



SPRING FEVER

We've already covered some of the signs of spring in previous articles, but the list is by no means exhausted and every year the season differs. So here are a few more.

Despite the hard weather earlier in the year, the Herons at Harrold were already on their nests by the 23rd February, and at the time this is being written, 26/5, the first young have fledged and are beginning to fend for themselves. Great Crested Grebes were also displaying by late February - a weird and wonderful sight with much gathering of weed and shaking of heads. Other signs of spring among the wildfowl included the sudden appearance of flocks of Teal on their way north to their breeding grounds, with a maximum of 35 at Harrold on 27/2, and the equally sudden disappearance of most of the Wigeon, for the same reason, by mid March. Of the summer birds, Chiffchaffs had arrived by 15/3 and a Blackcap was singing in the garden on the 3rd April. The hirundines and swifts provided an interesting pattern of arrival at Harrold, with the bulk of the Sand Martin on 12/4, most of the Swallows on 20/4 and the highest numbers of Swift and House Martin on 9/5. This is not an untypical pattern but reflects only one observer's coverage - beware of general conclusions from limited data! It is interesting to speculate, however, on the destination of the two buzzard seen flying over Turvey on 28/3. Both Northants and Bedfordshire have experienced a great upsurge in Buzzard numbers in recent years and both counties now have breeding pairs. Bedfordshire may also be joining the ranks of those counties with tree-nesting Cormorants, if it hasn't done so already, as there is a pair attempting to nest nearby in the Ouse Valley. This spring list of birds was completed with the arrival of a Spotted Flycatcher at the Abbey on 14/5 - always one of the last to come - and by the sight of three magnificent Black Terns hawking for insects over the main lake at Harrold on 15/5.

It was the insects, however, which really made one feel that spring had truly arrived with Brimstones and a Comma out on a glorious 6th March, and a willow in full blossom covered in honey bees and flies on the same date. Willows are also a vital source of fuel for early moths, and over one hundred were present in the moth trap on March 16th (all later released). Bee-flies are another sign that winter is in retreat, and Brother Herbert was surprised by the first on 28/3 - they look like miniature furry humming-birds. Both Holly Blue and Orange Tip butterflies were exceptionally early this year - the first of the former on 31/3 and of the latter on 10/4, and both are still just hanging on now at the end of May. This is also the time when the first damselflies and dragonflies begin to drag themselves up from the depths and to undergo a transformation every bit as wonderful as that of moths and butterflies. The first Large Red Damselfly was out on 5/5 - a typical date, and the first Azure Damselfly on 12/5. I've seen no large dragonflies yet at the Abbey, but their cast skins were evident on 19/5, and we should know whether these are from either Four-Spotted or Broad-Bodied Libellulas in a day or two.

So spring is almost played out, but there was a sting in the tail on the 17th May when a terrific rain-storm assailed us for over two hours, which Ray Briscombe clocked at well over two inches, and which flooded the garden as far as the caravan and almost as far as the goatshed. Which leaves me with vivid memories of deer splashing through the bushes, a sodden hedgehog skirting the water's edge, and myriads of every

conceivable insect, spider and snail clinging desperately to any blade of grass, or other support, which still showed itself above the raging flood. If you want to know what creepy-crawlies you have in your garden, my advice to you is put it under a couple of feet of water and see what comes out!

Br. John.