

## March 2011

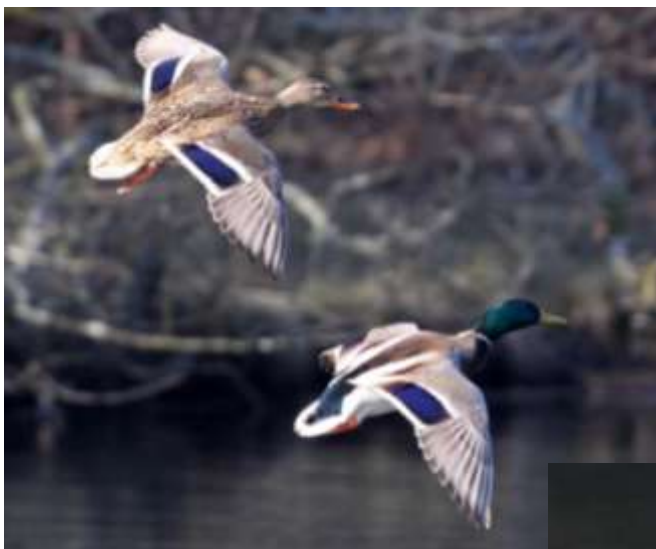
On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the month, the weather was set fair with clear skies and sharp sunshine. I motored over to the **Forest of Dean** to look for **Goshawks**. It was peak time for these large but elusive birds of prey to be displaying high above the forest. By the time I arrived at **New Fancy View**, where a smart **Willow Tit** conveniently perched above where I parked, several bird-watchers were already in place with their telescopes on top of the hill. I stayed there all morning and must have had 8-10 sightings of these large **Accipiters**. All were too distant for the **Canon 400mm f.4** to pick up in detail. However, the best – or least unsatisfactory – shot that I obtained was the one on the **right**. This shows the bulging line of the secondary wing feathers and distinctly rounded tail which distinguishes the flight silhouette of the **Goshawk** from that of the smaller **Sparrowhawk's**.



**Buzzards** were more obliging, often soaring to a great height. During the afternoon, when I was visiting the **Canop Ponds**, one swung up above the canopy before disappearing over the skyline – see **left**. Although **Buzzards** are two a penny now, with birds regularly flying over our house in **Leigh Woods**, this is the best picture I have ever taken of this species.

Right: A glossy black Raven pictured while passing the look-out at New Fancy View. With that huge bill and 'long-necked' appearance, there is no mistaking our largest member of the Crow family. Unlike **Carrion Crows** and **Rooks** for that matter, **Ravens** have a distinctly triangular tail and more angled wings. We regularly see them and hear their croaking calls over **Leigh Woods**. A pair regularly nest in the **Avon Gorge**.





By 13.30 hours, Goshawk sightings had become few and far between, and so I changed location to the **Canop Ponds** to look for Mandarins. Parking the car, I walked around with my heavy **Canon 500mm f.4**, hoping that I could rest it on something, should I need to use it. I found plenty of reasons to swing it into action.

**Mallard** were very active.

Already, they were paired up, often flying around in couples. I saw none of the sexual chases which are more characteristic of later in the season when the ducks are brooding and the drakes mercilessly pursue lone ones and rape them.

Several were less than pure bred: the drake on the **right** has a touch of **kharki Campbell** about him, with no white neck ring and a fawn breast.



**Left:** A **Little Grebe** glowing in the bright afternoon sun. I saw several. The males were frequently trilling.

**March** is a good time to see **Coots** at their most quarrelsome. The pairs space themselves out but there always seemed to be much trespassing, and this caused a great deal of grief!



**Right:** A typical chase, the bird on

the **right** sees off a neighbour which has dared to come too close. These altercations are generally preceded by a clear warning – often mutual threats involving the parties swimming towards each



other with the head held low, the hackles raised and with much 'chinking'.

**Left:** With the gleam of hatred in its **ruby** eye, a **Coot** threatening to launch an attack.

**Right:** Another feisty **Coot** seeing off a rival. Note the ruffled neck feathers, the cocked tail and wings ready to be whirred into action.



And if this intimidating display fails.....



.....the birds resort to serious fighting. In the picture **above**, it looks as though two cocks are locked in combat, while a female awaits the outcome. I believe that another bird which is just out of the frame was involved as well.

I was hoping to see **Mandarin Ducks**, and was successful (**below**).



Although a native of **China**, these wood ducks have become established in this county as a result of birds escaping from wildfowl collections. Although now rare in **China** and the **Russian Far East**, these gorgeous birds now number around **7000** adults in the UK. Favouring ponds with overhanging trees, the **Forest of Dean** is a good place to spot them. Doubtless these **Mandarins** originally escaped from **Slimbridge** which is just across the **River Severn**! A recent report indicated that between 35 and 50 had been seen on **Canop Ponds**. I saw about 3 pairs. In the photograph **above**, a contented couple dabble peacefully out in the lake where the birds were pulling up pieces of vegetation.



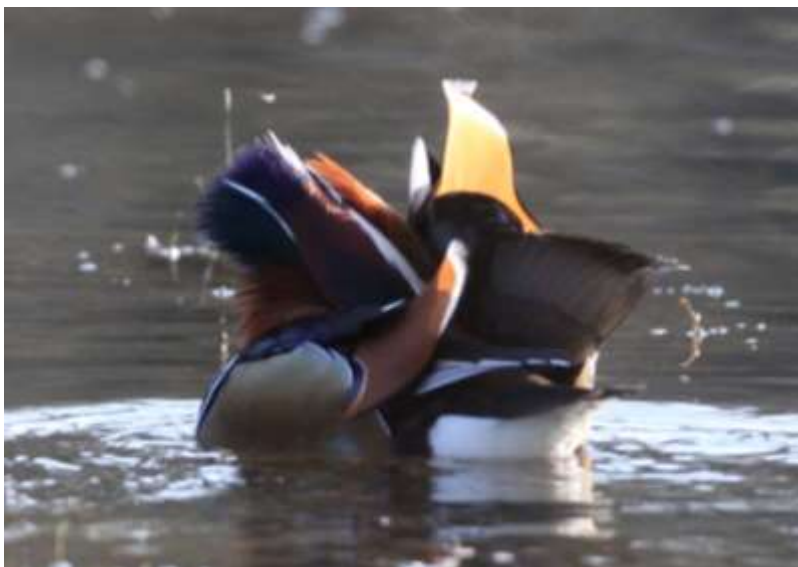
Globe-trotting birders extol the beauty of **Birds of Paradise**, but the **Mandarin** drake take a lot of beating. Rather like the **Peacock**, who would believe that such a strikingly handsome bird could exist? Competition between drakes to catch the eye of the ducks has resulted in the bird's gleaming plumage which was shown off to its full glory by the low, afternoon sun.

**Right:** Another drake dabbling, and showing the glossy green feathers on the forehead. You could never design such a bird!



**Mandarins** are unusual for wildfowl insofar as they nest in tree holes – so do a few other species – but the drakes return to their mates when the ducklings hatch and help to look after them. The drakes of other kinds, once mated, tend to abandon the females. The observation that **Mandarin** couples are faithful has led to their use in **Oriental** art as metaphors of conjugal happiness (see picture on the **right**, taken from *the web*). In traditional **Chinese** lore, these birds symbolize wedded bliss and fidelity.





And finally, a **Mandarin** drake preening, showing the two 'sails' typical of a fully flighted bird. In wildfowl collections, the birds are pinioned to stop them escaping, and so usually only possess one of these magnificent vertical feathers.



On the 5<sup>th</sup> March, there was a pair of **Bramblings** on our lawn with the usual collection of **Chaffinches**. The cock was beginning to show his breeding colours. The dark head feathers still have a scattering of grey-brown tips which will wear off.

**Right:** The pair of **Bramblings** with a **Chaffinch**. The black-bordered grey napes of the **Bramblings**, and the orange forewings stand out in a mixed flock of finches, and are surprisingly easy to spot.



Having mercifully been absent for much of the winter, **Roe Deer** have started sneaking into the garden. This young animal – probably last year's fawn – walked in as bold as brass just after lunchtime on the 6<sup>th</sup>. The **Begonia** flowers have been nibbled off, and some clumps of lilies have been chewed down to the ground. Our neighbours have lost their emerging tulips to the the deer.



Reluctantly, after three decades of living in our house, we have had to resort to gates. But not electrically operated ones that we call 'prison gates' that seems to be the fashion these days for new people who move into **Leigh Woods**, but good sturdy wooden ones. Since fitting them, there have been no signs of deer in the garden. So, with luck, **Sally's** vegetables should be safe this Summer.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of the month, I spent most of the day in deepest **Somerset**. Firstly, I visited **Greylake RSPB Nature Reserve** for the first time where I photographed a flight of **Wigeon**.





There is a good board walk through the reeds which leads to a very impressive hide with large windows overlooking the wetland. **Wigeon, Shoveler, Mallard and Teal (left)** were all within easy viewing distance. I saw several **Little Egrets** but not as many as another visitor whom I met who had counted nearly 30 earlier on, scattered over the reserve. This is a very good

location to see **Snipe**, although none put in an appearance while I was there.

Right: Again, the light was excellent and, with the sun behind me, the drake **Teal** were wonderfully illuminated. They are so small, that it is sometimes difficult to appreciate the subtleties of their plumage. Note the metallic green spectrum just showing above the flanks.



I then headed south to **Burrowbridge** to look for the flock of **Common Cranes** that are being introduced onto the levels. I drew a blank. So I returned towards **Bristol** via **Shapwick** where I stopped to see if I could spot the **Great Egrets**. I quickly found 4 on the scrape at **Shapwick**. It was interesting to see that there were signs of at least one of the birds, like the one on the **right** which is colour-ringed, coming into breeding plumage, with a dark bill and bright green lores. Note how the bird has raised the delicate plumes on the back – the **aigrettes** which were so much in demand just over a century ago and which brought about a





terrible slaughter of these birds, especially of **Little Egrets**. The **Great Egrets** were quite active, and, hand-holding the heavy **500mm**, I managed to obtain some pleasing pictures of these dazzling members of the heron family.



**Above:** On the final approach to land, one of the **Great Egrets** uses its relatively enormous wings and spread tail to slow down before gently landing in the water. Note the primaries which are bent upwards by the force of the air and the ruffled wing covert feathers, indicating an incipient stall.

There were signs of rivalry between our common Grey Heron and the White Egrets. Just where one of the Great Egrets was fishing, that was exactly where the Grey Heron wanted to be!

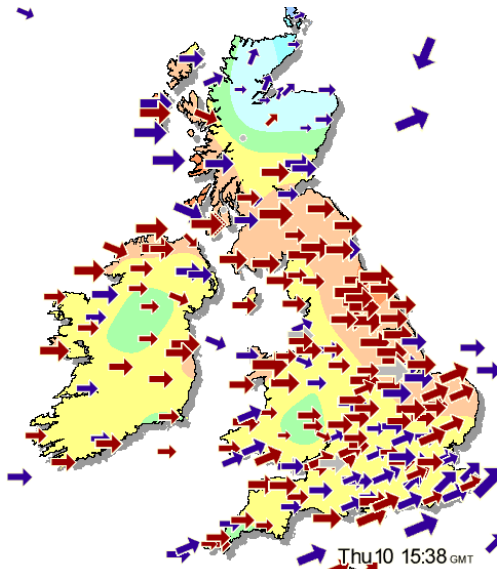
On the **right**, I just managed to capture the moment when the **Grey Heron** flew in, and, croaking in fury, supplanted the exotic visitor which did not stay to argue.



**Right:** On landing, the aggressor somehow looked very pleased with itself. With hackles and crest raised, this looks very much like a display of triumph.

The only other notable species that I saw was a female **Marsh Harrier** wheeling in the distance.





**Left:** The UK wind map for the **10<sup>th</sup> March**, a day when high westerlies prevailed over England.



**Right:** I rather fear that the bitter winter in which snow laid on the ground for rather a long time has killed a lot of **Wrens**. This is born out by the apparent disappearance of the species from Leigh Woods. During the month, I heard non singing. However, the bird photographed by **Sally** was sunning itself on our cold frame on the **13<sup>th</sup>**. When disturbed, it flew off into one of our neighbour's gardens.



On the other hand, the female **Goldcrest** is still coming down several times a day to peck at crumbs on our kitchen wall feeding station. The picture on the right was taken on the **16<sup>th</sup>**.



At 07.00 hrs on a dreary **Sunday 13th**, I joined a party of people at **Abbots Pool, Abbots Leigh** for the **Trevor Silcock Memorial Walk**. Trevor was a very active ornithologist around **Abbots Leigh** who died in 2010, and this annual event celebrates his life. It was led by the renowned **Bristol** ornithologist, **Ed Drewitt (left)**.

Over the course of two and a half hours, we saw and heard a good selection of woodland birds, including a **Wren** and **Tree Creeper**, and the cider apple orchard on the edge of the wood hosted a good mixed flock of **Bramblings** and **Chaffinches**. Some of the cock **Bramblings** were looking very bright indeed. There must have been between 10 and 20 **Bramblings** feeding on the ground – perhaps on pips from the rotten apples? A pair of **Ravens** flew overhead and a **Buzzard** was flushed from within



the wood. The interesting news that I heard was that **Redpolls** were visiting gardens in **Abbots Leigh**. We have not seen any this year in our **Leigh Woods** garden.

**Left:** The 'early birders of **Abbots Leigh**'.

Insofar as bird song was concerned, **Song Thrushes** and **Robins** were singing lustily, but **Blackbirds** did not start up pipe up until later month.

**Right:** A pukka cock **Blackbird** outside our kitchen window.



**Above and left:** A small bee – a **Carpenter Bee?** – dead in our conservatory showing its 2 pairs of wings.



**Left:** On the 17<sup>th</sup>, I sat in the garden of a house in **Abbots Leigh** awaiting the **Redpolls** which were coming in to the feeders. Alas, none showed up. However, a nice hen **Brambling** was a regular visitor to one of the seed feeders

A **Dunnock** hopped around a pile of logs by the shed. Its unassuming plumage belies the fact that this bird's sex life embraces almost everything imaginable. Not for them 'till death us do part' with one mate. Both sexes may establish multiple partnerships and also indulge in sneaky affairs. Some hens are polyandrous – and the cocks are often polygamous. It all depends upon the bird's status within the **Dunnock** community.



Back home, we have up to 5 **Coal Tits** at a time around just one of our feeders and by the 18<sup>th</sup>, **Blue Tits** were in and out of two of the nest boxes. On the **left**, a **Coal Tit** singing high up in one of the **Austrian Pines** outside our house.

On the 20<sup>th</sup>, I saw my first **Hoverfly** of the season – *Episyrphus balteatus* and, being a gloriously sunny day, a brilliant yellow **Brimstone Butterfly** and a **Peacock** were flitting around. Needless

to say, the large furry **Bumblebees** have been in evidence most of the month. During the third week of the month, the '**May**' blossom was a picture, and our **Forsythia** and **Anemone blandas** were beginning to show their blue flowers. The **newts** seem to be late in arriving – I did give the pond a thorough cleaning in **January** so it is now relatively devoid of vegetation. But on the evening of the 21<sup>st</sup>, I saw about 8 **Common/Smooth Newts** and one male **Great crested Newt**.

For some time, I had been attempting to obtain a picture of the **Goldcrest** that regularly visits us on a piece of natural vegetation. The problem is that the tiny bird hardly keeps still for a second unless it is feeding on the wall. I succeeded at last on the **21<sup>st</sup>**. It uses the **Dogwood** to perch on while jumping to and fro between the **maroon** shoots and the wall.

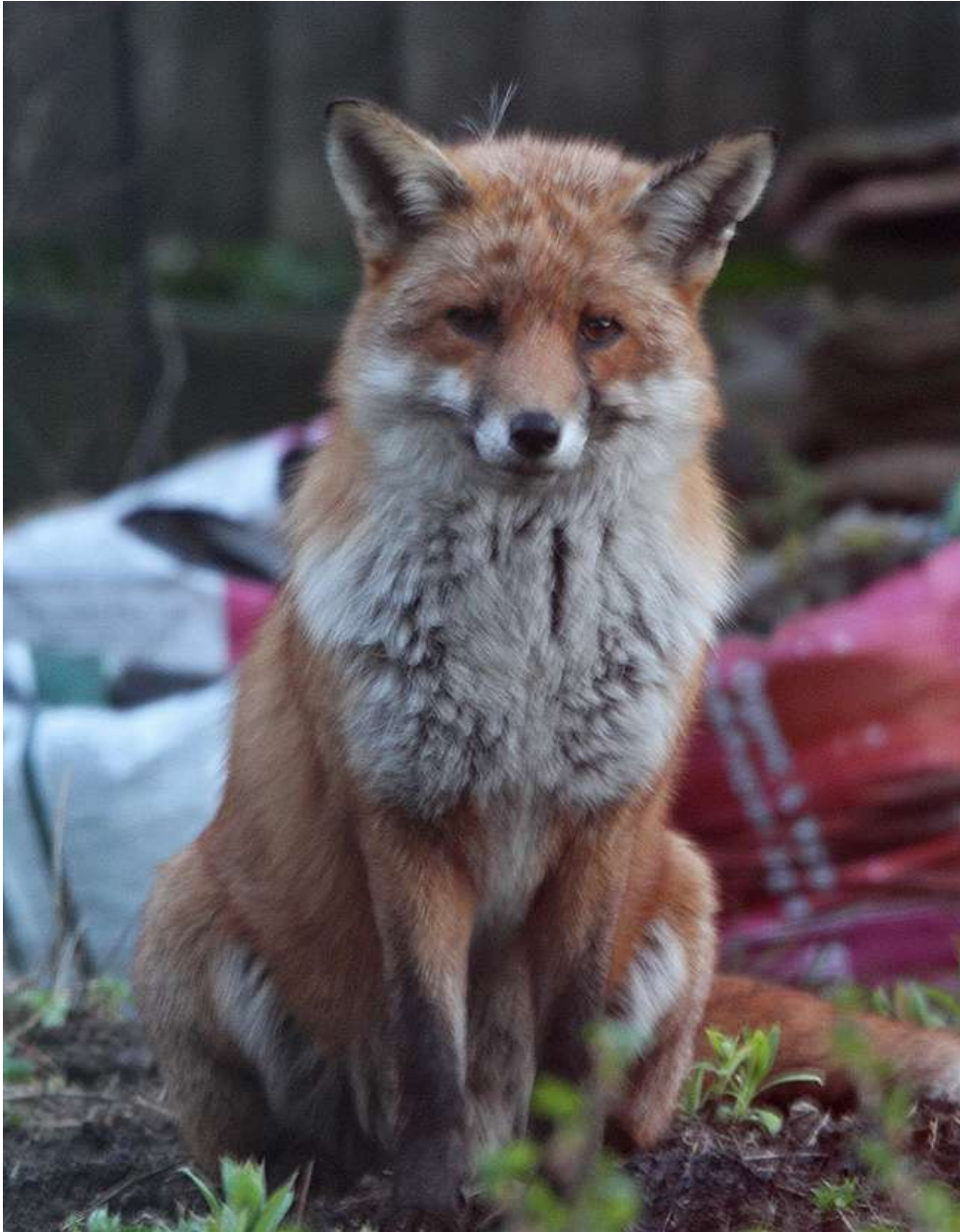


I am signing off the notes for this month on the **23<sup>rd</sup>**. High pressure prevails over the country although we have the typical gloomy skies which accompany an anticyclone during the winter. It has, however, been a very dry month, the driest for decades. But, as the sun becomes ever higher in the sky and the days longer, our **photo-voltaics** have been producing **12.9 Kw/hrs** on really clear days and the **solar water heaters** have driven the temperature to **65 degs C**.



**Above:** Our **Daffodils** on the **22<sup>nd</sup> March** – in almost full bloom well before **April**. I also heard my first **Chiff-chaff** of the year singing on by the airfield at **Doynton**.

And by way of a post-script, at 6.30 in the evening, the **Fox** that comes into our garden at night to be fed, was sitting patiently in the rhubarb bed. It was looking so plaintive that **Sally** went out and scattered some food over the lawn. Before doing so, I took a few photographs of it through double glazing in fading light. The picture **below** is the best one.



Come on! Where's my supper?

--ooOoo--