

Mike's musings: environment and conservation

Spring 2016: April and May

Preliminary note: this musings is somewhat biased towards describing birdlife, for which no apology is made, as the choice of the content reflects what is currently topical in the environmental and conservation fields.

Weather April and May

April

The many number of days when it rained characterised this month. Except for three days on the 8th, 10th and 15th when 7.5, 9.0 and 8.0 mms. respectively fell, the amounts of rain were quite small. Nevertheless, they indicated the unsettled weather that prevailed over the month. Rain occurred on 18 days, the amount totalling 63.95 mms. (2.65 ins.).

May

To an extent the weather in this month, despite a few days during the second week, when high pressure was experienced and seemed to suggest a warmer and less windy interval, was not realised. In the end the weather resembled that in April in terms of the temperatures, wind directions and somewhat unsettled conditions. In some respects the month was more like that expected in April in past years with days of sunny periods and rather heavy but brief showers. During the last week of the month, until the 31st, the weather was dry; on that day it rained from midday until after it was dark, when 10mms. fell

There were fewer wet days than in April this year. However, on five days (9^h, 10th, 11th, 18th and 31st) a total of 64.50 mms. (2.63 ins.) fell, In fact, the total rainfall (75.45 mms. (3.10 ins.)) was significantly greater than that in April.

A depressing spring?

Given the weather experienced in April and May, it has hardly been a welcome spring for most of the days in the two months. Indeed it has been more like winter often with persistent cold and blustery winds from a northerly quarter accompanied by quite a number of cloudy and wet periods. In effect, it is apparent that this so-called spring weather has been little different than that in the two previous months. There were few fine and warm days and only short intervals of settled weather which from an inspection of previous years' records seem to be becoming the norm for this time of the year.

The only consolation has been that when the deciduous shrubs' and trees' flowers finally blossomed and came to leaf, the countryside was blessed with a spectacular sight of gloriously luscious green foliage. Unfortunately, the enjoyment of this phenomenon was short-lived because the very strong cold winds quickly scattered the flowers and newly sprouted leaves. However, the animal and bird wildlife seems to have adapted to the conditions to breed and rear their young successfully.

The UK better off within the European Union (EU) than outside it?

It should be categorically stated at the outset that this section is not about the looming economic and political arguments relating to the referendum on membership. It is actually a statement of the environmental and conservation benefits that have been promoted by the EU.

From time to time Mike's Musings has contained topics inspired by articles published in the journal *British Wildlife*. In a recent contribution to that journal Mark Avery* raised the issue that the environmental gains for the UK indicate that the country is much better off being in the EU than outside it.

The writer of this Musings fears that he is treading on dangerous ground in commenting on Avery's article as it is indeed seemingly introducing politics into what should simply be a natural history matter. Avery cites two immensely important benefits emanating from the EU that have been conferred on the UK. One is 'The Bird Directive' (EEC 79/409) and the other is 'The Habitat Directive' 1992. In addition there have been many other wider continuous initiatives, such as those relating to the conservation of bird and animal species and the management of coastal areas, uplands and wetlands for wildlife. Most organisations, for example The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) and local Wildlife Trusts, fully endorse the EU's actions, especially its recognised establishment of the environmental regulations enacted.

If the UK leaves the EU it is possible that the government may attach less importance to what are quite stringent policies, accepted by member countries, on meeting environmental protection targets which might be abandoned, especially in a recession when economic goals take precedence. Such an action by the government would be a travesty for the quality of peoples' lives, particularly that of future generations.

*Mark Avery 'Naturally Opinionated' *British Wildlife*, Vol. 27, No.4, April 2016, p247

The demise of the barn owl in West Berks?

This profile of Barn Owls has been prompted by a booklet published by BBOWT (Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust) directed at persuading local residents to become members of the Trust. The booklet's distribution is apposite on the grounds that, in the West Berks rural area, a significant proportion of the land use is potentially conducive to supporting the continued existence of this iconic bird.

It has been estimated that in the UK the population of Barn Owls has declined by more than 75% over the last century as a result of the loss of suitable nesting sites, for example old and wooden farm buildings, mature woodlands containing dead and hollow trees and permanent grasslands that harbour greater numbers of rodents, which constitute the owls' principal prey, than cultivated pastures. Furthermore, the widespread use of chemicals, particularly herbicides and pesticides, has largely eliminated the invertebrates on which the rodents feed. Moreover, the remaining 3% of natural grassland in the country is very fragmented therefore impairing the availability to the Barn Owls of their preferred hunting grounds.

The fortunes of Barn Owls is are very much governed by the breeding success each year of the short-tailed voles, the most numerous rodents found in grasslands. For instance, in 2013, the the terrible weather determined the disastrous breeding season the voles suffered and consequently that of the owls.

While the downs in West Berks provide appropriate grasslands, currently there is an insufficient quantity of hedgerows, old trees and farm buildings, in what is predominantly an arable farming area, to allow the number of Barn Owls to thrive. Thus the provision of these features would have to be a long-run strategy and will obviously depend on the commitment to such environmental projects by land owners and occupiers and/or their

willingness to undertake the required work. A short-run solution would be the erection of suitable owl boxes in the existing farmyard buildings and woodlands. This is what BBOWT is initially planning to do, hence an appeal for funds to undertake the project, and also encourage local residents to get involved to provide the conditions for the population of Barn Owls to increase.

Snippets

The Big Farmland Bird Count

It is not commonly known that the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust has recently published its third Big Farmland Bird Count. The data for this was gathered between the 6th and 14th of February this year by nearly a thousand farmers, covering 0.9 million acres in which 130 species of birds were identified. The most numerous species recorded were fieldfares*, lapwings, rooks, starlings and wood pigeons. The trends over the three years of the investigation are in the process of being analysed.

**the presence of fieldfares in the findings is the result of the time of the year the investigation was conducted*

Classical music programme tweets

The BBC Radio 3 has introduced its own 'Tweet for the Day' of bird songs which has formerly been a feature of Radio 4's news broadcasts. On Sundays, over the last four weeks, between 0800 and 0830, the programme has played the recordings by Chris Watson of bird songs. So far those presented have been the blackbird, nightingale, skylark and thrush, the transmissions being followed by two pieces of musical compositions inspired by each of the four birds. For example, after the skylark's song, 'The Lark', sung by Hoagy Carmichael and an orchestral composition by Ralph Vaughan Williams 'The Lark Ascending' were played.

Hawthorn blossom spectacle

This spring many hedgerows locally have been a mass of white flowers of the Common Hawthorn (also known as May, Quickthorn and Whitethorn) seldom seen in such abundance. Despite the cold weather, this display has been magnificent with the prospect of a glut of the Hawthorn's 'haws' (its red berries) which the birds will appreciate as a vital part of their diet in the coming autumn and winter.

Mike welcomes comment on his musings: [email: mikesmusings@btinternet.com](mailto:mikesmusings@btinternet.com)