

Keeping Warm

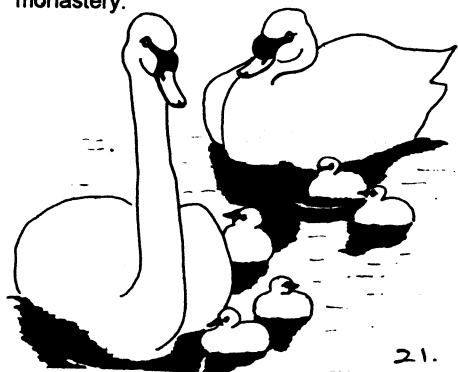
It's a well known fact that winter weather changes human behaviour and not only physically, but psychologically too. We survive by turning up the heating, putting on more clothes and by not going out unless we have to. Some of us, if we are really pushed, can even go off and take a holiday in the sun. But how do the birds survive - especially those who do not move on? Well, many of the things they do are similar to our own behaviour. They cannot put on extra clothes but they can fluff out their feathers to give them that little extra bit of insulation - hence the sudden appearance of plump robins at the bird table. Nor can they turn on the electric blanket, but they can tuck their bills into their feathers and warm up the air with their breathing! They can also emulate us by eating more, "jumping up and down" (i.e. moving) and just plain shivering in order to generate heat.

More obvious stratagems are seeking warmer places to spend the night and huddling together. There is a regular pattern to the bird movements just after dawn and just before dusk as they return from or go to roosting sites. Sometimes over Turvey, several hundred rooks and jackdaws can be seen in long drawn out columns heading to a favourite wood for the night. The larger the wood the higher the internal temperature, it may be only a matter of a few degrees but that can make all the difference, the warmer it is the longer the bird can survive on the previous day's food intake. This is also true of the starlings we can see heading to and from Bedford, and occasionally pied wagtails also.

Ducks and geese are so well insulated that they can ride out the nights in safety on the local ponds and gravel pits, but here too they can sometimes be seen in very close flocks constantly on the move, several hundred greylags were doing just that at Harrold recently, perhaps to keep at least some of the water ice-free. There are many stories of waterfowl being taken unawares by a sudden drop in temperature and finding themselves stuck firmly in the ice in the morning. And it is no mere affectation when birds are to be seen fast asleep standing on one leg only - they are keeping the other leg warm. They will also do this by covering both legs and feet with their body feathers, and have even been known to do this in flight by flying with feet and legs forward.

If the worst comes to the worst they will do what we do unwittingly and with the danger of death, but they do in order to survive: they will fall into a torpor to conserve every last ounce of energy.

So when we feel cold it's worth giving a thought to how the birds, and the wayfarers, are managing - when conditions turn bad we can expect greater variety of both at the monastery.



Br. John