

Thorndon Birdlife, April 2017

As I write, we are heading for a few days of high pressure, dry weather and easterly winds, which will help our early summer visitors as they strive to get here from their wintering grounds. By the end of April the dawn chorus will be augmented by the songs of chiffchaffs in the tall trees, blackcaps in gardens and whitethroats in scrubby areas and hedgerows. The swallows will return from their wintering grounds in South Africa and the house martins from their still unknown winter quarters. April really is an exciting month of profound change in the world of birds.

Many of the birds that return to breed here in the summer do so because of the profusion of insect life, which they rely on for their food and to feed their young; quite simply, they cannot find enough here during the winter and it is that simple requirement for food that drives their phenomenal migrations.

It really is worth looking at these birds and wondering at the sheer determination of such small creatures to overcome adverse weather, challenging terrain, sea crossings and almost unimaginable physical effort in order to get here to raise their young.

On 26th February there were good numbers of common gulls in the fields at Thorndon Hill and between Thorndon and Occold. The adults of these birds are really smart looking in the late winter and early spring with their white head, body and tail contrasting with their grey back and wings (with black wingtips) and yellow bill, yellow-green legs and feet and dark eye, that gives them a very benign look. Although called 'common' gull, these are not the commonest of our smaller gulls (that title belongs to the black-headed gull) and they breed further north in the UK and indeed much further north in Scandinavia and Russia.

During March I was also very pleased to see three brown hares one day, two of which were chasing each other round like, well, 'mad March hares'! Although it was clear that the female wasn't about to give in to the male's determined pursuit, she didn't have to fend off his advances with any 'boxing'. Also towards the end of the month I watched a pair of red-legged partridges quite close to my garden. They have bred in the garden in previous years and these two looked like they might have been prospecting for a nest site. They were certainly very skittish.

The surge in insect numbers in April should include the first butterflies, such as the aptly-named orange-tip, the males of which are white, with extensive orange tips to their forewings. Both the males and females have a lovely green marbling on the underside of their hind wings, which is very distinctive when you see them at rest. If the weather is mild by the third week of April we should see swarms of St. Mark's flies. These are the black flies with trailing legs that fly lazily around in groups at rooftop height around St. Mark's Day (25th April). My favourite early spring insect is the dark-edged bee-fly, which is the dark, hairy, bee-like insect with the long proboscis that you see flying around close to the ground.

I really look forward to seeing all of these and many others as we wend our way through the middle month of the spring and I shall be pleased to receive any reports of birds and other wildlife of interest in Thorndon, Rishangles, Hestley Green and Braiseworth.

Stephen Dean 678093