

APRIL began with fog thick enough in the morning to blot out the **Clifton Suspension Bridge** from the view overlooking it in **Leigh Woods**. It cleared in the afternoon as the photos below show. Both were both taken on the 2nd April.



Biting North winds followed which brought snow overnight on the 5th April and a temperature of just 1 deg C; flurries continued until the morning of the 7th.



Far from heralding another Ice Age, April is historically a month of highly variable weather as the westerlies are at their weakest and often allow the incursion of Arctic air at this time of the year. The battle between the cold dry polar and the warmer, moist Atlantic air is what gives us our **April showers**. This month, we had plenty of those, sometimes



with dramatic **Cumulonimbus** clouds which often dropped hail stones. The picture on page one is of a large **CuNmb** to the East of **Bristol** on the **13th April**.

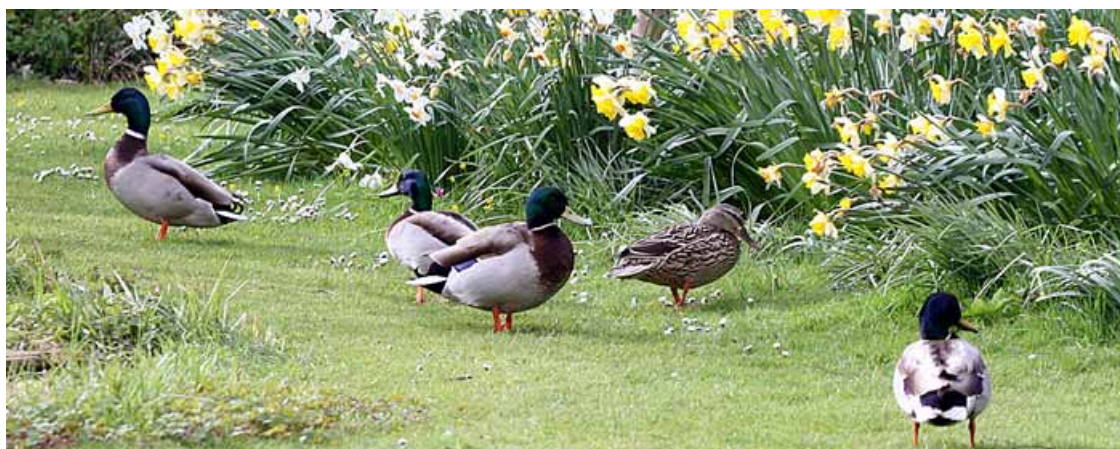


Ever on the lookout for **Hoverflies** which are often very attractive and, as adults feed on nectar, I saw my first Bee Fly (*Bombylius*) of the year on the **8th April**, hovering like a little furry bumble bee over the **Forget-me-nots**. As the photograph (left) shows, they have an astonishingly long proboscis for accessing nectaries located deep inside flowers. The grubs are parasites inside Mining or Solitary Bee nests, first stealing the honey and pollen and then chewing their way through the bee's brood.

The last time I saw a **Brambling** on our lawn was a female on the 7th. As for Summer visitors, I did not hear a **Chiff-chaff** until the 2nd April in **Leigh Woods** – see right singing at the top of a tall Ash tree. **Vickie Howard** saw her first **Swallow** in **Abbots Leigh** on the 5th April – I spotted one a few days later. By the 9th April, the odd **Blackcap** was warbling in the woods but not very enthusiastically. I heard a **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** drumming on the edge of **Nightingale Valley** on the evening of the 7th April, but I did not see it.



As usual, we had an invasion of **Mallard** during early April. A duck is usually responsible possibly looking for a place to nest. She is invariably pursued by a bevy of sex-hungry drakes. She always seems to be accompanied by her 'mate' because one of the drakes is usually more aggressive and keeps the rest of the gang at bay. On the occasion depicted below, there were 5 drakes. As they generally head for our small pond and stir it up, I do not encourage them!



During the first half of April there was plenty of evidence that birds were busy building nests and **Carmen** our **cat** makes a valuable contribution to their enterprise. Our cat is a



Birman which is like a long haired Siamese but with a flat face and no 'squint'. As she is now getting an old lady in cat terms, she is no longer interested in taking a toll of the local wildlife (she was a 'mouser' rather than a 'birder'). On the contrary. She is a great asset during the breeding season.

Each day, **Sally** gives her a good brushing and collects the fur. During the Spring, she fills a couple of hanging feeders with the silky stuff and the hen tits like the **Marsh** and the **Great Tits** (below) which are engaged in constructing their nests go crazy. Each bird spends minutes at a time tugging at the material and attempting to cram so much into their beak that much of it wafts away onto nearby twigs.



Her mate is often in attendance to make sure that she behaves herself as there are other avian lotharios around on the look-out for quick affairs! Then, having collected a huge beakfull, she departs often losing half of her payload within the first few seconds. It is as though **Carmen's** soft fur is irresistible and acts like a '*super-normal stimulus*' recalling the experiment whereby an **Oystercatcher**, given the choice of its own eggs and a huge artificial one prefers the latter. Whatever the reason, given decent weather, the tit's nestlings around here will certainly get a warm start in life snuggling down in **Carmen's** cast-off winter coat.

I keep my microlight aircraft near **Doynton**, a small village between **Bristol** and **Bath** where there are still **Starlings** and **House Sparrows** – both species that are not too common in our neck of the woods. In fact, **Starlings** disappeared when our neighbour's roof was renovated a few years ago and I have never seen '**spudgies**' here in 24 years. So on the 10th April, I took the camera to **Doynton** and photographed the sparrows.



The incessant chirping 'cock sparrers' is almost music to my ears these days. A cock **House Sparrow** in breeding plumage is really quite a nicely marked little bird. Alas, absence of winter stubble in our fields, bird-proof roofs, and possibly a marked shortage of insect food in summer perhaps due to pollution has caused a massive decline in the UK. But little colonies still hang on in pockets – and **Doynnton** is one of them. Look at the colours on this cock **Starling**, one of many singing in **Doynnton**.



I wonder how many of the residents have open fires because **Jackdaws** were actively dropping sticks down many of the chimney pots (right). Chimneys are a favourite site for their nests.

On the 11th April, we visited Nigel and Kay Simpson who live in **Tidenham Chase** in **Gloucestershire**. Their wood in an old quarry was carpeted with **Wood Anemones**.



Apparently, the flowers were not as thick as usual but it was a delightful sight, especially in places where they were mixed with **Celandines**. We also saw a couple of



Early Purple Orchids – see above.

The 22nd April was a reasonably good day, and a **Peacock Butterfly** in good condition fluttered around our tulip bed and landed in one of the blooms looking in vain for nectar.



On the 23rd April, we went to **Extremadura** in central **Spain** for a few days where an abundance of rain fell early in the month. As a consequence, the countryside was carpeted with Spring flowers.



The dazzling display of **Broom** and **Lavender** in **Montfrague National Park**. An account of that trip will be filed under '**Bird Logs**' on this website.

We returned on the 28th and after being in sunny Spain with daytime temperatures of around 30 degs C and tepid evenings, we shivered in windswept Bristol. However, the **Bluebells** were in full bloom in the garden and our apple blossom came out while we were away. Also the fine cock **Blackbird** that frequents our garden was collecting worms, so he must have nestlings nearby.



Vickie Howard took the photograph below of five out of the nine **Mallard** ducklings on **Abbots Pool** on the edge of **Abbots Leigh**.

