

Wildlife notes 53, May 29th 2025

Dear Friends,

I've been inspired to finally get round to picking up my pen and writing some wildlife notes, after a very long gap, by the arrival of crowds of noisy, busy and cheery starling families! It is one of my favourite wildlife sights and sounds. Starlings in an area all synchronise their breeding so the young birds leave the nest at the same time. This is a defence against predation as any birds of prey, or even cats for that matter, are overwhelmed by the numbers of young birds. Some are caught, but the majority survive.

You will probably hear them before you see them – the term “garrulous” comes to mind as the juveniles demand constant attention and food from their parents. They love short grass and therefore are commonly seen on lawns and in short grass fields. The adult birds have quite a unique way of feeding – they stick their beaks into the ground and then open them, creating a hole, which they peer down to see if there is anything edible. Often your lawn can look as if you have run over it with a soil aerator, it is so covered in small holes after a flock of starlings have been there. They are good for your lawn in lots of ways, not only aerating it, but also ridding it of their favourite food, leatherjackets which feed on grass roots and can be a real nuisance in a lawn. Currently there are several flocks of around 50 birds feeding all round Burnturk, Kettlehill and the nearby fields. Lovely!

Another massive wildlife happening at the moment, especially after such a mild winter, is the exponential breeding of aphids. My big sycamore in the garden must have millions of aphids and over the last few weeks they have all been exuding honeydew. This is the sweet, sticky waste which comes out of their bottoms, as they suck the sap on the leaves of the trees – basically it is aphid poo! Many animals rely on this sweet liquid and some ant species even collect the honeydew directly from the aphid, lapping it up and returning to their nests to feed their own young larvae.

The direct effect on me of all this honeydew, which at times has been falling from the tree so thickly that it is like standing in a rain shower, is that all the ground under the tree becomes a sticky mess. Carol refuses to park her car anywhere near my tree, and I will publicly promise Sandra a car wash, as it is a wonder she can still see out! I've had to buy a special T-shirt for the dog to stop her becoming completely stuck up and my house fills up with small stones, grass, leaves and petals which stick to feet and get trailed in!

So, why do I put up with it, you may ask? Well, as well as honeydew, there are hundreds of thousands of aphids which are falling or getting blown from the tree (in fact, there is one on the back of my hand as I'm typing this!) This is an absolute feeding bonanza for birds which have hungry nestlings to feed. The tarmac outside the window is always covered with tree sparrows, house sparrows, pied wagtails, chaffinches, and even the blackbirds and jackdaws, who pick up the aphids by the beakful to take to their babies. Yes, even Jackdaws can pick them up at a rate of about 2 a second (sadly, I have timed them!), and at that rate, they can fill their food pouch in their throat quickly, to take to the babies. So, my sycamore, and its aphids provides food for dozens of baby birds and that makes me happy to put up with the mess. Sycamore trees sometimes get a bad name, but they are very good for wildlife. Actually, most years it isn't so bad, but this year there has been no rain to wash the tarmac clean regularly, so it has been worse than usual.

Keeping with the bird theme, I have at least two pairs of bluetits, one great tit and 4 pairs of tree sparrow in boxes and the first baby birds have flown the nest and are starting to find their way in the world. I've been seeing young birds on the Kettlehill pond – definitely some baby moorhens and possibly mallard ducklings too. I know there are a pair of little grebes, so I expect they will have babies soon as well.

I'll try to keep up with wildlife notes sooner next time, but in the meantime, as usual, I am always pleased to hear from you about the wildlife you have seen in our area too.

Alison