

Wildlife Diary No 21, 7th January 2010



Cold makes life difficult for wildlife

This prolonged cold weather, with no end yet in sight, is bound to have an adverse effect on many birds. In the last couple of weeks many have arrived in the UK, trying to escape freezing conditions on the continent only to find that it's no warmer here – indeed probably colder!

Most notable among this recent wave of immigrants have been bitterns. Some had certainly already arrived when I wrote about them three weeks ago, but since then it seems many more have flown over. Attenborough Nature Reserve at Long Eaton had a remarkable seven, Drakelow and Willington two each and Carr Vale one, with others scattered about elsewhere. Over 40 were being reported in the UK earlier this week, which must be a record count.

While pools and wetlands still had some open water left, bitterns were still able to fish. A DWT staff member reported seeing one catch a perch at Drakelow last weekend. Like herons, bitterns will also eat small birds and mammals given half a chance - but these will be in scarce supply now. I gather the lagoons at most of our reserves are now completely frozen over and that these birds have mostly moved on.



Redwing in a Kilburn garden © Pete Stevens

at Alkington near Ashbourne, the latter field being a spot they favour in most winters. The grass is grazed short and the field slopes to the south, allowing the sun to warm its surface and bring earthworms and other invertebrates up within reach. Since my visit however, snow has fallen there and temperatures have remained below zero all day, so I imagine these birds will have moved away by now, perhaps to the Severn Estuary, where they can feed below the high water mark, or over to Ireland, France or Spain.

Other waders such as snipe and woodcock also struggle to maintain body weight in these icy conditions. There was certainly an influx of woodcock just before Christmas with as many as 60 being seen at one site in Hampshire – a remarkable number to be found together. Ducks have also arrived in the country recently. For example, the numbers of smew, a diving duck related to goosanders and mergansers, have increased recently,

Birds that would normally be eating earthworms at this stage of the winter are also struggling. Fieldfares and redwings turn to this food source once they've polished off the berry supply. While many of these thrushes have already moved away, the few that remain come into gardens and orchards searching for apples. I usually store unwanted apples from neighbouring gardens but my stock has been used up and I'm having to buy some in! So far we've had fifteen blackbirds and three fieldfares in the garden feeding on them. The fieldfares become very aggressive, chasing off anything that dares to approach their favoured apple, though starlings will stand their ground. Lapwings and golden plovers are also earthworm specialists. During the holiday I came across mixed flocks near Mercaston and



male smew © Darren Chapman

as often happens when continental waters freeze over. The males are very handsome birds, mainly white with a black mask. One took up residence at Aston on Trent gravel pits, but that is the only one in the county so far. Further south, I watched a male with a posse of four 'redheads' (either females or immature males) at Cotswold Water Park just after Christmas. To keep track of recent local bird sightings go [here](#) and [here](#).

Peregrine project to claim world first

As I went to switch my computer off at about 10.45pm on the evening of 20th December, I decided to check the web cam that looks across the tops of the gargoyles on Derby Cathedral. Luckily, an adult peregrine was in view and it was actively searching the night sky, obviously in hunting mode. After a while it took off and disappeared. I decided to wait and see if it would return. Minutes later it did and to my amazement, it was



carrying a woodcock which was still very much alive! So the next day I alerted Nick Moyes who managed to capture the sequence and put it on YouTube. There have been many observations of peregrines catching prey after dark (for example at the Empire State Building in New York) but, as far as we are aware, there is no publicly available film record of this taking place. So we believe this clip constitutes the first footage anywhere in the world that proves conclusively that these birds hunt at night. We hope to get media coverage in the next few days. To see the clip (if you are allowed to!) search for 'youtube peregrine night-time hunting'. Be warned though; you can't help but feel very sorry for the poor woodcock which had probably just flown over from the continent seeking warmer conditions only to meet its maker rather soon than it would have hoped!

The corpse remained in situ, frozen but uneaten, for the next sixteen days. Then, as this screen grab taken three days ago shows, one of the peregrines finally began to pluck it. The story will be on the [project blog](#) shortly. (And I see we've logged over 5500 hits since 1st January even before this story has broken!)

Fooled by a Mimic

While out sawing firewood in the garden the other day I clearly heard the wonderful bubbling calls of a curlew. I stopped to see where it might be coming from and there above my head was the culprit; a starling chattering away to itself, interspersing its clicks and whizzes with a fine rendition of the curlew's summer song.

And a few weeks ago I heard the distinctive call of a little owl – or I thought I did. Looking up – all I could see were starlings, one of which was busy fooling me yet again!

Starlings are excellent mimics. The late Eric Simms, sound recordist and author, said he could tell where his wintering starlings had come from by listening to which species they mimicked. He once heard one copying the unmistakable, fluty notes of a golden oriole – a song it could really only have heard in Europe.

Hibernation or not?



Of our British mammals, only bats, dormice and hedgehogs are true hibernators. All others remain more or less active throughout the winter.

Passing a badger sett the other day it was clear from the footprints in the snow that its occupants had been out and about. And in many fields I've noticed that moles have pushed up fresh molehills through the frozen ground, as my photo shows.

On the insect front, queen wasps (and some butterflies) hibernate through the winter, often coming indoors to do so. Then, as the central heating is turned up, some of them wake up and fly about. This happened to a presenter on BBC Radio Derby who reported being buzzed by a wasp early on Monday morning. He was puzzled and asked for an entomologist to phone in and explain what was going

on. I hardly count myself as an entomologist but I know enough about wasps to answer his query, so I phoned up the station and was soon on air. It enabled me to log my first wildlife enquiry of the New Year and to get the Trust's name flying round the ether as everyone was tuning in for traffic news as they skidded back to work.

