

Thorndon Birdlife, April 2014

The first month of the birding spring has not disappointed and, after what seemed like an eternity of wet and windy weather, it has been a real pleasure to enjoy some sunshine and calmer conditions at times.



Brambling

In the last week of February I was very pleased to hear of some bramblings coming to a garden on the outskirts of the village. These very smart looking, chaffinch-sized, finches breed from Scandinavia, eastwards through Russia and the northernmost parts of Asia, but spend the winter as far south as the Mediterranean. They have an orange wash across the breast and the 'shoulders', which contrasts with their very white belly. Dark spots on the white flanks can be obvious in a good view, as

can the dark tail and white rump, which is very different from the chaffinch, which has a black tail with white outer tail feathers and a greyish-olive rump. In the winter bramblings have a predominantly yellow bill. Finches moult into their winter plumage in the autumn and acquire their breeding plumage by a process of feather abrasion in which the pale tips to the feathers gradually wear away over the course of the winter to reveal the breeding plumage colours. In bramblings this gives the males a striking black head and back and this can be seen on birds seen later in the spring so do look out for these in April as they make their way back to their breeding grounds.

On 4th March the first chiffchaff of the spring was heard singing in trees along the High Street. As I've said before, chiffchaffs do have a preference for taller trees and so do listen out for their distinctive onomatopoeic song throughout April. The date of this first record is very early for Thorndon, so it is possible that it was an over-wintering bird rather than a fresh arrival from their normal wintering grounds in southernmost Europe and North Africa. Nonetheless, a singing chiffchaff is always a welcome sign that winter is over.



Little Owl

On two occasions during March a little owl was seen near the Church, which I am really pleased about because I haven't been seeing them in many of their former haunts. The little owl has an interesting history in Suffolk in that there were a few records in the first half of the nineteenth century, which probably related to migrants from the Continent, before those that had been introduced elsewhere in England spread to the county by about 1880. Many introductions of 'alien' species have wrought havoc with native

ones but the little owl is a rare and happy exception. These charming birds are not much bigger than a starling and are often seen during the day, perched on fence posts, when their piercing yellow eyes and 'frowning expression' are obvious.

During April, as well as an increasing amount of bird song generally, we should start to see and hear many more summer visitors and by the end of the month our swallows and house martins will have returned from their African wintering grounds, along with blackcaps, whitethroats and lesser whitethroats. April is when the coming into leaf of deciduous trees and bushes brings forth an increase in the insects on which these birds feed and so, not surprisingly, it is the month when the spring migration really gets into full swing.

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

Stephen Dean.