

## Thorndon Birdlife, February 2020

As I write we are experiencing a settled spell of weather with very high atmospheric pressure. The highest barometric pressures are often recorded in January and what they give us is cold and still weather with sunny days and clear nights. Established for any length of time, however, and they cause dense fog. As at today (22nd January), that's exactly what has happened.

From a bird's point of view it is the cold temperatures that create the biggest problem and they need to spend as much time as possible finding food, so anything we can do to help can make all the difference.

On 5th January I saw six skylarks together in the field to the south of The Street. They might be the archetypal 'little brown job', but they're appreciably bigger than a house sparrow, for example. Against the dark earth it was the birds' white underparts that stood out the most and watching them through the telescope (they weren't very close) their heavily streaked brown upperparts were very obvious. They have an off-white stripe over the eye that curls round the 'face' and joins the base of the bill. In flight they show a whitish trailing edge to their broad wings and white sides to the tail. Skylarks have a rather characteristic fluttering flight action and, of course, they have a most wonderful song, typically delivered from a great height, where they can remain aloft for many minutes.

The following week I was very pleased to see a mistle thrush flying into the mature oak tree on the edge of my garden. When we first came to Thorndon I used to see mistle thrushes a lot and they are one of the first birds to start singing (and nesting) at the end of the winter. As you might expect from their name, mistle thrushes are very partial to mistletoe berries, which they will defend aggressively against other birds with their harsh football-rattle call. Like their smaller relative, the song thrush, mistle thrushes have pale underparts with dark spots and brown upperparts, but the spots are more circular in shape and they are paler brown on the head and back, and especially the rump (just above the tail). Mistle thrushes have a languid flight action and a long tail, which gives them a fieldfare-like appearance. If you see one flying away from you look out for the white corners to the tail, which is unique among resident British thrushes.

I've seen barn owls recently along Stoke Road between Thorndon and Stoke Ash and along the Thwaite Road between Thorndon and Collingsford Bridge. I've also seen one tawny owl in trees at the 'fiveways'.

On 19th January, in the sunshine, I saw a little group of male winter gnats doing their up and down display, as if they're each attached to an invisible puppeteer's thread, which they perform to attract females. So, even in the depths of the winter there are a few insects about for our insectivorous birds.

We'll have to see what happens weather-wise in February, but it can be the coldest month of the winter (as it was two years ago), but as we get towards the end of the month lots of our resident birds will start singing and you'll see birds that have been in groups all winter turning up in your garden in pairs.

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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