

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

**Midwinter: 2014/ 2015**

### **Weather report: December and January**

#### ***December***

It was a relatively mild month with above average daytime temperatures in the second week on five days and also on the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> when 12.1 Celsius (C) was recorded. There were frosts overnight on seven nights which were not severe except over the night of the 29<sup>th</sup> when the temperature fell to minus 3.2C. There were light winds from the north east/north west virtually for the whole of the month.

It was dry over the first nine days of the month and subsequently, of the 11 days on which rain fell, the amounts occurring were mostly small on 9 days. It was only on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>, that substantial falls were recorded of 13.0 and 11.0 mms. respectively. The total rainfall for the month was 47.25 mms. (1.68 ins.).

#### ***January***

The first half of the month was mild with daytime temperatures above the seasonal average, reaching double figures on the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>. With the exception of the 26<sup>th</sup> when 10.3C was achieved, from the 16<sup>th</sup> the days were colder, temperatures dipping below the expected average, especially over the last five days of the month when cold air, accompanied by high winds from the Arctic Circle, came southward. The wind directions were more variable than those in December in the first week, becoming south west to west before settling back to north east/north west quarter for the remainder of the month.

The month was wetter than December, particularly during the first three weeks. There were heavy falls of rain on the 3<sup>rd</sup> (15.0mms.), 7<sup>th</sup> (13.0 mms.) and 14<sup>th</sup> (20.0mms.). By the end of the third week it had rained on 13 days giving a total 90.35 mms. (3.56 ins.). In the last 10 days there were 7 days on which small amounts fell, giving 20 days in the month on which it was wet. The total rainfall for the month was 100.15 mms. (just below 4 ins.).

### **A perilous future for wildlife?**

#### ***1. The likely impact of government fiscal policies***

It is with increasing concern for the future wellbeing of wildlife in the UK, given the country's financial situation (notwithstanding the current strong rate of growth in the economy), that there is a pressing need for the government to slash public expenditure to eliminate the budgetary deficit and reduce the level of the national debt. It is estimated that public sector spending will need to be cut by up to £50billion over the next three years.

It is almost certain that sustaining environmental and conservation funding will be given a low priority. Indeed, that the Department of the Environment Farming and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), which is responsible for funding a number of environmental activities, will suffer further draconian reductions in its budget is a foregone

conclusion. It lost 30% of its budget in the previous round of government expenditure cuts. Moreover, central government grants to Local Authorities (LAs) will also be lower. While LAs have some autonomy of how they allocate such grants, they too, understandably, will not consider that environmental projects are essential expenditure.

## **2. The implications of the review of the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act**

There is an additional factor in the public domain which is likely to have an adverse impact on the fortunes of wildlife. This is the prospect of revisions to the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981, following a request by DEFRA to the Law Commission (LC) in 2010 for a review of the act. Writing in the local weekly paper\* a couple months ago, Andrew Davis stated that reconsideration of the legislation was overdue because of its age and fragmented nature. The LC duly provided DEFRA with a report in 2012 which it approved and called for a draft bill to be prepared that was due to be published last autumn, but it has been delayed until this coming March.

Apparently, the draft will include reference to invasive vicarious liability, ie should the owner or occupier be held responsible for a crime committed on his/her property, in particular by an employee, irrespective of whether they are aware or not of the crime. The issue is an important one, given for example, the prosecution of gamekeepers who have killed raptors (all of which are protected by law), that they have preyed on game birds. A recent high profile case has been the killing of hen harriers because of their predation of red grouse.

In effect there is a conflict of interests; on the one hand of the protection of birds of prey by wildlife bodies and individuals versus, on the other hand, the pursuit of game-bird shooting. Proponents of the latter interest fear that stringent restrictions imposed on them would be an unacceptable intrusion into their activities and impair the viability of their enterprise. Currently, the stances of the respective protagonists are very entrenched and it would appear that there will be a protracted and contentious debate. Should the proposal of vicarious liability not be introduced, then there is a danger that instances, such as the hen harrier case, will continue to occur to the detriment of the protection of wildlife. Undoubtedly Musings will have to return to this subject in due course.

\*Country Matters, *Newbury Weekly News*, Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> December, 2014, p41.

## **3. A possible problem for funding appeals by wildlife bodies?**

As a result of the cuts in government and LA finances, bodies with an environmental and conservation remit, such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT), National Trust (NT), regional and county wildlife trusts, will need to secure more funds. Locally, is it an instance of a cut to save money that the West Berks Council has handed over the management of nine nature reserves, including the Discovery Centre, to the Berks, Bucks and Oxon WT (BBOWT)? The upshot is, of course, the trust may need to employ more staff and therefore find additional finance to pay them; it certainly cannot simply rely on volunteers. Consequently, BBOWT will undoubtedly be under pressure to appeal to their members and the general public to meet their increased operational costs. Thus there is an implication by environmental charities that there is no limit to the public's generosity.

The compiler of this Musings has had first-hand experience of appeals for financing the work of the environmental bodies he supports. Almost literally, hardly a week goes by when there is not an appeal to fund yet another initiative, site or ongoing programme. If this experience is now becoming the norm, one wonders whether a point might be reached where such appeals will be resisted with a ' Oh! Not again a demand for funds' response and disposal of the appeal communication into the WPB. If so it will be a sad day if charitable giving declines because of this reaction, especially if it is by the 10% of the population that give 60% of total funds raised by charities.

Environmental quality and conservation are an essential part of our lives, whether we are rural or urban dwellers. The neglect and degradation of wildlife will be a travesty if the present generation allows it to happen and thus reduce the quality of the lives of future generations. Given the looming financial stringency we should do our utmost to ensure that the central government and LAs maintain adequate funding to safeguard the environment and our wildlife. Lobby your MP and LA councillors accordingly on the run up to the election and thereafter.

### **Caring for wildlife at this time of the year**

While cold weather is an inconvenience to us, it is a matter of life and death for wildlife. In our gardens there are three essential actions that can be taken to enable it to survive:

- Offer fat-rich food; peanuts, sunflower seeds, but ideally fat balls, especially for birds
- Supply an adequate amount of water; make an effort to ensure it does not ice up by replenishing it as necessary DO NOT use an anti-freeze!
- Provide suitably dry and reasonably warm overnight shelter.

### **Snippets**

- A very large count of bees over three months last summer revealed that allotments are a better habitat for them than the countryside, gardens or parks.

*For details of the study log on to [www.http://greatbritishbeecount.co.uk](http://greatbritishbeecount.co.uk)*

*So to see bees locally visit the allotments in the centre of Kintbury; sorry Inkpen you have no such facility.*

- It is mistakenly thought that owls are able to swivel their heads through 360 degrees to gain all round vision. They actually can rotate their heads through 270 degrees. Given that they have binocular vision they have an excellent field of view.
- Buzzards, once almost persecuted to extinction, are now thriving and are more numerous. Locally, they are a common feature and even at this time of the year can often be seen in a group of four or more soaring over woods and fields uttering their characteristic mewing call.

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