

Country Notes for October 2020

This is the month when darkness creeps back into our lives. The nights are already noticeably drawing in and at the end of the month the clocks will go back, plunging us into darkness long before afternoon is over. There are compensations however. For some it will be the sight of the vast array of colour in our trees and hedgerows – and whose spirits are not lifted on a sunny autumn day by the sight of trees in their autumnal splendour. For others it may be the smell of a bonfire hanging in the air, or perhaps for those with a log fire or woodburner, that first fire lit early in the evening, allowing us to settle down cosily in our village homes.

However, outside things are not slowing down at all; in fact quite the opposite. Birds which were silent during the latter part of summer, as they moulted after the breeding season to give them fresh feathers to guard against the cold of winter, have now found their voice again and are calling relentlessly. Just recently in the Hollingbourne Meadows nuthatches have been extremely vocal with their fast calling and rising ‘phit phit’ call. These birds look rather like extremely sturdy tits with their steely grey blue plumage and orange markings. They are remarkable for the fact that they can travel around a tree, both up and down, and at any angle in their search for food. Often difficult to see, they are often located by hearing their call. In recent times they have started coming to bird feeders in our gardens, in particular if the treats on offer include peanuts.

The only other bird that can travel around a tree in a similar way, apart from woodpeckers, is the treecreeper. However it is very different in appearance, being brown and almost mouse like, both in character and size. Their longish beak allows them to probe inside the bark for insects, upon which they feed. Their journey around the tree is however very different from the nuthatch which can wander around at will. Treecreepers only travel upwards, circling the tree as they do so. Should you see one and it disappears just wait a few seconds as it will surely appear again as it continues its circling, upward motion. Once it reaches the top it will then fly down to the bottom again as, unlike the nuthatch, it never travels downwards on the trunk or branch. Its call is a very quiet and high pitched ‘peep’.

Both birds are a pleasure to watch as they go about their business.

Nature never stops, whatever the season.

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