

Country Notes for February 2024

February can be one of the coldest months with sleet, snow, ice, rain and high winds all a possibility. Such weather can seem very inconvenient to us from time to time but for much of our wildlife it can become literally a matter of life and death. A real lifesaver for many of our birds at this time of year are the berries left over from the autumn. The birds tend to favour the red ones which means that by February a lot of the red ones have gone, making ivy, in particular, a popular plant with its green berries now turned to black.

However, there are always some red berries left and at the time of writing there are still some hawthorn berries in our parishes. In the autumn I noticed a large number of such berries in the Meadows Trust and at the time of writing there are still some left. These are particularly attractive to members of the thrush family such as blackbirds, song thrush, mistle thrush, redwing and fieldfare. I have certainly witnessed many of these birds feasting in the Meadows Trust this winter.

However, there is also one other bird which enjoys berries, which is particularly worth looking out for this year, as this has turned out to be a 'Waxwing Winter'. These beautiful birds irrupt some winters into our country from the colder northern regions and this winter there have been a lot of sightings. Waxwings are essentially light brown and have a small crest on their head and yellow, white and red markings on their wings. They are about the size of a starling. They are usually seen in groups rather than individually and there have been many reports of them nearby. I have yet to see one this year but I am eagerly on the lookout as they really are stunning birds.

Equally stunning though are the hawthorns, as not only do they provide a wonderful spectacle of red berries in the autumn and winter, but their white blossom, often called 'may' is a delight in the countryside in the spring when it often appears at the same time as cow parsley. 'All the milkiess of May time' as H E Bates described it!

However, that is still to come – and in the meantime if you see someone out walking his dogs and staring intently at every berried bush it will probably be me! Here's hoping that some waxwings pay our villages a visit this winter.

Andrew G Snowdon