

Be careful what you wish for, as the saying goes! For several years now I have commented on the lack of rabbits in our area, and indeed, across many places in Scotland. Well now, they are back with a vengeance! There seems to be rabbits everywhere, including in most people's gardens, if the reports I am receiving are correct. Whether they have developed a population immunity to the rabbit haemorrhagic disease, I don't know. With myxomatosis, in the 1950s when it first arrived in this country, it killed over 90% of all rabbits. However, within 10 to 20 years, the rabbits had developed resistance to the disease and now if there is an outbreak of myxomatosis, less than 50% of the population is affected, and those who do catch it often recover. So maybe the same has happened for haemorrhagic disease.



*Photograph courtesy of Aileen Neilson*

One aspect of the increased rabbit numbers to look out for over the next couple of years, should be an increase in the number of predators, such as buzzards and foxes. In normal circumstances rabbits form a large part of their diet. In the last few years, I have noticed that there have been fewer buzzards and foxes, so I expect we may see that change again.

This is the season that Roe deer have their babies and I am lucky enough to have a roe doe in my field. Usually they have twins, and leave them hidden for most of the day, returning infrequently to feed them. However, my doe is quite bold and grazes the field at all times of day. Twice recently I have been able to watch one roe fawn in the field. The first time I saw it, it was going mad! It was running back and forward, jumping around and racing round it's Mum! It was lovely to watch. Until she clearly got fed up and jumped over the fence, which the tiny baby couldn't manage, so it was left behind to pace up and down the fence looking very worried. Today, I saw it again, out with Mum, and this time when she jumped over the fence, it seemed quite resigned, and although I didn't see it in the long grass, I think it may just have curled up to sleep until Mum came back.



I have also seen twins in the long grass of a field near Coalpit Den, and I know of other female Roe in lots of different places, who I am sure will all have babies.



*Photograph courtesy of Bob McConnel*

This long dry, cold and windy spell of weather has been having its effect on wildlife, particularly birds which are all raising young at the moment. I often stop feeding bird seed in the summer, but I have kept going this year, and lots of house and tree sparrows, blue, great and coal tits, and greenfinches and chaffinches have been coming regularly. I have also been putting out dried mealworms, which the birds love. Initially, I was giving them to a pair of blackbirds who had a nest nearby, and they took lots of mealworms for themselves and their young. They successfully fledged at least 2 babies that I saw looking quite grown up eventually. Then my "secret" blackbird feeding spot was discovered by 2 pairs of Jackdaws, who have become positively addicted to mealworms! Whenever I appear they quite often land right beside me and I regularly have a line of Jackdaws following me, flying from post to post, or running along a shed roof beside my head. They get their mealworms close to the feed-shed door and when they have finished the first helping, they land on the open door, or even come into the shed with me to ask for more. But – they are very clever and they know that they never get a third helping of mealworms and once they have eaten the second lot, they never come and ask for more! So, they can definitely count to two!

With the ground being so dry, the blackbirds are struggling with their second brood to find any worms in the hard ground. If I am working in the garden they come right up to see if I have disturbed anything edible. Yesterday, I threw down a handful of mealworms and they came straight away to get them. Mealworms are a very high energy, high protein food for wildlife and although I don't usually feed in summer, this year has turned out to be very difficult for birds so far, so I am giving a helping hand.

Fresh mealworms are what licensed bat workers use to feed any injured bats they have to look after, and talking of bats, I have got my bat colony back in my flat roof. I've not counted them yet, but I think there must be a couple of hundred again. I'm intending to have a bat watching evening at the end of June or early in July, but I will choose the date at relatively short notice as it is best to watch them in good viewing conditions. So, look out for the e-mail, or on Facebook for the information.

As I write this it is raining (of course – I am meant to be cutting grass!), and that may well help the food situation for much of our wildlife. In the meantime, if you have been feeding the birds, then please keep going and let me know about any interesting sightings you have.

Alison