

Dear Friends,

I'm sure I heard on the weather news tonight that this is the start of meteorological spring! Brrr.... It's freezing! Luckily the wildlife is influenced by what the weather is actually doing to decide when spring has arrived, and also the amount of daylight. Many birds have been getting in the mood during almost the whole of February, singing and establishing territories. I've heard Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Blackbird, Great Tit, Chaffinch, Robins and others so far this year. It will only be 3 weeks until the first of the African migrants arrives – the Chiffchaff is usually the first, around the end of March, closely followed by Sand Martins.

I don't think I have mentioned during my winter wildlife notes that I have been aware of two large coveys of Grey Partridge around this winter, one of 16 birds and one of 12. As far as I am aware, they all survived the winter. Now they are dividing up into breeding pairs. If there happened to be an equal number of males and females, then that would amount to a massive 14 pairs of partridge in our area! I've decided to record everywhere I see a pair of partridge and over a few weeks I will be able to work out where their territories are, and how many pairs we have. I'll keep you posted!

Also here in large numbers are our Roe Deer. There is a herd of 11 which I see almost daily, sometimes on the Chapel side of the Burnturk woods, and sometimes on the Schoolhouse side. Today I was driving behind a cyclist who almost fell off his bike while watching them grazing in the field. I'm sure Grumpy (see wildlife notes from November 2022) and her two young from last year are amongst them, as I still occasionally see her. At least I'm sure it is her, as there is one deer family who pretty well ignore me when I am walking in the woods and the dogs seem to be terrified of her! This large herd of deer is here even with me knowing about at least 3 deer carcasses in the woods. I always assume they have been hit on the road and crawled into the woods to die. The carcasses must make a great feast for our carnivores and scavengers, such as foxes, badgers and buzzards. It doesn't take too long for them to all be eaten.

On a much more cheerful note, for about a week in the middle of February, there was a Kingfisher living on the Kettlehill pond. I saw it twice and know of others who saw it there too. It will have been feasting on sticklebacks. At the same time as the kingfisher, I saw a Cormorant on the pond one day, but I think it didn't stay long as Cormorants feed on much larger fish and I don't think it would have found anything to its liking. When I was at University, I did a course on fishery management and for one exercise we were given cormorants (which had been shot legally under license) to dissect. Some of them had trout over 2lbs (almost a kilo) in weight inside them, so I can understand why fishery managers nowadays use bird scarers to try to keep them away. However, the birds are only doing what they have to to survive and a fishing pond must seem like a positive feast to them!

Finally, and to finish on a really spring like note, I saw the first Primroses blooming up Cults this weekend. That seems early to me but it was lovely to see them.

Alison