sparrows. Except in the more open areas of Inkpen, this species is not very common, as the village is too wooded to attract them to take up residence. However, there is no shortage of them in Kintbury. What is remarkable about sparrows is how gregarious they are in family groups and others of their own kind. It seems that the young sparrows often remain with their parents after fledging. The constant chirping and staccato calls are certainly not territorial as they fly from bush to bush, or hedge to hedge, or grassy areas to forage. The other smaller birds that can be heard are merely producing, rather half-heartedly, what amounts to keeping in contact with their kin. The most frequently one can hear are garden birds, such as green and gold finches, tits and wrens.

There are two notable exceptions in the bird world that use a territorial song to claim or defend their territories vocally which they are currently doing. Robins sing for the whole year, although in the autumn, after a brief period of silence while they are moulting, their song is different from the spring and summer one and is the means of declaring its territory. Both male and female robins claim territories as do the year's young robins.

The second exception to note is the behaviour of tawny owls which do vocally challenge each other in claiming territories in the autumn. The young owls also endeavour to find a territory; it is highly likely that they will be driven out of their parents' territory. This autumnal occurrence among 'tawnies' is why their calls are much more in evidence at this time of the year.

### **Disappearing grasslands and hay meadows**

No apologies are made here in deciding to return to the issue of the loss of much of England's grasslands. We are very fortunate to have much downland locally, which because of their steep-sided slopes remain as essentially unimproved permanent pasture, much of it used for grazing sheep. This is not the case on more lowland agricultural land in the country as a whole, which has lost over 50% of its hitherto permanent pasture since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. An example of the impact of this on the landscape is little more than a few miles away in Wilts, where former grassland is now used primarily for arable farming in a landscape largely denuded of hedges in very large fields in which virtually no wild flowers occur.

The issue of the demise of unimproved grasslands has become topical again as it is apparent that even locations designated as wildlife areas, very many designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), are under threat. Of particular concern are small parcels of land which have the potential to be retained and managed as hay meadows.

A campaign to save such valuable grasslands has been launched by wildlife trusts, following claims that 25% of nationally important sites have been lost since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The trusts want the protection of such sites to be reinforced by defining the implementation of government schemes more clearly under the Environmental Assessment Agriculture Regulations. The trusts consider that currently and proposed designated sites should be granted statutory protection so that landowners and farmers are eligible under the CAP (Common Agriculture Policy) for support payments.

Furthermore, the trusts argue that there ought to be an updated inventory of grasslands. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that very small wildlife sites will be suitably managed because individual trusts may not have the required resources. In many cases the quality of such grassland sites to support wild flowers has already been impaired. The future for conservation of these sites is increasingly becoming problematic.

### **Snippets**

- It is alleged by some people that badgers are so called because of their prodigious ability to dig their setts, entrances and many tunnels. It is claimed the name for them is derived from the French word 'becheur' meaning digger. A, perhaps, more feasible origin of the name is that it relates to the white flash on their foreheads resembling a badge.
- Kestrels can be described as lazy nesters as they largely make use of the old or discarded nests of similar sized birds. They sometimes make use of existing holes in trees, or even cavities in rock faces or buildings with similar apertures or lay their eggs on suitable ledges. In this respect kestrels' behaviour is somewhat like that of peregrine falcons.
- Harvest mice effectively have five limbs as they use their tails to assist them to climb the stems of arable crops or those of the plants and shrubs in hedges along field boundaries.