

Thorndon Birdlife, December 2017-January 2018

December sees the beginning of the ornithological and meteorological winter, during which our winter visitors will continue to arrive from colder climes further north and east, their movements dictated by day length, the harshness of the weather and the availability of food.

As I write, I have only recorded three frosts so far this autumn and the hedgehog in my garden is still coming for mealworms and cat food, so I hope that it will be able to put on enough weight to be able to hibernate if the weather gets really cold.

Also on the mammal front, I received a report of a badger in broad daylight near the River Dove. I was very interested to receive this report for two reasons: all my badger sightings have been at night and I have never seen a live one in our part of Suffolk. Unfortunately, a good indicator of the distribution and abundance of nocturnal mammals is ones that fall victim to road traffic and the only one I've seen in Thorndon was dead at the side of the road a few years ago. I hope one day that I'll see a live one here.

The late autumn and early winter is when tawny owls start calling to attract a mate and establish a territory and there are two common calls: the females utter a loud "Kee-vick" and the males make the familiar hooting call. I received a call from a resident to say that, sadly, a tawny owl had come down the chimney in her house and had died. The bird had been found when the chimney was swept and it had been ringed and so the lady called me to let me know. Not surprisingly, the ring that the tawny owl had been fitted with was a British ring (they don't tend to go far during their lives) and I submitted the details to the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO).



The details came back quite quickly (this can all be done online these days) and this tawny owl had been ringed as a nestling, in Thornham, on 12th May 2012. So, although it hadn't moved very far from where it hatched (4km), it had survived for five years. The ringing of birds (by fully trained and appropriately licenced ringers (which is overseen by the BTO)) can tell us a lot about how long birds live for and where they go. The oldest ringed tawny owl in Great Britain so far was found dead 21 years, 10 months and 24 days after it had been ringed.

I've not yet seen many redwings and fieldfares, just two flocks of about 60 and a dozen respectively, all flying west. As their numbers increase over the winter, look out for them on berry-bearing bushes, such as 'fire thorn', but they are not the only birds that are attracted to brightly-coloured berries and I was very pleased to hear of a pair of bullfinches on fire thorn along the High Street on 11th November. Surely one of our most attractive birds, the stunning males are a vivid combination of reddish-pink, black and white.



I am always pleased to receive reports of birds and other wildlife of interest in Thorndon, Ris-hangles, Hestley Green and Braiseworth and I am very grateful to all those who have shared their sightings with me over the course of 2017. There is a lot of interest in the natural world in our gardens, hedgerows, woods, fields, ponds and rivers and, in contrast to many things over Christmas and the New Year, it doesn't have to cost anything to enjoy.

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