

Another Hard Winter

We left off in November wondering what winter would bring – and now we know: something of a repeat of the last two winters with prolonged periods of snow on the ground and some very low temperatures. We recorded 18 degrees Fahrenheit at one stage in the monastery courtyard. In addition to this, there has been no let up to the rainfall and flooding until the last few days – leaving the ground almost liquid in many places. And so what of the birds and other wildlife?

The variety of birds has been much as ever but their behaviour markedly different. The resident flocks of Skylark, Linnet and Wood Pigeon seem to have shifted to the north of the road leaving Grindstone Hill remarkably empty. This of course has a lot to do with field use and where game cover is most plentiful. A flock of 300 Linnet, for example, was busily feeding on a rich seed –bearing crop just to the north of Great Oak farm on 19th January, with 20 plus Yellowhammer and a few Chaffinch too. This was once a favourite place for Tree Sparrow but not so far this winter.

A flock of 110 Skylark was also present near Priory Farm on this date on stubble and newly sown Rape. There was snow on the ground on this day and this often forces Woodcock out into the open. Two were disturbed from near Pict's Hill . We even had one in the garden a few weeks later. And it was in the garden where some of the best birdwatching was possible with many birds desperate for food and giving very close views.

We've made a point in the monastery of both putting food out and allowing weeds and shrubs to come to full term. And so we had sightings of Marsh Tit feeding on Honeysuckle berries, Goldfinches on Teasel, Bullfinches and Blackbirds on Spindle, Fieldfare and Redwing on Hawthorn and, later, on Rosehips and Cotoneaster, and birds galore on Yew berries. After Blackberries and Hawthorn the Yew trees are usually one of the first fruit or seed bearing resources to be stripped. On one day in early December the trees opposite my room were being continually visited by a stream of Redwing and Blackbirds with a few Mistle Thrush and Song Thrush. The former were desperately trying to ward the others off and the latter skilfully weaving in and out while the Mistle Thrush were looking elsewhere. Blue Tits, Greenfinch, Chaffinch, Nuthatch and a Grey Squirrel were also taking their share.

Greenfinches have been scarce in recent years and so it was pleasing to see up to 13 visiting the Rosehips on one occasion. Rosehips are one of the last most visible fruits to go being too large for most birds until they have been softened up by frost and rotted down a little. Fieldfares can manage whole hips and one spent a week or more guarding its own supply in the walled garden; other thrushes were driven off but it completely ignored a Greenfinch pecking away at the flesh.

Best of all was the presence on three occasions of Lesser Redpolls attracted firstly by the seeds of Golden Rod and later by nettle seeds in the chicken-run. This winter has been especially good for Redpoll generally but it's a devil of a job separating out the different species. And lastly, it's a pleasure to report Sweet Violets already in flower and a flock of 85 wild grey geese heading home on 21st February. These were probably Whitefronts which are markedly smaller than our resident Greylags and Canadas, and a lot quieter!

Br. John