

## **Mike;s musings: environment and conservation**

### **Late Winter early spring: February and March**

#### **Weather February and March**

##### ***February***

The temperatures for the month were not consistently at an average expected, for example, exceptionally, on the 1<sup>st</sup>, the thermometer reached 14.7, but dipped on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> to half that level. It was quite mild between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> temperatures being respectively 13.5, 13.4, 11.0 and 10.6. From the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> the thermometer remained below the average readings for the month with a low of 4.3 on the 13<sup>th</sup> and 4.5 on the 14<sup>th</sup>. For a couple of days (22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>) it was milder when 10C was reached, before falling to the expected average level between the 24<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>. On the leap-year day of the 29<sup>th</sup> a surprisingly high level of 14.7C was recorded. There were overnight frosts on the 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> with temperatures falling to just below zero. This occurred again on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> when there were clear skies overnight.

The weather conditions for the month were largely unsettled. In the first week, there were very strong winds from the north-west and rain storms. The wind direction changed briefly in the second week varying between south-east and the west before turning northerly again. The last week of the month was dry apart from the last day.

It rained on 12 days but the amounts on each of the days being quite modest. The heaviest falls were on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, when respectively, 6 and 8 mms. were recorded. The total rainfall for the month was 46.5 mms. (1.8 ins.).

##### ***March***

The month opened with two unsettled days and light rainfall accompanied by blustery winds from the south-west backing north-west. It was drier between the 3<sup>rd</sup>. and 5<sup>th</sup> when there were sunny starts to the days, becoming cloudier as the days progressed. On the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> a light frost occurred, disappearing once it got warmer as the sun rose. On the 8<sup>th</sup> there was a very wet day punctuated by torrential short showers which continued overnight to the 9<sup>th</sup>. On the 11<sup>th</sup> there was a distinct improvement in the weather as for the first time in the year it became more settled. As high pressure moved in from the continent from the north-east it was sunnier but there were chilly winds.

On three days between the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> the days started with thick fog, it becoming warmer as this cleared so that by mid-morning there was hazy sunshine but it tended to become cloudier in the afternoon. For the first time in the year it was almost spring-like. On the 14<sup>th</sup> there was no early fog it being almost clear right through the morning. The forecasts by the meteorologists was for the weather to remain settled for several days. However, as often happens in the winter, when high pressure sets in, it was rather gloomy between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 23<sup>rd</sup> and occasionally there was even a persistent drizzle in the mornings with slightly better afternoons as there were brief bright periods. However, the brisk winds from a northerly quarter kept temperatures just hovering around double figures.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> it rained intermittently all day but the falls were light. On the following two days, although on the 25<sup>th</sup> there was a very springlike day, overnight it rained and on the 26<sup>th</sup> it was another dull wet day. Then, over the night of the 27<sup>th</sup> the storm, Katie, hit southern England with winds gusting to almost 100mph when 19 mms. (four fifths of an inch) of rain fell and even in West Berks there was considerable damage to buildings and

fallen trees disrupted travel.

Over the last three days of the month the weather redeemed itself when temperatures exceeded 13C, despite the northerly winds, and it did not rain. Indeed there were prolonged bright periods: a touch of spring at last.

March was slightly wetter than February. It rained on 11 days (one more than February) and the total for the month was 55.8mms. (2.28 ins.).

### **The late winter experience for wildlife**

In February, to an extent the weather remaining relatively mild, the early emergence of plants and preparatory breeding behaviour by birds was maintained, giving the possibility of an early spring. However, as indicated above in the weather reports, the colder spells with overnight frosts, especially in March, which kept daytime mornings chillier, slowed down somewhat the advent of spring-like conditions and thus wildlife activities. The persistence of northerly winds, occasionally very strong, meant that trees, shrubs and flowers started to come into leaf and blossom at the time in the year they should, at the end of March. Likewise, also, the arrival of early migrant birds and insects.

It was heartening to hear resident birds such as blackbirds, mistle and song thrushes, chaffinches, dunnocks, nuthatches, starlings, woodpeckers, crows, jackdaws, rooks and ravens uttering their full territorial sounds. The pairing of these species and their establishment of nesting sites was the final sign that the breeding was underway.

Blackthorn flowers started to be evident by mid to late March and also the leaves of hawthorn were well formed. However, larger trees were still largely bare, although larch trees had begun to display the golden sheen which precedes the emergence of their full foliage. In woodlands there were some signs of the bluebells, sorrel and wood anemones pushing through the remains of the autumnal leaves. In some cases in sunlit areas between the trees these other early spring plants were further forward in their development with flower buds being visible.

### **A wildlife profile**

The compiler of this musings acknowledges that he has a bias towards presenting profiles of bird species, given his principal interest in that form of wildlife. Thus he considers it timely that the boundaries of topics should be broadened. Accordingly, an initial look at mammals here is given. A member of the rodent species has been chosen as a subject. Why is this? It is because that Inkpen has a claim as being one of the very few sites in which a particularly uncommon mouse, found only in southern England, is located.

The number of species of indigenous rodents in the wild in the UK consists of mice, rats, squirrels and voles, which have now been augmented by more exotic species (originally pets) which were released or escaped into the wild. They include the crested porcupine, gerbils, hamsters, Indian giant squirrel, musk rat and West Indies mouse. Of the six resident species of mice, namely common or hazel dormouse, fat dormice, harvest, house, wood and yellow necked, it is the last which is featured here.

This mouse has a brown back and white belly and is rightly named because of its yellow collar, flanks and breast streak. It is a fairly large mouse, being 10 cms. (4 ins) long from its nose to the base of its tail, which is longer than its head and body. Like the wood mouse it is a nocturnal animal normally inhabiting woodlands. In Inkpen it is found on the Common, a BBOWT nature reserve, foraging on seeds and fruit (berries). Living for about

two years it has up to four litters a year of five or more young. It is an adept climber but is known to visit gardens to forage and enter outbuildings and even houses, particularly in the winter. Indeed, the writer, when he lived adjacent to Inkpen Common, regularly had to ascend to the attic to rescue this very attractive rodent to release it back into the wild in order to help to maintain the existence of this almost rare rodent in Inkpen. He did this by installing a baited trap that a mouse could safely enter. Sometimes it seemed that the released mouse would find its way back into the attic!

## **Snippets**

### ***The long sleep***

Research shows that dormice hibernate for much longer than was thought as it was discovered that they have slept for up to ten months, which is the most prolonged time any mammal has done so. It has been asserted that in years when there has been a shortage of beech mast, their favourite food, it is likely they will be deterred from breeding and will simply re-hibernate in the early summer only a month or so after they have emerged from the winter's sleep. This raises the question as to how the dormice know there will be a shortage of beech mast. One researcher, perhaps somewhat tongue in cheek, has suggested they count the beech flower heads prior to hibernation in the previous autumn!

### ***Recovering hidden nuts***

Continuing the topic of food and taking the behaviour of birds' habits of recovering food stored in the autumn for future consumption, the choice of Jays as an example is an apposite one. They appear to have three ways of finding in winter where the cached nuts are. The first is to choose a storage place near trees where they roost and there is soil which it is easy to peck a hole in and secrete their bounty. The second is to choose areas where squirrels have buried nuts, which they can plunder, and, thirdly, it is alleged they can detect the cached nuts by smell.

### ***Yew trees***

Yew trees are so conspicuous that it is difficult not to notice them, especially in churchyards. Yet they tend to be taken for granted and consequently are of little interest. However, they are formidable objects, not only for their size but also their properties. Accordingly, they ought to be treated with respect. Not only are they long-lived, up to 2000 years of age or more, but they played a significant part in the history of the country, particularly as the source of the English Longbow, which was an effective and deadly weapon in many wars in the past.

However, a key reason for according the yew due respect is that its red berries, which are very prominent in the autumn, are extremely poisonous. While the outer flesh of the berry is edible, it is the seed in the middle which is lethal. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the yew's berries are not a threat to birds as they avidly consume both the fleshy part and the seed contained within it without suffering any harm.

*Comments on the Musings is welcome: email: [mikesmusings@btinternet.com](mailto:mikesmusings@btinternet.com)*