

## Thorndon Birdlife, May 2014

April 2014 has been a lot more spring-like than last year and the combination of the mild winter just gone and the often settled conditions this spring have seen many plants much more advanced this year. For example, dandelions - which react to high atmospheric pressure to flower and set seed - have already been providing food for goldfinches.



Chiffchaff

By 28th March there were 4 Chiffchaffs in and around Rishangles and they continued to arrive during April; I saw two at the northern side of the Fen on 21st. I heard my first singing blackcap of the spring along The Street on 31st March and, as it wasn't there the following day, I suspect that it was a migrant, passing through.

One of the most exciting things in birding is visible migration, which is when you see birds actually on the move. On 13th April I saw my first swallow of the spring in Thorndon, flying purposefully northwards over the fields to the south of The Street. When you see birds like this there is a palpable sense of urgency in what they're doing: they need to get to their breeding grounds and get on with the important business of rearing young. The early spring migrants are usually those that are heading further north, where the breeding season is shorter, which means that those who will breed with us usually arrive a little later.

On 15th April I watched three house martins drifting slowly north over The Street and so I expect that those that breed in the Thorndon area will be with us before the end of April.



Yellowhammer

On 21st April I took a walk along the river from the water treatment works to the Fen. The conditions were calm and warm and I was very pleased to have prolonged views of a pair of yellowhammers, feeding on the ground. I stopped, just a few metres from them, and stood still. They carried on feeding and I raised my binoculars slowly (birds are often very tolerant of slow movement) and was able to get a wonderful view of the brightly-coloured male and his rather more subtly marked mate.



Orange-tip butterfly

Eventually, they flew to a nearby hedge and I carried on and saw several male orange-tip butterflies and quite a lot of St. Mark's flies. These two insects are classic early spring sights and I was especially pleased to see them as they were hard to find this time last year. The St. Mark's fly is named as it is usually on the wing by St. Mark's Day (25th April) and it is the large black fly that drags its long legs beneath it when it flies in rather loose swarms.

I also saw one of my favourite early spring insects, a dark-edged bee-fly, flying low over the grass on the playing field. These insects look superficially like a small bee because they have rounded hairy bodies, but they also have a very long proboscis. Their translucent wings have a dark leading edge, hence the name. Also flying over the playing field, into the rather fresh north-easterly breeze, was a single common buzzard.



Dark edged bee fly

May will see the chorus of bird song reach its peak as our resident breeding birds are joined by the last of our summer visitors and you should start to see juvenile fledglings being fed by their parents in your garden. The blackbirds in my garden have already fledged their first brood and I watched the female feeding a fledged youngster on 25th April.

At the beginning of May look out for the return of our swifts as they get ready to land for the first time since they left us last August.

As ever, I shall be pleased to receive reports of birds and other wildlife of interest in Thorndon, Rishangles, Hestley Green and Braiseworth.

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