

## Wildlife Diary 27 18<sup>th</sup> February

### Of Ants and Dippers....

Twice in the last ten days I've come across **anthills**. First while walking over **Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve** on the Chilterns (watching **red kites**) and secondly, while walking the coast path round Anglesey (where **peregrines** and **porpoises** were to be seen).



View north from Aston Rowant showing the M40

**aphids** underground. The aphids suck the roots of the plants growing above. The ants then feed on the sugary honeydew by 'tickling' the aphids which induces them to secrete it. The anthills themselves may be over 100 years old, maybe much older in some cases.....

Anthills at Aston Rowant NNR

If you've ever driven down the **M40** you'll know the first place well. The motorway cuts straight through the reserve as it climbs up through the Chilterns. It's a great place to see red kites of course, often several at a time. However, if you walk out onto the scarp slope on the west side of the motorway, the permanent grass pastures are riddled with anthills – apparently **100,000** of them! They are the work of *Lasius flavus*, the **yellow meadow ant**. Each anthill contains about **5000** ants...so you can do the maths and work out how many ants are present! These ants are farmers. They nurture



In **Derbyshire**, pastures with anthills are now few and far between. There was a fine example between Gregory's Tunnel on the Cromford Canal and Holloway until the owner fenced it and introduced **red deer** some years ago. Kieron Huston, the Trust's Senior Wildlife Sites Officer, has come across several anthill meadows while surveying wildlife sites but some of these have also been destroyed, for example by ploughing.

The other anthills that are well known and indeed hard to miss are those made by **wood ants**, *Formica* species. They are often built of pine or conifer needles and can reach a considerable height and size. The ants are big and will squirt formic acid at you if you disturb them. They are not uncommon in conifer woods in central and north Derbyshire – the most southerly occurring in woods near **Alderwasley** - I recall taking a Wildlife Watch group there to see them.

In gardens, there are two very common species, neither of which make anthills but instead live under paving or in lawns. The **black ant**, *Lasius niger*, may even live in the walls of your house and will sometimes invade it, searching out anything sweet. The **red ant**, *Myrmica ruginodis*, has a powerful sting, as any gardener will know, whereas the black ant neither stings nor squirts.

To read more about ants go to [bwars.com](http://bwars.com) or to this [bbc page](#).

## Derbyshire's ant meadows

Returning to the yellow meadow ant, Kieron Huston tells me that he is aware of only half a dozen sites for these ants south of the peak district.

One at Cromford has been destroyed recently but the one in his photo at **Middle Peak Spoil Heaps**, near Wirksworth, is still there apparently.

Come July and August, and these colonies suddenly spring into prominence as thousands of male and new queen ants fly up on their nuptial flights. Most fall prey to birds but enough queens survive to re-invigorate existing colonies or start new ones.



Anthills near Wirksworth © K Huston

## Dippers in song



Dipper © Darren Rees

The **dipper** is one of the earliest birds to start singing. I remember hearing one chattering away on a rock in the middle of the River Dove in a snowstorm before Christmas some years ago.

Some dippers move downstream in winter and appear on stretches where you wouldn't find them in summer. Winter records from places like the **River Ecclesbourne** in Duffield spring to mind.



Once winter rains and snowmelt have gone, dippers return to take up territories on the fastest-flowing upper reaches of the Dove, Wye and Derwent and their tributaries. My photo shows the Dove below **Coldwall**

**Bridge** near Thorpe, a section where I've heard dippers singing this winter. The trees are **alders**. They are quite content to be immersed in water all year round because they have nitrogen-fixing bacteria living in nodules on their roots. Incidentally, the little orange patch in the middle of the tree is a growth of the **velvet stemmed fungus**, *Flammulina velutipes*, a frost-hardy species which fruits throughout the winter.

## Red kites

Two red kites were reported near **Erewash Meadows NR** at Langley Mill last Thursday and again last Saturday (13<sup>th</sup>). The success of the kite [Chilterns reintroduction project](#) has been truly amazing....worth a look!

