

## **Mike's Musings**

### **Spring 2015: April and May**

#### **Weather reports for April and May**

##### ***April***

The month was a mild one which the meteorologists claimed was the warmest for quite a number of years. In West Berks, with the exception of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>, between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 23<sup>rd</sup> the readings on the writer's maxi-min thermometer were in the mid to high teens, hitting 19.6 Celsius (C) on the 8<sup>th</sup>, 18.8C on the 13<sup>th</sup> and then 20.0C plus, being 23.1C on the 14<sup>th</sup>, 23.0.8C (15<sup>th</sup>) and just 20.0C on the 21<sup>st</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>. In the last week, however, the weather was rather unsettled with fresh and chilly northerly winds, which were a feature of almost the whole month.

It was a remarkably dry month for there were mostly light falls of rain. For example on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> the amounts recorded were, respectively, 1.0 mms., 1.25mms. and 0.25mms.. It was not until the 24<sup>th</sup> that it rained again, then doing so every day until the end of the month. Overall, there were 10 wet days, the amounts falling on each ranging between 0.25mms. and 3.0mms.; the total rainfall for the month was 15.0 mms. (0.61 ins.).

##### ***May***

Weather-wise the month was a notable one on two counts. Firstly, it was chilly virtually over the whole 31 days, particularly overnight, even though there were few frosts. The Atlantic jet-stream came south from its normal location at this time of the year over the north of Scotland. It therefore drew down cold winds from a NE/NW direction with drizzly conditions and occasionally quite heavy rain. Secondly, except for heavy falls on the 4<sup>th</sup> (11.0 mms.) and on the 14<sup>th</sup> (13.0 .mms.), almost a half an inch on both days, there were modest falls overnight and in the mornings, it tending to clear by early afternoon with bright periods. Temperatures over the whole of the month were two to three degrees C. below the average expected often not reaching the mid teens.

Rain fell on 14 days, concentrated in the first three weeks of the month. It was dry between the 23<sup>rd</sup>. and 28<sup>th</sup> before unsettled weather returned on the 29<sup>th</sup>. The total rainfall was 58.4 mms.(2.38ins.) well above the normal level for May.

#### **A spring of contrasts**

The summaries of the weather for April and May, given above, clearly indicate the marked contrasts experienced this spring that support the conclusions drawn below of the impact on wildlife locally. To an extent because the weather pattern has echoed that of the two previous months, described in the February and March Musings; it explains the notion, widely expressed by wildlife commentators, that spring this year has been up to two weeks later than would be anticipated.

Certainly, until the warm spell in mid April, trees and shrubs were virtually displaying their winter garb bereft of leaves and blossom. This changed dramatically when, within a week, they burst into life as the warm days occurred. The transformation was truly dramatic as seemingly everywhere the hedges and woods and pastures became a brilliant green, followed almost immediately with a fantastic floral

abundance. First, the Blackthorn blooms adorned the hedgerows and woodland edges. It seemed in no time that the Hawthorn trees followed suit, with the brilliant white of their flowers setting off the glossy fresh green of their leaves. It was then that the Rowan trees' more delicate off-white blossom took over. Currently, the cow parsley, not to be outdone, has risen to the occasion, it dominating the banks and road and path edges; they seem to be exceptionally tall this year. As this is being written the Horse Chestnut 'candles' have joined the spectacle.

It has not been such a comfortable time this spring for the fauna, especially the summer migrant birds. The seemingly persistent and strong northerly breezes have hampered both their arrival and incentive to start nesting as noted in the previous Musings. Locally, swallows, house and sand martins and swifts were 10 to 14 days later in arriving. It has been reported by the Springwatch team on BBC 2 that some summer visitors have still not arrived. Locally, for instance, up to the Bank Holiday Monday, reed and sedge warblers have not been heard along the river and canal in the Kintbury area.

Even some resident birds, such as male chaffinches, dunnocks, house sparrows and starlings, had appeared to have postponed breeding, notwithstanding that they had established territories, and had been in full song, for some time. If the unsettled and chilly weather conditions continue, it may well adversely affect the breeding success of birds. The number of chicks fledging might be lower, especially for species reliant on insects and their larvae, to feed the nestlings. Currently, there appears to be an insufficient supply of such prey. At present, an indicator of a lack of availability of insects is the scarcity of butterflies whose activity is sensitive to adverse weather conditions.

### **Hedgehogs: under threat of extinction?**

It has been obvious for almost three decades that the population of hedgehogs has been in rapid decline. The writer of this piece, like many other rural residents, was alerted to the issue of the demise of this much loved mammal by the paucity of road kills encountered. The long established organisation set up in 1978 and originally named 'Tiggywinkles', now known, officially as The Wildlife Hospital Trust, was very much involved in the rescue and protection of hedgehogs, especially in the drought of 1984 when these animals were badly affected by it. In some senses this incident revealed the warning signs of the vulnerability of hedgehogs and possibly foretold their decline.

Very recently the public's attention has again been drawn to the plight of these creatures by Michaela Strachan, widely quoted in the national media, who is also a member of the current Springwatch on BBC2. Her concern, prompted the Today programme on Radio 4 to include a slot on the issue and the Times published a feature article on it. Somewhat, alarmingly, she argued that in the middle of the 20th century there were 30 million hedgehogs in Britain and now there are only one million. The catastrophic decline has been attributed to habitat fragmentation and loss, the grubbing out of hedges, road kills, the impact of pesticides and predation by badgers, the numbers of which have increased tremendously because they are now a protected species..

Moves to protect hedgehogs and encourage their increase are accelerating via such initiatives as the 'Hedgehog Champions', 'Hedgehog Street' campaign and the British Hedgehog Preservation Society (BHPS). Suggestions to assist the revival of the animals are to put out food (cat food is ideal) and water, cut holes in garden fences or dig tunnels under them to facilitate the extension of their territories, which ideally should be 30,000 square metres, create suitable wild life areas that provide cover and prey, and woodpiles for hibernation and safe havens for them.

It is apparent that most of the initiatives so far taken have been directed at suburban and urban areas rather than rural ones. Accordingly, do the actions suggested and implemented for the protection of hedgehogs hold implications for West Berks residents? The properties of country dwellers have much larger gardens than urban ones and are unlikely to be transformed into what might be described as 'compacted' and 'regimented' as those in larger villages and towns that are increasingly being paved, and/or gravel-laid to accommodate vehicles and their gardens neatly customised and manicured. Such gardens are therefore becoming unsuitable habitats for hedgehogs.

Nevertheless, the loss of habitats in rural areas, largely stemming from the continuing intensification of agriculture, is a factor in the decline of these animals. Moreover, the predation of hedgehogs should not be underrated. The allegation by some commentators is that badgers, which are more numerous than in the 1950s, and has a significant impact on the hedgehog population, has credence.

There may some sense in adopting in our local area some of the initiatives advocated above by those actively engaged in protecting and endeavouring to increase the hedgehog population. It would indeed be a sad day if the present younger generation, a high proportion of which have never seen a hedgehog, would never get the opportunity of enjoying the existence of this gentle and timid creature.

*Following up on the notion indicated in the previous Musings of giving profiles of different forms of wildlife, the section below features the third smallest of Britain's birds.*

### **The Wren**

It is not widely recognised that the wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) is allegedly our commonest bird. Writing in the Independent in 2013, Michael McCarthy quoted estimates by Musgrave et al in an article in *British Birds* (date, vol., issue and page nos. were not specified) that there were 17million (m.) wrens, 13.3m. robins, 12.4m. chaffinches, 10.8 m. wood pigeons and 9.6 m. house sparrows (the numbers of which have declined dramatically in urban areas).

Common as it may be, the wren is very inconspicuous as it, like the dunnock, has a skulking nature, tending to hide anywhere where it feels secure, especially in gardens. The scientific name of it means 'cave dweller' that aptly describes its furtive behaviour. Consequently, it is seldom seen, except when it flits like lightning from one cover to another.

However, the wren is very often heard for the male has an incredibly loud and strident song which issues from a hedge or bush where it has secreted itself.

Analysis of recordings of the bird's song cum call, have revealed there are some 50 notes uttered in less than five seconds. The sound of such a small creature is one of the most striking of any bird's song; in some ways reflecting a quite aggressive nature for the male vigorously defends its territory.

It is the female alone that rears the young as the male usually mates with a number other females. She is very competent mother as is demonstrated by evidence of the high proportion of a brood which fledges. The wren is indeed an extremely feisty bird which undoubtedly explains why it is one of Britain's most successful birds and its most numerous.

### **Snippet**

The invitation for the public to vote to name the national bird closed on May 7<sup>th</sup>. It is understood that the winner is to be announced on June 10<sup>th</sup> on the Springwatch programme on BBC 2.

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