

Nature in the community, Broadway, Worcestershire. October 2016 to January 2017

Mark & Christine Turner

October 6th and 7th 2016 threw up a number of events here in Broadway that were key signals locally of the changing seasons. Chattering and twittering flocks of Pied Wagtails and Goldfinches gathered on rooftops and overhead wires, even a few Greenfinches which are heavily depleted in numbers nowadays joined in. Greenfinches of course suffered greatly in the past with the onset of Trichomoniasis, a debilitating disease which continues to strike down these birds and other species such as Collared Doves, Pigeons in general, even Tawny Owls and birds of prey. I still receive reports of suffering birds, the latest being a Greenfinch this October. The bird in question apparently sat for long periods hogging a seed feeder, I can well imagine the bird was struggling to swallow its food successfully due to the canker which develops in the throat. Surprisingly for the observer the bird flew down to the ground and slept huddled up at the edge of the lawn.

Not totally unexpected but equally a joy to see, was an influx of House Martins hanging around and frantically fly catching, building up their reserves for the great journey ahead. Our local breeding colony had long since departed. Not to be outdone by this, a lunchtime high wire act comprised of more than 50 Starlings.

With a change in wind direction from the East and North East came the first Redwings and Blackbirds, though not yet in any significant numbers. Finches were easily up to three dozen bounding around neighbourhood gardens, all of which could be seen from the kitchen window which faces out towards escarpment fields to the North.

October 12th highlighted a growing trend among our local Buzzards to come ever closer within the neighbourhood such as an individual passing low overhead mid-morning, actually alighting in a back garden tree just a few doors up. To my mind, Buzzards as regular garden visitors would be a welcome addition in the local community, for despite an army of domestic/feral cats here, we have a rat problem. I have seen many whole dead carcasses of rats in the avenues which I guess have been poisoned. It is quite a shock to come home and find a freshly dead rat on your path, just ask Christine. I am sure Buzzards would make marvellous pest control officers if only the Jackdaws would let them stick around!

That same morning presented us with examples of nature that should be avoided. Both cases could have represented dangerous nature if we had been braver to look closer. Our plumber that morning prised open a long since maintained water stop-tap box to find a Black Widow like arachnid under the lid. He wasn't too happy about putting an arm down the hole! Not so much as an hour later my attempt to relocate a bird feeder by the front hedge was swiftly aborted when Christine noticed a large Hornet type insect buzzing around me. I scarpereed without any hesitation so did not notice exactly what it was. Christine however, saw it well and after seeing an article on the BBC's Autumnwatch programme, believes it was an Asian Hornet. A local beekeeper told us observations were still rare in our region thankfully, but any sightings need to be reported as they are voracious predators of Honey Bees.

October 31st brought an end to a very mild start to autumn characterised by one of our most colourful fall periods in recent memory. Still in the nest was a large nestling Wood Pigeon with its sibling plus a parent perched alongside in a Broadway High Street tree. Broadway pigeons, both feral and wild, often nest close to the bustle of passing residents and tourists alike.

November 1st dawned quite differently, being cold, grey and murky. Our front garden Ash tree was now a mere skeleton and the front lawn thickly carpeted in yellow and brown leaves.

A local site that rarely fails to disappoint is Broadway Gravel Pit and November 2016, although finding the place to be lacking in the pond department, was bountiful with its woodland bird community. This year's nest box breeding Nuthatches were still present and seen mingling with mixed species flocks that included Goldcrests (up to 3 at a time), but more notably a Marsh Tit. Once commonplace and regular here, like the current situation nationally it has become scarce and every record is of the utmost importance. A plaintive *choo* note was all I could get from this apparent loner, but my goodness it was really confiding too.

Norton, Evesham was the next venue for a local winter record. This came in the form of a Peregrine heading North to North East shortly before midday on November 26th. Interestingly, this may not be just a chance find of a passage bird since it was heading for an area of open country, woods and quarries which I discovered to be a wintering area for Peregrines, Goshawks and Merlins around the mid to late 1990's.

At midday on a very mild December 7th, we were treated to a rare event at home with two Red Kites patrolling around our Broadway housing estate, passing directly over the back yard en route for the escarpment. Needless to say they were somewhat hindered by a couple of Jackdaws, but goodness me, it is a sight we are still coming to terms with here and we never tire of seeing. Subsequently we observed single Red Kites in the same locality on a further eight occasions up to January 17th.

December 18th whilst listening to a Robin singing in the back yard, we commented on the lack of Blackcaps in recent times. Then, mid-morning, a male Blackcap plonked down on our feeder's stand right in front of the living room window. The bird next showed on December 23rd but our resident Robin made him nervous. Boxing Day however, trumped even these latter events with two male Blackcaps side by side gleaning red berries from the back yard Cotoneaster.

During the last week of 2016, with continuous days of frost, our back yard with its large berry bush became the centre of activity. Visits included at least two each of Song Thrush, Redwing and Blackbird, then a female Blackcap following the two males. The Cotoneaster became a treasure to defend by all its visitors and ownership was hotly contested.

Despite New Year's Day 2017 being exceedingly soggy, our modest and minimally planted back yard was host to a record 6 Blackbirds competing for the fruits of the Cotoneaster. Out front was equally busy with Blackcaps and Goldfinches among others.

January 4th 2017 turned out to be a red letter day. Whilst watching and scanning for local Red Kite movements from the kitchen window, I happened to spot a single Waxwing in the very top of a Silver Birch in the school grounds. Searching further out on foot I traced the Waxwing/Redwing activity to a Rowan Tree at the bottom of our Close. Its berry crop was practically depleted but Christine counted 4 Waxwings among the hordes. By 14:50 the Waxwings had regrouped in the very tops of trees edging the school field, all facing the same way and stock still. By now the Waxwings numbered 26 and always perching separately from the Redwings. Waxwings incidentally are not intimidated by the presence of possessive Thrushes or Blackbirds. Waxwings will remain calm when all around appear to be in a flap.

January 6th was our next Waxwing encounter beginning with three flying between the school field, Lime Tree Avenue and Orchard Avenue where Christine traced them to a garden previously visited by Waxwings during a recent past winter visitation.

Now, the beauty of back yard birding brings the opportunity to observe behaviour of our more common and overlooked residents. Mid-January we saw (despite changes and extremes of weather) Dunnocks engage in courtship rituals that famously involve three or four individuals dancing, posturing, chasing and singing. It is almost

as if periods of unseasonable mild weather throws the birds in to a false sense of security. Even our Robins have formed a cosy pairing which I did not expect so early in the year. The next chapter in our studies inevitably accelerates towards the glorious season of spring.

References:

Turner, M.E., 2000. *Birding Buzzard Country*. For notes on Salford Priors area wintering raptors.

Turner, M.E., 2007. *Hawkwatch*. For notes on Broadway Waxwings and other rarities.