

## Thorndon Birdlife March 2021

The Beast from the East came with a vengeance early February and caused chaos in the garden after leaving a large deposit of snow. On one of those days, under the garden feeders I counted sixteen chaffinches, four dunnocks, three robins, twelve blackbirds seven woodpigeons and a couple of pheasants. On the feeders were blue tits, great tits, marsh tits, coal tits, long-tailed tits, goldfinches, greenfinches, chiffchaff, male blackcap and the occasional squirrel.

Long-tailed tits (*aegithalos caudatus*). This species of tit has a very different appearance to the other tits and can be easily separated from them by its long narrow tail. Tiny-billed, short-winged with essentially black and white plumage washed with grey and pinkish tones. In the northern race the head is totally white but in other races the head has a black stripe above the eye. It's extremely restless with flocks moving through deciduous woodland and along hedgerows in characteristic 'follow-my-leader' sequence. The sexes look the same and young birds undergo a complete moult just a few weeks after leaving the nest so it becomes impossible to separate them from the adults after they have undergone this moult.

Vocalisations are a valuable aid to locating and identifying these birds. When in flocks they issue constant contact calls and are often heard before they are seen. The calls become faster and louder when the birds cross open ground or if an individual becomes separated from the group. They are active feeders, hunting out insects and spiders among the smaller branches and leaves of trees in woodland and gardens. They were once regarded as a rare visitor to bird tables but Garden Bird Watch results together with those from the Garden Bird Feeding Survey have shown an increase in the use of gardens and the food we provide. As a small bird the Long-tailed tit can suffer high mortality during particularly cold winters and losses of up to 80% have been recorded by The British Trust for Ornithology, small birds lose heat more rapidly than larger ones owing to the fact that a larger proportion of their bodies is exposed to the elements (they have a larger surface area to volume ratio) and remember, small birds can ill-afford to carry large food reserves that will slow them down when trying to escape a predator. During the winter months these birds will roost together in an attempt to reduce heat loss and many individuals can pack into a nest box. Long-tailed tits begin breeding earlier in the year than other tits and construction of their elaborate domed nest begin in late February in southern England. The nest is made of moss, woven together with spiders' webs and hair camouflaged on the outside with lichens and an average of 1500 feathers and can take up to three weeks to complete and where long-tailed tits differ from most birds is that they maintain their sociability during the nesting period. Individual pairs will attempt to rear their own young but if they fail, they will help at the nest of a close relative instead – a process known as cooperative breeding.

Garden birds do have a lifeline. together, the sixteen million gardens across the UK form an area for wildlife larger than all our National Nature Reserves. This patchwork of habitats helps our wildlife to move about freely, forming a vast living landscape that links urban green spaces with the wider countryside. Encouraging birds to visit your garden is easy and a great way to help!

Now spare a thought for an iconic British bird the Barn owl during periods of snow cover.

The Barn owl diet of voles, mice and shrews is very hard to come by as they stay underneath the snow, although mice will move about on top of it, they do spend an increased proportion of their time underground eating food from their larder. When snow cover is more than about 100mm deep and/or frozen hard, the owls will have great difficulty finding and catching food. It is at times like these that some Barn owls turn temporarily to unusual food sources such as small birds. Although low temperatures, rainfall and snow cover can all have an impact on the owl survival, they are usually much less important than prey abundance. It has been demonstrated that Barn owl survival was much more closely linked to vole numbers than it was to winter weather. Winters with moderate weather and low vole abundance produced more Barn owl mortality than severe winters with high vole abundance. Let's hope that most will survive.

Garden sightings during the snow period; Fieldfares, Redwings, Mistle thrush on the mistletoe, Hen harrier (female, affectionately known as a ringtail) several Buzzards, Lesser Redpolls and a Brambling.

Sightings around the village. please contact me;

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