



APRIL This has been a Spring to beat all records, the best for more than 350 years and I missed it! The reason for my absence from Bristol was that I was aboard **M/V Plancius (left)** making her way from **Antarctica** to **Madeira** via the islands that rise from the *mid-Atlantic Trench*.



Over the course of a voyage of over 8000 miles via **South Georgia, Gough Island, Tristan da Cunha, St. Helena, Ascension** and the **cape Verde Islands**, I saw a lot of birds which I have reported on under '**Bird Logs**' on this website. It was interesting to see how the bird communities changed with latitude from the **sub-Antarctic** to the **Tropical**.



Above is a **Red-billed Tropic Bird** and **Northern Rockhoppers** of **Tristan and Gough** – appropriately called '**crazy crested penguins**'.

Back to **Leigh Woods** and the wonderful **April** weather. **Sally** noted that the average temperature for the month was 11°C (53.2°F) which was 4°C above normal and easily beating the average high for **April 2007**.



Paul Simons who writes the weather column in **The Times** noted on the 5th, that it was turning out to be a dry spring, and indeed, our weather gauge recorded nothing by the end of the month. South-west winds were bringing warm air from the sub-tropics and these were apparently followed by hot dry air sweeping up from North Africa. Another feature of the month was good sunshine! This was reflected in the output of our **photo-voltaics** which generated **356 Kw/hrs** (**200Kw/hrs** for the older array and **156 Kw/hrs** for the newer one). The maximum I have recorded in **April** from the old panel was in **2007** when it generated **210 kw/hrs**. Hardly any extra heat was used for our hot water because the solar panels provided with all that was needed, regularly driving the temperature up to 65°C in our hot water tank.



The fine, warm and sunny weather also brought on an amazing display of blossom in both our gardens and the countryside. The **Anemone blandas** were better than ever (**left**). I dug up several small clumps from a large house in the **Cotswolds** at least 20 years ago. The species spreads at snail's pace, but now they make decent blue cushions of blue flowers each spring. We have supplemented them from seed.



Sally took this photograph in early **April** before the apple blossom came out.

Daffodils, tulips, Wisteria and **Magnolias** were all out at the same time and lasted forever. The **Bluebells** were especially good this year. Apparently, the very cold conditions during **December 2010** did not persist into **January** when these plants start to grow. The mild **February** and sunny **March** helped them on and led to a glorious spread of blue carpeting in our woods. The **British Isles** is the home for half of the varieties of **Bluebells** which bloom during the short period before the forest trees under which they grow burst into leaf and shade them out.





Sally went to Prior's Wood during the peak of flowering and took several photographs of the spectacle – always difficult to capture with the camera. The blues, although sometimes intense to the eye, often are not registered so strongly by the camera.

I think that these flowers often look at their best when backlit and set against young ferns or bracken (see left).



Bluebells and many other early woodland plants are engaged in a race with time to produce their flowers, set seed, and build up their reserves by photosynthesis before the canopy above blocks the sunlight.

Right: Possibly my best picture of **Bluebells in bloom** taken in the good old days of film – certainly before **2003** when I went digital. This was taken in an area of **Leigh Woods** close to **Paradise Bottom** which is now very overgrown.



Left: **Magnolia** in full bloom in the gardens of **Bracken Hill** – what was **Bristol University's Botanic Garden** and now under development. I shall be reporting more on this next month.



Left: Unfortunately, *the wild flower meadow* behind the house which needs careful management, was neglected last year and, in early **April**, was looking rather sad.

Sally, who has been keeping a record of the place since the University sold it, found a few **Fritillaries** in bloom among the rather rank grasses and leggy ***Anemone blandas***.



While I was away, **Tony Cottrell** was busy locally and kindly sent me several photographs of what he had taken, including this attractive portrait of a **Willow Warbler** among blossom. His first photo of a **Hoverfly** – ***E. tenax***, our old friend, the **Drone Fly** - was taken on the **25th March** (below). This was a full month earlier than last year when he recorded his first sighting on the **17th April**, a confirmation of the very advanced **Spring**.



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