

Mike's musings: environment and conservation

Late summer 2015: August/September

The weather in the two months

August

The month was largely an unsettled one with an above average level of rainfall and at times a number of somewhat cool days with blustery winds. A notable feature of several days was a cloudy start which persisted until very late in the afternoons when warm sunshine occurred. It was by no means a month that brought summer weather.

The first nine days of the month were virtually dry (only 0.4 of a mm. on 5th) and warm with temperatures in low-mid 20's. It was a little cooler from the 11th to 15th when temperatures remained in the high teens and then warmer again in the low 20s to the 20th. The 21st and 22nd were quite hot days as the thermometer reached the high 20s. In the last week it was less summery than previously with two quite cool days on the 24th and 31st August, with a daytime temperature of 15C.

Winds were from a SE/SW quarter over the first week, while in the second week, until the 13th, light breezes came from a northern quarter. On the 19th the winds became SW/W until 29th while on the last two days they were cool from a NW/WE direction.

There was rain on 15 days, the heaviest falls being on the 10th (9 mms.), the 19th (11mms.), 24th (14mms.) and 25th (10mms.). The total rainfall for the month was 87.6 mms. (3.5 ins.).

September

It was virtually dry for the first 10 days, followed by more unsettled weather between the 11th and the 17th with heavy falls of rain on 13th and 16th. The 16th was a truly awful day on which 25mms. fell (just under an inch), in 8 hours. There was a dry spell from the 17th to the 20th but significant amounts of rain fell on the 21st and 22nd. The weather became more settled in the last week of the month as high pressure moved in from Scandinavia with temperatures around 18 degrees C. during the day.

The daytime temperatures maximums remained in the high teens throughout the month, except on 10th and 11th when they touched the low 20's. A number of days were similar to those in August, there being cloudy conditions until quite late in the afternoon. Winds were mostly from a W/N quarter; on a few days there were breezes from a N/E direction.

The total rainfall for the month was 60 mms. (2.36 ins.); it rained on 11 days. Almost half of the total, (25 mms.), occurred on Wednesday the 16th.

Late summer in West Berks

The swifts have long since gone and reed and sedge warblers were not far behind them while sand martins have already been working southwards, but

there are still house martins and swallows around which will leave for warmer climes soon, especially if fresh north-west breezes persist into October to assist migration as they will be flying down-wind. Gatherings of wheatears and ring ouzels have been observed on the downs, clearly en route south. Resident birds have largely dispersed from their nesting sites now the breeding season is virtually over. Corvids have certainly done this: jays have resumed a single existence and jackdaws and rooks have 'ganged up', often together, and are foraging in the fields in the area. Depending on the weather, it is possible for members of the thrush family to have one last attempt to breed.

The trees are just beginning to lose their leaves as autumn has set in, led locally by the horse chestnuts and birch, the leaves of which have turned yellow and brown on their branches, before falling. The recent strong winds have also given an autumnal feel to the days in bringing down green, as well as yellow and brown leaves. A notable feature is also the dry spells in July, August and September, which resulted in trees shedding leaves. Cases in point are the horn and whitebeams in the centre of Kintbury.

The most conspicuous autumn flowering plants that are numerous in the area are ivy in hedges that attract late flying butterflies, especially red admirals, wild prostrate cyclamen and teasel in field boundaries and verges which have a very prickly head ringed with small lilac coloured flowers and equally prickly leaves on their stems. Other very attractive autumn spectacles are the berries which this year are superb. The hawthorn, cotoneaster, pyracantha and rowan are literally laden with them; likewise crab apple trees have produced an incredible crop of fruit.

The wildlife in hedges

Some time ago in a Musings, the role of hedges in supporting wildlife through the food they provide, as a secure haven in which to live and breed and acting as a corridor, in order to move safely around the countryside, was examined. Very recently the wildlife value of hedge has been confirmed in an article in the British Wildlife Journal*. The owner of a farm in Devon, Robert Walton, carried out a two year study of all the main taxonomic groups – the plants, animals (including birds) and fungi, which included an investigation of what constitutes a good wildlife hedge.

He established that there were 2070 species in the hedge surveyed, acknowledging that many unidentified specimens known to be present locally were not seen and so were not included in the total given above. The species that were identified encompassed 1718 insects, of which there were 7 groups comprising flies, moths and butterflies, sun flies, aculeate bees and wasps, beetles, heteropteran bugs and caddisflies. (83%), 97 other invertebrates (4.7%), 125 plants (6%), 80 fungi and lichens (3.9%) and 50 vertebrates (2.4%), of which there were 7 groups comprising flies moths and butterflies, sun flies, aculeate bees and wasps, beetles, heteropteran bugs and caddisflies.

With regard to whether a hedge is a good phenomenon, Robert considered that most species benefitted from its existence. A significant proportion of the

species in the hedge that were rarities are likely to be on the Red Data Book, for example six red-listed and five amber-listed birds were present; 40 other species in decline and so threatened with extinction included 26 moths, the common toad, grass snake, common lizard, dunnock, song thrush, spotted fly-catcher, marsh tit, willow tit, house sparrow, bullfinch, brown long-eared bat, soprano pipistrelle, hedgehog and hazel dormouse.

That a hedge supports so many species holds implications for the most suitable landscape to maintain its connectivity to other hedge and wildlife sites, particularly the maintenance of a varied structure, its planned diversity and the existence of a 'green lane bordering' the hedge. Other relevant studies in the past indicate that Robert's findings confirm that they grossly underestimated the number of species a hedge contains. However, the study emphasizes very strongly that hedges play a crucial role in maintaining the ecological integrity and biodiversity of both suburban and rural areas.

*Robert Walton '*Life in a Hedge*' BW. Vol. 26, No. 5, June 2015, pp. 306-316

Feeding the red kite in urban gardens – what 'next'!

Several hundred years ago, red kites were very much urban dwellers. As a raptor they were not noted for being hunters, indeed they were largely scavengers and were an everyday feature of cities and towns, particularly so in London before refuse collection was instituted; consequently waste was deposited in the streets.

Yet now, kites have returned to urban locations, notwithstanding there are often few nesting and roosting sites. The principal reason for their return is that they are being fed. Amazingly, Reading is a red kite hotspot nearly every day, it being estimated that up to 440 birds are fed in the town's gardens. It was considered, however, that the nature of the food may not really be suitable if it consisted of cooked waste food, containing additives harmful to the birds because it lacked raw meat, skin and bone, vital in maintaining sufficient levels of calcium in the birds. Fortunately, in a survey of 1000 households, it was found that most did offer the right kind of food and it appears the kites are thriving on it. Notwithstanding that they are being fed to attract them to such a place as Reading, it is remarkable that red kites, once a normal part of past urban life, have returned to such conurbations.

Footnote: The writer is aware that residents in West Berks are known to attract red kites to their gardens by providing appropriate food. This is probably why this particular raptor is common in the area and also why they do circle at a low level over human habitation.

Snippets

- Harvest mice are one of the smallest rodents. They are just five inches from the end of their noses to the tips of their tails. In fact they have tails two and a half inches long, the longest in proportion to their heads and bodies of any rodents.
- Despite now seldom being grown in the southern UK, it is often still possible to discover a few oat plants bordering cereal fields. In some

locations wild oats can be found.

- The population of blackcaps is growing. During the summer they are widespread in the country, but are now beginning to move south to overwinter in Britain. They are drawn to gardens where they find the feeders therein include fatty foods, especially fat balls. For many years now, they have become resident birds in the UK. As their name indicates, the male has a black stripe over its eye whereas the female has a chestnut coloured one.

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