

## JANUARY 2008

Early January was pretty dreary with sheeting rain, high winds, and cloud so thick that one wondered whether the sun had gone out. The garden



as ever full of hungry birds – 45 plus **Chaffinches** and among them was usually at least 3 **Bramblings** – on one occasion I counted no less than 7 (see left). Looking much more orange than their more familiar cousins, they also displayed a narrow white rump rather than a patch of dull green plumage when they flew up into the trees.

As we cooked the last of the crop of our **Bramley** and **Peasegood Nonsuch** apples, the **Blackbirds** are having a feast on the peelings.

It seems to be several years since we had a decent fall of snow in this part of the world – and looking through some of my collection of 35mm slides, I found a few I took in **Leigh Woods** in January 2000. As I recall, it did not lay very long but it all looked very pretty for an hour or two in the bright sunshine.



No sooner had I typed this on the **10<sup>th</sup> January** than the teeming rain turned to a blizzard and, despite the drenched ground and temperature of 3 degs C, it soon started to settle, much to the consternation of the ground feeding **Chaffinches** as their seed started to disappear under a blanket of snow. They soon transferred their attention to the sunflower feeders and gave the tits a bit of competition (below right).



We recently bought a couple of new feeders which hold *Fat Snax*, balls of fat which have all sorts of stuff imbedded (left). Although it took the tits several days to find them, now they seem to prefer the new food rather than the sunflower seeds. No less than 7 **Blue Tits** were clinging to one of the new feeders yesterday. Lots of calories but I wonder whether animal fat clogs up bird's arteries like it does our own?



This is the first time that I have seen a **Great Spotted Woodpecker** feeding from a sunflower seed dispenser. Usually they go for peanuts. This is a rather nice male with a red nape.

Every three or four years, I have to clear out our pond because the **Water Lilies, Reed Mace, Yellow Flags** and sundry other forms of aquatic vegetation literally fill it up. Also a small **Oak** tree inconveniently drops its spent foliage into the water and this forms a stinking sludge on the bottom. I do this in the middle of the winter before the newts arrive. It is quite amazing how much I have to remove – this year it was two and half barrow loads, and I still had a root of lilies that I could barely lift. In the past, I have generally found a dozen or more dragonfly nymphs and several newts, the latter having opted to spend the winter underwater rather than stowing themselves away somewhere in the garden. However, this year, I only found a couple of small nymphs – probably **Damsels**, and three newts.



As I shall be unable to write anything more until the end of early March, I will just mention one event that should be underway before then – **frog orgies!**

### **Amorous Amphibians**



You would think that cold-blooded **frogs** would await the balmy days of Summer before their thoughts turned towards breeding. Not so. Often long before the dreary days of February are over, frog orgies are well underway. Indeed, I wrote one of my early Parish **Nature Notes** on *Valentine's Day* and reported that these amphibians were busily spawning in the **Botanic Garden's Pulhamite** pond where I took the accompanying photographs. Even a hard frost and a bit of ice does not seem to dampen their ardour. Unfortunately frogs and toads are in serious trouble the world over due to a deadly *chytrid* fungus breaking out of West Africa. This attacks the moist skin through which they breathe and so those infected suffocate. Thankfully, our own frogs and toads have escaped so far. But they have their own problems. The drainage and pollution of ponds and the general fragmentation of wet places favoured by these creatures have greatly reduced our own populations. This means that garden ponds where male frogs croak and the females spawn are really important refuges. Despite our efforts to introduce frogs into our own little pond meeting with failure due to the ravenous newts devouring every tadpole – even large ones sporting back legs - many ponds in the parish host breeding amphibians.

It would therefore be interesting to know how many do so. The more terrestrial **toads** tend to spawn later. The males undertake nocturnal treks of several miles to the ponds where they traditionally await their mates. When the bloated females arrive, they generally fall



for the males with the really deep croaks which is an indication of their size and thus their success in the survival stakes. Alas **toads** have their special trouble because their spawning treks often take them across roads where thousands meet their demise every year. To mitigate the slaughter, there are over 500 traditional 'toad crossings' throughout the British Isles where, each Spring, volunteers pick up toads arriving at one side of the road and carry them safely to the other. (see [www.froglife.org](http://www.froglife.org))

