

Thorndon Birdlife, September 2017

September is the first month of the autumn in birding terms and there are lots of birds on the move as many of our summer visitors depart for warmer climes and, by the end of the month, the first of our winter visitors will be arriving from the north and the east.



Spotted Flycatcher

I received a report of spotted flycatchers in a garden along the High Street on 24th June, one of only two locations in the village this summer, which is poor in comparison to recent years. Similarly, I've heard of only one other turtle dove, this one in Rishangles on 27th June. I do wonder whether the run of cold northerly winds that we experienced in the early summer held birds up on their way here and they simply didn't make it in time to breed here. If that's the case I can only hope that they were able to breed elsewhere in northern Europe. Certainly, swallows were absent this year from one of their traditional breeding sites in the village where they've done well in recent years.

On 25th July and 14th August I was delighted to see a male bullfinch in my garden. There has been a bumper crop of honeysuckle berries this year and I have seen one feeding on them before, so I wonder if that is what he was after. My earliest birding memory is of a pair of bullfinches in our garden in Essex, when I was six or seven years old (I wasn't recording things quite as diligently in those days) and so it is a bird that is always a special delight for me. I hope to see this one again as there are plenty of berries for it to eat.



Bullfinch



Green Woodpecker

Also on 25th July I had wonderful close views of an adult female green woodpecker feeding on the ground with a recently fledged juvenile male. This was one of the closest views I've ever had of a juvenile green woodpecker and I hadn't realised that even at that early age you can tell males from females because of the colour of the malar stripe that runs down the side of the neck (red in males and black in females). As this bird was a juvenile it had completely dark eyes and hadn't yet developed the pale iris of the adult.

It's been quite a good summer for insects and on 30th June I saw two hummingbird hawk moths together, feeding on valerian. I'm pretty sure that this is the first time that I've seen more than one at a time in Thorndon. On 2nd July I watched a small tortoiseshell butterfly warming itself up in the sunshine and the I saw another, along with a ringlet and a speckled wood and a red soldier beetle (harmless and beautiful), which we used to call 'bloodsuckers' when I was a child.

On the 23rd and 24th July the weather was very hot and I watched a screaming party of swifts hurtling round the rooftops along The Street. Always redolent of high summer this is a spectacle that I look forward to every year. This year there were quite a lot of swifts on the move on 30th July and I didn't see one in Thorndon after that date, so they left a little earlier this year than usual. By the time you read this they will already be over the forests of central Africa. In the hot weather on those two days there were several red admiral and peacock butterflies on the buddleia in my garden and on 5th August there was a single painted lady butterfly there. Like the hummingbird hawk moth and the red admiral butterfly, the painted lady butterfly is a migrant from southern Europe and North Africa that arrives in Britain in variable numbers each year.

Another very impressive migrant insect is the southern hawker dragonfly and on 21st August I caught a female that had come into the house and put it out in the garden. Spectacular and harmless to people, they will often come into gardens, where they patrol methodically on the lookout for insect prey and they can be quite curious, flying up to you, having a good look and then darting off. As well as being generally larger than damselflies, dragonflies always hold their wings at 90 degrees to the body when they are at rest, whereas damselflies fold their wings along their bodies.



Southern Hawker Dragonfly

There have been two adult hedgehogs in my garden over the summer and I know that other people have been feeding hedgehogs in their gardens. I feed the ones in my garden on dried mealworms, which they seem to relish. Other people put out cat food and dog food, which they're also very partial

to. I also have a dish of water for them and it is interesting to watch them coming out in the evenings, making straight for the mealworms and then having a drink once they've eaten them all.

As I write, 25th August, there are still plenty of house martins and swallows around the village so, now that the enigmatic swifts have departed, do take time to enjoy them. They've already taken to perching on wires in family groups and these assemblages will become more obvious during September, especially early in the morning and in the evening, as they prepare for their long migration. We know that 'our' swallows fly all the way to South Africa but we still don't know where in Africa house martins spend the winter.

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

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