

Wildlife notes 37, 11th April 2023

Dear Friends,

Although I'm writing this when the weather has turned unsettled again, it really does seem as if spring is properly here. This morning I was along the Cults road and the blackthorn flowers are just on the point of bursting into bloom. They absolutely cover the bushes in masses of white flowers, but you have to be quick to see them as within a week, they are all over. There are also one or two nice bushes of blackthorn to see beside the road between Annfield Mains and the top of Annfield Brae. Blackthorn, of course, is the bush which gives us sloes in the autumn, essential for making sloe gin, for those who like it!

Also along Cults, the primroses are beginning to flower, and on every road verge in our area there are the yellow, dandelion-like flowers of Coltsfoot. I've seen bumblebees and butterflies around on the warmer days, and they really appreciate the early nectar sources of these spring flowers.

This is the time of year when we have both the last of our winter visitors, such as Pink foot geese and Fieldfares still to be seen and heard, and at the same time the first of the summer visitors arriving. This year I heard Chiffchaff very early, on the 20th of March, and now they are "chiffchaffing" away from every wooded corner. These small grey-green birds are quite hard to see, but very easy to know they are around because of their constant distinctive call. I'm expecting to see swallows within the next 2 weeks – please let me know when you see your first ones!

Other birds to look out for or listen for in our area are Lapwings, or Peewits. Having been alerted to their presence by Stevie, I took a walk down to the bottom of Rameldry Brae and along the Ash Path last weekend. There is a large rushy field, which has recently had a pond created in it, and I saw and heard at least 5 peewits flying and displaying. These birds have had a catastrophic decline in numbers across Britain and it is great to see several pairs setting up home. Any time a crow, or bird of prey goes near them they fly up and call with their distinctive "peewit, wit, wit, peewit" call and mob the bird until it leaves their territory. They nest on the ground and unfortunately they love to choose to nest in the bare earth of ploughed fields. Sadly, this means that they are very vulnerable to losing their eggs and chicks when tractors pass over. When I was at university (a long time ago!) my undergraduate project was "The feeding ecology of Lapwings and Jackdaws in Upland Farmland". Many hours spent peering down a telescope showed that while Lapwings preferred to nest in bare ground, they did nearly all their feeding in wet marshy ground, taking their chicks there as soon as they hatch. For them the ideal home is a mixture of wet, rough grassland, and farmed fields – exactly like we see at the bottom of Rameldry Brae. So fingers crossed for a good Lapwing breeding season. My parents always used to talk about the "Teuchats storm". This was a period of very cold wet weather which often came in April just as the Lapwings, or Teuchats, started to nest, quite often resulting in the failure of the first nests, and causing the birds to have to start again.

I've also heard Curlew calling in these marshy fields at Rameldry, which I have to say, is one of my favourite bird calls. They like to nest in long rough grass so hopefully they might be successful nesters in our area as well.

Finally, I have the first Blackbird chicks in the garden! Although I've not looked for the nest, both the male and female blackbird are quite tame, but recently they have been much more cautious near me, and they both give tremendous alarm calls whenever a Jackdaw or Crow is in the vicinity. This is a sure sign that they have chicks hatched and they are being very protective.

Alison