

Mike's Musings: environment and conservation

Late winter/early spring 2015

In one section the content of this Musings harks back to its early days, too many years ago for the compiler to recall clearly the exact format adopted. The original stance was to devote a section on the essential characteristics and behaviour of one or more species of wildlife. The first choice on the return to the former approach is a short profile of one of our most favourite beloved birds presented below.

The weather reports for February and March

February

At the start of the month it was cold with daytime temperatures seldom exceeding five degrees Celsius (C). Overnight, on quite a number of occasions the recorded thermometer readings were a degree or so above or below zero. Snow fell on the 2nd but amounted to no more than 50 centimetres (2 ins.) and therefore caused little inconvenience. The chilly spell persisted until the 11th after which during the day it was slightly warmer, temperatures being above the average expected; especially on the 25th and 26th when they were 12.1C and 11.6C respectively. The month was a relatively dry one as it rained on only nine days, the amounts being quite small, apart from on the 22nd when the rain gauge contained 11 mms. (0.45 ins.) of rainwater. The total rainfall for the month was 40.0 mms. (1.63 ins.). Consequently February did not live up to its reputation as the fill-dyke month.

March

Over the first two and a half weeks the weather was marked by daytime temperatures reaching double figures, accompanied by blustery and cold conditions which gave a significant chill factor to the winds, largely from a north-westerly and north-easterly quarter. High pressure for short periods occurred several times throughout the month often giving rise to dull and rather dismal days. However, when the breezes were brisker the clouds tended to break up, the skies becoming almost completely clear imparting some early spring-like warmth as long as one remained in sunlit areas.

In the last week of the month the weather was more unsettled with strong westerly winds and heavy showers. However, it was still a remarkably dry month because it rained on only seven days and the amounts were small; the total rainfall over the 31 days was 18.75 mms. (0.74 of an inch).

Signs of spring at last?

As the weather reports for February and March above indicate, this winter, certainly since January, has been somewhat prolonged with the air flows over the country originating from Scandinavia and the Arctic. Even on fine days it was cold enough to maintain wintery conditions and retard the onset of spring. These conditions delayed the growth of the flora, for example the snowdrops were almost two weeks late in coming into full flower, likewise the celandines, aconites and daffodils. However, the snowdrops in particular were a magnificent sight, remaining in full bloom until the third week of March. It also looks as if the aconites, celandines and daffodils will last well into April.

With the exception of cherry trees, the blossoms of which are currently superb, most shrubs and trees are showing little sign of coming into leaf. Blackthorn, usually the harbinger of spring, which flowers before its leaves appear, is at the time of writing this piece, hardly fully in bloom. Indeed, the hawthorn appears literally to have stolen the limelight, as its fresh leaves are a lovely shiny green. Of course, it is very likely that once the day-time temperatures rise to the mid-teens, the bushes and trees will rapidly burst into life.

To an extent the full territorial songs by resident and summer migrant birds have only just begun. While great and blue tits, robins and wrens did start to sing in February, the utterances by blackbirds, chaffinches, greenfinches, mistle and song thrushes were rather desultory until the middle of March. Clearly, given the weather conditions, these birds have delayed their establishment of territories and nesting locations and breeding activities, until there are sufficient sources of food for their young once they have hatched. This, of course, is especially vital for the species whose principal forms of sustenance are insects.

Some migrant bird species have already arrived. The chiffchaff, whose two-note call, if it can be considered as a song, reflects the common name it is known by, is one of the first summer visitors. Another early migrant is the blackcap, now often overwintering in the UK and so can almost be referred to as a resident bird. The date of the arrival of overseas birds is, to some extent, determined by the direction of the wind at this time of the year. The largely northerly winds over the last month, should they continue, will certainly have an adverse affect on the timing of the arrival of such species as house and sand martins, swallows and a number of warblers for example, garden, reed, sedge and woodwarblers, tree pipits and whitethroats.

Churchyard nature reserves

A few decades ago there was quite a strong movement to develop wildlife areas in churchyards, but until recently the interest in these forms of nature reserves seemed to have waned. However, an article in *British Wildlife** by Sue Cooper has indicated that there was still a significant level of activity throughout the country. This short piece has drawn on Sue's assessment of the state and importance of sites, which includes some typical examples of work being conducted.

Collectively, the green space of churchyards has been estimated to be over 18,000 acres, giving an average size of an acre per church. In the mid eighties a number of organisations were set up to give a degree of formal structure to the management of these sites. English Nature (EN) and Council for the Care of Churches (NCC) inaugurated the Living Churchyard and Cemetery Project (LCCP). As a result of this initiative local wildlife trusts set up their own living Churchyard Projects (LCPs). On the demise of the LCCP a new entity, the Caring for God's Acre (CfGA) was formed. Essentially members of these organisations are actively working in churchyard sites as volunteers thus obviating the need to raise sizable funds to maintain them.

Because they are nearly all enclosed, the majority by quite high walls, churchyards harbour plants virtually lost in the wild, especially several species of lichens, mosses and trees. A crucial feature of churchyards is that many go back to Norman times and by their very nature are unimproved, having never been fertilized. Thus in this sense they are almost unique, but above all are very valuable wildlife havens. This is

also certainly the case with respect to trees in Burial grounds, especially Yew trees, of which birds make much use. However, it should be noted that the sites are not confined to churchyards. The churches themselves are included because they support wildlife, such as bats and birds, for example house martins, swallows, swifts and insects.

It is of interest to examine examples in West Berks of the care and management churches and their cemeteries with regard to wildlife. Taking the case of the seven churches in the United Benefice of Walbury Beacon, the situation is not a particularly satisfactory one. Inspection of the churchyards alone reveals that only two have assigned small areas, ostensibly to encourage wildlife, consisting simply of rough grass in which a few garden plants and wild flowers can be found; the sites offer little evidence of active wildlife maintenance and or management,. The remaining five churches have areas of short grass devoid of any other forms of wildlife which are simply mowed regularly to keep them tidy. However, all seven churchyards are quite extensive and have the potential to become valuable conservation areas.

It certainly should not be considered that members of the respective churches would take the initiative to institute 'Caring for God's Acre' schemes. They are not likely to have either the people or the expertise to undertake such ventures. It is really up to local wildlife groups or trusts to inaugurate them. In the West Berks area this would fall under the jurisdiction of BBOWT (Berks Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust). In the past the Trust did carry out some surveys of churchyards locally and ran a section on the subject. Currently BBOWT it is not actively engaged in such schemes.

Nevertheless, Sue Cooper's article is timely in reminding those involved in endeavours to increase wildlife initiatives in suitable sites, of the role churches and their land can play. Indeed, the CfGsA (whose president is HRH the Prince of Wales) is presently undertaking a four year project, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, and is very active in England and Wales. It is publicizing projects in progress on the Web; see [www.caring for godsacre.org.uk](http://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk)

*Sue Cooper, 'Caring for God's Acre' British Wildlife, Vol.26, No. 2, December 2014, pp106-114.

Lapwings under threat of extinction

By means of what amounts to an expanded snippet, the following profile briefly examines the plight of the Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*), particularly in West Berks. Sadly, it is a species that has been declining rapidly since the 1970s. The main causes appear to be the advent of intensive agricultural practices, loss of suitable habitats and disturbance.

The only time of the year they are seen locally in some numbers is in winter between November and March when they congregate in places such as Thatcham Marshes and occasionally Hungerford Marsh and on Wilton Water at Crofton, or on flooded meadows and mudflats. It is heartening to learn recently that there are in fact a couple of scores of lapwings breeding on open land in the West Berks vicinity, successfully rearing young which are steadily increasing the numbers each year. Long may it continue if they are not disturbed.

The common name of 'Lapwing' is derived from the now obsolete 'Lapwinch' and 'Lapwink', basically referring to the bird's head crest when it moves up and down. Nowadays the name relates to its broad wings and erratic, floppy and rather laboured flight. The flight behaviour of a Lapwing, wishing to lose height, is often termed 'shooting', which is an almost a corkscrew-like tumble earthwards.

In several parts of England Lapwings are called, as a indication of their call, 'peewits' / 'peewheets' / 'peeweep'; an apt description. The bird is actually related to the Plover family, in which there are 20 species globally. Indeed lapwings are widely known as the 'Green Plover', probably because the plumage becomes an iridescent green when in the right light. They are extremely attractive looking and are very vocal when feeding, often in large groups. They disperse from their winter locations during the breeding season, particularly if they have spent time near the sea, but can form colonies in habitats that are suitable which are open but provide safe sheltered areas for their young.

A Snippet

The public have been invited to vote for a national bird and there is a final shortlist of ten species from which a choice can be made. The birds nominated are, in alphabetical order: *barn owl, blackbird, blue tit, hen harrier, kingfisher, mute swan, puffin, red kite, robin and wren*. *Note: the national bird of Sweden is the blackbird!

To vote go to: votenationalbird.com (Voting closes on May 7th)

Email: mikesmusings@btinternet.com