

## Thorndon Birdlife, April 2013



March, it has been said, is the month that shows people who don't drink what it's like to have a hangover and after a beautiful, sunny, spring-like day on 5th - when I had a lovely view of a barn owl on a roadside fence post at Rishangles - we were plunged into much colder temperatures and yet more snow, which will have put the brakes on the breeding attempts of the chaffinch and robin that had started nest-building in my garden. As I write, 17th March (St. Patrick's Day), we are in a rather unsettled period of breezy, showery, cool conditions and there is a song thrush singing along The Street. The forecast for the end of the month and into April is for drier, calmer and milder conditions, so let's hope for some decent weather over Easter.

There have already been a few records of some of our early-arriving summer visitors



Lesser Whitethroat

elsewhere in Suffolk but it is in April that we should see and hear the first summer visitors in and around the village. The first chiffchaffs and blackcaps should be with us by the end of March and by the end of April the dawn chorus will be in full swing and we can expect to see swallows and house martins around the village, whitethroats and lesser whitethroats in the hedgerows and taller trees and reed warblers and cuckoo in the Fen.

April 25th is St. Mark's Day and it is at about that time that we usually see the first St. Mark's flies on the wing. These are the somewhat long-bodied, black flies, the males of which fly (sometimes in swarms) with their long legs hanging down.



Common Whitethroat

Last month I wrote about the yellowhammers that had come into a garden to feed and the highlight this month concerns another bunting that came into a village garden feeding station. The owners had seen this bird on several occasions towards the end of the winter and had been rather perplexed about its identity on its fleeting visits to their seed feeders. They very kindly alerted me



Female Reed Bunting

when it reappeared on 3rd March and I got to their house as quickly as I could. By the time I arrived it had disappeared but as we discussed its appearance and speculated about what it might be it came back and showed itself to be a female reed bunting. This just goes to show that one can never predict what's going to turn up because reed buntings live mainly in wet, freshwater habitats such as reed-fringed ditches and reedbeds, but they do also occur in arable habitats during the winter and I presume that, like last month's yellowhammers, this bird

had been driven into gardens with reliable supplies of food by the harsh weather.

Reed buntings are about the size of a house sparrow and are essentially brown and streaky - the archetypal "little brown job" - but, as with most buntings, the key to identifying them is the head pattern. The males are very striking, with a black head and a white collar, but the female is rather more subtly marked. Female reed buntings have a brown crown (the top of the head) and face relieved by a pale stripe over the eye (the supercilium), which runs around the back of the face (the ear coverts) to join with the white stripe that runs back from the base of the bill (the sub-moustacial stripe). Below that is a black stripe that also runs back from the base of the bill (the malar stripe). The back is brown with blackish streaks, the wings are brown with darker markings and the underparts are greyish-white with dark streaks. As with all buntings the bill is a typical seed-eater's: conical, like a sparrow's and the reed bunting's tail is black, with white outer feathers, like a yellowhammer.

I have seen the virtually all-white pheasant again a couple of times during March along the Thwaite Road and I also received a report of an aberrant chaffinch just like the one I saw at Thorndon Hill on 1st April last year. This bird had a lot of white plumage and it may well have been the same one as last year, but this time it was in a garden along the High Street.

I always welcome reports of birds and other wildlife of interest in Thorndon, Rishangles, Braiseworth and Hestley Green.

Stephen Dean