



**MARCH** Although the weather seems to have turned for the better now, March has been largely a month of leaden skies, frequent rain and blustery wind, often from the North. Perhaps the dreary weather has been responsible for delaying our **Bramblings** from setting off across the North Sea to Norway and Sweden where they nest. Most years, we see the odd bird on our lawn – although not last Winter – but on March 10<sup>th</sup> there were no less than nine among a flock of 35

**Chaffinches**. Usually they liked the lawn on which I scatter a mixture of Canary seeds, but occasionally, they monopolised the hanging feeder which was filled with sunflower seed and niger seeds.



Left: two cocks and a hen. Below is a rather nice male. By mid April, he will lose the ‘frosty’ edges of his black head feathers.



Sally saw two on the 29<sup>th</sup> March but none since then. A few years ago, a cock bird hung on until early April and even started singing. In the end, the urge to migrate kicked in and it disappeared.



At the end of February, our neighbouring village of **Pill** hosted a really early harbinger of Spring – a cock **Ring Ouzel**. For a week or two, this moorland thrush visited a small garden in **Ham Green** every quarter of an hour or so to fill its crop with *Viburnum* berries and this was where I managed to take a photograph of it (left). In the west country, **Ring Ouzels** were called **Michaelmas Blackbirds** on account of them appearing during the Autumn *en route* from our northern moors and Scandinavia to the Mediterranean where most over-winter. However, I suspect that this bird probably spent

the winter somewhere either in this country or just across the Channel in Northern France. If not, then it was an amazingly early Summer visitor.

Another notable visitor to our ‘fat ball feeders’ during the last two weeks of March was a cock **Blackcap**. Although this individual might be a very early migrant from Africa, it is just as likely to be a bird which nests in Eastern Europe. Results of ringing and other

research has revealed that the **Blackcaps** that we see here in the Winter are likely to be from that part of the Continent. They find our mild Winter climate to their liking while the **Blackcaps** which nest here head South-East towards Africa via Spain.

Left: our male **Blackcap** with a **Long-tailed Tit**.



**Long-tailed Tits** really like whatever is in these commercial ‘fat balls’ and a pair has regularly frequented the feeder outside our kitchen window. One afternoon, I put the 600mm lens on my Canon 5D camera and took some big close-ups of the birds that were visiting it (below).



You can clearly see the pale pink mantle plumage of the bird on the left.

Below: **Blue Tit**.



Although **Siskins** are increasingly frequent visitors to gardens, we only see them occasionally.



This year, I only observed these dainty little finches a few times – a pair on two or three occasions. Otherwise single birds like the colourful cock **Siskin** on the left that I photographed early in the month.

Despite the bitter winds and scudding clouds, which seemed all too prevalent until the end of the month, the progress of spring was not halted for long. **Blackbirds, Song Thrushes, Robins** and **Hedge Sparrows** started seriously to sing, and the **Newts** returned to our small pond at the normal time. There is at least one a male **Great Crested Newt**. On 4<sup>th</sup> March, a sunny but bitterly cold days, I visited the **Blackdown Hills** where our friend **John Burrell** has 5.5 acres which he manages for nature. He invited me to see the swards of **Wild Daffodils** which were at their peak. The sight was truly memorable. Much daintier than the cultivated ones (see inset at the beginning), the mass of blooms made a glorious golden carpet beneath the leafless canopy of **Oaks** and **Alders**; in places the flowers were so dense that it was difficult to know where to tread. Although the wood is heavily grazed by **Roe Deer**, the flowers are untouched,

presumably because they are very distasteful. With Easter arriving early this year, they certainly lived up to one of their folk names – **Lenten Lillies**. Appropriately, John's wood is in a vale called **Lillycombe**. Once widespread across most of the country, the wild **Daffodils** were eagerly picked and sold in the towns – a practice incidentally which did them no harm. But nowadays, the original wild species is curiously restricted, mostly to Devon and the Border counties.



The **Daffodils** in our garden were blooming quite early this year – an event that could be attributed to 'global warming'. Of course, the climate is always changing. Spring was sprung earlier than usual this year. For example, compare the two photos of our **Daffodils** which were taken *only two years apart*.



March 22<sup>nd</sup> 2006



March 22<sup>nd</sup> 2008



And yet, this time last year our small **Chilean Crinodendron** (*C. hookerianum*) tree was a mass of flowers hanging like scarlet Chinese lanterns but this year, the flower buds are so small, it will be at least one if not two months before they burst.

The large queen **Bumblebees** (*Bombus leucorum*) welcomed the **Flowering Currants** (*Ribes sp*) I fancy that there were far fewer visiting the pink blossoms than in previous years. Soon they will be joined by smaller workers as the queens get down to laying eggs and rearing their broods.

**Bristol University's** former **Botanic Garden** in **Leigh Woods** has been sold to Oxford developers called **Kingerlee** and are now closed to the public. For the moment, much of the garden is being maintained, and this month, the area in the centre of the grounds was a glorious sight with blue **Wood Anemones**, **Primroses** and a few **Daffodils** in full flower. Let's hope that they survive the building operation.



During the month, we had several good blows arising from deep depressions that were sped across the Atlantic by a strong jet stream. On Maunday Thursday, the crown of a healthy looking **Ash tree** in **North Road**



was snapped off. It has therefore been a good month for collecting fire wood and one piece I recovered had a splendid growth of leathery dark **Cup Fungi** (*Peziza* sp) growing on it. There are various kinds and one is appropriately called **Orange Peel Fungus** because of its appearance. It is not edible!



**Pat Holmyard**, one of our neighbours, reported that her house was infested with **Ladybirds**.

These had obviously been hibernating and, on awaking, gathering at her windows. I collected a few and there were two species: The left-hand one is a melanistic (dark) form of the common **Two-spot Ladybird** (*Adalia 2-punctata*) and the other looks like a **Sixteen Spot** (*Micraspis 16-punctata*)

I spent the last week-end of this month with my sister **Valerie** and her husband **Brian Rusher** who live on the edge of the **Ickworth Estate** near **Bury-St-Edmunds** in **Suffolk** and I was greatly impressed with the number of **Starlings** and **House Sparrows** that I could see from their garden. We have not seen **Starlings** in our garden for years and none have nested in the vicinity for well over a decade. The last that I recall nested in a the roof of a nearby Victorian house but the new owners had the roof renewed and thus 'bird-proofed'. However, in **Ickworth**, several **Starlings** I could spot several singing on the neighbouring houses. One illustrated on the right had chosen the TV aerial on Brian and Valerie's house, and was nesting beneath the tiles. **Starlings** are greatly under-rated;



with their spotty, lustrous plumage they are surprisingly colourful. Note the **blue** base to the beak which indicates that this bird is a male; in the female it is **pink**.

A **Blackbird** was also singing on the roof and a **Mallard** was sitting tightly on eggs in a nest very well hidden underneath one of the garden shrubs where I had no chance of photographing of her. Her ducklings will have a long walk to the village pond.

And when I returned to **Leigh Woods** on the 30<sup>th</sup> March, the **Magnolia** in our garden was in full bloom. So were the **Forget-me-nots** (below left with a nicely marked **Muscid** fly).



---oooOooo---