

Thorndon Birdlife, March 2017

We certainly had a real variety of weather during February: very cold conditions in the middle of the month, with a covering of snow on 12th, overcast and mild conditions a week later, on 19th, and a ferocious storm on 23rd, which is just abating as I write. March can be a turbulent month, sometimes characterized by equinoctial gales, but with the lengthening days and the sun at a progressively higher elevation in the sky, settled and sunny weather can be quite warm. We shall see.

March is the first month of the ornithological spring and will see a transition as bird song and nesting activity increase, the departure of many of our winter visitors and the arrival of our first summer migrants.

On 3rd February I heard greylag geese calling as they flew over. These may have been migrants or local birds on the move, it's impossible to say, but I've only heard them flying over the village once before.

The following day I received two calls about goldcrests at garden feeding stations, at one of which the bird was feeding on suet. I've written before about how some of the goldcrests that winter with us come from as far away as Russia and I wonder whether these birds were fattening themselves up for their long spring migration.

On 6th February I received a report of a grey heron near the Wash. These birds are always a delight to see because of their sheer size and usually languid flight, which makes them rather majestic.

On 16th, as the weather was getting a little milder, I heard a dunnock singing. The old name for these rather understated birds is hedge sparrow, but although they are about the size of a house sparrow and have brown and grey, dark-streaked plumage, you can tell that they're not sparrows because they have a pointed, robin-like bill, unlike the conical, seed-eating bill of a sparrow. The dunnock belongs to a European and Asian family of birds called the accentors and you'll typically see them on the ground, foraging for food and flicking their wings nervously. Their song is a short, pleasant sounding warble, characterized by being in a very narrow sonic frequency range; in other words, it sounds a bit flat, but it is very distinctive and when it comes to identifying birds just from their calls and songs, it is one of the easier ones to learn.

As expected, hazel trees in open spots are dripping with catkins and there has been an impressive display of snowdrops near the Church, and I was delighted to see a pair of grey partridges and a very handsome brown hare near Rishangles on 19th February.

Look out for the hares 'boxing' in March as females try to deter over-amorous males and keep an eye out for hedgehogs in your garden. You may also see frogs and toads coming to spawn if you have a pond and the cheerful yellows of primroses, lesser celandines and daffodils will hint at the arrival of spring proper.

Listen out for the simple onomatopoeic song of the chiffchaff and the wonderful rich warbling song of the blackcap, the first of our summer visitors to arrive.

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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