

## Spring Unfolding 2002

Well before the first Cuckoo, or indeed Swallow, there are signs of change in the natural world which are indicative of spring. Among the plants a whole succession of flowerings take place from even before the new year. Spurge Laurel is often one of the first, followed by Snowdrops and Winter Aconites in our gardens. Hazel catkins were beginning to open by the end of January accompanied by the tiny vivid red male flowers. Sweet Violets were out by the 13th February and Lesser Celandine on the day after. Some of the Yew trees were also shedding their pollen by this time, and by the 17th one of our self-sown Plum trees was just beginning to flower. By the 20th it was the turn of our garden Daffodils. In March Coltsfoot was out on the first, Common Whitlow Grass on the third, Blackthorn by the sixth and a Box tree was in flower on the day after attracting hoardes of flies. I missed the first emergence of wild Primroses but the Cowslips were out by the 29th.

Moths and butterflies are another regular indicator of lengthening days and warmer temperatures with several having the names to match: hence Spring Usher on the 6th February, March Moth on the 17th February and a Herald Moth on 2nd April. Butterflies were harder to come by with only Brimstone in March, on 12th, and then none until April with Peacock on 2nd, Small Tortiseshell on 3rd, Speckled Wood on 4th and Holly Blue on 5th. The last named seems to be having an exceptional year so far.

As for birds, there is a gradual recruitment of new singers from well before Christmas. One of my favourites is the Mistle Thrush which seems to choose some of the wettest and wildest days to sing on, as it did this year on January 25th. Common Buzzard were pairing off and taking up territories from early February with ten being seen over various woods locally on the 5th. Our few local Lapwings were also on their breeding patch by 14th February. A male Stonechat on March 6th signalled the beginnings of spring passage and was followed by 35 Meadow Pipit in Abbey Park on 16th March and a Chiffchaff at Woburn Sands on 20th. Fieldfare were moving north-east on 27th March and gathering around Picts Hill and Great Oak Farm prior to departure in early April. Swallow, Willow Warbler and Blackcap on 4th April, with Cuckoo on 21st bring this calendar of spring events to a close.

This list is necessarily very selective and very subjective, but with the need to monitor global warming this rediscovered 'science' of phenology has become very important. I would be interested to know of other signs and dates of sightings in the immediate area.-

