

Mike's Musings Early Autumn 2015

Weather in October and November

October

In the first week there was fog that persisted all day on the 3rd and 4th. This was replaced by three wet days, with quite heavy falls of rain (16.0mm) on the 5th followed by two warmer days when temperatures during the day reached the high teens. In the second week, running through to the third, there was no rain, the day temperature hovering between 13 and 15 Celsius (C), despite fresh winds from a NE/NW quarter. Over the last 10 days there were showers, small amounts of rain falling on all but three days; the 29th was an exception, being a wet one, when 14.0 mms of rain were recorded. Temperatures remained in the mid-teens, which was about average for the time of year. It rained on 9 days, the total fall for the month was about the average expected; 57.5 mms (2.35 inches).

November

The month opened with settled days, being foggy in the early morning with light ESE/SW winds breezes by noon, followed by rain later in the day and overnight. During the first week there were modest spells of rain, while over the first 5 days of the second week it was dry, and, given the W/SW winds, the weather was mild with above average temperatures normal for November. From the 13th of the month to the 19th it rained every day accompanied by very strong W/NW winds during the week-end of the 14th/15th. Blustery weather continued into the third week until the 18th. The 19th was a quieter but very strong blustery north winds occurred on the 20th and 21st. Overnight on 21st there was the first frost of the autumn, the temperature being 0.3 C. and on the 22nd there was another frost but the thermometer remained above freezing at 0.7C. The unsettled weather returned on the 22nd lasting till the end of the month. It was mild over this period with daytime temperatures in the low teens. There were bright periods interspersed with showers. It rained on 22 days over the month, although the amounts each time were not large. The wettest days were on the 5th (8.0 mms.), 7th (8.0mms.), 17th and 30th (both 9.0mms.) The total rainfall for the month was 99.15mms. (just over 4.0 ins.), which was well above the average expected for November.

A Crazy Autumn

The two months were exceptionally mild until the last week in November and as a consequence it was more like spring than autumn. The experience, certainly for gardeners and nature lovers, was really startling. The deciduous trees hung on to their leaves up to the 14th November, thus making it a quite memorable spectacle of autumn colours.

However, amazingly, in the absence of any frosts, until the third week in November (see weather report above), overnight temperatures remained above 8 C. and indeed did not fall below 12 or 13 degrees on several nights. This encouraged shrubs and plants to grow more shoots and even burst into bloom again. Moreover, plants which normally do not emerge until January/February were beginning to grow. Daffodils leaf 'spikes' have already broken through the soil, and Celandine and Aconite leaves are fully formed, while Polyanthus are adding to the floral display with their bright colourful blooms. Furthermore, summer bedding plants' flowers were surviving. The berries on Cotoneaster, Hawthorn, Holly, Rowan, Whitebeam and Pyracantha have been magnificent and they, with a very good crop of rosehips, will be welcomed by birds when winter sets in.

The birds have reacted to the spring-like warmth by showing signs of behaviour akin to that displayed during their breeding season. Members of the Thrush family generally start to utter territorial songs in January and February if there are mild days. Mistle and Song Thrushes, albeit in a somewhat half-hearted manner have uttered a few phrases of their full song. Not as vocally as the Thrushes, male Blackbirds, another early breeder in the new year, have already been sparring with each other in beginning to establish their territories. A number of

smaller species, notably Blue, Coal and Great Tits look very smart in what can only be described as breeding plumage.

However, other birds, particularly those whose diet is largely of acorns, beech mast and nuts, for example Jays, Nuthatches, Magpies and even Coal tits, especially at this time of year, are preparing for winter by secreting such fare under the bark and in the crevices of trees, in leaf litter and soil. Also, very obvious during autumnal evenings are the hoots, 'kewicks' and screechings of Tawny owls, a normal occurrence for them as they re-establish their territories and this year's young endeavour to create their own ultimate breeding locations.

Winter visitors

Earlier in the year, the profile of a particular creature was re-introduced in Musings with the emphasis tending to be on birds. In this section the focus is indeed on them, but not specifically on a single example. With the looming advent of winter, it is perhaps appropriate to expand the profile to indicate winter visitors likely to be seen locally, especially in gardens. To an extent, what species might appear depends on mainly three factors, namely the direction and force of the wind, temperature and weather conditions.

Two species have already arrived in some numbers which makes them particularly conspicuous, given the topography, considerable areas of woodland, existence of the AONB and the open nature of agriculture in West Berks. The most prominent of the two are fieldfares, members of the thrush family. They congregate in arable fields and large areas of grassland to search for grubs, but are also partial to berries. In doing this they are competing for a food that is the staple diet of Redwings which are also winter visitors which come in some numbers. They too are a Thrush, being about the same size as a Song Thrush. Their cheerful chattering can be heard as they collect in quite large groups in trees bearing berries to feed.

If there is very cold weather, several species of small birds form flocks to search for food and occasionally a few break away from others to sustain themselves at feeders. The ones likely to be seen in our area are those which normally spend the winter further north, such as Arctic Redpoles, Bramblings, cousins of Chaffinches, and Siskins (notwithstanding that their favourite food is the seed found in fir cones), which are relatives of Gold and Greenfinches and are now firmly established frequenters of gardens. A former summer visitor now increasingly overwintering in the UK is the Blackcap, a warbler that is becoming quite common, but is hardly tolerated by resident species. Indeed, Blackcaps can become quite aggressive and have been observed to force other species off feeders. Another warbler, the Chiff Chaff, has been known to spend the winter in Western Europe and east and southern parts of England. As yet the writer has not seen it in West Berks at this time of year.

The movement of a number of species of birds common in the UK occurs from the continent when the weather there becomes colder, particularly if there are strong easterly winds. The species most likely to do this in large numbers are Blackbirds, Chaffinches and Robins, often congregating in fields to feed. A more exotic bird which arrives in some winters is the Waxwing. To an extent they are drawn in by the cold on the continent, but a key factor is the availability of berry bearing shrubs. They are not necessarily in widespread numbers, tending to be concentrated on the east, south east and southern counties. They are a most striking bird with a large head crest, pink plumage, grey rump, black primary feathers and bright wing markings, getting its name from the red waxy spot which is clearly visible when it perches.

Snippits

- British bats mate in the autumn. The most common one is the pipistrelle but a peculiar feature of bat breeding is that although mating occurs in late September through to October, the young are not born until the following summer.

- Ivy is a late flowering plant that blooms well into the autumn. It is a boon to overwintering butterflies, especially Red Admirals, which feed on the flowers, prior to their hibernation, late enough in the year to sustain them until they emerge the following year.
- First it was the loss of elm trees (two million a year), then ash trees (a similar number a year) which have been under threat of extinction, certainly in the Midlands and Southern England. Now it is the oaks which are infected with AOD (acute oak disease). AOD is a bacterial disease transmitted by the Agrilus beetle. The oak epitomises the character of the UK countryside so the threat to its continued existence is a tragedy.

Comments on Musings is welcomed. Email: mikesmusings@btinternet.com