

## It ain't over till the fat lady sings

Well, we have spring at last, or have we? This is being written on 24th May and shifting jet streams have meant a return of bitter northerly winds, and so an already late season is being delayed even further. A harsh winter can actually benefit some species by preventing too early an emergence and killing off harmful bacteria but a very late spring can undo the good.

The latest national report on Britain's wildlife already makes worrying reading. On farmland, for example, 60% of all species surveyed (1064 in total) have declined, and 34% have declined strongly. Much of this decline can be attributed to changes in farmland management but on top of this we now have to map the effects of changes caused by global warming.

Turvey still does rather well for its range of farmland species, with much sensitive land management taking place locally, but there's no doubt that the populations of many species are in freefall. One-time favourites such as Cuckoo, Turtle Dove, Spotted Flycatcher and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker are now very hard to come by. This is generally true of many insect and plant species too. The specialists are going and those with broader habitat tolerances are taking their place.

In my own time in Turvey, some 23 years now, we have lost such once common species as the Wall butterfly and the Garden Tiger moth, and it's now rare to see more than a few individuals of any butterfly at a time. Nationally, farmland butterfly populations have fallen by 32% in this period and farmland moths by 64%. Plants too have become increasingly restricted in both range and number, it all looks very green still but a closer look reveals a marked decline in variety.

.....And so to map this year's changes on to these long-term declines -with snow on Palm Sunday and temperatures down to -6 Centigrade at our Easter Vigil, albeit at 4.30 a.m., it's perhaps not surprising that what I took to be our local Lapwings headed off south again for some respite care on 24<sup>th</sup> March. Many other birds which had shown signs of breeding behaviour also shut up shop at this time and waited the cold spell out - there's no point in building a nest in a leafless tree unless you're big enough to see off the local crows and magpies!

Moth catches have been dramatically down on previous years and we are still some fifty species behind those of 2011. Butterflies have also been

very slow to emerge, with no sightings even yet of Red Admirals and Speckled Wood. Winter thrushes were very late in departing with the last Redwing seen on 13<sup>th</sup> April and the last Fieldfares on 14<sup>th</sup>, and there was still a female Goosander on the river on 18<sup>th</sup> April. These winter birds overlapped with the first strong movement of southern migrants from 12<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> when, unusually, both Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler arrived together, the former almost a month later than in some other years. This weekend also saw the return of a white-faced Song Thrush (last seen on 24<sup>th</sup> January) and a fine male Wheatear in Abbey Park. Swallows and House Martins also reappeared, and the Blackthorn began to flower at last.

The first Common Whitethroats were marking out territories on 20<sup>th</sup> and this was a peak day for overwintering butterflies such as Peacocks, Small Tortiseshells, Commas and Brimstones. There was a marked greening of hedgerows from 23<sup>rd</sup> onwards and, in early May, some of the best displays of Dandelions and Daisies that I've ever seen. The first Bluebells to flower waited until 24<sup>th</sup> April and are being rapidly overtaken by Cow Parsley, Nettles and Hogweed. Swifts returned to the village on 8<sup>th</sup> May but as the cold spell continues there's no guarantee that they will stay to breed.

Br. John

