

May is the high point of the birding spring and there will be lots going on. Our resident birds and those that have recently arrived from their wintering grounds will be in full song and concentrating on the all important business of nesting and rearing their young.



On 29th March I had a lovely view of a barn owl, perched on a fence post in Rishangles, in broad daylight. Barn owls had a wonderful breeding season last year and so there are good numbers around and it's not unusual to see them during the day, especially if they've got young to feed. I received a report of another one, again during the day, between The Street and the River Dove on 16th April.

On Easter Sunday I saw a single bullfinch at Rishangles, a hare between The Wash and the Church and my first 5-spot ladybird of the spring.



A week later, on 12th April, I heard my first blackcap of the spring, singing from a garden on the north side of The Street and later the same morning I saw my first swallow of the spring at Rishangles. The swallow was a male (you can tell adult males from females in the spring because the males have much longer outer tail feathers, which is quite obvious on a perched bird) and it is always a joy to see the first one and to wonder at its astonishing migration back here to breed, all the way from southern Africa.

The following day, 13th April, a cuckoo was heard calling between the High Street and The Street.

Last month I mentioned the survey of house martins that is taking place this year and next year and I was delighted to see at least four, and possibly as many as six, over The Street on 16th April. This is quite an early date for Thorndon and I wonder if these birds were passing through, on their way further north. By the time you read this 'our' house martins should be back at their nests and I'd be very pleased to hear from you if you have them nesting on your house or outbuildings.



The real feeling that spring had sprung that day was enhanced by a single peacock butterfly. I've seen another one since but I haven't yet seen any orange-tip butterflies (one of the classic early spring species). Other insects to look out for are the dark-edged bee-fly, which you'll see low over the ground, and the St. Mark's fly, which is the rather long-bodied black fly that you see in small, loose swarms, usually at about rooftop height.

I'm no expert on gastropods but I knew that the rather unusual-looking slug that I saw on 16th April was something I hadn't seen before. It was quite slim-bodied and about 2" (5cm) long and was olive-green with rather pretty yellow rosette markings along its entire length. A quick look in the field guide enabled me to identify it as a yellow slug, which is quite common, apparently. I know that slugs are the gardener's least favourite visitor but they are a favoured prey item of the hedgehog.



On the evening of 21st April I saw a single bat, hawking for insects over Pond Farm. It was small and so almost certainly a pipistrelle. These animals are always a delight to see and it is marvellous to watch their agility as they pursue their insect prey, which they detect by echo location.



In May the arrival of our summer visitors will continue and I am especially looking forward to seeing my first swifts of the spring. I shall also watch with interest and hope that the robins that are nesting in my garden will be successful. I'm putting out mealworms for them and any that are left at the end of the day will, I hope, be hoovered up by hedgehogs at night.

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

Stephen Dean 678093