

Not everything goes to plan

Like most people who care about wildlife we are sometimes prepared to give nature a helping hand. However things don't always turn out the way we intended. Last year we placed several nest boxes around the Common. Two of the Kestrel boxes were used - one by magpies and the other by squirrels. A Little Owl box on Grasslands Common looks as if has been occupied by woodpeckers. Never the less wildlife as a whole has benefited.

In the last issue I explained how to make a bee box from the oasis foam used to arrange dried flowers. I was very proud that all the holes I made in my bee box were eventually used. Imagine my dismay when last week I found that a woodpecker had discovered this welcome larder and had started to dig out the holes to get at the over wintering larvae. It just shows that however well intentioned you may be nature is always able to throw a spanner in the works.



My beebbox before "Woody" got to it

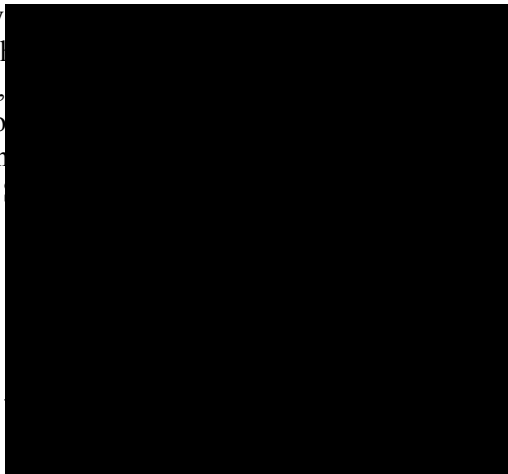
Hi-Ho! Hi-Ho! Its off to work we go

Winter is the time when most of the conservation work is carried out on the Common. This year as part of our heathland regeneration programme we are clearing 5.5 hectares on Grasslands Common. This involves removing over 100 mature pine trees; this may appear to some people to be vandalism on a grand scale. We are after all the Horsell Common Preservation Society. The truth is that over the last 50 years Britain has lost nearly 60% of its lowland heath. Lowland heath is now a more endangered habitat than tropical rain forest. The large pines are a

seed source which every year produce thousands of young seedlings.

As well as cutting down the larger pines some will be pulled over so that the root plate and the soil beneath it are exposed. This will provide habitat for solitary bees and wasps that dig their tunnel nests into the bare sand. It will also provide basking and breeding sites for reptiles.

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Fifty years ago the area around the six-cross roads car park was almost entirely heather. Today the car park is surrounded by pines, the ground underneath is sterile, and very little will grow there. Most of the wildlife live high above in the tree canopy, this was one of the reasons why it was chosen as a site for the car park. Visitors can park and enjoy the Common without causing too much disturbance to the wildlife.

If we continue to do nothing the whole common will eventually become one large pine plantation and the heathland will be lost for ever.

Even though HCPS own the Common they cannot do as they like, felling licences have to be obtained from the Forestry Commission to fell the larger trees and English Nature have to be consulted as part of the management plan.

Several students from Woking High School are joining in the conservation work that happens during the winter months as part of their Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme. The work takes place the second Sunday of every month between 10am - 1pm. The group meets in the six-cross roads car park, contact Bill Pugh 01483 715721 for more information.

Jarvis the Nightjar



Jarvis will be spending Christmas in Africa. Nightjars migrate south every autumn to warmer climates. They will return to Horsell Common next spring.

Last summer was a good year for nightjars. At least two pairs were reported on Grasslands and others were seen and heard on the main common. Nightjars are ground nesting birds which need large areas of open heathland for their survival. They are most active in the evening and at night, catching insects on the wing.

The male has a few white feathers on the tips of each wing which are exposed when flying. They also have a very distinctive *churring* call. Sometimes they can be attracted in the early evening by waving a white handkerchief which the male sees as a competitor moving into his territory.

Lots of Mosquitos

If you walked on the Common during the summer you may have noticed the unusually large number of mosquitos. The name mosquito is from the Spanish for "little fly".

The prolonged wet weather last year and the fact that mosquitos have aquatic larvae and pupae are the main reasons. Temporary pools of water especially under trees were more abundant in the spring. These pools are rich in bacteria (mosquito larvae food) from decaying leaves and they also lack many of the predators such as fish which could prevent a build up of numbers.

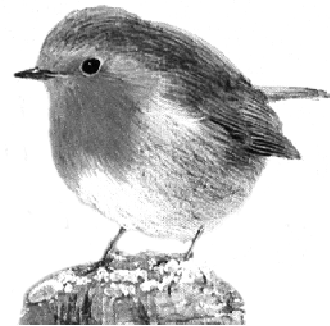
The mosquito season is usually short as the breeding pools dry up during the summer. Last summer many of the ponds on the Common remained wet for the whole season. Only the females bite and they use body temperature, smell and movement to identify suitable victims. The very large numbers seen flying under humid conditions are probably males that have a short life and do not bite.

Little can be done to control the numbers except insecticide spraying or destruction of pools, and either would be wrong on nature reserves because they would kill too many other species indiscriminately. Repellents rubbed on the skin can prevent bites. In most case mosquito bites cause minor inconvenience, occasionally an allergy may result but this is rare. Malaria is not a problem in Britain.

Cold winter nights

In winter birds are faced with a problem. As the days get shorter there is less daylight for feeding and building up reserves of fat. The nights are also getting colder so birds have to make every effort to conserve energy during the night by cutting down on energy loss.

One of the ways they do this is to fluff up their feathers to increase their insulation like plumping up a duvet or eiderdown. A small bird can double its volume of plumage and increase its insulation by one third. This still leaves the legs and beak as a source of heat loss. Squatting, so that feathers cover the legs, or standing on one leg at a time helps. Tucking a beak into the warm air trapped in its wing feathers is just like pulling the duvet over your head.



The plump robin seen on Christmas cards is only trying to keep warm

Many small birds roost in dense cover, such as ivy or leyland conifers. Here, they are safe from the worst of the chill from the wind. They will often roost on the sheltered rather than the windward side of the tree.

A robin will sometimes spend the night in a barn or outbuilding. Telltale white streaks of droppings show where a bird has a regular night-time roost. Blue tits will often return to the boxes they used for nesting in the spring.

Many small birds huddle together for more protection. Wrens pile on top of each other, beaks in and tails out. Flocks of long tailed tits roost in rows along a branch in cold weather as a way of conserving heat.

Despite these energy-saving practices by the birds, the key to surviving cold nights is still a good dinner. Birds can cope with longest and coldest nights provided that they are well fed so that they have plenty of fat to burn to keep warm. You can make a difference to the survival of birds during the winter by making sure that your bird table is well stocked during cold weather when snow and ice hide their natural food.