

Thorndon Birdlife, March 2013

As I write we're once again in the grip of very cold weather and the 'lazy' Suffolk wind; you know, the one that whistles in from the east and doesn't go around you, it blows right through you. Despite this, there are a few signs that spring is not far off: snowdrops, winter aconites, hazel catkins and even a few primroses in more sheltered spots. By the time we reach the Spring Equinox in a month's time the daffodils that were planted around the village by the Women's Club for the Millennium will be in flower and we should start to see and hear the first of our summer visitors.



The last cold and snowy spell of weather lasted up to 26th January, when there was still a lot of lying snow, and I enjoyed watching a lone fieldfare in my garden. It looked really beautiful against the snow with its purple-brown mantle, pale grey head, back and rump, yellow bill and whitish underparts with dark streaks on the breast and chevrons on the flanks. It's more usual to see fieldfares in flocks and indeed, as the most recent cold spell took hold, I saw a flock of about fifty flying west with their characteristic loose flight action and longish tails giving them a very distinctive appearance.

The cold weather also drove a small group of yellowhammers into a garden near Braiseworth. Generally, yellowhammers are found in areas with good thick hedges out in the fields and perhaps these birds had come into the garden looking for an easier meal. Male yellowhammers are vivid, sulphur-yellow on the head and only slightly less intense yellow on the underparts, with an orangey-brown wash across the breast. The females are less strikingly plumaged but both sexes have a bright chestnut rump and a proportionately long black tail with contrastingly white outer tail feathers. So, if you see a bird that looks a bit like a sparrow in its overall size and shape, but with a slightly longer-looking tail, it's worth looking to see whether you can see the colours that will give it away as a yellowhammer. As the male's head and body plumage abrades over the spring it reveals more and more of the yellow colour and so later in the spring they are astonishingly bright yellow.



Also on the subject of birds coming into gardens looking for food, a very interesting report came from someone in the village whose house has a thatched roof. They noticed that something was pulling out the thatch and they were very surprised to find that the culprit was a green woodpecker. I presume that it was looking for insects hibernating in the thatch but this is a piece of behaviour that I've not heard of before.



Also on 26th January I saw a flock of about a dozen lapwings flying languidly over a snowy field in Rishangles and the strong sunshine meant that the white of the snow reflected the light onto their black and white rounded wings and white underparts in a way that was absolutely stunning.

Then, overnight, the temperature increased by about 10 degrees Celsius and the next day the snow had gone. The contrast between the two days was remarkable and the warmer temperature certainly prompted several birds to start singing. Over the last three or four weeks, as well as the robins, I've heard dunnocks, wrens and blue tits singing and the amount of bird song will become increasingly evident throughout March as birds sing to attract a mate and defend a territory.

By the Spring Equinox I hope that the first blackcaps and chiffchaffs will have arrived back from their Mediterranean and North African wintering grounds. I wrote about blackcaps in last month's edition and their powerful, short, warbling song, characterised by sweet notes and chatters, is quite distinctive. It sounds a little like the beginning of a robin's song but rather than tailing-off wistfully, it remains powerful. It is often possible to hear the two singing together, which makes for an interesting comparison.

By contrast, the chiffchaff has one of the simplest songs: "chiff-chaff-chiff-chaff-chaff-chiff-chaff" and so on. For all its simplicity, the song of the chiffchaff is a sure sign that spring is on the way. Look out for these small warblers in taller trees around the village. They are olive-green with paler underparts and have a distinctive habit of flicking their tails downwards.



If you haven't done so already, now is the time to clean out any nest boxes that you have as this will get rid of any parasites that might be lying dormant in old nest material.

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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