

Behaviour notes on Farmland birds in winter 2017/18

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Winter of 2017/2018 has been harsh and highly changeable, perhaps almost a return to normal seasonal conditions, although you might argue "What is normal?" At least up to the end of January it wasn't warm, we don't want warm winters to become normal. Despite all the snow, ice, rain, wind and fog, Christine and I managed to move house and get settled in before the elements hit back hard.

Once relocation was behind us, we could enjoy recording wildlife in a thrilling new setting and yet remain within Worcestershire's southern bounds.

Sunday 7th January dawned frosty and clear with a chill wind. Bird activity was very evident from first light including a Buzzard on the wing past our new home at Mount Pleasant Farm (SP051394). Birds were keen to start foraging, not least a few of the usual garden regulars, but also large flocks of winter thrushes (Fieldfares outnumbering everything else; I even saw an albinistic individual) and Wood Pigeons. The latter two groups inevitably drew in the predator element of bird society including a female each of Sparrowhawk and Kestrel topped off with a low level fly-by Peregrine shortly after 9.00am.

With fog gradually enveloping the landscape on 8th January, Buzzards took to the fields to forage. I found 8 individuals off the Hinton Road between Childswickham and Mount Pleasant Farm. One field alone had 4 dotted around it; they appear to plod reluctantly across the mud, walking like ungainly Chickens then stand for long periods waiting for something to happen.

This open arable countryside is the wintering grounds for Golden Plover and Lapwing, the former frequently numbering 4 or 5 dozen. Needless to say, a low-level hedge hopping Sparrowhawk in hunt mode is quite usual here.

There followed a further four days of thick fog that truly scuppered any chances of exciting hawkwatching, but also keeping bountiful numbers of prey species from moving on. It goes to prove however that even an intensively farmed countryside such as this, despite its lack of hedgerows, its isolated stands of trees, even fields of solar panels, during a harsh winter still holds a diverse range of wildlife as we have discovered in the short time since relocating from Broadway. Deer are often in view, lone Foxes tramp back and forth, wandering Rabbits and Muntjac brave the openness. Clearly our Mammal Atlas Survey notes would get a much needed boost.

Oddly, this flat vastness south of Evesham, west of Broadway, has no sheep or cattle, just occasional horse paddocks, but so much arable and fruit growing land.

Monday 22nd January brought us a break in the relentless wintry weather, blue skies and sunshine enticed Buzzards and Ravens out in full view. One Raven wandered into our backyard airspace at the Farm which clearly upset the territory-holding pair of Carrion Crows as they launched several attacks on the Buzzard-sized Corvid; it was clearly not welcome here.

Pairs of Buzzards were beginning to make regular appearances hanging aloft over our local blocks of woodland re-establishing owners' rights for others to be aware of.

On the subject of territories and food coveting during this bleak period, we have witnessed classic behaviour played out from the comfort of our living room. A Mistle Thrush has fiercely guarded a berry-laden Cotoneaster bush from plunderers the size of a Robin and upwards. As keen observers of diurnal birds of prey, the uncanny resemblance of a Mistle Thrush to a Merlin in hunting mode, as it launched from the top of a Weeping Birch Tree gliding

straight down to the berry bush, made us ponder on the likelihood of this being an evolutionary strategy employed by the mini raptor impersonator.

Equally entertaining has been a Fieldfare guarding over windfall apples adjacent to the Mistle Thrush's stake out. Fieldfares do not like Magpies approaching it has to be said, they are not tolerated, but Fieldfares have not shown any propensity to challenge the Mistle Thrush. In fact another Mistle Thrush following the resident bird into the grounds of the Farm resulted in a terrible scrap. I'm sure any Fieldfares nearby at the time would have taken heed, but as I have seen even the resident pair of Carrion Crows were not above being chased off those precious windfalls. In the same token Magpies get chased off the apple store by the Crows; this is a daily saga in the bird community. For me Corvids provide some of the most compelling viewing at present. We seem to be awash with Magpies, 12 to 15 birds noted at pre-dusk gatherings, but also pairs of them engaged in what appears to be courtship chases round and round the trees. Resident Carrion Crows are busy trying to discourage them or escorting another Raven intruder off the premises. It is interesting to note that despite Fieldfares being known to roam the countryside in large winter flocks, individuals will take charge of their own patch that provides a long term larder until it's time to leave.

With daytime temperatures becoming milder on 29th January, and despite it being somewhat blustery in this open landscape, I recorded a Raven working the airspace back and forth over the canopy of a local deciduous wood, repeatedly twisting over in flight onto its back. Obviously a display of some kind though I didn't see another bird at the time.

There has been an extraordinary scenario played out in our modestly sized walled courtyard garden here at the farm this January. Seed is put out on the flat coping stones of the wall beside an overhanging *Pyracantha* bush. Occasionally three Robins are drawn together here and perform animated posturing dances with puffed out chests, stiffly cocked tails and strange wavering head movements which I can only draw a direct comparison to how a Wryneck behaves in the hand of a ringer. I am inclined to think this is a pair plus an interloper. Fights are generally avoided but occasionally inevitable.

I will close with notes at the start of February 2018 on the first signs of spring approaching with male Chaffinches breaking into full song, our Mistle Thrush now has a partner and a pair of Collared Doves are nest building in earnest. After following our resident pair of Carrion Crows' trials and tribulations defending their patch from invasion by others this winter, at 07.30 on 12th February during a beautiful and poignant moment, I saw them arrive together in the large Willow on the farmhouse frontage with the first nest twig. It was passed from one bird (with quivering wings) to the other, fumbled somewhat clumsily into place, but consequently dropped to the ground. Nice try, but I felt privileged to have seen it. These are the founding moments of family life to come.