

Thorndon Birdlife, October 2017

I am writing this on the evening of the Autumn Equinox, having put out the mealworms for our regular hedgehog just after 7pm, and it's sobering to think that the nights will be getting longer for the next three months. This is a time of real transition, when the last of our summer visitors will be heading off to the south and our winter visitors will begin to arrive from the north.

One of the signs that the breeding season is over is when flocks of gulls appear in our fields, where they follow the plough, picking up worms and other invertebrates. When resting, gulls like to loaf around in open places, before flying off to roost on bodies of water in the evening. On 26th August there was a large flock of gulls loafing in a field between Occold and The Wash. There were 362 birds in total, mostly lesser black-backed gulls (337) accompanied by a smaller number of herring gulls (24) and one lone black-headed gull.

The same day I saw a southern hawker dragonfly in my garden and I was surprised to see a grey wagtail on the muck heap at Briswell Green. I tend to think of grey wagtails as being winter visitors to our part of Suffolk and so seeing one on a warm August afternoon seemed a bit incongruous. Perhaps they have bred nearby. Also along Briswell Green I had lovely views of a female yellowhammer and two stock doves.

On 27th August I saw a blackcap in my garden, which was either a female or a juvenile, as it had a reddish-brown cap (only the adult males have a black cap). Blackcaps are very fond of soft fruit in the autumn, such as elderberries and blackberries, which have a high sugar content and make excellent 'fuel', enabling them to fatten-up for their migration. Whilst 'our' blackcaps migrate to winter in southern Europe and the Mediterranean, others, from central Europe, migrate west and spend the winter here in Britain.

On 2nd September I had the opportunity to compare two of our small falcons within a minute, when just after seeing the familiar kestrel, hovering by the roadside, a hobby flew over, heading south quite purposefully. The hobby is noticeably slimmer and shorter-tailed than the kestrel and has much more pointed wings. Unlike the essentially brown, buff and grey kestrel, the hobby is very dark grey on the upperparts and is white underneath with bold black streaks. The head is reminiscent of a peregrine with a white throat and 'cheeks', contrasting with a black mask and 'moustache'.

On 7th September I was pleased to see two hedgehogs together in my garden, one of which was considerably smaller than the other, perhaps a well grown juvenile. If you have hedgehogs in your garden please do continue to put food and water out for them throughout the rest of the autumn as they need all the help they can get to feed up enough to get to a weight that will see them through the winter.

In October we usually see the arrival of blackbirds from northern and central Europe, redwings and fieldfares from Scandinavia and northern Europe and goldcrests from as far away as Russia. Do enjoy the spectacle of autumn's changing colours as the leaves turn and mushrooms and toadstools emerge.

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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