



DECEMBER I have been away in the **Antarctic** from the beginning of **November** and only returned to **Bristol** on the 20th December so I have been unable to keep up these monthly **Nature Notes** for the last two months. However, one of my illustrated '**Bird Logs**' for the first of the three voyages I completed on '**Polar Star**' appears elsewhere on this website. It is an account of the wonderful diversity of **Southern Ocean** wildlife to be encountered in the **Falkland Islands, South Georgia** and the **Antarctic Peninsular** – like the mighty **Wandering Albatross** illustrated above.

The last week here at home in **Leigh Woods** has been marked by freezing temperatures and frost and a surfeit of **tits** coming into the feeders. The stars of the bird table have undoubtedly been **Long-tailed Tits**. Sally has counted up to 17 around the front wall where they love to peck at the ground up mixture of bread, peanuts and sunflower seeds, and also the hanging feeder containing the 'fat balls' (**below**).



It is a great sight – tails in the air and heads down. Ever restless, they stop only for a brief period before heading off across the road into the **Botanical Gardens**. However, before long, they are back and mixing with the **Great, Blue** and **Coal Tits**. I am amazed at how these little mites manage to keep warm in 0 degs C with a cold **Easterly** blowing.

They must generate a lot of metabolic heat and their plumage must act as very efficient insulation against the chill. I have seen **Long-tailed Tits** in **Russia** when the ground was blanketed with snow and the temperature was way below what we have been experiencing. At night, they huddle together, often in a hole or old nest, for warmth.





There have been up to 35 **Chaffinches** feeding around our house and some of them have very scaly outgrowths on the feet. The cock bird above is very badly afflicted but only on one leg. It is apparently caused by a cancer inducing *Papilloma* virus and this species seems to be especially prone to it. Those affected appear to survive quite well for some time – the bird above appeared to be in good health – but sooner or later, the condition must affect them.



I have never seen any **Greenfinches** or **tits** with badly deformed feet – the **tits** in particular use their feet to grasp food so that the bill can be brought to bear on it (see left).

Robins are beginning to be feisty and setting up their nesting territories.

Despite the cold weather, a **Great-spotted Woodpecker** has been repeatedly drumming from a dead branch on one of the large **Corsican Pines** outside our house since before Christmas. I do not think that I have heard the 'song' this early in previous years.

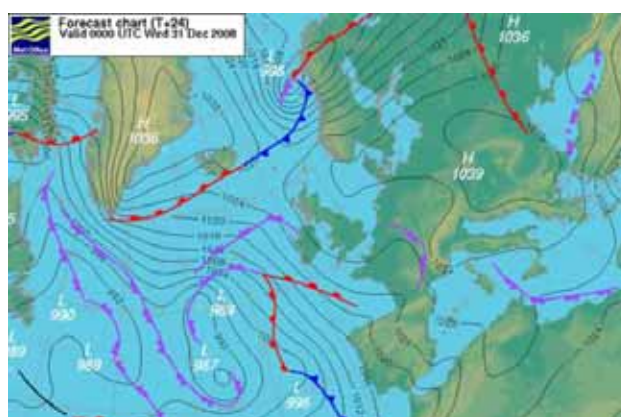




A cock **Blackbird** – just tall enough to tuck into the ‘fat balls’. Flocks of **Redwings** have been flying over and Sally noted a **Fieldfare** in the garden earlier this month pecking at the apples that we put out for the thrushes.

Note: the best position in our garden for photographing the birds that come into the feeders does not get any sunshine at this time of the year!

As I finish this on the last day of 2008, the prospect is a yet more ‘*high pressure gloom*’ as a large and very vigorous region of high pressure over **Europe** blocks the passage of Atlantic weather fronts and sends a stream of **Siberian** air over the UK. I have been colder here during the last few days than I ever did in two months in the **Antarctic**! So I conclude this year’s **Nature Notes** with **Penguins**.



Just before returning home, the **Adie Penguin** chicks had just started to hatch on **Peterman Island** in the **Antarctic Peninsular**. Above is a pair of ‘proud parents’ checking out their new offspring – one egg had yet to hatch. For more, refer to my **Bird Log** entitled **Falkland Islands, South Georgia & The Antarctic Peninsular, Parts 1 and 2**.

HAPPY NEW YEAR