

Winter thoughts

Over the last few weeks a Green Woodpecker has been a regular visitor to my garden. Moving up and down the lawn looking for insects. I've had Green Woodpeckers in the past but only the occasional visit when there have been ants nest in the garden, ants are one of their favourite foods. Great Spotted Woodpeckers visit my peanut feeder several times a day.

I began to wonder why this new visitor had moved in. I then realised that the very wet weather had waterlogged the usual feeding ground on Grasslands Common and so he had crossed the Littlewick Road in search of dryer pastures.

This started me thinking about how the weather can effect wildlife. We all know that when there are storms on the coast seagulls often fly inland, and the arrival of redwing and fieldfare usually indicate that the first heavy snow has fallen in Northern Europe and Scandinavia.

In very cold weather birds rely on fluffing up their feathers to provide more insulation. Robins always look fatter in the winter. They will sometimes stand on one leg to reduce the area of skin exposed to the cold. Insulation comes not only from feathers, but also from surroundings. Blue tits will return to nest boxes abandoned after nesting, cramming themselves in on freezing nights. The warmth of many bodies raises the overall temperature. The smallest birds are at greatest risk and huddle together for protection. While some on the outside may succumb, those in the middle will survive: 96 wrens have been recorded in one such scum.

Many birds avoid the ravages of winter by flying to areas that are warmer with abundant food supplies. They return in the spring when food is more readily available. Migration can be just as dangerous, not least because of changing weather. Birds are tremendous navigators, but they need cloud breaks to see the sun or stars to find their position. Strong winds, rain, fog and thick cloud can force them to ground. This is a real problem for small birds flying over the sea.

With the recent series of mild winters we have the largest number of Dartford warblers on the Common that people have ever seen. This is because in hard winters up to 80% of these small birds will die. The numbers do recover because it is the fittest birds that survive and they have less competition and so are able to rear more young, but it does take a year or two.



Dartford warblers live all year round on Horsell Common in a hard winter 80% of them will die.

Freak weather can also be a real killer. There are accounts of ducks being encased in ice in thunder clouds and falling as hailstones. In Canada where golf ball size hailstones are a regular occurrence large areas of vegetation are flattened killing almost all the bird life as well. Nearer home in Essex in September 1991 thousands of birds, from waders and barn owls to pheasants and skylarks were killed by freak hailstones.

Sometimes birds native to North America are seen in the west country. They have been blown over 3,000 miles across the Atlantic by strong westerly winds. Very few ever survive as the alien environment and long journey usually take their toll.

Looking out from your centrally heated houses spare a thought for the birds on these chilly winter days and nights. As long as there is no food shortage cold winter nights do not necessarily kill. Put up a bird table and fill it with bird food or household scraps. Position your bird table near a tree or hedge not in the middle of the lawn. The birds will feel safer if there is cover nearby. Get an adult to disinfect it regularly with boiling water. In cold weather a source of drinking water is just as important as food. Your bird table could be a life saver and will provide you with hours of free entertainment.

Happy bird watching!

The Fox - Britain's wild dog

Winter is the time when you are more likely to see and be aware of foxes. With less foliage around there is less cover for them. It is also the time of year when they start to mate. Many foxes live on the Common during the day and visit our gardens at night normally to scavenge from dustbins and catch rats and mice. They can often be seen at night caught in car headlights as they cross the road.

A large fox regularly visits my garden after dark it squeezes between the gate and gatepost leaving behind some of its red hairs. It then passes the house activating the outside lights, which do not seem to bother it, and exits under the chain link fence at the bottom of the garden. If my cats are out at the time they seem to ignore one another. The fox has certainly never made any attempt to attack them.

The red fox is the only wild relative of the dog in Britain. Its coat is red-brown above and white grey below, in many case it will have a white tip to its bushy tail. With a long pointed muzzle and erect ears it has highly developed hearing and sense of smell. Many years of being hunted has made the fox very wary of human beings.



For most of the year the dog fox (male) and the vixen (female) lead separate lives but in mid winter they meet up to mate. Around this time you will hear the sharp barks of the dog and screams of the vixen as they seek one another out. After mating the vixen will make her den, or earth, in a quiet spot sometimes under a tree root, or they have been known to dig under garden sheds. Between three and six cubs are born in April. The vixen will take them hunting with her when they are about one month old.

One month later they will become independent hunting for themselves. They will catch and eat rabbits, mice, frogs and hedgehogs and if times are hard will eat worms, beetles and berries.

Foxes mark their territory by leaving droppings which like their earth have a very distinctive musty smell.

The fox has a reputation for being sly and cunning. If it is being hunted it will take to water or mingle with sheep to conceal its musty smell. There is one story of how it rids its self of fleas. It takes a twig in its mouth and then backs slowly into water, driving the fleas towards its head and on to the twig which it then drops.

State of the Planet

The first programme of the new David Attenborough series on BBC1 *State of the Planet* dealt with the importance of very small insects in keeping the environment in balance. Very small insects form the start of the food chain on which so many other creatures rely.

The cold misty mornings at this time of year highlights the thousands of tiny spiders webs that there are in the heather on the Common. A good example of how, what looks like a barren landscape, can prove to be an important building block in the survival of our planet.

Winter word search

R	V	H	B	N	J	O	E	A	R	T	H
E	U	I	F	X	O	F	G	O	D	A	F
K	P	C	X	L	U	I	S	G	I	F	D
C	L	I	S	E	E	H	V	W	U	E	
E	I	T	S	G	N	A	A	N	C	O	G
P	T	N	O	B	O	N	S	K	D	O	C
D	R	A	M	Y	I	H	S	G	L	E	Y
O	G	L	W	D	A	R	T	F	O	R	D
O	V	T	N	O	R	E	L	B	R	A	W
W	E	A	R	M	U	Z	Z	L	E	U	F
I	C	H	B	D	X	I	N	S	A	Q	B
S	W	S	E	N	O	T	S	L	I	A	H

All of the words in our puzzle come from the stories in this issue. See if you can find them.

<i>Earth</i>	<i>Muzzle</i>	<i>Fleas</i>
<i>Dog Fox</i>	<i>Woodpecker</i>	<i>Dartford</i>
<i>Vixen</i>	<i>Hailstones</i>	<i>Warbler</i>
<i>Scandinavia</i>	<i>Atlantic</i>	<i>Ducks</i>