

Wildlife Diary; 18th March 2010

Common or garden

While it is always exciting to find rare or unusual wildlife, great pleasure and interest can be taken by observing the behaviour of common species, for example in gardens or as you go about your work...here are two examples:

In a Duffield garden, a **grey squirrel** has been observed trying to avoid further attacks from the local

magpies by creeping over the lawn in an attempt to get to the bird feeders unnoticed. David Kershaw's photo shows the strange commando-type crawling posture that the squirrel adopted as it tried (and succeeded) to make itself look unobtrusive and avoid attack.....

Meanwhile at DWT's Avenue Washlands Reserve, a **weasel** has adopted the large ceramic 'sculpture' of a medusa's head as its base. This photo is one of several showing the weasel scurrying round and over the sculpture which was designed as a



Photo © David Kershaw

hibernaculum for the local **grass snakes** or **great crested newts**. The tunnels and chambers created inside the head by school children and the education staff are perfect for such creatures but also, it seems, for this little mammalian predator too!

Photo: Dave Savage



Botanists awake!

The earth may still be cold but several plants have started to thrust upwards towards the light. The leaves of **wild arum**, **bluebells**, **wild garlic** and **dog's mercury** are all visible now. On several limestone banks around Cromford and on the Via Gellia, look for the pale flowers of **stinking hellebore**, *Helleborus foetidus*. This early flowerer has jumped ship from local gardens and successfully naturalised itself without ever getting out of control. It grows wild in southern France.....so it's not too far from home.

I walked through **Ticknall Limeyards Site of Special Scientific Interest** at the weekend and was pleased to see the management work that The National Trust has carried out there. This site used to belong to DWT until the NT took over Calke Abbey and its parkland, of which the limeyards are part. It made much more sense for the NT to manage the site rather than the wildlife trust. This was the first reserve the trust ever acquired back in the 1970s, following a prolonged and eventually successful campaign mounted by naturalists to stop the site being filled in with fly ash from a local power station. In fact it was this campaign which prompted the formation of the **Derbyshire Naturalists' Trust**, later to become the Derbyshire Wildlife Trust.

The limeyards are the site of numerous shallow quarries, the lime being used by builders and farmers.



Once the quarrying ceased, nature moved in and what once were open quarry faces and depressions became covered in scrub and woodland. The site has a good range of ferns including the most prolific show of **harts tongue fern** I've ever seen.

Climbing up into the trees are thick lianas of **old man's beard**, *Clematis vitalba*, a limestone-loving plant restricted mainly to the southern part of the county. The open areas have a rich limestone flora including **bee orchids**.

Harts tongue fern cc N Brown

Some butterflies at last

In the last few days a few butterflies have emerged – and not before time! **Small tortoiseshells** were seen on the 8th and 9th and a male **brimstone** on 16th. These were pipped to the post however by a **red admiral** seen sunning itself in a Micklover garden on March 1st and a **peacock** in Belper on 4th. The first **frog spawn** has been seen in Birch Vale and three **sand martins** flew through Willington NR on 16th. A few **bumblebees** have also been reported. By next week we may expect a **wheatear** and perhaps an early **ring ouzel** too.



Male brimstone cc N Brown

Wildlife briefs:

1. A new **hornet** species, *Vespa velutina* is spreading north through France and can be expected to reach the UK soon. It feeds on honey bees and has been decimating hives in France.
2. It is suspected that **water shrews** may be using **echo-location** to find their way around and that the loud squeaking they make has ultra sound components. Certainly their eyes are usually shut as they scurry about!
3. There's a new website for anyone interested in UK **grasshoppers**, **bush crickets**, **ground hoppers** and their relatives known collectively as the **Orthoptera** – [Orthoptera Recording Scheme - Home](#)
4. In a cave in Hungary, **great tits** have been seen preying **pipistrelle bats**. It is believed they do this only when driven by extreme hunger. However the bats get their own back in Spain where there's a species of bat that catches and eats migrating passerine birds such as **warblers**....