

COLD WEATHER MOVEMENTS

This is being written on a terrifically wild night - no, the monks are not having a party, but the wind most certainly is! (16th Feb). At another time of year, especially in the spring or autumn, and in another place, especially on the coast, one might expect all sorts of avian oddities to turn up, but not unfortunately in Turvey in late winter. We have, however, had at least a couple of days this winter when cold weather has forced several species to move and some of this movement has been visible over Turvey.

A series of sharp frosts in late December occasioned the first of these winter "migrations!". Geese could be heard flying over during the night of the 23rd December. These may well have been the local Canadas and Greylags heading for ice-free water further south, but with also the possibility of wild geese, such as Whitefronts, being on the move too. Christmas Eve was a day of breathtaking beauty with hoar frost coating everything to the very tops of the trees, and, sure enough, small flocks of Lapwing and Golden Plover could be seen heading south and west as the day went on. These two species have to respond very quickly to cold weather as they rely on damp, unfrozen pastures for much of their food supply. A brief spell of milder weather soon followed, however, and some Lapwing were already returning east on Boxing Day. This move proved premature for by the 1st January snow was falling in the north and east of England and, once again, Lapwing and Golden Plover were having to fly rapidly to the south and west.

These birds do not, of course, always "know" for certain that snow is on the way from the north or the east, nor that conditions on the coast or in the south and west will necessarily be more favourable. Evolution has, however, favoured those birds that have made such moves in the past and so most of the birds are "conditioned" or "programmed" to repeat them. The "signal" for them to move is probably the direction of the wind at this time of year, and its temperature. By moving with this wind they are more likely to stay ahead of bad weather. They could of course be driven by hunger also, but by then this may be too late and the birds that will do best are those which can move ahead of the worsening conditions with energy to spare. Some birds will even go as far as Ireland or North Africa, if the cold weather chases them that far, but if it catches them up here then they are in deep trouble! Some lapwings have even been seen heading west from Ireland in such conditions but only a few have been known to have made it as far as the USA.

Many birds, particularly the smaller ones, choose the other option and stay put. Woodland birds, such as tits and woodpeckers, can usually continue to find food in the many nooks and crannies of the trees and under the leaf litter below. Wrens survive the cold nights by huddling together in holes in the trees, but they suffer great losses, if the cold spell goes on too long, because of their small size and insectivorous diet. The birds that stay put have to rely on a series of good summers and mild winters if their winter strategy ever fails them, as it did, for example, in 1962/63.

This winter has generally favoured the birds that have stayed put but as for next year, who can tell?

Br. John

