

Thorndon Birdlife May 2019

I saw what may have been the same two hares that I mentioned last month on 30th March and they were a bit more animated, although I didn't see them 'boxing'. The next day I had wonderful views of a pair of grey partridges in the field behind my house. They were close to the back of my garden, working their way closer all the time, and I really hoped they would come in. We have had red-legged partridges nesting in the garden before and to have had grey partridges actually in the garden would have been a real treat. The male was very alert and was noticeably more brightly coloured than his mate, with that lovely subtle orange colour on his face and throat and a very obvious dark inverted horseshoe mark on his breast. Eventually they moved back out into the field, but it was lovely to see such a handsome (and these days rather scarce) bird so close.

The first bat that I've heard of this spring (presumably a pipistrelle) was over The Street on 8th April and the following day a brood of 14 mallard ducklings was seen further south along the Thwaite Road. Also on 9th four common buzzards were over Thwaite Road with a single red kite. Eventually the four buzzards drifted off together and the kite headed off in a different direction.

As the weather warmed up in the week before Easter we came under the influence of clearing skies and a pronounced south-easterly airflow from the Continent, and on Good Friday I saw my first house martins of the spring when half a dozen were over The Street shadowing a kestrel that was drifting north at about twice rooftop height. Generally, a kestrel wouldn't be fast enough to catch a house martin in flight (although I did see one trying many years ago), but the natural response of small birds when they see a predator is to keep it in sight if they don't need to avoid it urgently.

Also on Good Friday I saw my first holly blue butterfly of the spring and heard a blackcap singing in a garden along the High Street. Eventually I had a good view of it singing from trees and bushes around its intended territory. The song of the blackcap begins and ends with a quiet, low-pitched chattering and then breaks into an explosive warble, with sweet notes, before terminating with the lower-pitched, scratchier notes. You'll hear the whole thing if the bird is close, but usually all you hear is the middle part of the song: loud, short, sweet and really attention-grabbing.

Lots of summer visitors have been seen along the coast in the warm, dry conditions - with favourable winds - over Easter and these conditions (especially when it's clear at night, when many birds migrate) will really help these birds to get to where they need to be.

In May the birdsong will reach its peak as our resident birds are joined by the majority of our summer visitors. At the beginning of the month 'our' swifts should be back from Africa and they will land when they get back to their nest sites for the first time since they left us last August. The fact that they will have been on the wing, night and day, for the last eight or nine months (including a sea crossing over the Gulf of Guinea on their spring migration) surely makes the swift one of our most remarkable birds. By the end of May I hope that we'll also see spotted flycatchers, one of the last summer visitors to arrive.

May is the most exciting month of the birding spring, when almost anything can turn up.

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

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