

Mike's musings: environment and conservation

Late summer: August and September 2016

Weather

August

After an extremely dry July, the month started with a heavy rainfall overnight on the first of the month when 10.5 mms. (0.43ins). was recorded. There was relatively light rain, on the second and third before a dry period occurred between the 4th and 17th. There were wet days during the third and fourth weeks of the month when modest amounts of rain fell on seven days. The total rainfall was well below the average expected, even for a summer month; there being 31.6 mms. (1.3 ins).

On many days it was cloudy in the mornings with often blustery W/NW winds and so it was quite chilly, followed by bright periods in the afternoons. Such weather dominated the month, certainly not enjoyable for what was purported to be summer. There were few days which could be considered as really warm. Indeed a few were very muggy and often overcast, as on the 22nd and 23rd. Overall it was not a happy months for holiday-makers.

September

The month opened with three wet days on the 2nd to the 4th, before a few days of dry weather occurred. The pattern of the first 10 days was similar to August with W/NW winds persisting, before becoming more southerly and westerly, which brought cloudy and damp conditions. There were dry days at the beginning of the second week, followed by two wet days before becoming drier again between the 11th and 14th during which there were hot days with temperatures in the mid to high twenties. Overnight on the 15th there were violent thunderstorms when 23.0 mms (almost an inch) of rain fell. It then was dry for a couple of days before there was continuous steady rain all day on the 19th. From the 20th to the end of the month the weather was cooler, particularly in the morning, hinting, more emphatically, the onset of autumn.. Except for the 26th the winds were from the N/W. It tended to be cloudy early in the day, apart from on the 28th and 30th. which were clear until mid morning. It rained on nine days of the month, the total being 54.25 mms. (2.2 ins.) .

A rather unsettled summer

Despite the somewhat disappointing weather in August, there has been much to appreciate in the West Berks environment over the last two months. This was especially so in the middle of September, as alluded to above in reporting the fine and very warm days, deferring to an extent the coming of autumn. Indeed, the prospect was of a repeat of conditions and spectacle that marked the same period last year. Apart from the horse chestnut trees, the leaves of which had prematurely gone brown, at the time of writing this report there is virtually no sign of the foliage on any vegetation losing its still fresh green appearance or its 'fruit'. In particular it looks as if there will be a bumper crop of crab apples and a continuation of the growth and ripening of blackberries and wild raspberries, while there are absolutely loaded displays of berries on hawthorns, hollies, rowans and horn and white beams. There is also the promise of very good crops of nuts which will be welcomed by the birds and many rodents, ranging from squirrels to dormice, when they start storing food for the winter.

The mild weather has favoured birds, both resident and migrants. They still have plenty of food sources which has meant that summer visitors, such as swallows, house martins and even some warblers, such as the willow warbler and chiffchaff, could be seen, having remained locally until almost the end of September. The wood pigeons have even continue to breed as their empty egg shells are still to falling from the nests which remain intact. Also, jackdaws and rooks are surprisingly interested in visiting the nests they use for breeding as opposed to the ones they roost in. Remarkably, male blackbirds are sparring with each other, albeit half heartedly.

Despite forecasts of chillier weather, there is a possibility of it remaining mild into October. Perhaps there might be an Indian summer!

The debate about the conservation of wildlife continues

Issues relating to the threats to the natural environment concerning its degradation and loss and that of the conservation of its wildlife, particularly fauna in danger of becoming extinct, continue to have a high profile amongst bodies in the field of natural resources. These issues and the debate have been quite extensively examined in past Musings over the last two years.

The recent publication of the *State of Nature Report*, compiled by 53 wildlife organisations, specifically

targeting agricultural entities as being responsible for the dire state of the natural environment and wildlife, asserts that Britain has a very poor record in comparison with other European countries. The charges made by the report refer to farming practices, especially the overuse of fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides, changes in the seasonal timings of plantings and harvests and the decline in mixed farming. Furthermore, the report states that 56% of the 8,000 species identified have declined over the over last 40 years, 53% of which occurred between 2002 and 2013. It is also estimated that in excess of 1200 species will become extinct, principally animals, birds, fish, flora, insects and reptiles. Moreover, reference is made in the report to the loss since 1945 of wild flower meadows, the area of which has declined by 97%, and the deterioration of designated wildlife sites.

The farmers' and other land-holders' response to the findings in the report is that the impact they have had on the environment and wildlife has been exaggerated. They consider that too much emphasis in the report is given to criticising farming policy and failing to give due regard to the importance in the economy of food production in rural land use. However, the compilers of the report do acknowledge the influence of other factors, for instance climate change, urbanisation and the increase in the numbers and activities, such as for holidays, sporting events cycling and walking, of visitors from cities and towns to the countryside, which has increased dramatically in recent years and contributed to environmental degradation.

Undoubtedly, the apparent conflict between agricultural goals and conservation ones is likely to remain the pivotal issue in the ongoing debate as to the balance to be attained between rural economies and environmental activities. The publication of *The State of Nature* has reinforced the concerns of how to secure the protection of wildlife without impairing other activities in rural areas. Practical factors also need to be assessed, particularly to decide on the nature of an appropriate structure and the mechanisms for preserving wildlife, especially where species are facing the risk of being made extinct. Above all, in this context, devising a means of increasing the numbers of each species in such a way as to achieve a self-reproduction population size that remains viable in the long run, has to be implemented.

Snippets

- *Wild Cyclamens*
Cyclamens (*Cyclamen hederifolium*), are attractive plants with deep pink flowers shaped a little like small tulips. They have been in bloom in quite a number of areas locally, particularly Kintbury, for well over a month. Nearly all of them are certainly escapees from peoples' gardens. The only place in the country from where truly wild ones have originated is probably Kent. Wild flower books suggest that escaped specimens do not establish themselves in the wild. This is definitely not the case in West Berks, here they have flourished.
- The melancholic Robin
The robin is almost alone in maintaining its song throughout the year. It is now, in late summer, that the bird starts its sombre utterance. Only the chattering Corvids, especially jackdaws, accompanying it. It is rather a stuttering and fragmented song which is very distinctive, the purpose essentially being to establish its territory.

NB. Avid music lovers who listen to BBC Radio 3 at 8 am on Sundays would have recently heard a recording of the robin's song in a programme introduced by Martin Handley as 'tweet of the day';

- Multiplying muntjacs
Unlike the long established fallow, red, roe and sika deer, muntjacs breed almost at any time in the year. Currently, given that we are in the late summer season they gather in local woodlands, revealing their presence by a short sharp bark, rather than being sighted. Recently this behaviour was heard in the Cowlease copse just below Inkpen's southern boundary. They are now the most common deer in central southern England and are the most destructive, especially if gaining access to gardens.

Mike welcomes comments on his musings: email address: he can be contacted via the Inkpen Village Website