

## Thorndon Birdlife, October 2013

October is very much a month of transition in the natural world and in birding terms it is the second - and often most surprising - month of the autumn. One thing's for certain, however, and that is that the last of our summer visitors will be departing for warmer climes and the first of our winter visitors will be arriving from the north and east.

Thank goodness we have had a prolonged period of warm summer weather in 2013 and, after the gloom and doom of last year, one of my abiding memories of summer 2013 will be the profusion of butterflies. It was a real delight to see so many small tortoiseshell (last year I only saw one) as well as good numbers of peacock, red admiral and large white, a single painted lady on 25th August and a single speckled wood on 15th September.

One of the things that's very noticeable at the end of the breeding season is that many of our familiar garden birds become conspicuous by their absence. Robins, for example, seem to vanish as they stop singing and retreat into cover to moult. The first sign that this process was nearing completion was on 25th August, when I heard one singing. Soon they will back to their customary tameness and familiarity.

Blackbirds also become very furtive and what I am sure is the very tame male that has been in and around my garden since last winter reappeared on 9th September. This bird is a first-year male; in other words one that hatched in 2012. You can tell these younger male blackbirds by the fact that their primary feathers are dark brown, rather than black. These are the outermost wing feathers and you can see them on the closed wing when the bird is hopping about on your lawn as they are the ones that project the furthest towards the tail. It is the combination of this bird's brown primary feathers and behaviour that make me suspect it's the same one. Once he has completed his post-breeding moult (which will include the wing feathers) I shall have to rely on his behaviour as a clue to his identity because his new primary feathers will be black. This bird has a rather distinctive song and so if he survives the winter and remains to breed next year I shall listen out for the tell-tale phrase in his song.

The prolonged summer weather appears to have extended the breeding season for some of our birds, such as the female pheasant I saw on 26th August with two young only a few days' old.

On 30th August I was delighted to find a grass snake again under the 'tin' that I put down and its size suggested that it was the same individual that I found there on 2nd May. These beautiful animals are still active on warmer days in October so don't be surprised if you see one.

Common Buzzards have bred in Thorndon this year and on 2nd September the two adults and three juveniles were all in the air together over Thwaite Road.

The autumn passage of migrant birds starts in August when the swifts and spotted flycatchers depart and continues right through September and October and into the beginning of November. During this time, when lots of birds are on the move, migrants can turn up almost anywhere (which is what makes the autumn such an exciting time). A good example of this was the reed warbler in a garden along Thwaite Road on 4th September. Reed warblers breed in reed beds and along reed-lined rivers but when they are on migration they will stop-off wherever they can find insects to feed on and a safe place to roost. This bird

was on its way to Africa for the winter. It may have been a local bird or from much further afield but as it was caught, ringed and released, if it's caught by another licenced bird ringer he or she will know that it was in Thorndon on 4th September 2013. This sort of information helps us to build up a picture of birds' movements and this, in turn, helps to identify important areas where birds breed, spend the winter, or stop-off on migration. For example, a lesser redpoll that was caught and ringed in Thorndon in 1st January this year was re-trapped on 25th April near Thetford. This may mean that some of the lesser redpolls that we see in the alder trees along the River Dove or feeding on nyger seed in our gardens in the winter may have bred in the Breckland forests. It will be interesting to see if this individual returns to Thorndon this winter.

So, in October, look out for the last of the swallows and house martins before they head off for Africa and for the first of the redwings and fieldfares arriving from Europe. You may also notice goldcrests joining the mixed flocks of blue tits, great tits, coal tits and long-tailed tits in your garden and we should start to see the first lapwings and golden plovers in the fields around the village.

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

Stephen Dean 678093