

Dear Friends

Once again I have to apologise for the long gap since my last wildlife update. I'm afraid I've been away, and then very busy catching up!

Although I was visiting relatives in Canada, I've got to say, the wildlife was not really any more magical than it is here, but the weather in Canada was much better!

Since I got home, I've been pleased to come across some success stories in our own birds and other wildlife. I've been lucky to have 3 or 4 pairs of swallows nesting at my house, all of whom have now just about fledged their second brood of the season (there is one brood in a stable nearly ready to fly). Most of my swallows had the usual 4 or 5 chicks, although the pair in the feedshed only had 3 for their second lot. However, the brood at Pap Inn which I mentioned in the last wildlife note, with a very large family of 6 babies, have done it again with their second brood and successfully raised another 6 to fledging! This is very unusual and great news for a species which is declining in numbers across Britain.

Still on the subject of Hirundines, a couple of days ago I was amazed to watch a group of at least 100 Sand Martins feeding over the grain and mixed "weed" fields (these are deliberately planted weeds to help soil fertility and structure on this organic farm). Clearly there were lots of insects attracting them to the area. But the most interesting thing was to see how they were using the taller weeds to rest in, treating them in the way they would a reed bed. They would fly around a bit to feed and then land in the weeds to rest. They wouldn't be eating the weed seeds, nor eating insects off the plants as they are strictly aerial feeders, so great to see them improvising a resting spot. These Sand Martins will probably not have nested near here. As they all looked like juveniles, I suspect they will be all the offspring from various colonies across Fife. I have heard from a sand martin expert that the young birds spend several weeks flying around the general area where they were hatched, getting to know their way around, check out potential nest sites for next year and generally making a "map" in their heads so they don't have to waste time when they return from Africa in the Spring – they can get straight to a suitable nest area and start raising a family!

I've seen a couple of broods of Grey Partridge chicks. They can fly when they are only a week or so old and when they definitely don't look as if they can possibly be big enough to do so. One group flew up vertically from a crop of barley and landed a few metres further down the row. They looked quite small so they may have been a second brood, as it is late in the season for partridge chicks. I've also seen a brood of red-legged partridge. These are not native to Britain but were introduced for shooting and have spread across the country.

Away from birds, it is the season for hairy caterpillars (and other caterpillars) to stop feeding and to start looking for a safe place to pupate. I don't know what it says about my driving, but I seem to be able to spot them rushing across the road and to avoid squashing them! If I'm walking and I see them crossing the road, I try to move them to the side, but I take care, as in some species the hairs can produce a skin irritation when you pick them up. This is a defence mechanism to try to stop birds from eating them.

I've not seen nearly so many roe deer babies this year, but today we disturbed two quite young ones on the road verge up Cults. They had been panicked by us passing on ponies and tried to get through the fence, which they couldn't. It did seem a very odd place for their Mum to have left them, but we hurried on and hopefully the doe will have been nearby to sort them out.

Alison

PS – See over

Postscript: Dear Friends,

I've had a row from one of our Friends who gave me information about an interesting wildlife sighting which I forgot to mention to you all!! So I'd better make amends by sending out this additional wee note.

It seems that we have had Pine Martin added to our wildlife list in the last couple of years, which is really amazing. Roughly 2 or 3 years ago, one was caught on a camera trap in Eastwood, feeding on a carcass. It might have been a one-off occurrence, but then last winter, a walker near to Coalpit Den was surprised when a largish animal dropped from a tree in front of her and ran off. She didn't get a good look but the suspicion was - pine martin. Also last winter, I had reports of some sort of large animal being heard living in attic space in a local house, and I do know that pine martins can do that.

Then, this week, there was a very clear and definite sighting of a pine martin crossing the road at the Middlefield junction, at about 8am in the morning, so in broad daylight. So, I think we can definitely conclude that these animals are now part of our fauna. Wonderful that we can be part of the successful spread of these animals across Scotland.

And then just to show that I can remember to use your information, I must share with you a lovely photo from John Duncan of a Roe Doe with an injured leg, living in their garden with her two babies. Thanks very much for that John.

Alison.



*Photo courtesy of John Duncan*