

Country Notes for March 2019

As I sit down to write these Country Notes, I have just returned from a walk with Bracken, and, even in mid-February, there is already something in the air that was missing until recently. This is the sound of bird song because, although spring does not arrive until 20th March, many birds will have built a nest and laid eggs by then. Their calling is to attract a mate or establish a territory.

As March arrives there are still three weeks of winter to go before spring arrives, but flowers are in evidence everywhere. Gone are most of the snowdrops, but in their place is the exuberance of daffodils, filling our villages with creams and yellows and also enticing us with their scent. The last of the crocuses are still to be seen, joined towards the end of the month by some of the very early flowering tulips. In our woods and gardens there is a carpet of yellow celandines to be found in many places. All of these add to the bounty of this time of year.

Early March also provides us with a display of catkins, hanging like caterpillars from the bare branches of bushes and shrubs. It is easy to believe that all catkins are the same and of the same variety. However, this is far from the case. Probably the most familiar are the catkins of hazel, long and greenish-yellow. In time these will provide animals, birds and us with delicious hazelnuts. These are grown in plantations in some parts of Kent, but may just as easily be found in our hedgerows. Silver birch trees also grow catkins that have small patches of brown all over them. The catkins on willows are also very familiar, appearing fluffy and certainly looking very attractive. Alders have catkins that are brown all over and almost look as if they are remnants of the autumn rather than the new growth of spring. These trees are a real favourite of siskins at this time of year, small greenfinch-like birds which increase in number considerably during the winter.

Other trees also grow catkins, including some types of oak. Whether we are keen to identify the exact type of catkin or whether we are just happy to enjoy the sight of them dancing in the breeze there is no doubt that they, together with the other signs of new growth, are an exciting foretaste of all that is to come over the next few months!

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