

Thorndon Birdlife, November 2015



As I had hoped, I got an opportunity to see good numbers of birds taking advantage of the temporary supply of food that was made available by ploughing. On one day during October there was a lot of activity in the field between The Street and the High Street, when good numbers of gulls, starlings, rooks, jackdaws, carrion crows and wood pigeons were feeding in loose flocks.

The gulls were mostly black-headed gulls, with smaller numbers of common gulls and herring gulls. The black-headed gull is our commonest small gull

and during the winter the adults lose the black (actually very dark brown) hood and just have a dark spot on the ear coverts (just behind the eye), so they look mainly white. The back and wings are in fact light grey and there with a very obvious white leading edge to the primary feathers (the outer part of the wing), which have black tips. The head, body and tail are white. Black-headed gull has a red bill, tipped with black, and red legs and feet.



Interestingly, the common gulls and herring gulls were all in what is known as 'first-winter' plumage, which is to say the first plumage they have after their post-juvenile moult (so they hatched this summer). The different plumages that gulls have before they acquire their distinctive adult coloration can be quite bewildering because common gull doesn't moult into its adult plumage until it is in its third winter after hatching and herring gull doesn't moult into its adult plumage until it is in its fourth winter after hatching. So, identifying and ageing immature gulls can be quite a challenge.

The black-headed and herring gulls may have bred locally but the common gulls may well have come from a lot further away as, apart from a breeding population in Kent, they are a bird of the north of Britain and northern Europe, all the way from Scandinavia to Russia. Not surprisingly, the wood pigeons included adults and juveniles, the latter having dark eyes.

Seeing rooks, carrion crows and jackdaws together enables you to appreciate just how much smaller the jackdaws are, with their pale eyes and grey colour at the back of the head. The starlings are now acquiring their smart, spotted winter plumage.



During October we had some prolonged spells of high pressure, giving us easterly or north-easterly winds. These conditions helped many thousands of birds to cross the North Sea to winter here, thereby escaping the much harsher conditions of eastern and northern Europe. One of those species is Europe's smallest bird, the goldcrest. Amazingly, these tiny birds flock here in their thousands and their thin, high-pitched call is a frequent sound in our gardens, woods and hedgerows during the winter and I have heard them calling around the village. Look out for them with roving flocks of blue tits, great tits and long-tailed tits during November.

I'm still (24th October) getting three hedgehogs in the garden, feeding on the mealworms that I put out for them. They look to be putting on plenty of weight in preparation for their forthcoming hibernation. If you're having a bonfire party, please check the bonfire before you light it in case there are any hedgehogs there (they do like to hole-up in piles of brushwood), as they need all the help they can get. By way of contrast, on 25th October I saw a single red admiral butterfly on ivy flowers.

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