

Country Notes for January/February 2023

After a relatively mild and very wet January there cannot be many of us who are not hoping that the weather may be a little kinder to us in February. However this can also frequently be the coldest month, with ice and snow always a possibility. Encouragingly there are so many signs of new growth in our gardens and countryside. Snowdrops will be in full flower, and what a thrill it is to see such beauty so early in the year. By the end of the month they will be joined by the first daffodils - and one can almost hear the sighs of relief as we wonder at the hope and expectation that they give us each year. Deepest winter can often seem to provide a picture of greys and browns, and suddenly we see colour, brightening our lives up and filling our hearts with such joy.

It will be a while before our winter migrant birds leave us and the summer migrants arrive, but there can still be wonderful surprises for the observant walker along our footpaths and lanes. Just recently I have added two birds to my list that I have never seen in Hollingbourne before. The first was a snipe, a beautiful, finely marked wader in shades of brown, cream and grey, proudly displaying the long beak that it uses to poke around in the mud in search of food. This bird I saw at the south side of the Meadows Trust land, flying away in its famous zigzag motion and giving its call which is a sharp 'scarp'. This is very much a bird of wetlands (!) but they do tend to spread out onto flooded and damp meadow lands in the winter. This bird used to be much more common than it is now and it is currently on the Amber List.

The other new bird, which I saw just a few days later flying parallel to the Pilgrims Way against the back ground of the North Downs, was a peregrine falcon. At first glance I assumed it to be a kestrel but its direct flight and much more solid appearance made it clear that this was indeed a peregrine. These birds also tend to spread out during the winter months but unlike the snipe have become less scarce in recent years. This is as a direct result of fewer pesticides being used, as they feed on small birds which in turn feed on insects and other bugs. Decades ago, when pesticides were in common use, it had a devastating effect on the peregrine population. DDT, thankfully now illegal, had a particularly bad effect on this particular food chain.

There is so much to look forward to seeing this month, both in the countryside round about and also in our gardens.

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