

Thorndon Birdlife, September 2014

Although July and August this year have been largely warm and settled, we haven't had a drought and so plant growth has been vigorous and it's been a good summer for many insects. These, in turn, will have provided food for many of our resident breeding birds and summer visitors.

In contrast to last year, one of this summer's real delights has been the abundance of butterflies, with especially good numbers of small tortoiseshells, peacocks and red admirals. I've also seen gatekeepers, meadow browns, green-veined white and speckled wood. I'm hoping that having 'dead-headed' the Buddleia in my garden will prompt it to produce more flowers for the later butterflies, hoverflies and bees.

I've mentioned previously that little owls are getting rather harder to find and so I was pleased to hear that they have bred successfully at one location in the village and, after last year's disastrous breeding season - because of the long, cold winter and very late spring - barn owls are really bouncing back this year, helped by an abundance of voles, which are one of their main prey items. Vole populations fluctuate from year to year and in years when they are abundant barn owls and tawny owls can find more food for their young, more of which will survive and fledge.

Like most mammals, voles are not that easy to see, but I did enjoy prolonged views of a bank vole on 29th June as it picked up seeds under one of the feeders in my garden. Voles have blunter features than mice, with smaller eyes and less prominent ears and because their eyesight is not especially sharp it is possible to get good views if you just keep still. Bank voles have more reddish-brown tones to their fur and slightly longer tails than the short-tailed (or field) vole.

Twenty years ago little egrets were a rare sight in Britain but they are breeding successfully here now and are a regular sight along the rivers and the coast in Suffolk. They're a bit scarcer inland and so always nice to see in Thorndon and there have been a couple around the set-aside over the summer.

One of the summer's most impressive insects is the southern hawker dragonfly and I watched a female on two consecutive evenings at the beginning of August. Little-changed since prehistoric times, dragonflies generally lay their eggs on water plants and so, if you have a pond in your garden, you may see female dragonflies ovipositing (egg-laying) in the water before the end of the summer. When the eggs hatch the larvae live under water, where they are ferocious predators. Eventually they clamber out of the water onto an emergent stem, such as a reed, where they undergo the final stage of their remarkable transformation into adult dragonflies. Once emerged, dragonflies cannot fold their wings back along the body and so their wings are always held at right angles to the body when they are at rest. Damselflies, however, fold their wings back, parallel with their body when they are perched.

I was fascinated to receive a report of mussel shells being found along the river. I had a look at the shells and, as far as I can determine, these are swan mussels. Their larvae attach themselves to fish, where they develop and eventually drop off and settle on the river bed, where they grow into adults. Their presence here suggests good water quality and I dare say they are preyed upon by otters and herons.

Another surprising find was a cormorant, which took up residence on a pond in the village. It was a year-old bird, which after a few days wasn't really bothered by people. When I saw it it was swimming in the pond and then walked up onto the bank to dry itself off. Despite feeding entirely on aquatic prey, cormorants don't have the most effective waterproofing and so have to stand out, with their wings outstretched, in order to dry their feathers in the sun or the breeze. In recent decades cormorants have begun breeding well inland, in fresh water habitats, where they nest in trees. I do see them along the River Dove from time to time as well as birds flying over, but it was a real treat to get such wonderful views of one on a pond in the village.

Thank you for the reports of spotted flycatchers in and around the village this year. They've certainly bred successfully in Rishangles and along the High Street in Thorndon. By the time you read this they will be well on their way south for the winter. The other early migrant is the swift and I've enjoyed watching their screaming parties over the village this summer. Generally, they've gone by the end of the first week in August but I was surprised to see them as late as 13th this year.

Three days later there were gulls following the plough along the Thwaite Road and this will become a frequent sight during September and October. Other birds will be gathering into post breeding season flocks and so look out for starlings, rooks and jackdaws foraging in the fields and for mixed flocks of smaller birds in your garden.

September is when the autumn migration reaches its peak and almost anything can turn up. The weather will play a big role in governing bird migration and one of the most noticeable signs, as the days shorten and the temperature cools, will be groups of swallows and house martins on the telephone wires around the village.

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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