

WINTERING BIRDS IN ITALY, and more

This may seem an odd topic for the Turvey News but there are connections. October witnesses a mass movement of birds from the colder regions of central and northern Europe to the south and west and a recent trip to Italy gave me the chance to see whether the movement there was similar in timing and composition to the movement here. A little earlier and the focus would have been on the more exotic summer migrants which rarely make it as far as Turvey but this prolonged stay in Italy for our General Chapter at Monte Oliveto coincided with arrivals of Skylark, Starlings, Chaffinch, Siskin, Wood Pigeon and, perhaps, Song Thrush and Goldcrest too. The monastery at Monte Oliveto sits on a hilltop in an area of soft clays just to south of Siena. The landscape in winter looks decidedly bleak and barren but is in fact an important wheat and wine growing area and there are many woods in the deep gullies which have been weathered into the clay. The barren feel to the area may be partly due to the Italian love of hunting which makes all the resident birds extremely reluctant to show themselves. There were many Robins but you wouldn't know it apart from their calls, and the few Wood Pigeons seen at first were always rushing from one patch of cover to the next. As the wind veered to the north and the temperatures dropped, however, there was a marked arrival of birds. Large flocks of Starlings appeared at field margins or perched on wires, there was a sudden rush of Wood Pigeons in flocks a hundred strong and the distinctive sound of Skylarks moving south. The wonderful cypresses which are a feature of the Abbey attracted Goldcrests and small groups of Blackbird and Song Thrush were seen furtively stealing what I took to be Olives from a tall tree in the garden. So it was indeed a similar mix to birds we would expect at Turvey but without the Redwing and Fieldfare which I found on my return. Perhaps these had yet to arrive in Italy.

Birds may have been scarce at first but this was certainly not true of the insects. The first week produced an impressive array of crickets and grasshoppers, some with legs and antennae which made them the size of one's hand, others a glorious mix of jet black and glossy green, others still with blue hindwings and a house cricket all of my own. Fortunately we were spared the mosquitoes but not the Praying Mantises, the Wall Lizards, the Moorish Gecko playing hide and seek around a plastic drainpipe, and even a Tortoise and a Porcupine .. but that's another story.

Br. John