

Dear Friends,

I've got to say I prefer this frosty sunny weather to the usual grey skies, rain and mud, but it will be having a significant effect on our wildlife. I've been feeding the birds twice a day instead of the usual once. I put out bird seed, sunflower hearts, peanuts and fatballs, which all disappear rapidly at the moment. I enjoy the large numbers of squabbling pigeons and jackdaws, and all the little birds who wait their turn. There is always enough to go round! I currently have 4 robins in the garden who are not quite so fierce with each other as normal. One comes for dried mealworms and is very tame, and one is determined to come and live in the house, despite the objections of the dogs. I'm always having to turf it out!

There are still plenty of Fieldfares and Redwings, although the hawthorn berries are starting to run out. There have been two fieldfares squabbling over my windfall apples. Sometimes they can be very possessive over a particularly good food source and will guard it against other birds. Sometimes, however, they can be happy to share and I have heard of a garden in Newton of Falkland where 20 or 30 Fieldfares are eating up the windfall apples.

I was walking along the south, sunny side of Eastwood recently and there was an amazing amount of bird life around. I think, like me, they were enjoying the bright sun and the shelter from the north wind. I saw 4 woodcock, and was pleased that they did not fly too far, just enough to get out of my way. Actually, I'm surprised they are still here as they depend on soft ground to hunt for worms with their long bills. There must be sufficient unfrozen ground beside the ditch and two small ponds in that area. If it gets even more cold, they will move away to warmer areas of Britain to find food.

The trees were full of little birds looking for spiders, and other small insects and beasties which were maybe stirring in the slight warmth of the winter sun. There seem to be plenty wrens still (wrens can suffer really badly in long spells of hard weather and numbers can plummet), robins, blackbirds and thrushes grubbing about in the dead leaves, and blue, coal and great tits in the branches. Then, from the tiny patch of unfrozen water where the ditch runs into the pond at the bottom of Honeyhall field, up flew 50 Teal! I've never seen so many Teal together! They are Europe's smallest duck, much smaller than the common Mallard, but a dabbling duck, like the Mallard. That means they feed by "up-ending" in shallow water and grubbing about in the mud, as opposed to diving like some other duck species. The males are very handsome, with a chestnut and green head, a bright green patch on the wings and a lovely yellow tail. Of course, I couldn't see that as they flew away, but I knew they were Teal from their small size, and their delightful piping call.

Moving on nearer to Smithfield the hedge was alive with 6 or 8 bluetits, about 25 tree sparrows, and some little brown birds I struggled to recognise! But then they spoke, and I knew straight away they were female Reed Buntings. Reed Bunting males are very recognisable with their black heads and white moustaches, and in fact the females are also very easily identified as they too have a creamy white moustache, I just wasn't expecting to see them there! But reed buntings will join flocks of finches and other small birds in the fields in the winter, so really, I should have known! Luckily, they have a distinctive little "cheep".

One very strange wildlife encounter was on Monday evening, about 8.30pm. I went out to the garden with the dogs, and there, flying around in the light of the security lamp was a bat! It flew around for a few minutes and then landed on the house wall and crawled up into the bat roost under the flat roof! It was -4°C and all bats should be sound asleep in hibernation! I contacted my batty friend and he said it was the maddest thing he had ever heard! However, he did some research and sent me this information: *If you have seen a bat flying in winter, it may have been awake naturally due to milder weather, disturbed by human activity, or not have been in very good condition at the start of hibernation: if a bat runs out of hibernation fat reserves it will wake up to feed regardless of temperature.* So sadly, I think the most likely explanation is that the bat was desperately hungry and looking for food, which it was unlikely to find on Monday night. Hopefully, it will manage to keep going until we get some milder weather when it might be able to top up its reserves.

And finally, the snow gives us the opportunity to see all the tracks and signs of animals who go about their daily business in our area but we hardly ever see them. Rabbits, hares, roe deer, and foxes all leave their tracks. I was walking up Cults yesterday, on a path which is often used by horse riders in the better weather. I was surprised that I was the first human to leave any tracks in the snow, but the path in the snow was actually beaten down by all the animal tracks! I thought that animals would possibly avoid using human paths if they could, but here they seem to be actively following them, perhaps because the grass is usually cut and it is easier for them to get about than in the overgrown areas? Who knows!? I always find plenty to puzzle over in our wildlife and countryside!

Alison