

Wildlife Diary for 1st April

Bursting onto the scene.....

Plant life is certainly on the move, despite the recent cold and wet weather. Lawns are getting their first cuts, sticky buds are bursting on horse chestnuts and early spring flowers are opening up. My photo shows [coltsfoot](#), *Tussilago farfara*, growing on the spoil of a limestone quarry.



It gets its name from the shape of its leaves which appear long after the naked flower stalks. Coltsfoot rock can still be obtained in chemists and natural health shops for use as a cough sweet. It has also been used as a substitute for tobacco.

Its folk names include 'son-afore-father' referring to flowers-before-leaves, foal-foot relating to the leaf shape and sweep's brushes due to the shape of the flower. My sources for this information are the excellent Englishman's Flora by Geoffrey Grigson and Flora Britannica by Richard Mabey....both are mines of fascinating information about plants, their names and uses. Coltsfoot is widespread in the county, growing on waste places, waterlogged banks etc.

Tree and song burst

As the hazel catkins fade, so pussy willow and wych elm flowers open up. The former are large, golden and very obvious, the latter tiny and hardly noticeable.

Male flowers on a tall goat willow growing in my garden usually draw blue tits, bumblebees and already an early chiffchaff has been singing in it (even though the flowers aren't open yet). The birds will be either after the pollen or, just as likely, hunting tiny leaf beetles and other insects attracted to the flowers.

I've also had a blackcap in the garden recently, pecking at the now shrivelled berries on a bunch of mistletoe that I hung up before Christmas. The bird, a handsome male, soon burst into song. Whether it was a late wintering bird or an early summer arrival is hard to tell - though I suspect the former.



Toad crossings

Driving home late the other night down a narrow lane, I was forced to stop the car, get out and, despite the rain, remove the toads that were crossing the road right in my path. These engaging creatures are squashed in their hundreds every year on their way to their spawning ponds and lakes.

Years ago, before Health and Safety intervened, the Trust used to co-ordinate toad crossing patrols across the county and I joined them on many an occasion. I gather there are still some ten toad crossing patrols in operation locally – and nationally many more. Good luck to them!



Curlews bathing © Andrew Haslen (SWLA)

Nowt like a good scrub....

Birds need to keep their feathers in tiptop condition, so bathing is a constant aspect of their behaviour.....and it's always good to watch.

Some species seem to really enjoy bathing - and curlews are one of them. They find a suitable puddle somewhere and really get 'stuck in'! [Andrew Haslen's](#) lively and beautifully balanced painting captures the intensity and obvious gusto that curlews show while sprucing themselves up!

In gardens, blackbirds, robins, starlings and wood pigeons are frequent bathers. Interestingly, the activity is often stimulated by rain!

Wildlife News:

- At least six ospreys have flown north over the county in the last week including one over Carr Vale NR. Only one of [Roy Dennis' birds](#) has crossed the Channel so far but all will fly over or past Derbyshire soon. I'm told the nest platform at Ogston has fallen down.....perhaps someone will get a new one put up?
- The Avenue Reserve near Wingerworth recorded five swallows and 10 chiffchaffs one day last week.
- [Derby Cathedral peregrines](#) have now laid four eggs and incubation has now begun.....
- The first common lizards were seen about three weeks ago I discover.



School bird nest web cams take off

Some 50 Derbyshire schools now have nest boxes with cameras attached, allowing children to watch blue tits and the like build their nests and lay their eggs. To see the linking website go [here](#).

A blue tit sizing up a nest box at Brigg Infant School, South Normanton recently.

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