

Thorndon Birdlife, April 2020

In these times of self-isolation and social distancing the rhythms of the natural world carry on and at this time of year birds' instincts turn to pairing up and breeding. This was clearly illustrated for me the other day when, in amongst a flock of woodpigeons feeding on the ground, were a pair of stock doves and a pair of red-legged partridges (there were also two brown hares hunkered down together in a furrow, keeping out of the wind). There are already two pairs of blackbirds nesting in my garden.

At the start of the breeding season birds need to be in peak condition and look their best. Birds moult their feathers at different times and some, such as yellowhammers and chaffinches, moult their head and body feathers in the autumn and the new feathers have buff or brownish tips, which gradually wear away over the course of the winter, to reveal the bright colours of what we think of as their summer plumage.

One of our commoner summer visitors, the whitethroat, moults its wing feathers over the late summer and so has pristine wing feathers for its arduous migration to sub-Saharan Africa, where it spends the winter, but it doesn't then grow new wing feathers for its return migration in the spring. Whitethroats will be back here in April, so when you see one rising up from a bush or hedge in its short song flight, think about the wear and tear on its wings over the thousands of miles it will have travelled since it left us last September and that it will not grow new ones until the end of this year's breeding season. Amazing.

If I were to ask you which is the most common British breeding bird, you might well think it is the woodpigeon (actually the fourth most common), the blackbird (fifth most common) or the carrion crow (which comes in at number 21). You may be surprised to hear that figures released by the British Trust for Ornithology (which carries out a multitude of studies of British birds) show that the commonest British breeding bird, with 11 million pairs, is the wren. You may not see wrens that often, but you will almost certainly hear them as they have a disproportionately loud, powerful and varied song for such a small bird. I saw one in my garden on 19th March and I shall look forward to hearing the song over the coming weeks.

During April look out for the return of our swallows and house martins and listen out for the increasing amount of bird song, both from our resident birds, such as the blackbird and chaffinch, and from our summer visitors, such as the chiffchaff, blackcap and whitethroat as the breeding season reaches its peak.

April is a wonderful time to enjoy nature as there is so much going on and the great thing about that is that it doesn't have to cost a penny. Enjoy the beauty of plants and trees coming into leaf and flower, attracting a multitude of bees, butterflies and other insects; frogs, toads and newts in our ponds; and the birds singing and nesting. If you're lucky you may see a hedgehog or even a grass snake.

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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