

## Thorndon Birdlife, June 2013

Last month I mentioned having seen a brown hare a couple of times in an area where I have seen them in the past but not for some time and so I put a bit of effort into keeping an eye on that area. On 23rd April I saw no fewer than four hares there and a fox, which sauntered across the field quite close to the footpath. The following day there were four hares again and two melanistic\* rabbits and whilst I was watching them a common buzzard flew over and then, much to my delight, a barn owl.



A melanistic rabbit

With the arrival of the spring this year feeling very retarded by the cold weather, it was surprising how quickly the blackthorn came into blossom with slightly milder conditions around 26th April, and the same day my continued observation of the area the hares were frequenting yielded a single roe deer.



Housemartin

Following the house martins being seen at Rishangles on 14th April I finally saw my first ones in Thorndon, over The Street, on 30th. As I've said before, it is remarkable that we don't know whereabouts in Africa our house martins spend the winter and I rather hoped that some would be caught and fitted with geolocators (as has been done with swifts) so that we can track them when they leave our shores in the autumn. I understand that this is planned for this year and so I hope that we will start to gain a greater understanding of these birds' migrations because knowing where our summer visitors spend the winter, and the routes they use on their migrations, is vitally important in conserving them.

On 5th May I saw my first swifts of the spring in Thorndon, when two were over The Street with house martins and swallows. Seeing the three species together is always a joy because it allows for direct comparison and an appreciation of the differences between them, both in terms of their plumage and their flight actions. Swallows have dark upperparts, a white belly, a dark head and breast and a long tail and they have a very fluid and graceful flight, often at low level. House martins, on the other hand, are rather broader-bodied and broader-winged than swallows and do a lot more gliding, often at moderate height. They have dark upperparts, wholly white underparts and a short, forked tail, and if you see their upperside when they bank they have a really obvious square white rump patch. Swifts are completely dark brown except for a paler throat (which is quite hard to see) and usually they look very dark, almost blackish. They have narrow bodies and long, narrow, scythe-shaped wings and a short forked tail. Swifts often fly rather higher than the other two species and glide a lot on stiff wings.



Swallow



Grass snake

A few years ago I put a piece of corrugated iron down in a grassy area in the hope that it would attract some reptiles and on 5th May my patience finally paid off when I lifted it and there was a grass snake underneath. These harmless reptiles are very beautifully marked, with a broad yellow collar behind the head. This one was a youngster and I hope that I'll get to see it again over the summer now that it's found somewhere to warm itself up.

I haven't seen many butterflies so far this spring but on 6th May I saw a male orange-tip and one large white on the wing.

On 7th May I watched a dunnock preening itself very thoroughly in an elder bush and then it flew a short distance and sprawled out on a horizontal ledge against a fence, where it could bask in direct sunshine. Birds do this quite often on sunny days, fluffing up their feathers, fanning their wings and tail and half closing their eyes. When you see them doing this it's tempting to think that they're injured or ill but actually they do this as part of their feather-care regime.

Monday 15th May I saw my first fledgling blackbird of the spring in my garden. It was with an adult male and so I know that we've got two pairs here because elsewhere in the garden there's a female still on the nest. In fact, I saw what were probably the males from these two pairs on 19th May displaying to one another with their wings drooped and tails fanned (presumably to make themselves look as big as possible). These two birds were making it clear to one another where their territorial boundary was with a lot of posturing but very little overt aggression so I presume that they were simply confirming an established state of affairs.



Dunnock

On the same day I was very pleased to see a lesser whitethroat. These small warblers winter in Africa and return here to breed in hedgerows with taller trees. Not much bigger than a blue tit, lesser whitethroats are grey above and white below, with a darker grey mask. They have the typically pointed bill of an insectivorous bird and like the other Sylvia



Lesser whitethroat

warblers (common whitethroat, garden warbler and blackcap) their movements are rather purposeful, which makes them a little easier to follow and get a good view of than many other small birds.

During June do continue to enjoy the bird song that is all around us and if you'd like to learn a little more BBC Radio 4 is broadcasting "tweet of the day" just before 6am each day. If that's a little too early for you, have a look at their website, where all the broadcasts can be found along with photos of the birds so you can "put a face to the name". Also during June you should start to see young birds in your garden and do take the time to enjoy the swifts, swallows and house martins around the village.

I am always pleased to receive reports of birds and other wildlife of interest in Thorndon, Rishangles, Braiseworth and Hestley Green.

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\*Ed – I looked up the term melanistic rabbit and for those as ignorant as I am this dark colouring is usually caused by genetically-determined melanism (also called melanosis). Basically this term refers to any increase in dark pigment which may cause brown coloring or black patches or markings--but in the most extreme cases results in black or near black over most or all of the body. Humans are also subject to this, only we call it a sun tan!