

Dear Friends,

Wildlife Notes 31, 17th October 2022

We enjoyed a very wet, windy and cold autumn wildlife walk at the weekend, exploring round some stubble fields which we don't often have access to. One of the highlights was finding clear evidence of where some of our Grey Partridges spend the night! At night the coveys of partridge huddle together, each facing outwards to watch for predators such as foxes. As they sleep they leave behind little piles of poo. Judging from the long lines (at least 2 or 3 meters) of partridge poo we found, they must use the same area over and over, but slightly moving along to a clean area each night!

We also found a few fungi, including the jelly fungus, *Peziza*, which grows on rotting straw. My fungus book says "poisonous, unless very well cooked"! I don't think I'll be giving that one a try! Interestingly, each time I carefully dug up a fungus in the field, I found a small earthworm, which is a very good sign that the soil is in reasonable condition. Last year, this farmer used direct drilling, so the ground was left unploughed for the first time in many years. Clearly this has helped the soil invertebrates.

We also saw 2 or 3 small groups of Skylarks. They come together in the winter into these small flocks to feed in stubble fields, picking up weed seeds and small beasties. If it all gets frozen solid or covered in snow then they will move to the coast to feed on the strand line. Not a true migration, more a general movement throughout a smaller area.

Talking of migration, I heard a Chiffchaff calling near the hairpin bend on the 13th of October. This is incredibly late to hear this species which should be well on the way to Africa by now to spend the winter. Chiffchaff are usually the first warbler to return to Britain in the spring and I wonder if climate change is encouraging them to stay here all year round, giving up on a long and dangerous journey? Blackcap, a closely related warbler, now have a well established population who stay all year, including in Fife and even further north. So, things are changing in our bird populations. However, I once saw a house martin in early November, as just as "one swallow doesn't make a summer" so one small change in bird behaviour doesn't mean that the seasons have completely changed yet.

Leaving the stubble fields and thinking about our woodlands, this has been a very good year for fungi, of all shapes, sizes and colours. I regularly meet eastern European people foraging for fungi which is much more common in their culture than in ours. They gather colourful and interesting baskets of many different species which are edible. I had the misfortune to be served up a plateful of mis-identified fungi once, which didn't affect anyone else in the group but which made me very ill for 24 hours, so it has rather put me off wild mushrooms! However, the range of colours and flavours is great if you know what you are doing! Incidentally, my ranger colleagues who attempted to poison me with toadstools never let me forget it, and when I retired I was given a large (and rather lovely) framed print of the offending species – Clouded Agaric!

It's nice to have all our wild geese back again, mostly Pinkfeet. At the moment there are over 10,000 roosting on the ponds at the Wilderness between Ladybank and Pitlessie. They are very easy to view from the road and are especially dramatic to watch coming into the roost just as it gets dark. There are regularly several thousand geese feeding in the fields near to Clatto reservoir although I don't think they are using the reservoir for roosting. I've also seen around 20 Whooper Swans, including one with a strange kink in its neck, which is very noticeable when it is flying. I saw it last year as well and I'm really surprised it has survived its journey north to Iceland to breed, and then come back again. The Whooper Swans usually use Clatto reservoir to sleep, and are sometimes there during the day as well. Clatto Reservoir is a good haven for wildlife especially in the winter, though you will need binoculars to see the ducks in the far west end of the reservoir. When in summer you are lucky to see a couple of dozen wildfowl, in winter there are usually several hundred. They are mostly wigeon and mallard, with some teal, goldeneye and tufted duck as well. Well worth a visit if you want somewhere nice for a walk as the Fife Pilgrim's Way goes that way and you can park at the reservoir near the waterkeepers cottage (now in private ownership).

Alison

