

Whitchurch Nature Notes

Signs of Spring - Part 2

Spring is a really busy time of year for our **native birds**. They are nest building, egg laying and incubating, followed by the exhausting job of feeding the chicks until they are fledged and can fly the nest. Some species rear a second or even a third family after the first chicks have flown. By the end of the summer, it is not surprising that the adults look so bedraggled.

The amazing thing about birds is their variation in size, shape, colour, habit, calls and food requirements, even just here in the UK. It is not surprising that we love to see and hear them in our gardens, and on our local walks.



Familiar garden birds

The little bird pictured above is a dunnock, also called a hedge sparrow (not to be confused with the house sparrow, which is in a different family). This is one of my favourite birds – they have a quiet, mouse-like way of creeping about under bushes in search of insects. There is a pair of dunnocks resident in our garden, alongside other common species such as robins, blackbirds, blue tits, great tits (pictured here), long-tailed tits, goldfinches, greenfinches, chaffinches and wrens. This is not an exhaustive list, and you will no doubt see many other birds in your own garden.

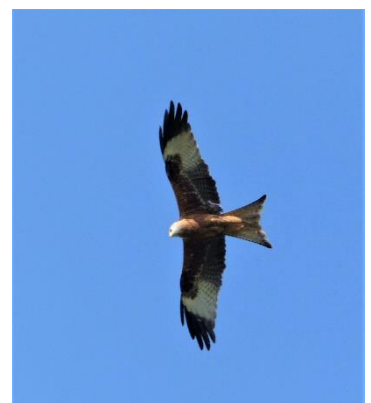


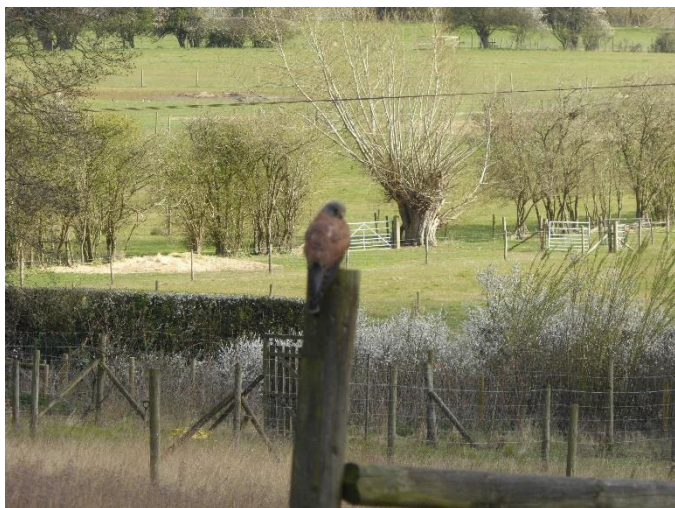
The summer visitors are now arriving too, after their incredible migration journeys. Our UK swallows, for example, fly north all the way from South Africa, a distance of about 8000 miles. Amazingly, most swallows return to the same colony, with 44 per cent of pairs reoccupying the same nest. This unusually strong nest-faithfulness is called philopatry (“home-loving”). Swallows are a sure sign that summer is on its way!

Birds of prey seen around Whitchurch...

It is quite remarkable how we have become so used to seeing the different birds of prey now resident in our local area. My neighbour recently counted 14 kites and buzzards enjoying the thermal currents above Bozedown – and this is by no means a record number.

Red kites (on right) were successfully re-introduced in the Chilterns in the 1990s by the RSPB. During this same period, buzzards re-colonised the south and east of England without human intervention. This is partly due to the banning of organochlorine pesticides in the 1950s and 1960s, which reduced their ability to reproduce.





I can remember being really excited seeing buzzards when holidaying on Mull in the 1970s – now we see them circling over our garden every day!

The easiest way to tell the difference between the two species is to look at their tails. Red kites have a distinctly forked tail whereas buzzards have a shorter, rounded tail.

Also, if you keep your eyes open, you might see a kestrel (pictured here) perched on a post or hovering above the fields, on the lookout for voles and other prey.

Unusual occasional visitors

We soon take for granted the birds we see regularly but beware – their more unusual cousins can take us by surprise! Fish ponds can be raided by herons if they are not protected with netting, and if there are no fish, an unsuspecting frog will make a tasty meal instead.

Other 'odd' birds may land on our bird tables, attracted by the regular visitors, so it is a good idea to always have your camera handy. A photo makes identification much easier, especially if it is an LBJ (little brown job)!

Of course, the visitor might be a sparrow hawk, swooping in to perhaps take an unsuspecting blue tit from your bird table. They are so fast; you may only see a few feathers left as evidence.



Richard Wingfield sent me some interesting pictures of unusual aquatic visitors he has seen locally, some in his garden. The one pictured above is a handsome Egyptian Goose. You will see the others in the Photo Gallery linked to these notes.

Identifying birds from their songs & calls

Many people have remarked about how wonderful the dawn chorus has been recently. It is a real skill being able to pick out the different bird species from this melodious jumble of sound. True 'birders' rely much more on their knowledge of bird songs to identify a bird, rather than being able to see it, especially in woodland.

The National Trust have an excellent guide to the dawn chorus on their website. Click on this link https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/lists/our-guide-to-birdsong-and-bird-spotting?campid=email_central_Newsletter_16042020_Sub2aMEMNONFAM

Scroll down to the section "**Teach yourself how to recognise different birdsong**" where there is a link to a recording lasting about 5 minutes of a dawn chorus and an explanation of all the birds that are singing. Give it a try if you would like to improve your bird song ID skills.

I would like to thank Richard Wingfield, Sandra Parkinson, John Bradon and Geoff & Meryl Weir for their interesting contributions and photos for these Nature Notes and the accompanying Photo Gallery.

Look out for the next issue of Nature Notes including contributions from other local enthusiasts