

Dear Friends,

Wildlife Notes 44, February 29th 2024

Although I'm sure the weather will have more to throw at us before the winter is out, there are so many signs of spring that I really need to share them with you and spread the hope that we will soon be into warm sunshine!

As usual it is mostly birds which have been showing their courtship behaviour and spring-like activities. Recently, when I put up a big flock of around 200 mixed Jackdaws and Rooks, feeding on left over barley stubble, I was really surprised to see no less than 9 Ravens flying with them. Ravens used to be unheard of in Fife and I can clearly remember my complete excitement when I saw one in the Lomond Hills for the first time, sometime in the late 1990s. By 2004 there was a single pair nesting in the Lomonds, but now they are quite widespread in Fife. In our area I hear them almost every day. They are a large bird, about the size of a buzzard, and they have quite a long-looking tail which has a distinct wedge shape at the end. Anyway, these 9 Ravens were flying about clearly in courtship displays as they tumbled over and over, swooped down towards the ground and even flew in tandem, with one looking as if it was riding on the back of another. As I walked up the hill, they were flying quite low overhead and twice I made direct eye contact with one! I asked it what was going on, but it didn't reply! Our speaker at the Hall talk last week, Will Cresswell, is a great birder, so I asked him. He said that he thought these 9 birds would all be young ones from last year or the year before, as the mature adults would all be paired up and probably sitting on eggs by now. He told me that the young birds would have been just checking each other out, working out who were the strong ones, the best flyers and the good lookers! Getting ready to pair up to breed in future years.

All the other little birds are also singing. In particular, Great Tits are common this year, and sing loudly, often sounding as if they are saying "teacher, teacher, teacher" However, experienced birders say, if you hear a noisy bird you don't know what it is, then it is a Great Tit! They have a wide variety of songs which they sing with great gusto.

In the mixed conifer and birch of Burnturk Woods, it is mostly Coal Tits which I hear, but there are Goldcrests as well. They are Britain's smallest bird, weighing in at only 5g, the same as a 20p coin. They are hard to spot in the branches as they search about for tiny insects and spiders which are their food. I had an amazing view of a male Goldcrest displaying to a female, when I was at Birnie Loch last weekend, a display which none of us in the group had seen before. The male Goldcrest, has orange feathers in the centre of the golden stripe on its head, and when it displays it raises this crest with an amazingly strong flash of bright orange. It was definitely a "WOW" moment to see this happening. So, this will be happening in all our woods just now, as Goldcrests are reasonably common, so I need you all to keep your eyes peeled and see if you too can catch this super little display!

More obvious bird singers, usually from a high tree tops are the Blackbirds and Thrushes, both Song Thrushes and Mistle Thrushes. All 3 species are singing in our area at the moment.

On a different note, listen out from the drumming of Great Spotted Woodpeckers as they beat out a tattoo on a suitably resonant dead branch. I'm not sure how woodpeckers judge a good drummer, and decide who is the best and gets to keep a territory and get a female. According to RSPB, both males and females drum, to keep in contact and maintain their pair bond. The noise of their drumming changes according to the branch they happen to be hitting at the time.

Away from birds, the mild weather we had a week or so ago, enticed out some other creatures from hibernation. Sadly, the first toad has been killed on the road as it made its way down to the pond. The high water level in the pond may not be good news for the frogs and toads. They will lay their spawn around the edge, in about a month's time, but if the water level goes down to its more usual level the spawn will be left high and dry. We will have to keep an eye out for this and maybe end up organising a rescue mission!

I have also seen a couple of bumblebees out, but they will hopefully have found a cosy spot to settle down again, until this colder weather is past.

So, I'm sure there are many more signs of spring, but these notes are more than long enough already!

Alison Irvine