

As the rain batters down outside and I'm snug in with my cosy fire, it seems appropriate to sit down and have a catch up about our winter wildlife. The alternating icy and still weather, then wet, windy and mild, is just as challenging for them as it is for us. We never know whether it is long johns and vests, or a summer shirt! And many of our wildlife species are equally confused.

I heard last weekend about someone finding a frog out on the road, which they were able to move to the side, but really both frogs and toads should be hibernating at the moment. With such changeable weather they run the risk of being caught out by a sudden drop in temperature. As they are cold blooded animals, they can become very sluggish and then make easy prey for a passing predator such as a fox. Toads have some built in protection as they have toxic, nasty tasting glands on their skin, which most animals find distasteful and will leave them alone. Although, this doesn't always work as I have seen toads which have been killed by something and neatly had the toxic skin removed, like a glove, so the predator can eat the meaty insides. Frogs are not so lucky and rely on being much faster jumpers to escape, but that doesn't help them at all in the winter if they've been caught out in the cold.

There are still plenty of winter visitors who come here to enjoy our relatively mild weather, such as the geese. There are several thousand Pink Foot geese in the general area, feeding on fields around Ladybank and Pitlessie. I understand that many of them are roosting overnight on the Eden Estuary, at Guardbridge, although most of the skenes I see flying over at dusk, have been heading west towards Loch Leven.

A much less well-known winter visitor is the Bullfinch.



Credit to Margaret Ronaldson

Yes, we do have our resident birds who spend the whole year here, and nest in our countryside, but every winter their numbers are increased by an influx of continental and Scandinavian visitors, who

come here to get away from the harsher winter there. I have been hearing bullfinches every day and seeing small flocks of around 6 in all our woods and scrubby areas.

I don't like to mention it, but the winter time is when we are much more likely to see rats around our property. They usually spend the summer nesting and foraging out in the fields, but when the weather gets bad, they come looking for extra food around human habitation. They have good reason for this as they can find all sorts to eat in compost areas, sheds and in stored food. The population of rats (and many other rodents such as mice and voles) go in cycles and I get the feeling that we are at a peak for rats this year. They have been around many properties that I know of, for the whole summer. I found one drowned in a bath of water recently and have seen a few scuttling in bales of hay. So, it is probably a very good time to be a rat, and definitely not so good if you are scared of them, or have hens, horses or other livestock!

I must stick up a bit for rats, I think. The species which lives here is the brown rat, introduced to this country in the 1700s, carried on ships from Central Asia, where it is a native species. Now it is widespread across the world, an incredibly successful species. They form a major part of the diet of many of our native predators such as owls, foxes, stoats and weasels. So, they are an important part of the ecosystem. However, I've got to say, that when they are around my property, they are a terrible nuisance. I've had them chew through a 10 gallon plastic container of expensive liquid horse food supplement and the whole lot drained away and made a terrible mess. They can chew through wires, doors, sheds and bales and I have to admit, that like many other householders, I set traps and try to keep them at bay, no matter how useful they are in the natural world!

Let's talk about something more pleasant! Now is the time of year when ivy is in full flower, providing a great source of nectar for any insects which venture out on the milder days. Sometimes the path is carpeted with tiny green petals which fall from the flowers, and the scent can be quite strong in good conditions. Talking of flowers, the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland, have, for the last 13 years, organised a New Year's Day plant hunt, to record which plants can be found flowering on the 1st of January. On January 1st 2024, a team of Fife botanists visited Downfield Farm and recorded around 12 species of plant in bloom! As with the rest of the UK, the commonest flowers in bloom were Daisy, Dandelion and Groundsel. So, if you fancy making your New Year's Day walk a bit more exciting, and doing a bit of "citizen science" then you know what to do.

BKCT has a wildlife walk arranged for Thursday 2nd January, starting at the Jubilee Hall at 10am, so I think we will do our own bit of flower hunting then as well!

Hope to see many of you there.

Alison