

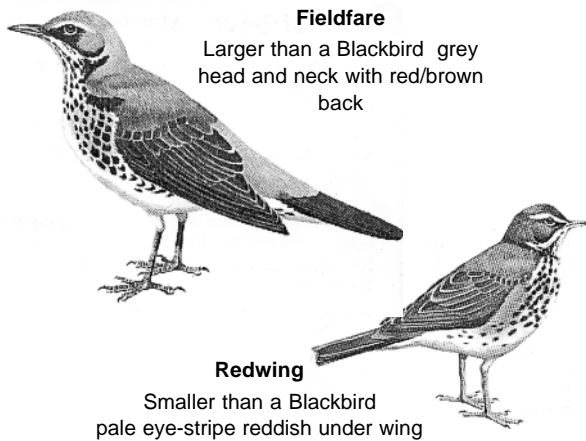
A Breath of Fresh Air

WINTER

The newsletter for schools from the Horsell Common Preservation Society

A hard time for the birds

Have you noticed how many red berries there are on the holly trees this year? Some people believe that it is a sign that we will have a hard winter. If the weather is bad in Scandinavia or Europe many birds will move to Britain during the winter months. Birds like the Fieldfare and Redwing who are members of the thrush family. A flock of these birds will strip a holly bush of its berries in a single day. Other birds only visit us during the summer months. At the end of the summer they fly south to Southern Europe and Africa, this is known as a migration.



For the birds that remain winter can be a very hard time. When the ground is frozen or covered in snow it is very hard to find food. Some small birds need to eat half their body weight in food every day to stay alive. Many of the birds that live on the Common will move into our gardens at this time of the year.

In my garden in Cheapside, on the edge of the Common, I feed the birds all the year round. On my peanut feeders I have resident flocks of Blue Tits and Great Tits. At this time of year they are joined by Long Tailed Tits and Coal Tits. I also have a Sparrow Hawk that regularly takes Great Tits. This may seem cruel but a pair of Great Tits can produce two families of between 5 - 12 young in a summer. Only two need to survive to replace them. It is the healthiest birds that usually survive.

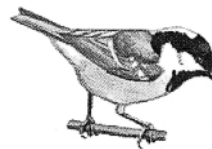
If you decide to feed the birds in your garden what kind of food should you put out? Birds



Blue Tit
Bright blue cap yellow chest



Great Tit
Larger, wide black band down yellow chest



Coal Tit
Black cap white patch on back of neck dirty pink chest



Long-tailed Tit
Black, white and pinkish with long tail

need foods rich in carbohydrates and fats to help them survive the long, cold nights. Peanuts (not the salted kind) in a net bag are a favourite. These will attract Tits, Siskins, Nuthatch, Finches and I have several of the brightly coloured Great Spotted Woodpecker on my feeders. Many birds like Robins, Dunnocks, Chaffinch and Wrens prefer to feed on the ground and will eat kitchen scraps like stale cake and bread, uncooked pastry, cooked rice or pasta, bacon rinds and cheese. If you want to buy food wild bird seed is readily available and contains a large range of seed and grains that attract larger birds. For smaller birds millet is a grass seed that has a high starch content and is a good source of minerals and vitamins. Catfood is also a real treat for birds! Remember that drinking is just as important as food so make sure that there is always water available especially when there is frost or snow on the ground.

I've had over 30 different kinds of bird in my garden ranging from a Heron, that was after the fish in my pond, to a Goldcrest the smallest British bird.

This year we have had the rare Dartford Warbler nesting on the Common, in a very hard winter over 80% of the birds can die. This is a very shy bird and will not move into gardens. So we have made piles of birch trimmings near where it nests to provide cover for the small insects it feeds on in case we get a lot of snow.

Trees on the Common - Scots Pine

There are several plantations of Scots Pine on the Common most of the oldest and largest trees are in the area that runs from opposite Castle Road to the Sandy track. Scots Pine is an evergreen. The pine needles, which are in fact its leaves, are twisted about 7cm long and grow in pairs. The cones which are the fruit are egg-shaped about 7.5cm long green to start, ripening to brown. It thrives best on sandy or gravelly soil and can reach to a height of 35 metres. In the open it can be broad and spreading, but in narrow and confined spaces it grows tall and straight. If you look up at the trunk on some trees you will see holes about 4-5 metres from the ground these



are the nest holes of Great Spotted Woodpeckers or Nuthatches. The branches higher up provide nesting sites for Goldcrests and food sites for Coal Tits who probe the bark for insects and extract seeds from the cones.

Looking for a mate

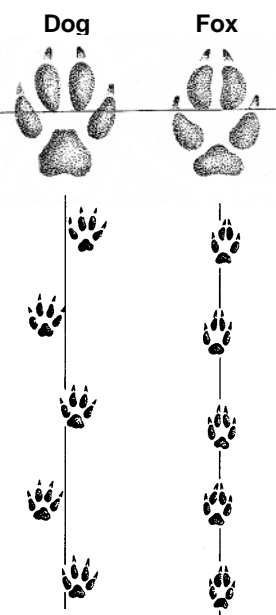
In February birds and animals start to pair up before mating in the spring. Frogs will start to appear in the ponds around the Common. Males will hitch a ride on the backs of the fatter females. You should not encourage your dogs to swim in the ponds, because it is particularly important that the wildlife is left undisturbed during the breeding season.

Female foxes called vixens can be heard calling during the night for a mate. Some people say that it sounds human, very like a child crying. Birds will begin to pair up and will start to defend their territory. Robins in particular can be very aggressive and you may see fights developing around your bird table, as the males see off any rivals. My resident robin will take on upto 30 chaffinches and send them all flying off.

Winter footprints

If we have a fall of snow it will be a good opportunity to try out your tracking skills. If there is no snow then the soft mud around the edge of the ponds will provide evidence of the animals that have visited.

As many people walk their dogs on the Common it best to eliminate dog tracks first.



The tracks of a domestic dog and a fox can sometimes look similar. The best way is to look at the line of the track. The tracks of the fox are arranged in almost a perfect straight line. With a domestic dog the track is wider and either side of a centre line.

The outer toes of a dog are further forward and the track is almost completely filled with the pad marks. There is very little space between the toes and the rear pad.

