

Wildlife notes 52, February 27th 2025

Dear Friends,

I think these wildlife notes are like buses – you get nothing for months and then two come along in February! But there seems to have been a lot going on to alert you to!

Although the weather has been a bit hit or miss, I'm hearing lots of birds who definitely think there is spring in the air, and this afternoon I came across a robin with a nearly completed nest in my hay shed. It was in a remarkably stupid place, close to where various cats go for a snooze and completely accessible, but maybe it was only a practice nest. Certainly, when I met the robin coming back in with more nesting material, I tried to explain that it was a very poor choice of nest site!

The robins have been singing their hearts out in the garden, and there is more than one pair, which has resulted in quite a bit of fighting going on. It isn't possible to tell male and female robins apart by just looking at them, but if you see 2 robins being nice to each other at this time of year, they are definitely a pair.

Other birds singing now are song thrush and mistle thrush, both lovely songs, but for me, the song thrush has one of the most beautiful songs. It usually sings from high up in a tree and often repeats the phrases of its song three times. Mistle thrushes have a similar song, but not quite as clear and repetitive.

Chaffinches are also singing. I hope a few pairs have come through the winter as I have found at least 2 who had not been well and subsequently died, presumably from the infectious bird disease, Trichomonosis. Finding them was a timely reminder for me to clean out my bird feeders regularly and if possible, to change the site where I hang them.

Both woodpigeons and stock doves have been "singing", if you can call their rather repetitive notes a song. My mother always said that woodpigeons say "tak' two coos, Paddy, tak' two"! However, she would not have known stock dove calls, as until recently they were rather rare and widely scattered. Now, their population has been increasing across the UK and even in our area we have at least 6 pairs. They actually look like town pigeons, smaller than woodpigeons and with no white markings on their neck and wings, and an iridescent glow when the light catches their feathers. They generally nest in holes in trees or in dense ivy on trees, and so far, I've not had any come to the seed I put out in the garden. Unlike the woodpigeons, when I often have a dozen coming when I put the food out. They are not happy to share and regularly end up fighting, bashing each other with their wings and making a lot of noise. It certainly isn't peaceful when a woodpigeon fight breaks out!

I've been seeing a few interesting birds of prey in the area recently. Driving up from Kettle towards the cemetery, I was lucky enough to have a Merlin flying right beside me and then perching on the wall for long enough for me to have a good look. The Merlin is Europe's smallest bird of prey, with the males not much larger than a blackbird. The females are a bit bigger and generally brownish in colour, while the males are quite grey. The one I saw was either a female, or an immature bird – it is hard to tell them apart. Then not long after I had a Merlin in the garden, again a female or immature, but only a fleeting glimpse this time as it shot after the small birds on the feeders. Merlin breed in the Scottish uplands but not in this area, but in autumn and winter they can move down to lower ground, or birds from Europe and Scandinavia come to this area.

Then, I had a visit from a very oddly marked Sparrowhawk, which spent about an hour in and around my garden. It was a male, with largely grey plumage, but it had very striking white spots over its back, and its cheeks and breast were very bright orange/red in colour. I've sent the (rather fuzzy) photo I took round various birders and not been able to get any agreement about whether it was a rare sub-species, or just a very oddly marked normal sparrowhawk! One of life's little mysteries!

I was watching a Kestrel perched in a low tree, and after a while it swooped down to the ground, trying to catch vole. It had no sooner landed on the ground, than a Magpie swooped down and chased it off. I think the Kestrel must have missed, as it certainly didn't carry any prey away, and the Magpie grubbed around the area for a few seconds, before it too flew away empty beaked. I thought it was very interesting that the Magpie must have been waiting for the Kestrel to pounce, hoping it would be able to steal the catch and get an easy meal. I've never heard of this behaviour before.



Female sparrowhawk. Photo by Margaret Ronaldson

Talking of voles, while we were feeding the ponies the other evening, waiting for our particularly slow eater, the Shetland, to finish, a field vole came out from the undergrowth and scuttled up to the feed bucket, presumably looking for any bits of chaff or grain which the pony had dropped! It did this several times. It must have known there would be an easy meal for it from what the pony dropped, and maybe it too got fed up waiting for him to finish and decided just to risk it while the going was good!

Finally, I have had two completely reliable reports of a big tawny or brown coloured cat in the area over the course of this winter. Described as the size of a large German shepherd dog, in both instances it was seen from close range (less than 10m), and it's snarling teeth featured largely in the description. Someone else said they saw a big black cat crossing the road at the Drummy woods about 3 weeks ago. I would be very interested to know if anyone else has seen a big cat in the last couple of years, as I think there is no doubt that there is something going on.

Alison Irvine