

Dear Friends,

I thought I was waiting for better autumn weather to arrive, but I've given up on that, so instead, I will write a little note about how our wildlife might be coping with all this wet. It has been shocking – I heard that a whole year's worth of rain had fallen on Downfield area during the month of October!

As I wrap up myself, the dogs and even occasionally, the ponies, against the rain, how does our wildlife cope?

Of course, there are winners and losers on the wildlife front. I've recently started seeing woodcock in the woods round here again. They arrive from Scandinavia and further east to spend the winter in our milder climates. They feed in damp woodland and field edges, so they will be really enjoying all this rain. Their habitat has expanded hugely as every little hollow is full of water. Worms and invertebrates will be near the surface to avoid drowning and will be an easy meal for the birds.

Other water birds, such as ducks, geese and swans, with their very well-kept waterproof plumage, will also be able to survive well in this weather. They get wet every day anyway as they feed! For geese and swans, fields of grain, potatoes or vegetables which have been poorly harvested because of the bad weather, provide a bonanza of food, even after they have been ploughed, as unharvested crop is turned up to the surface. I've not actually been seeing huge numbers of geese in our area yet. Maybe they have stayed further north as there is just so much food for them?

However, other wildlife is probably struggling a lot more. Owls, who depend on hearing their prey, really struggle in rainy and windy weather. Barn Owls in particular hate the wet weather and I expect that the survival rate of this year's young will be very low. Tawny Owls seem to be very numerous this autumn, and it is easy to hear them calling in almost all the groups of trees round about. The female has the "Kee-wick" noise and the male tends to stick to "Whooo Whooo! But as they are often together and calling to each other, we often hear it as kee-wick, whoo whoo, or as the story books have it, tu whit tu whoo.

The Roe Deer should be ok with all the rain. If they are in reasonable health, and can find shelter from the wind and rain, then they should not feel the cold. Talking of Roe Deer, I must update you on Grumpy, the rather aggressive roe doe from last winter. She appears to have moved to Eastwood (although of course, I cannot be sure it is the same deer). Many of you will know Carol, who walks her dog in Eastwood every morning. Twice now she has met Grumpy. The first time, her dog had shot off into the woods following a scent, but a short time later she came running out of the woods as fast as she could, with a very angry roe doe close on her heels. The dog hid behind Carol, who (imagine this!!) jumped up and down, waving her arms and shouting "bad deer, bad deer"!! Of course, faced with this vision, the deer stopped, turned and walked back into the trees. Carol says she has seen Grumpy one more time, but she shooed it away again and they appear to have reached an understanding not to bother each other anymore!

The usual large numbers of winter-visiting Fieldfares and Redwings are in our area, feeding on hawthorn berries up Cults and on Rameldry Brae. Both are members of the thrush family who come here in the winter to feast on our berry crop. On a rare sunny day recently, while driving up Cults, I was able to clearly see the bright flash of red under the wings of the Redwings, as they flew up from bushes on the roadside.

Visitors from the continent regularly boost the numbers of birds we have living with us in the winter, including common garden birds such as Blackbirds and Robins. Bullfinch numbers are high at the moment too, boosted by continental visitors. I love to hear the distinctive little noise which Bullfinches make. It is worth googling it so you can recognise them, as it is usually the sound which leads me to seeing them. The males in particular are stunning with their bright pink front and white rump.

This has not been a particularly good year for fungi. It was really too dry in June and then wet in July, dry in August and now too wet again. I wonder if the diversity of fungi that we have is going to be affected by changing climatic conditions over the years? There are, however, some big “rings” of fungus round some of the trees near to the road, which you might be able to spot. Many are a species called Clouded Agaric, not edible, though not deadly poisonous, which I can confirm through personal experience! I was once fed a plate of these for lunch by a seasonal ranger who had mis-identified them, and although I clearly didn't die, I was very ill for 24 hours! Horrible. I was never allowed to forget this and when I retired, one of my leaving presents from the ranger service, was a beautiful framed print of Clouded Agaric, which now hangs in my kitchen! And no, in case you were wondering, I no longer eat wild mushrooms, no matter who has identified them!

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