



SPRING IN AND AROUND THE ABBEY

Although Spring officially begins on 21st March the natural world is, fortunately, not so easily cowed by the forces of officialdom and there are signs of spring from well before this date. Even on New Year's Day a quite respectable dawn chorus could be heard with Song Thrush, Robin, Dunnock and Great Tit all singing strongly, and a Wren giving a brief burst of song in the afternoon. These five have been the mainstay of the daily chorus ever since, being joined in February by Blackbird, Chaffinch, Blue Tit and Greenfinch; in March by Goldcrest, Yellowhammer and Chiffchaff, and in April by Coal Tit, Goldfinch, Linnet, Blackcap, Cuckoo - on the 27th - Common and Lesser Whitethroat and Willow Warbler.

Some of these birds will have spent the winter with us and some are obviously summer visitors, but the first migrants can easily pass unnoticed because they also occur in smaller numbers during the winter months. A flock of 45 Meadow Pipits near Moat Farm on the 10th March were undoubtedly migrants, as were another 32 near Hill Spinney later in the month. Linnets and Goldfinch also pass through at this time. 28 Goldfinch in Abbey Park on 24th March made a fine sight, as did a Buzzard flying south west on the same day, perhaps on its way to the West Country or Wales after wintering in Eastern England. Two Goldfinch showed signs of staying on to breed in the monastery garden until one of the pair unfortunately ended up in the cat. The other is still singing and, hopefully, may still find another partner. The cat has also been responsible for thinning out the Blackbird and the butterfly population - consuming several chicks of the former and a peacock

and a brimstone of the latter: cats are definitely a mixed blessing!

Perhaps it is not surprising, after last year's poor showing, and the attentions of the cat, that butterflies have been late and few in number so far this year. The first, probably a Peacock, was seen on the 8th March, followed by a beautiful male Brimstone on the 10th. Hibernating butterflies such as these can appear at almost any time in the New Year if disturbed from their roosting sites or woken up by a sudden sunny spell.

This may also be true of early bats and hedgehogs, a large bat being seen flying south in broad daylight on 22nd April, and a hedgehog was ambling along in weak sunshine on 28th January - though they also move around to look for somewhere warmer if they get too cold!

The flowers seem to have been particularly prolific this spring - with fine displays of primroses, cowslips, bluebells and cuckoo flowers, and, now in May, of pignut, buttercups and cow parsley. One of the first flowers to emerge is the tiny, deep red "flower" (really styles) of the hazel, appearing as early as 16th January. Another easily overlooked "early riser" is the Spurge Laurel, a native evergreen shrub which was in flower on 3rd February near New Gains Farm. This plant is most often associated with woodland on the chalk downs of the south but occurs in scattered groups in our local hedgerows - perhaps because of the calcareous nature of the limestone beneath.



Br. John.