

Thorndon Birdlife, June 2016

Spring has well and truly sprung after the late cold spell - the "Blackthorn Winter" - and I think that the cool weather, with northerly winds, towards the end of April, held up some of our migrants. Even so, on 22nd April, a turtle dove was heard singing along the High Street and a male blackcap was in a garden along Thwaite Road.

I was very pleased to receive a report of a marsh tit feeding young in a garden along Thwaite Road on 29th April because it is nothing like as common as blue, great and coal tits. Despite its name, the marsh tit is really a bird of mature trees and often its presence is given away by its "Pitchu" call. It is about the size of a blue tit but much more sober in its colours, having brown upperparts, wings and tail, a neat black cap and a small black bib, off-white cheeks and underparts, a short, pointed, black bill and strikingly blue-grey legs and feet.

I saw my first house martin in the village on 30th April, which is about a week later than usual, but by 4th May the weather had warmed up and there were swifts, swallows and house martins all hawking for insects together over The Street. This is always a treat as when you see the three - often confused - species together you can really appreciate the differences in their flight action and plumage: they really are distinctly different from one another.

The same day I saw a sparrowhawk and 13 starlings over The Street and several 7-spot ladybirds. The starlings have bred successfully as I saw a fledged juvenile being fed by an adult on 20th May.

The weather had really warmed up significantly by the early May Bank Holiday weekend and there were a lot of migrant birds on the move. On 8th May the first spotted flycatchers were seen near the Church, which is quite an early date considering that they sometimes don't arrive until June.

Also on 8th May I saw single orange-tip and holly blue butterflies. The male orange-tip is a distinctive white butterfly with orange tips to the forewings. The hind wing is beautifully marbled with green on the underside and that marbling effect is present on the upper surface of the hind wing too, but in a much more subtle way. The male holly blue butterfly is a paler blue than the common blue butterfly, but they are easily told apart when they are at rest because the holly blue has very pale blue undersides to the wings with tiny black spots, whereas the common blue has duskier underwings with larger black spots, encircled by white rings. Both species are small and holly blue is particularly fond of ivy.

On 30th April I had wonderful views of two brown hares and although one appeared to be very interested in the other, I didn't see them 'boxing', which is when the female fends off an over-amorous male.

I was delighted to receive a report of a grass snake, near the Church, on 8th May. These harmless reptiles are very distinctive, having a green body with delicate black vertical streaks and a yellow 'collar' at the back of the head. Grass snakes are excellent swimmers and will come to garden ponds, where they feed on amphibians.

June is the first month of the birding summer, so look out for newly-fledged juvenile birds begging for food from their parents. Do take time to enjoy the swallows, house martins and swifts over the village and look out for turtle doves and spotted flycatchers as the last ones arrive from their African wintering grounds.

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

Stephen Dean 678093