

## Winter Come and Gone?

It has become increasingly difficult to distinguish one season from another with some of the warmest February days ever this year. Such weather is ideal for colds and wayfarers but must be very confusing for the wildlife. It is difficult for one observer to separate out what is really happening but there does seem to have been a change in the pattern of behaviour of both birds and insects this year, with fewer of the former in their usual winter haunts and more of the latter out and about early.

The ducks at Harrold, for example, seemed to have peaked well before Christmas, with over 400 Wigeon, 110 Pochard and 26 Teal present on 14 December and a virtual absence of these species in mid-February. It is well worth a glance at the resident flocks of geese, however, when nothing much else seems to be about. There was a Pink-footed Goose with the Greylag on 19 December. Keep an eye on the trees too, as the tops of the larches produced five Crossbill on 5 January and there were Redpolls in the silver birches on 13 January and Siskins extracting seeds from the cones of the alders on the 15th. Gone are the days, however, when it could be said, as it was by Richard Jefferies, that

"sparrows crowd every hedge and field, their numbers are incredible; chaffinches are not to be counted; of greenfinches there must be thousands. ... I caught glimpses of a ploughed field recently sown one spring from the window of a railway carriage, every little clod of which seemed alive with small birds!" (Nature Near London, 1893)

The clue here is the reference to spring sowing which has largely given way to the autumn sowing of winter wheat and the consequent lack of unsprayed winter stubble. Fields which now produce a flush of small birds are thus few and far between. So it was a delight to see 300 Chaffinches in such a field near Odell Great Wood recently, and 70 Yellowhammer and 30 Linnet in another near Great Oak Farm.

Thrushes have also been scarce this winter, but this may be because they have chosen to winter elsewhere rather than because of a deterioration in the local habitat. We may well see substantial numbers still as they pass through on their return journey east, and, indeed, the largest flock so far has been of 100 Redwing in Abbey Park on 12 February, all singing softly away from the tops of the trees - a classic sign of Spring, albeit somewhat early.

Also earlier than usual has been the recent emergence of butterflies, bees and other insects in temperatures reminiscent of Summer rather than late Winter. Brimstone, Peacock and Small Tortiseshell butterflies have all beaten my earliest record by a week or two. Moths have also been active on the milder nights, but this is not so unusual, several species having wingless females which the males hunt out even at the turn of the year. There were six species of moth in the trap on 13 February which included four of this type: the Pale Brindled Beauty, the Dotted Border, a March Moth and a Spring Usher - which perhaps says it all! Honey bees and bumble-bees have also been out and about, as well as a hoverfly mimic of the former as early as 30 December. It will be interesting to see whether the insects have gambled correctly or whether winter has still a surprise or two in store.

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