

Thorndon Birdlife, December 2016 - January 2017

First of all, I should like to thank all the readers who have contacted me about birds and other wildlife in Thorndon, Rishangles, Hestley Green and Braiseworth (and one or two further afield) during the course of 2016. I am always interested to receive these reports as they give a much more comprehensive picture of what is going on than I would ever be aware of just from my own efforts.

As I've said before, the first part of understanding any living thing is to know what it is and I enjoy the challenge of helping people to identify things that they are uncertain of.

December, January and February are the birding winter months and, to a large extent, what we see is governed by the weather, both here and in continental Europe. This because if the weather in Europe is severely cold a lot of birds, will cross the North Sea to our generally more clement maritime climate. There are fewer such migratory movements if the weather is relatively mild.



Treecreeper

During the winter many birds are a lot more gregarious than they are during the breeding season, when they have to defend a territory, and so you will encounter mixed flocks of blue tits, great tits, long-tailed tits and coal tits in your garden and in the woods and hedgerows around the village. These roving flocks of birds take advantage of many pairs of eyes, both in terms of looking for food and avoiding predators. Within these flocks look out for treecreepers, goldcrests, nuthatches and, if you're lucky, marsh tits.

Providing a variety of food at your garden feeding station will help to cater for many different birds. All of the previously mentioned birds will enjoy suet blocks or balls and peanuts and some will also take sunflower seeds. It is interesting to watch how different birds exploit the same food source; finches, such as house sparrow, greenfinch, chaffinch and goldfinch are adapted to manipulate seeds in their bills so as to extract the nutritious kernel from the husk, so they can come to a seed feeder and perch in one place and gorge themselves. Tits, on the other hand cannot do this, so they fly in, take one seed and fly off with it. They don't go far but they have to hold the seed down with one foot and chisel it open with their bill to get at the kernel.



Marsh Tit

It is also worth scattering some food on the ground for those birds that are less keen to come to bird feeders and tables. Dunnocks, robins and blackbirds will take advantage of food scattered on the ground and mealworms are a favourite.

Don't forget to provide a supply of clean water for birds to drink and bathe in.



Red-legged Partridge

In the last couple of weeks I've seen a small covey of red-legged partridges near The Wash. These handsome birds are one of four species in this family that occur in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and Asia Minor. Red-legged partridge was introduced to Britain from France and they have been in Suffolk since the eighteenth century. They are striking birds with bold black, white and chestnut barring on the pale grey flanks and a vivid head pattern of grey crown and white stripe over the eye, which is separated from the white chin and throat by a black stripe that runs from the base of the bill, through the eye and across the ear coverts so as to encircle the white throat. Below this stripe the grey ground colour of the breast is streaked with black and white. The bill, eye-ring, legs (of course) and feet are

bright red. One of the most interesting things about red-legged partridges is that the female will often lay two clutches of eggs, one of which she incubates whilst the male incubates the other. This undoubtedly helps to mitigate any losses to predators and to bolster the population.

Partridges are generally ground-dwelling and so, contrary to The Twelve Days of Christmas, you're unlikely to find one in a pear tree!

With best wishes for Christmas and the New Year,

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