

Thorndon Birdlife, September 2013

Thank goodness we've had a much sunnier and warmer summer than last year; it's been a real pleasure to see such good numbers of butterflies, bees and other insects.

I hope that many of our insectivorous birds will have done well this year and I was pleased to receive reports of spotted flycatchers from four sites around the village. At one, although the birds lost their first clutch of eggs, they re-nested and successfully reared five young, which all fledged. At another site a pair successfully reared three young, which all left the nest on 8th August. Adult spotted flycatchers continue to feed their young for about three weeks after they've left the nest and at this time they are very vocal, uttering a short, high-pitched "zee" every few seconds. This is their 'contact call' (all birds use them) and is their way of keeping in touch with one another. It was this call that alerted me to their presence in my garden on 11th August. These are likely to have been local birds foraging a little further from their nesting site as they feed-up for their perilous journey to their African wintering grounds.



The swifts that have been present in my part of the village were still here on 8th August but the following day they had gone. A few migrant individuals continued passing through up to 13th August but I haven't seen one since. Like the spotted flycatchers, the swifts are on their way to Africa for the winter, having been with us for a little over three months. These are birds that live their lives at full throttle, arriving at the beginning of May, getting straight on with the business of nesting and rearing their young before heading south for the winter. For me they are the essence of summer and their abrupt departure at the beginning of August is a clear indication that autumn is on its way.



Turtle doves have been very thin on the ground this summer, being reported from a couple of sites along the High Street, in the Fen and between Thorndon and Stoke Ash and I can only hope that the better weather has allowed them to rear young successfully.

Reed warblers have again been present near the Fen and on 13th August I watched 11 swallows on the wires along The Street. There was a pair with four juveniles and another pair with three and, perched on the wires, it was possible to discern the slightly shorter tails of the two females and the much more subdued colours of the juveniles. Interestingly, one of the males was in full song and it was as if he was singing to summon his mate and young and keep them all together. During September, especially early in the mornings, we should see larger assemblages of swallows and house martins on the wires around the village as they gather together before heading off for warmer climes.



The prolonged cold spell in the spring meant that we didn't cut our buddleia back as early as we usually do, as a consequence of which it has flowered rather later this year. Since 14th July there have been impressive numbers of peacock, small tortoiseshell and large white butterflies, with fewer red admirals and meadow browns feeding on the flowers, along with lots of bees and

hoverflies. This year, for the third consecutive summer, I have received reports of tree bumblebees in nest boxes. This year they have been at two sites along the High Street and it seems that this recent colonist from Europe is becoming well established.



This has also been a good year for dragonflies and damselflies and some of these impressive insects will continue to occur during September. I was particularly pleased to see a male banded demoiselle damselfly in my garden on 13th July. Its spectacular metallic blue abdomen and the broad dark band across its wings were very distinctive as it paused on honeysuckle before heading off north.

Another real highlight on the insect front was the elephant hawk-moth caterpillar that was brought to me for identification on 20th August. These caterpillars are impressively large (10cm (4") in length and over 1cm (1/2") in width) and are either greenish or brown, with four black and white 'eye-spots' towards the head and a short, curved horn towards the tail.



The caterpillars pupate and then over-winter in chrysalis form before emerging as beautiful green and pink adult moths the following spring.

On 11th July there was a juvenile brown hare sat in the middle of The Street as I drove towards the Church and this, or another leveret, took up residence in my garden towards the end of the month where it made several depressions in the ground at the edge of the grass and in the flower beds. These depressions in the ground are called 'forms' and it is here that the animal rests (unlike rabbits, they do not dig burrows). Quite why a leveret would want to come out of the fields and into gardens I'm not sure, but I have seen one in my garden once before and I have spoken to other people who've seen them in theirs.

On 14th July I was sorry to find a dead badger on the road in the village and I presume it had been hit by a car the night before. They are becoming more common and widespread in Suffolk but I've never seen one in Thorndon. It's not the best way to see animals, of course, but road casualties like this (such as the otter a few years ago) do tell us that nocturnal animals that we otherwise hardly ever see are living in our neck of the woods. I'd be interested to hear from anyone else who has seen badgers in the village.

During the summer I have watched very different reactions of other birds to the presence of sparrowhawks. The first concerned a male blackbird, whose behaviour was very strange to watch. Over a period of several minutes he either froze and crouched down or stood up and stretched, all the time staring intently at the female sparrowhawk he had seen perched in an oak tree. When she took off and flew right over where he was he shot off into cover and as she passed me I saw that she was carrying prey and so wouldn't have been interested in trying to catch the blackbird. The second concerned the reaction of several house martins to a male sparrowhawk in flight. They flew around the sparrowhawk, never too close, calling excitedly, and eventually he drifted off out of their territory. This behaviour is called mobbing and lots of birds do this to birds of prey and owls.

Speaking of birds of prey, on 28th July, I had a lovely view of a red kite as it flew over Thorndon Hill towards the village.

During September do look out for swallows and house martins gathering on wires and for flocks of gulls, rooks, jackdaws and starlings as they take advantage of the worms and insects brought to the surface in freshly ploughed fields.

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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