

Dear Friends,

Wildlife notes 32, November 2022

I met the grumpy Roe Deer again this morning! Let me explain...

About 4 weeks ago, my dog came upon a roe doe, taking her completely by surprise, and the deer went into attack mode, rolling and butting the dog who was squealing and yelping. The dog ran back to me and the deer followed to within about 10 meters. I wasn't sure if she was going to stop or come for me too, but she decided discretion was the better part of valour! About a week ago, the puppy went running off in the woods and when I went to look for her, she suddenly appeared from the area I'd seen the roe doe before and she too was yelping and running for her life. This morning, I heard the same puppy barking in the woods from the same approximate area. I thought there might have been another walker, but the puppy came dashing back, tail between legs, and when I looked to where she had been, I saw a roe doe watching us quite openly and apparently, defiantly! She wasn't going to run away, and dog number one was cowering at my legs!

So, what's going on? She may still have this year's fawns with her, but I have never seen any sign of them, and they would be almost fully grown by now at 6 months old. I don't think she is defending her young. Certainly, the first attack could have been caused by pure self-preservation instinct when she suddenly found a "predator" right on top of her. But the fact that it has happened 3 times makes me think that we have a deer who is so used to seeing people and dogs that she has lost her fear and is defending her territory. Has anyone else had a similar experience?

On a more friendly note, the woods seem to be full of Woodcock at the moment. I see them every time I am walking, although I think they are more wary of the dogs and fly up so I can see them. These beautiful waders live and feed in wet woodland (and we certainly have plenty of that at the moment!). They live individually, not in flocks, and rely on their amazing camouflage to stay safe. They will literally stay still unless you are actually going to stand on them. I once spotted one about 15cm from the path, which had already been passed by 3 dogs and 1 person. I walked past and then called my friend to turn and look. She thought the bird was injured and started to go back. The instant the bird realised it had been spotted it was off! They used to breed in our woodlands, but I don't think there have been any nesting here for many years. The ones which are around just now are winter visitors from Scandinavia and Northern Europe. They are nocturnal, relying on huge eyes and amazing night vision to find worms and invertebrates around wet pools and grassland in, and next to woods.

Many other bird species are visiting from the north and the east to enjoy our relatively mild climate. One I've been seeing around the villages are Bullfinches. The males are amazing bright pink and the females a bit duller, and they have a very recognisable call (maybe you could check it out on a phone or computer). They feed on seeds such as dockens and nettles and are moving about in small flocks of 5 or 6.

In much bigger flocks are Fieldfares and Redwings, who are here to eat up all our hedgerow berries, such as hawthorn and rowan. Flocks of around 50 to 100 are up Culls. The Fieldfares are larger, a bit bigger than a blackbird, while the redwings are slightly smaller than our garden song thrush. You usually hear them before you see them with their loud rattling chatter (the Fieldfares) and high pitched single note calls (the Redwings). Once all the berries are gone, if the ground is not frozen, they move on to feeding in short grazed grassy fields, looking for insects and grubs. If we get frost and snow, they just move further south, to England and France until they find conditions to suit them.

And of course there are the visiting geese - huge flocks of Pinkfeet have been feeding in stubble around Downfield and Clatto area, arriving shortly after first light and leaving again as it begins to get dark. I've estimated there have been between 1000 and 3000 in these flocks. Recently I have been hearing and seeing a small number of Canada geese flying over. They have become naturalised in Britain and breed in many places such as Lochore Meadows and Loch Leven. In Canada they would migrate south in the winter, but our climate is very benign for them so they stay with us all year.

It has been hard to see and enjoy wildlife in this wet and windy weather, but it is still there, and on the whole, it prefers this weather to frost and snow, so at least some things are happy with the conditions!

Alison