

Mike's musings:Environment and Conservation

Midwinter: December 2015 January-2016

Weather December and January

December

According to the Meteorological Office, December was the wettest month for 32 years, resulting in there being four times the expected average. This was certainly not the case in West Berks. Yet again the rainfall total for the month demonstrated the uniquely drier nature of the local climate and weather.

The weather was wild on a number of days, namely the 5th, 12th, 22nd, 24th, 26th, and 29th. It was indeed a wet month, raining on 21 days, but the amounts were small, the only exception being on the 30th when 19.0 mms. fell. For example, there was 0.5 mms. on the 8th and the same again on the 14th, 1.0mm. on the 17th and 18th and 0.3mm. on the 26th.

Overall, the month was unseasonably mild with daytime temperatures being in the mid teens between the 1st and 12th and the 14th and 30th. The weather can be summarised as being depressingly dull interspersed with extremely storm-force windy conditions, with a total rainfall of 80.05 mms. (3.27 ins.).

January

The mild unsettled weather persisted until the 15th of the month, but as high pressure established itself the wind abated and it was much clearer, especially in the early morning, with cloudy/bright conditions occurring in the afternoon. There were quite severe frosts overnight from the 15th until the 20th, resulting in below zero temperatures as low as minus five to six degrees. On the 21st it became milder again and remained so until the end of the month, apart from the 28th of the month when there was a ground frost. It rained on 18 days, the total rainfall for the month being 75.25 mms. (3.07 ins.)

Thus, in many respects the weather in both months was similar. As such it has been an exceedingly mild mid-winter. The weather prospects are for the pattern of weather over the last four months to continue. Consequently, it is very similar to be what is known as a Mediterranean climate.

A remarkable winter

Continuing the weather patterns experienced in the previous two months, it was not surprising that it seemed more like spring than midwinter. Grass kept growing and flowers, not expected under normal circumstances to bloom until February or March, were fully open before Christmas. Gardeners and botanists were astounded to see plants in sheltered and sunny places, such as alpines, azaleas, clematises, daffodils, polyanthus and snowdrops in full flower. Not necessarily flippantly, a number of people considered that they would need to mow their lawns, and indeed a few did so. In Kintbury, at the beginning of the new year, contractors mowed the grass in the Lawrence fields.

In the previous Musings it was reported that several species of birds were already establishing territories and starting to sing. Robins were the most vocal superseding their plaintive winter song to declare emphatically they were ready to defend a selected site and to nest. Blue and great tits, chaffinches, dunnocks, nuthatches and wrens were also beginning to utter snatches of their territorial songs. The thrush family, especially blackbirds were rather more hesitant, but the song thrushes were loudly proclaiming their

presence with full-throated repetitive phrases in a burst of sound. They are, without doubt, the harbingers of spring, even if it is some weeks away.

The brief cold spell, noted in the weather report above, hardly halted the the progress of either plants' growth and flowering or preparation by animals and birds to breed. As this Musings is being wrtten in the last few days of January, neither all the daffodils nor snowdrops are fully open and therefore reached their most glorious displays. Also, to an extent the colder spell subdued the early dawn chorus a little.

The Impact of the disposal of Plastics on the environment and wildlife

This section is offered as an initial contribution to a debate on the issues of the role of plastics in our lives and and its disposal. The theme here is to consider the detrimental effects of our use of these materials. They have been in the news recently because at last they have come to the attention of the media as to the magnitude of the problems associated with their disposal and degradation.

It is estimated, in what is referred to as The Great Pacific Garbage Patch, that there are over 150 million tons of plastic waste in that ocean, which is increasing rapidly each year. A very troubling feature of this patch is that much of it consists of microscopic particles. The impact on sea wildlife is admirably illustrated by the evidence of turtles mistaking clear plastic bags as jellyfish which block their throats and so they starve to death because they can no longer feed. The impact on sea life of the microscopic particles is in fact even more lethal than larger pieces of plastic. Many other forms of wildlife are at risk and affected by plastic objects floating in the sea and washed up on beaches in coastal waters. Now, increasingly, where plastics are deposited in land-fill sites which are disturbed and exposed by animals and birds, land-based creatures suffer.

Yet another aspect of concern about plastics is one much related to our everyday lives. This is the the curse of littering by slovenly and inconsiderate people. It is clear that such behaviour does adversely affect wildlife. Even where plastic materials are biodegradable it takes a long time for them to disintegrate fully and so adds to the problems caused.

There are many instances of animals, birds and insects suffering and dying when they encounter discarded items. It is not just bags but other items, such as bottles, packaging, piping, plastic string, netting, syringes, carton and canister holders (eg those that hold beer cans) and sheeting that are the causes. Animals, for instance woodmice, dormice, harvest mice, bank and field voles and hedghogs, often entering bags and containers, get trapped or entangled in netting or coils of plastic from which they cannot extract themselves. Birds can be affected in the same way but are more likely to swallow plastic objects which chokes them or disrupts their digestive systems. Even insects, particularly larger ones, such as bees, can get entrapped or succumb to more toxic types of plastic. Even we humans and our pets can be harmed by the last form.

Lastly, there is also the aesthetic issue of plastic litter being an affront to our susceptibilities in that it is unsightly, and spoils our enjoyment of city, town and village life and use of the countryside. Finally, as a nation, we are labelled as being one of the worst litterers in the World. Foreigner visitors are amazed and find it inexplicable that we do not take more care of our environment.

The issues associated with plastics are immense and worldwide. As with those arising from climate change, reaching solutions with respect to plastics is a incredible challenge necessitating a global effort.

The Big Garden Birdwatch (BGBW)

The annual bird count sponsored by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) has just taken place (30th and 31st of January). It is claimed that it is the globe's largest wildlife survey. From which the results gained each year give a valuable profile of the state of many resident species. It is apparent that there is a decline in what is considered to be our most common birds. The RSPB lists 15 species most likely to be seen in gardens, especially urban ones.

The birds which the RSPB has identified as being in trouble are the chaffinch, coal tit, dunnock (formerly known as hedge sparrow) and greenfinch, but of the greatest concern are, amazingly, the house sparrow and starling (accorded 'priority species' status). This is astounding, given how common they used to be. There are three key explanations for declining numbers of garden birds; loss of suitable living and breeding habitats, the advent in recent years of debilitating diseases, particularly trichomonosis (known as Pigeon Disease) and decreases in vital food sources, particularly insects. The species listed in the survey which are thriving are the blackbird, collared dove, goldfinch (a relatively recent garden visitor and user of feeders), magpie, robin and woodpigeon.

Clearly, maintaining the yearly BGBW facilitates the establishment of and recording of trends in the numbers of specific species and birds, other than those listed in the schedule distributed by the RSPB. For example, those living near woodland in Inkpen would most likely see such birds as bullfinch, long-tailed tit, greater spotted woodpecker, jackdaw, rook, nuthatch, song thrush, treecreeper, wren and overwintering migrants for instance blackcap, chiff chaff, and occasionally, house martin and swallow. In hard weather, with northerly winds, it is possible for brambling, redpoll and siskin to come to garden feeders.

If readers have not participated in the BGBW, the RSPB welcomes reports of bird sightings, most certainly if uncommon species arrive in the garden. Much to his surprise, the writer has had visits from a kestrel and sparrowhawk in what is a very small village garden.

Snippets

- Dunnocks are one of the few species in which the females take the breeding initiative by creating a territory and mating with two or more males.
- Jonathan Tulloch, in a recent Times 'Nature Notebook' article, asserted that the Alder should be designated as the national tree because of its ability to absorb heavy metals, deposit nitrogen into the soil, rapidly colonise an area, help to reduce flooding by the absorption of water and its usefulness as a wood because it does not rot if immersed in water.
- It is easy to distinguish a bank vole from a field vole for the latter has a shorter and pink coloured tail (hence its alternative name short-tailed vole) and a colour which is more yellowy brown.

Do feel free to make comments by contacting the writer at mikesmusings@btinternet.com