

Thorndon Birdlife, May 2020

Well, what strange times these are. The combination of generally dry and sunny weather, and not being able to travel very far, has given me the opportunity to spend a lot of time looking at what's happening in my garden, with a few surprises...

As expected, the first chiffchaff was heard in trees along the River Dove near the set-aside in the third week of March and there was a red kite frequenting the Braiseworth area at the same time. In fact, there have been a lot of records of red kite around Suffolk in the last month and I saw one over The Street on 4th April.

On 2nd April I saw a flock of about 40 golden plovers over the field to the south of The Street, but they didn't settle, so I couldn't get a good look to see how many of them were in their spectacular summer plumage. The following day I had a really good prolonged view of a female sparrowhawk, perched on a low bough of the oak tree on the edge of my garden. It was facing away from me, but I could tell it was a female because her back was brown (males are blue-grey) and when she turned her head I could see her yellow irises (orange in males). You don't often see sparrowhawks perched so this was a good opportunity to really enjoy a prolonged view.

The following day, as well as the red kite and one common buzzard, there were several gulls flying over the village in a south-easterly direction. They were mostly lesser black-backed and black-headed gulls, with a few common gulls and then, surprise of the month, an adult Mediterranean gull! This is a scarce bird in Suffolk, although much more frequently encountered than when I saw my first one on the coast in 1978. On a bright sunny day the adult Mediterranean gull is a vision of white, with a jet black head and a red bill. Their most striking feature is their white wing tips, so the whole wing looks white; it is the only medium-sized British gull that doesn't have any black on its wing tips. This was the first one I'd ever seen in Thorndon, so I was absolutely delighted.

I usually expect to see my first swallow of the spring a week or so before the first house martin, but this year it was the other way round. I saw my first house martin over The Street on 5th April, as well as four common buzzards, a dozen or so peacock butterflies (all heading north on the fresh southerly breeze) and my first dark-edged bee-fly of the spring.

On 10th April I saw my first holly blue butterfly of the spring, a male flying around ivy (one of the larval food plants) and it did stop to rest a couple of times so that I could see its underwing pattern (which separates it from the common blue). That day there were several bee-flies on the wing, a skylark singing over the field to the south of The Street and several drone flies. The drone fly has the look of a hoverfly in the precise way in which it is able to maintain its position and then dart off at tremendous speed in a split second, and its colouration suggests a worker bee. They do like to rest on pale surfaces and I did eventually get one to land on my outstretched hand, giving me a chance to really appreciate its finer points.

It was 11th April before I saw my first swallows of the year in Thorndon, as well as a common buzzard and a female sparrowhawk flying east (possibly the one I had seen perched eight days before).

On 12th April I saw my first male orange-tip butterfly of the spring and two days later there was a blackcap singing from a garden on the north side of The Street. Spring was definitely unfolding very quickly.

As well as lots of red kites being seen around Suffolk there have been impressive groups of common buzzards passing through and on 15th April I watched six together over The Street.

I finally saw my first hedgehog of the spring in my garden on 24th April and on the same night there was a plume moth resting on the outside of a window, no doubt drawn by the lights on indoors. Plume moths are the pale coloured ones that rest with their narrow wings at right angles to the body, which makes them look a little like a tiny high-winged light aeroplane. There are several species and I wasn't able to determine exactly which one this was. On 25th April - St. Mark's Day - when I was looking out for St. Mark's flies, I had a lovely view of a female linnnet, perched on a wire outside my house, which is the first one I've seen from the garden for ages, so I hope they're nesting somewhere nearby.

I was very pleased to receive reports of other chiffchaffs, sparrowhawks, swallows, a barn owl and roe deer from Rishangles.

At the beginning of May birdsong reaches its peak and almost anything can turn up or fly over, so it's a very exciting time. Our swifts should be back with us in the first week of the month and I hope I'll get to hear the purring of a turtle dove, so if you have one near you I'd welcome a call. It is such a shame that these once very common summer visitors are now so hard to find. By the end of the month we should also see the return of spotted flycatchers.

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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