

**From bugs to buzzards.
The unfolding of Spring 2017, Broadway,
Worcestershire.
March 2017 to May 2017**

Mark & Christine Turner

The second week of March 2017 brought us the first significant changes in seasonal weather and animal behaviour lifting our spirits that had been suppressed by the seemingly endless dull, wet days of winter. Never mind what they say is the official start to spring; take your clues from Mother Nature herself.

This particular week strung together a number of events that provided those clues that came from a variety of sources. Just one week yielded Small Tortoiseshell and Brimstone butterflies, Bumblebees, Queen Wasp, nest building activity by Carrion Crows, House Sparrows and Starlings and finishing off with a singing Chiffchaff in our own backyard. Of course some resident birds sing throughout the winter, but this particular week we had Blackcap and Chaffinch joining in with the chorus line.

Overhead, Sparrowhawks became much more visual both with hunting and displaying and parties of Buzzards coming together to size each other up.

Although it cannot be said we were treated to prolonged spells of sunshine, the temperatures were much milder overall.

13th March added an industrious Treecreeper to early spring activities, busily collecting nest materials at Broadway Gravel Pit wildlife reserve.

15th March greeted us with temperatures creeping up to the high teens and day-long sunshine and local to home a Queen Tree Bumblebee on Flowering Currant and the appearance of a Common Bee-Fly. However the main even of the spring so far occurred on this very day as the clock ticked round to 13:00 hours. With the full-on sun safely tucked behind the roof of our flats, one of those brief coming-togethers of local Raptors played out directly overhead. Firstly, two similar sized Sparrowhawks shadowing each other (females) were closely followed by five Buzzards, one Peregrine and one Red Kite. It was hard work following all the birds as we had no cloud as a back drop, still, the Red Kite being unconcerned by the brief ensemble passed over at the lowest height coming away from the escarpment on its unhurried predictable route to the lower end of the village.

It's heartening for me to see these fabulous birds exploiting the conditions presented to them on lovely days such as this, especially when conditions are prone to change for the worst within 24 hours as indeed happened on this occasion. Raptors truly make the most of favourable conditions whether socially or guarding the home front.

Tuesday 21st March was gloriously sunny, but cold in the wind. At 11:50 hrs a pair of Ravens in flight, coming away from the escarpment, were engaged in what I can only assume to be a courtship/bonding display. Their journey incorporated tight formation with much twisting over or barrel-rolling and general playfulness on the wing; quite delightful to watch.

Sunday 26th March presented us with the next raptor gathering of note during a fine day at 14:20 hrs. Raptors arrived from all directions above our estate and peaked with eight Buzzards and one Red Kite. Appearing separately from this, but in the same locale, were Sparrowhawks and Ravens.

A warm, sunny but misty Tuesday 28th March started relatively cloud free but by midday had clouded over by a good 90%. One of our kites appeared over the estate at 12:15 hrs and gradually circled up and over to the escarpment. I then noticed it unusually changed to a sustained flapping flight with deliberate deep sweeps on the up

and down strokes, something I hadn't seen locally on recollection. I wondered if this might be a territorial or aggression display as it contrasted greatly with its propensity to glide. From a distance I could only make out a single Buzzard near to it that hung over the Knap, but the Kite was powering away and was soon out of view. After this the day declined towards a dull rainy afternoon when a female Sparrowhawk shadowed by 2 Jackdaws over the houses brought observations to a close.

By Friday 7th April whilst Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps were widespread and re-established, singing vociferously around Broadway, my first Swallow swept through our estate at 09:18 hrs. This was particularly pleasing as we had seen for ourselves this very week Hirundine arrivals at the Dorset monitoring hotspot of Portland Bill were causing no little consternation among recorders for their lacking in numbers. Even Wheatears were very thin on the ground, so when a bedraggled Hobby turned up, although not especially early, it was greeted with a little surprise. Usual prey species were not on the menu in any numbers just yet.

Back in Broadway our first two House Martins returned to the housing estate on 9th April over a particularly warm and sunny weekend.

11th April was also warm and sunny with a light wind, perfect conditions for raptors keeping local birds on their toes. Other than a food carrying Raven and frequent Buzzards, Red Kite, Sparrowhawk (a brown 2nd calendar year female) and Peregrine all featured. It was almost a repeat of 15th March curiously enough; proving keen observers of the area's top predators need not venture far for their fix of the action.

13th April was notable for my discovery of a Chiffchaff taking beaks full of dry grass into a purposely fenced off compound of dense vegetation at Broadway Gravel Pit, a strategy for keeping certain areas on the reserve as undisturbed. Whilst I stood nearby the bird doing the work was contact calling the whole time whilst the male sang loudly from above.

Two Buzzards circling up together north side of our flat on 25th April was not altogether a friendly meeting. With the sun glinting off their bright plumage, feigned attacks ensued followed by a heart stopping talons-locked spinning earthward, only releasing their deadly grip at the last moment. I have only witnessed this behaviour a handful of times and I have read accounts of talon-locked birds hitting the ground. Colin R Tubbs refers to this behaviour as a "cartwheeling downward plunge" in his account on aggression display between territory-disputing males.

On 26th April between 10:30 and 11:00 hrs, I observed a territory holding pair of Buzzards acting in an agitated manner, moving about a small wood's canopy, alighting briefly and calling constantly. Certain trees around the woodland edge were visited more regularly (these are territory boundary markers). In this instance I saw a Buzzard wing fluttering submissively and I quite thought a mating would follow. Eventually, however, it transpired that an intruder was present and the pair flushed it out of the marker tree and followed it off their patch.

Getting to grips with Buzzard behaviour and the purpose of each action takes time, patience and deliberation for the observer. The timing of these observations was at a critical time of year for our Buzzards as tensions are fractiously high approaching egg-laying time.

Bank Holiday Monday 1st May threw up a real surprise. A fully grown, heavily streaked and speckled juvenile Blackbird appeared in our back yard. This means our Blackbirds must have got nesting underway at least early on in March for such a well-developed youngster to now be fully independent.

Shortly before 20:00 hrs on 4th May, after a relentlessly windy though sunny day, our first Swift appeared among the House Martins

directly over our home in Broadway following an influx reported through Devon. Unlike many other migrants we could mention this year, Swifts have returned bang on schedule. By the next day two Swifts were back in our Avenue and already landing under eaves: more followed in quick succession.

10th May presented such fine conditions as to provide a veritable airborne feast for local birds by way of flying insects. Many species took advantage of the bounty including the spring's first local Hobby visibly displaying its catching technique and eating on the wing.

The stage was set for another summer of recording.

References:

Tubbs, C.R., 1974. *The Buzzard*. David & Charles Limited.
Turner, M.E., 2007. *Hawkwatch*. Trafford Publishing. For notes on arrival/departure dates for Hobby in the North Cotswolds.