

**October** started with a scorcher. The temperature had been building during the last week of the **September** and peaked on the 1<sup>st</sup>, reaching 27°C in the centre of **Bristol** and about 25°C in our garden. The maximum recorded was 30°C in **Kent** making it the hottest start to the month ever. While we sizzled in the south, **Scotland** was drenched with torrential rain on the 4<sup>th</sup> and two icebergs were sighted off the **Butt of Lewis**. The 1<sup>st</sup> was ideal flying weather here.



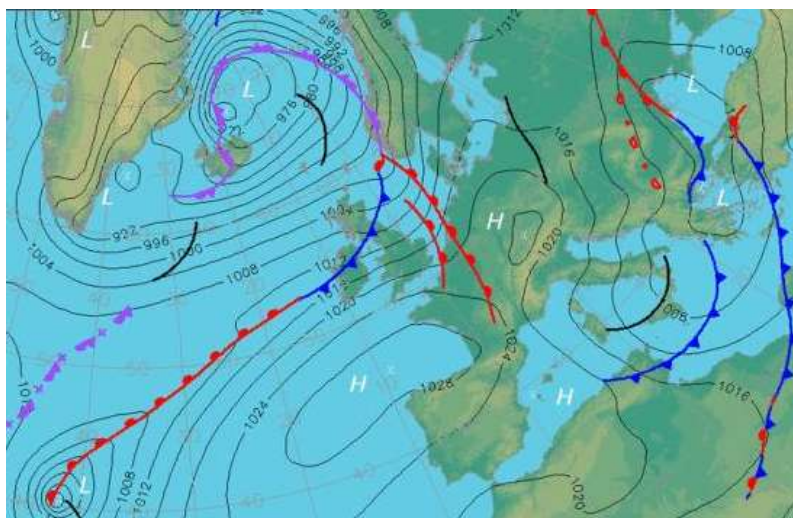
**Above:** Confused Cirrus streaming high over the **River Severn** on the 1<sup>st</sup>.



**Left:** Cloudless skies on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. The harvest has been gathered in over **Salisbury Plain**.

By the 4<sup>th</sup>, the high pressure had drifted off and the weather reverted to the usual westerlies and succession of fronts as the met map for the 9<sup>th</sup> shows.

This kept not only me indoors, but also made less welcome visitors come inside – **spiders!** As I noted in last month's **Nature Notes**, it has been a bad **Autumn** in the sense that we have had quite a few of these eight-legged horrors putting in an appearance.



They are all **arachnid lotharios** searching for mates, and in doing so, they tend to find their way into houses at this time of the year. The larger, fat-bodied females tend to lurk in their untidy silken hammocks which are spun in the corners of our sheds (**see next page**). On the **left** is my way of dealing with the itinerant males which are then taken way down the road before releasing them.



**Above:** The face of nightmares! The business end of a male *Tegenaria attica* showing the razor sharp fangs on the ends of the *chelicerae*. These are sunk into the spider's prey and inject a paralysing digesting venom. **Note** the swollen ends of the palps which are characteristic of male spiders and are used rather like fountain pen fillers for squirting sperm into the female's genital orifices.

**Right:** Inside the funnel of this web lives a female *Tegenaria*. Any male which enters her lair may very well mate with her but it will be his last fatal act!



**Left:**

A

more delicate species suspended in its web in our garden. I have noted an absence of the usual orb-web spinning **Garden Spiders** (*Araneus diadematus*) this year. Usually the foggy **Autumn** mornings show up the filaments of silk which become adorned with glistening droplets of water. The details of how this happens are somewhat complicated, but essentially each strand of smooth spider's silk is punctuated by tiny 'spindle-knots', the surface of which is rough. Apparently when water condenses on the web, the droplets slip down the smooth



textured sections of the web and coalesce around the nearest 'spindle-knot' to form large drops. Thus the difference in roughness is responsible for forming the pearly drops on orb webs on misty mornings like the somewhat incomplete one on the **left**.

Our life this month has been dominated by apples, apples and yet more apples. On the **right** are just a few of the **Bramleys** off one of the trees. All month, we have put our excess crop in a box out in the road for passers-by to take which they have done so with alacrity.



It has been a good year for **crab apples** as well (**left**) and many berry bearing shrubs are laden with fruit.



**Left:** A **Rowan** in our neighbour's garden is a picture this year.



I have noticed that many **Horse Chestnuts** which were devastated last year by the infestation of leaf mining moth larva (*Cameraria ohridella*) have been much less affected this year. The tree on the **left** at the bottom of **Rownham Hill** which looked dead by the end of last year's Summer was still largely green during the first week of this month.



**Right:** There is some infestation but it is relatively light. The young one in our garden has been almost unaffected this year. Was this **Summer's** cool weather not to the moth's liking?



**Left:** A very fresh looking *Syrphus ribesii* photographed on the 6<sup>th</sup> with my little Lumix camera.



**Right:** There are still some Hoverflies about – this is *Eristalis pertinax* photographed by **Tony Cottrell**.

At dawn on the 16<sup>th</sup>, I joined a few members of the **Bristol Naturalists'** ornithological section on a migration watch just north of the old **Severn Bridge**.



As it had been a fine clear night, the omens were not good to see flocks of birds on the move. Indeed, this was the case and from that point of view, it was disappointing.

There was no wind and the river was calm. A flotilla of **Mallard** and a pair of **Wigeon** cruised along the shore.



Two or three **Curlew** and a **Heron** were also in evidence. Just after nine o'clock, **Richard Bland** called the watch to an end, having recorded no great numbers of anything. **Chaffinches**, **Greenfinches** and a flock of **Starlings** were among those noted.

**18<sup>th</sup>** Early in the morning, I checked on the **Red Deer** in **Ashton Court Park** which were in the middle of their rutting season.



**Above:** This '**Royal**' was clearly the dominant stag and had banished the others to the perimeter of the park. As a consequence, he had virtually all the hinds to himself. The chances are, energy expended on roaring and mating would tire him out before the season finishes and one of the others would take his place.



**Left:** Biding his time perhaps, a lesser stag chews the cud far from where the action was taking place in the centre of the deer park.



**Left:** The dominant stag sees off a potential rival which looked as though he knew better than to challenge the 'monarch of the park'.

**Right:** The job of warding off other stags and monitoring the state of the hinds so that he can mate with them as soon as they become receptive prevents the top males from eating for perhaps a month at a time. This saps their fitness for surviving the winter in places like the wilds of **Scotland**. Many succumb. However, in deer parks like this, there is always plenty of food on offer, and a robust 'royal' like this one, can quickly recover from the rut and breed for may be a dozen years or more.



**Right:** During the rut, the hinds have an easy life, feeding and laying down fat both for the oncoming winter and their long pregnancy.





**Above:** Should a hind wander too far away from the 'harem', she will be quickly rounded up and chased back to where the stag can keep an eye on her. Its this relentless activity when their passion is running high that, under natural conditions, wears the stags out prematurely.

A couple of days later, I visited **Brean Down** to see if there were any late migrants coming through.





**Left:** A ridge of high pressure brought fine conditions in the morning with little wind. At first, only very long vapour trails decorated the sky, indicating relatively high humidity and heralding a change later in the day.



The only other 'thing' regularly appearing in the sky was a large flock of **Jackdaws** which I suspect, might reside on this peninsular of

**Carboniferous limestone**. A pair of **Ravens** regularly flew along the cliffs. The most interesting incident of the morning occurred when they and a party of **Carrion Crows** mobbed a **Buzzard** as it flew

along a ridge below where I was standing but I only managed to capture a clear shot as they were all streaking away inland.



On the **left**, the **Raven** is the top right-hand bird.

**Right:** A female **Kestrel**, shamefully somewhat out of focus changing its look-out position.



Small parties of **Goldfinches** (right) were encountered but little else of interest. I only spotted a couple of **Meadow Pipits**. It was therefore an uneventful morning.



**Left:** The **Hawthorns** were laden with berries but not a single 'thrush' appeared to be taking advantage of them.



**Left:** There is no doubt where the prevailing winds blow from up here – from the west – and they blow with some force!

A small herd of **cattle** have, for the moment, replaced the **goats**, and I noted that a few of the cow-pats were frequented by orange coloured **Cordilurid** flies. They were previously called **Scatophagids**!



They are males awaiting the arrival of females which lay their eggs in the nourishing excreta. You rarely see them these days because cattle are dosed with drugs which prevent various parasitical infestations of the gut, and these persist in the cow pats and prevent these dainty little flies from breeding successfully.



There were several small flocks of **Starlings** flying around the road leading back to **Burnham on Sea** – one landed in a garden close to the road and it was a delight to be able to watch them fossicking on the lawn, much as they used to in **Leigh Woods** a quarter of a century ago.

These are in their very spotty winter plumage. And yet their feathers are still shot with rich metallic **greens** and **purples** which can be seen if the light glances off them in the right direction (**right**). There were even **House Sparrows** chirping from the hedges.



**Leigh Woods** was still looking very green, even Spring-like when back-lit, until way past the middle of the month .....

..... and the mountain bike track is nearing completion (**right**).



Back tracking to the **14<sup>th</sup> October**, a mellow day and a view of **Abbots Leigh** village.



This field had one excitement – cowpats again but this time attracting a mixture of ‘green bottles’ and glossy black flies with brilliant orange wing bases – *Mesembrina meridiana*.

No other fly looks like this handsome member of the **Muscidae**. The females lay eggs on the cowpat and the carnivorous larvae then hunt down and predate the grubs of other scatophagous species. **Note** its deep ruby eyes and yellow face. I have seen very few of this species this year.



**Left:** One of the **Green Bottles** – probably the common and universal **blow fly** *Lucilia sericata*. This, like the individuals above, is a female and in the egg-laying mode. It belongs to the **Calliphoridae**. We might hate them but the World would be knee deep in carcasses without them.



**Left:** A cottage garden in **Abbots Leigh**. I visited this during **July** and **August** when it was full of flowers; now they have largely gone and so have most of the more obvious insects.

Although the very warm weather at the beginning of the month brought some **Red Admirals** into our garden, here, there was no sign of any **butterflies**. On the **right**, one of the last flowers of *Knautia Macedonia* is visited by a somewhat worn bumble bee. This might be *Bombus hypnorum*.



With its dark abdomen and foxy brown thorax, this bumble bee looks more like *B. hypnorum* which is relatively new to this country but which is spreading fast. A lot of these large bees have a very tired appearance at this time of the year.



However, back in our garden in **Leigh Woods**, there were quite a few **Honey Bees** around until the end of the month.



**Above:** A Honey Bee with pollen sacs full of *Cosmos* pollen, and **left**, some late fruiting **Raspberries** ready for eating. It was the only cluster left!

The alien from **Asia** in our midst – a **Harlequin or Halloween Ladybird**. Although pretty, it is apparently out-competing our own native species. However, it is so widespread, that it is here to stay so we had better learn to love it!



**Left:** A sluggish Drone Fly *Eristalis tenax*.



**Portbury Wharf Nature Reserve** on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. The tide was out and so were most of the birds!

A female **Reed Bunting** conveniently perched close to the hide next to the sea wall (right).



The large pond tends to be badly lit in the mornings with the sun in one's eyes. Several **Mute Swans** reside on it with an assortment of ducks and gulls.

**Right:** A pair of **Wigeon**. **Mallard**, **Gadwall**, **Teal**, **Tufted Duck** and **Pochard** were all noted.



**Left:** A **Little Grebe**. Two were diving near each other.



**Above:** One of several **Coots**. One of the drawbacks here is that the well built hides are a little too far away from the water's edge and so decent close-ups are not easy to obtain. I had my **Canon 7D**, a **100-400mm zoom** and I still had to savagely crop the shots. Even so, they are not wonderful.

**Right:** A **Common Darter** (*Sympetrum striolatum*) soaking up the warmth of the Autumnal sun.

Some of the **Blackberries** were still very edible.

The **28<sup>th</sup>** of the month proved to be a calm sunny day. As can be expected during the Autumn when the air is cool and humid, banks of fog formed at first but gradually dispersed as the sun rose. Even so, it was only 4.7-5.0°C at 2500ft. **Below**, the fog is just lifting off around the old Severn Bridge.





I suspect that this is our usual **Green Woodpecker**, snapped through double glazing on the **29<sup>th</sup>**. If so, then it has now donned its fine adult plumage.

Not that our lawn is much to shout about at the moment,

It is hardly a bowling green and yet, this Summer, probably due to the very dry conditions during the **Spring**, big patches of **Couch Grass** have sprung up. Their long tough blades are almost impossible to trim with a mower and have to be strimmed. On advice from lawn experts, I have killed them with deep acting *Tumbleweed* and the areas will have to be resown next **March**.



**Left:** We know when **Autumn** is really upon us when the **Liquidamber** or **North American Sweet Gum** tree opposite us inside what used to be the **University's Botanic Garden** lives up to its name. This was taken early in the morning before I left for the airfield. Although it looks like one of the maples because of the shape of its leaves, it is more closely related to the **Witch Hazels**.

**Right: Earthstars.** Sally's sister, Teresa, sent this picture to me that she took earlier this month in **Cornwall**. They are puffball-like fungi belonging to the **Gasteromycetes** which burst out of the ground. Their outer 'skins' break and splay open leaving a central capsule containing the spores. When rain drops impact it, spores are ejected from the apical aperture.



The **30th** brought a plague of **Ladybirds!** **Ladybirds** were everywhere. The outer walls of the house which faced south were covered with hundreds of them.



It was a bright, balmy day with little wind. Clearly, these little beetles were seeking out places to hibernate. The **right hand picture above** shows three investigating gaps under one of our conservatory windows. This is where we often find them when we open the windows. So far as I could see, they were all **Harlequins** – the two large white patches on the *pronotum* are good clues. There were so many flying around that many were landing in the water butts (**right**).



**Right:** A drowned **Harlequin Ladybird** showing the striped abdomen which is usually hidden from view by the *elytra*.



**Left:** It is a very variable species. This is the black form identified by the two very large red patches on the wing cases and the two white spots on the front of the body.

As the winds had been in the **south** recently, - see the met map for the **27<sup>th</sup>** - some of these insects might have come from the **Continent**.



Of one thing there is no doubt; the conditions were such that they were all stimulated to take to the wing.

During the month, our two sets of **photovoltaic panels** generated a decent **174 kW/hrs** of electricity (**95** and **79 kW/hrs**). **86mm** of rain fell during the month, **20mm** falling on the **4<sup>th</sup>** and most of the rest towards the end of the month. These figures were recorded by **Arthur Gregory** who lives just across the **Long Ashton Vale** on top of **Dundry**. I would expect our figure to be slightly less due to our lower altitude. Indeed, **Filton's** figure for the month was **45mm**.

Unless stated, all the photographs in these Nature notes were taken by **John Sparks**.

---oooOooo---



---oooOooo---