

Wildlife Diary February 25th

Migrants moving on up!



Checking the [website](#) of an expat bird watcher who now lives in Andalucia, I read that despite recent



poor weather, some early summer migrants have already begun to return from Africa to this exciting part of Spain. The first swallows have been moving north and local breeders have been seen mating already. The first little swifts and great spotted cuckoos have appeared and so have a few black kites. The black kite is a common and widespread bird in Europe but very rare in the UK (though there's an over-wintering bird with the red kites at Gigrin Farm in Wales at the moment). The bulk of the black kites will

migrate over Andalucia in March and April. My digiscoped photo above was taken at a huge rubbish dump near Cordoba a couple of years ago where we estimated there were over a thousand kites stopping off for a feed and rest before journeying on north to their breeding grounds. Here in Derbyshire, two summer visitors have already reappeared. Curlews gather at Willington NR each year before flying up to claim their territories and 20 have been seen (a peak of 60 can be expected in March). Oystercatchers have also begun to reappear with several sighted at Carsington.



While working in my own garden I've heard several birds staking out their territories nearby - including a little owl. Their distinctive calls hardly qualify for the term 'song' but they perform the same functions – warning other males to stay clear meanwhile attracting females to the territory.



The back-lit painting is by [Darren Rees \(SWLA\)](#) and, for comparison, the photo by local photographer Peter Allman (both copyright).

With fresh snow here on Sunday morning, my first job was to sweep an area under the bird feeders so I could put down seed. No sooner had I closed the back door, than visitors arrive, including 9 bramblings, 20 chaffinches, several blackbirds and goldfinches and a single tree sparrow and pied wagtail.....so my efforts were well worthwhile.



Everlasting flowers

There are only a few British plants whose flowers remain through the winter more or less as they were when they opened up. The one which springs to mind (mainly because I saw it in Anglesey recently) is the [carline thistle, *Carlina vulgaris*](#). The golden centre is composed of bracts. The flower petals themselves are tiny and disappear quickly. This is a plant of the limestone and according to *The Flora of Derbyshire* (A R Clapham, 1969) and the new online flora (see hyperlink above) '*especially where soil has been disturbed by lead mining*'.

Its much larger European relative, *C. acanthifolia*, is similarly everlasting. Known in France as the 'chardon soleil', it was nailed to doors as an omen of good luck. We have a couple of heads of carline thistles propped up behind the salt cellar on the kitchen windowsill, performing a similar job to their southern cousins I hope!

Close up and dangerous

A correspondent tells me she saw a sparrowhawk take a bird (in this case a collared dove) in her garden a few days ago. Although the bird was disturbed she thought it had returned later to claim its meal because the corpse was gone.

This is an occurrence I regularly get enquiries about. Either "Why have all the birds disappeared from my garden?" or once the culprit has been identified; "How can I get rid of these 'awful' birds?" I always reply that the observer should be delighted to see such an exciting raptor so close, reminding them that 50 years ago, sparrowhawks were virtually wiped out due to the persistent organo-chlorine pesticides that were in use at the time.

I explain that the 'no birds problem' is usually short lived. After a few weeks, the sparrowhawk realises that the birds have moved away and it will go off and hunt elsewhere, allowing the locals to return. Note the utter panic in the eyes of the wood pigeon in Andrew Haslen's fine painting.



Sparrowhawk and woodpigeon © [Andrew Haslen \(SWLA\)](#)

Tap the sap

February was the month to bore a small hole in the trunk of a birch tree and gather the rising sap in order to make birch sap wine. I've never tried this but I have drunk home-made birch sap wine - and very pleasant it was too. The methodology is on the web but if you should try it (and you're almost too late now), do remember to plug up your borehole with a cork or else the tree will slowly bleed to death....

In Portugal I've seen pine forests with big metal taps in every tree trunk. The end product of this industry is definitely not drinkable – it's turpentine!

Text by Nick Brown (nbrown@derbyshirewt.co.uk). Published by Derbyshire Wildlife Trust, East Mill, Bridge Foot, Belper, DE56 1XH. Tel 01773 881188. Reg. Charity 222212. Website: www.derbyshirewildlifetrust.org.uk