

BIRD NOTES – The Bird Year (based on bird notes by Roger Dickey)

Spring

The transition from Winter to Spring can bring aberrations of large flocks of Blackcaps (grey body and black (male) or brown (female) cap and normally a solitary bird), mixed flocks of farmland birds (Yellowhammers, Chaffinches and Linnets) before we move into Spring proper when the real business of birdsong and procreation begins. Great Bustards from the Salisbury Plain introduction scheme may be seen in the area; this is quite 'normal' as these huge birds naturally disperse during the winter – some go to Northern France, and will return to their breeding sites on the Plain in the Spring. No identification points needed for the largest and heaviest bird in Europe.

Acts of predation, severe pruning, or even high winds can result in a dislodged nest being found in the garden or under a hedgerow and it can be quite frustrating not to know the name of the architect. Birds using rigid twigs usually produce no more than a thin platform that is added to over the years. Pigeons and doves use this simple method, adding layers over time but always in the later stages, using thinner twigs and finer material. Bullfinches are also twig nesters but use rootlets and hair for the inner layer of their nests. Most birds build cup-shaped nests, domed nests being fairly uncommon, so it is a surprise to find that of the larger birds, Magpies do just that with a thin layer of twigs forming a cover. More typical domes are those of the Wren, Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler and Long-tailed Tits. Spiders webs are used by birds to bind moss and lichen, the Chaffinch using it for its cup nest, the Long-tailed Tit for its domed structure, and the Goldcrest for attaching its pendent cup to the underside of a twiggy conifer branch. Mud is also a quite common material, especially by hirundines but crows use it and so do Thrushes and Blackbirds by inserting a layer of mud between the twiggy exterior and the lining. Song Thrushes use a variation of this patten by missing out the latter layer and laying directly onto a mix of mud and wood pulp. Finally, Robins like dead leaves, moss, grass but no feathers. Dunnocks have a strong cup of twigs and other plant material, and line with hair and wool, and Chaffinches have a very deep cup of moss mixed with grass and feathers. And the list goes on...

Although still at the nest building stage in mid April, there could be fledgling Robins, Song Thrushes and Blackbirds about and several of our over-wintering Wrens, Chaffinches and Dunnocks may start to lay eggs. The former three are not dependent on flying insects and can therefore start laying earlier. The latter three feed their young on insects but generally spiders and small beetles. Blue, Great and Long-tailed Tits may be in various stages of nest-building as they appear to be capable of predicting accurately the extended cold weather thus ensuring that they take full advantage of flying insects, larvae and caterpillars when they eventually arrive. Adults will use most of their energy in defending territory, nest building and eventually foraging for food for their young and so high protein food such as fat balls, peanuts and hi-energy seeds make a considerable difference to their health. Adult garden birds can only benefit from supplementary feeding at bird-tables during this period and know instinctively not to feed seed or peanuts to their young. On migration, Chiffchaffs are here in numbers as well as Blackcaps and Willow Warblers (a Chiffchaff with a prettier descending song).

Summer

May has to be one of the busiest months of the birding year and it is a real pleasure

attempting to unuddle the confusion of second broods, juvenile plumage and calls and late migrant arrivals in the Spring and early summer chaos in our gardens, hedgerows, and woods. It seems so orderly in early April. It's usually Blackbirds that are the opportunists but a Robin taking over a Wren's nest while in the early stages of construction has been witnessed as well as a Blue Tit occupying a nest box for its second brood after the original resident Great Tit had successfully fledged all its young. Attempts to provide boxes other than for tits have been treated with the customary contempt but with such a profusion of mature trees, bushes, old stone walls and house eaves in the parish, it is hardly surprising that the pre-fab alternatives that we provide are not always occupied. They are still of use though and, as often happens in winter, boxes are occupied by several birds at a time in bad weather. Look out for warblers appearing; Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs in our gardens and lanes and Whitethroats in the field hedgerows. Clematis and Wisteria growers look out for Willow Warblers and Spotted Flycatchers.

It's time for second broods and particularly for those that suffered during the extended wet period in early Spring. Rather than hatch a brood at a time of minimal food, especially a lack of insects, many birds will abandon their nests and even their eggs to ensure that there is the greatest possibility of success later. Depending on the weather in March/April, some first broods may now be well developed, some still at the fledgling stage and other birds may be laying second batches of eggs. Wrens are particularly successful at second broods and it is not surprising that they are currently our commonest songbird despite competition from Chaffinches. But winners of the Wright Brothers' booby prize must go to Carrion Crows and Jackdaws. Despite launching themselves from great heights, the adolescents have an appalling record for staying there and several have had to be re-launched down Blind Lane or found cat-safe perches, to the consternation of their apprehensive parents. Young Little Owls are still fluffy balls of feathers and spend a little time outside their nest holes, basking in the sun between beetle feasts. Rains provide a supplement of earthworms from the softer soil. Young Kestrels, again still at the late downy stage, may keep to the woods before foraging on their own. Two Hobbys have been seen mating in early June towards Kingweston, Look out for Swift, Swallow and House Martin; it's worth trying to find 5 spare minutes in the evening as they provide spectacular feeding displays.

Autumn

The measure of a successful breeding season for birds is dependent on a sustained food supply. Nearly all young birds, whether the adults are seed or fruit eaters like Greenfinches or House Sparrows, are dependent on a good insect population throughout the summer and so long periods of cold, draught or rain all have an adverse effect on this year's youngsters. The appearance in late August of further juvenile Blackbirds, Starlings and House Sparrows will suggest that conditions have been good and that we will start the Autumn at least with healthy numbers. So where have most of the Robins gone? There is always a mid summer drop off in numbers as adults and juveniles move out of gardens and into the hedgerows in order to obtain a more diverse and plentiful food supply. The moult which most birds will be going through now will help to separate the all over brown speckles of the young Dunnocks with the emerging red fronts and plainer backed Robins. With the Swifts already gone by early August, Swallows are now fuelling up for their own departure. While they sit on telephone lines, have a look at the difference between the adults (males long, thin tail streamers, females shorter) which all have dark red foreheads and throats and this year's young whose foreheads and throats are distinctly pinkish buff-white and have quite short tail feathers. They are still much longer than the very stubby forked tails of House Martins,

which are pure white underneath and with a distinctive white band over the rump. It is not easy to distinguish juveniles but a useful tip is to look for a grubby off-white chin (how typical) when they are perched. Flying styles will differentiate the two species in the air with Swallows beating their wings regularly at low level and not making the long slow gliding curves that are typical of House Martins. For late night dog walkers, you should be starting to hear contact calls of Tawny Owls (the 'kewick' part) and the more territorial song (the 'Hoo Hoo Hoo Hoooh' part) as the adults 'move on' lingering juveniles from around traditional nesting sites.

The month of October is always considered to be the Doldrums of the birding calendar, when the last of the summer residents move south and are replaced by their northern cousins. This is a confusing time as many of the incoming birds are well known to us such as Robins, Song Thrushes, Greenfinches and Chaffinches. There is also very little to distinguish guest from visitor as most of these birds are non-territorial at this time of year. The exception is the Robin, a 12 month long songster and primarily because they like to hold territory all year. It won't be a surprise then to see the odd scuffle on the lawn between local and visitor as they sort out feeding territories prior to the winter. Most other birds hold an uneasy truce through the winter and flocking will begin in order to provide communal warmth in the very bad weather but also to ensure greater success in finding food – Starlings working on the principle that 200 pairs of eyes are better than one. Less for the larger birds, most migration goes unnoticed yet flocks of Wagtails, Blackcaps and Linnets pass overhead in their hundreds, stopping briefly at the coast for a last feed and favourable conditions before making 'the jump'.

So before buying extra bird food for the winter, this is the time to give bird baths, bird tables, feeders and nest boxes a good 'once over' with a domestic anti-bacterial spray (be sure though that no residue remains when re-filling bird baths). This is particularly important every year where feeding stations remain in one location and more so now that there is evidence that a newly discovered virus has been found within the European finch populations. The virus is not considered to be a threat to humans in any way, but simple hygiene precautions should always be taken anyway when dealing with domestic and wild birds, for the sakes of them and us alike.

Winter

The noticeable increase in Blackbirds, thrushes, Robins and most of the finches has swelled the local population and piping Redwings have started to make an appearance having staged briefly on the east coast to replenish bodyweight lost on the trans-North Sea flight. Quite amazingly, these larger birds are accompanied by huge flocks of Goldcrests that move from Scandinavian and Scottish fir forests into the southern woodlands. Look out for their distinctive yellow 'mohican' caps as this smallest of our native birds hunts continuously for spiders and insects, particularly in pines and evergreens.

Flocks of visiting Starlings, departing in the late afternoon from large trees with muted roar of wing beats, is a seasonal reminder to mention the phenomena of the Starling roost just north of Westhay (parking at ST456438). Arrive an hour before dusk on a still clear evening for best results!

Back to the Parish though and two more winter visitors to look out for are Bramblings (Chaffinch sized with blackish-grey head, orange breast and white rump with a liking for

beech mast and pine cones) and Siskins (smaller than a Greenfinch with more yellow and black on the wing and body, a black skullcap, and mad about alder seeds). Either can be seen singly or more rarely, in flocks, Bramblings on the ground and Siskins in the trees.

Two winters ago *Bird Notes* was comparing Lesser and Great Spotted Woodpeckers and the difference in their drumming patterns – short, staccato and with an abrupt end to the former and longer, slower and the end trailing away for the latter. In the last year I have not seen or heard any Lesser Spotted which may reflect their general decline throughout the county. The fragility of bird populations is particularly evident at this time of year when ‘the reckoning’ takes place and a list of parish sightings and evidence of breeding birds is submitted to the County Recorder. The cold snap in May set back many species, Grey Wagtails, Linnets, Skylarks and Marsh Tits, and both Barn and Tawny Owl numbers are down, offset thankfully by another good year for Little Owls, Song Thrushes, Blackbirds and Blackcaps in particular. Red-legged Partridges, Herons and Goldfinches became regular ‘garden birds’.

The parish may see large flocks of Redwing, piping as they move through the Hawthorn hedges, and also Fieldfares with their rattle-like call. These birds are true harbingers of winter and more noticeable than the scattered flocks of northern Blackbirds, Chaffinches, Robins and finches that swell local numbers. Late night revellers and dog walkers may hear an increase in Tawny Owl calls and hoots as the younger birds attempt to establish themselves in the village, their parents having chased them out of the woods where they were brought up. New young Barn Owls may be seen hunting along the village paths at dusk which would suggest a similar harsh parental regime being exercised in more open country. Not so Starlings, the young of which lost their brown speckled feathers last month and are part of vast flocks each evening flying to their overnight roost in the Westhay reedbeds. Late December and early January are ideal for this dusk spectacular. Finally a plea to keep the feeders and bird-tables well stocked and water dishes topped up, especially on icy days when the need is greatest.

A walk around the parish, especially alongside established hedgerows, will often ‘push’ birds to the limit of their territory before they circle around behind you to their original position. Migrating and winter visitors with no territory will stay a tactical bound ahead of you for much further and this is often the best opportunity to identify ‘northern’ Bullfinches of which we often have plenty. From the rear, the white rump (on both sexes) and single white wing bars are particularly distinctive and can’t be confused with the grey-green rump of the Chaffinch. Small jet black cap and the male’s fabulous dark pink front should clinch identification. No such problems with Grey Herons though. There are many residents, all with garden ponds, who will have herons on their garden bird lists. Despite a main diet of fish, they will eat almost anything live of a suitable size and spend most of their time patiently scanning low-lying fields, stream banks and rhynes for food. The nearest major heronry is in the private woods east of Somerton where last year there was a small increase, to 27 occupied nests (in 1952 there were 121 nests) so don’t throw away your pond netting.