

LEDBURY NATURALISTS' NEWSLETTER



2021/2

Editors Notes

Thank you so much to all this year's contributors. The initial response to the call for articles was quite low key, so much so that by normal publication time I only had three articles.

Slowly more have come and special thanks to those who responded to my direct requests.

I was quite surprised that the late start has made things so difficult. Normally I have plenty of time but the fine weather meant it was not so easy to sit in front of the computer and the work clashed with my numerous other early Summer activities & responsibilities. Building works at New Street have also drained quite a lot of nervous energy.

A lesson has been learnt and I'll be pushing a lot harder for an early start next year!

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Well here we are again, hopefully getting back to some sort of normality after all the problems of the COVID pandemic. Meetings on Zoom are largely a thing of the past, though in other spheres they can still be very useful.

A good thing to come from the zoom meetings was the start of cooperation with other natural history groups. We had an invitation to join Herefordshire Ornithological Club with their zoom meetings and a number of their members helped to swell the audiences at our meetings. It has become clear that in future we must develop closer relationships with similar organisations.

When the second lockdown finally eased we did have a summer program in place and, for me, one of the best moments was counting up the attendance at our first post lockdown meeting at Checkley Common on 18th June. This was led and generously hosted by Bob Hall and we had about 30 members present. Since then we had an uninterrupted summer program including day visits to Cleeve Hill and Gilfach.

The winter program went well apart one cancellation due to a storm

Throughout these difficult times the Conservation work parties have continued in Queens Wood and Haugh Wood thanks to Kate Wollen & her regular workforce and a project has also started in Frith Wood. If you are able to give

some time please contact Kate.

Amanda Lambourne has continued with her work parties on the town trail and the Swift group managed a full survey program in the summer of 2021. The survey group also managed a full program of monthly visits to The Colwall Orchard Group and thanks must go to Hilary for all the time spent coordinating all the data and producing the report.

Throughout all the members of your committee have worked hard for your club and have achieved a great deal. They regularly come up with simple logical answers to difficult problems. Throughout Alan Starkey has continued to keep our finances on the straight & narrow. On behalf of the club as whole, thank you all.

The one person we have to thank the most is Alan Pike, our Secretary since the end of 2013. He brought with him a staggering level of organisation and efficiency which we have all benefited from. Alan decided to retire from the job and I fear that trying to find a permanent replacement, even half as good, will make all the other challenges we have faced pale into insignificance.

Thankfully Wendy (Tanner) has agreed to fill the breach until a more permanent solution can be found. She is going to need a great deal of help.

Eden Tanner



Trip to the Netherlands in winter 2022

What primarily attracted me to this holiday run by Naturetrek was the fact that the mode of travel was by train....

We travelled by Eurostar to Rotterdam and then picked up a minibus. We were a party of 8 including the driver/leader. Every day the weather was bright and sunny with a blue sky but the northerly wind kept us truly wrapped up. We travelled through Zeeland, Flevoland and West Friesland. And stayed in 2 hotels. The stars of the trip were the estimated 50,000 wintering geese. These were feeding on the grass in the fields surrounding small villages in the large polders. Along with the geese, mainly Barnacle, Greylag, Canada, White-fronted, Tundra Bean and Brent there were clouds of starling murmurations. What a sight when a Raptor disturbed them, darkening the sky in their flocks. Excellent eyes spotted the 1 Red-breasted goose

amongst them, but we searched in vain for the elusive Lesser White -Fronted geese. Spoonbills, Avocets and Flamingo were amongst the waders and we saw many duck , including Smew and Scaup.

I was particularly pleased to visit the Re-Wilding marshy reserve which had been a source of support to the developers of the Knepp estate in West Sussex. This is 70 square kilometres in Flevoland called Oostvaardersplassen. A most inspiring educational set up as well as an extensive area for wildlife. All too quickly our 5 days in this largely reclaimed land was over.

We spent our last morning in woodland near Dodgeweg, hearing the Black Woodpecker and thrillingly seeing 6 Lesser-spotted Woodpeckers in a flock with Greater-spotted Woodpeckers.

Susanna Grunsell

A LEDBURY GARDEN

I have a small garden with a mixed fruit orchard, a walnut tree and other small trees. It is just after Easter and a grey squirrel showed itself sun bathing in a bay tree. The squirrels have been here for 20 years, some are the normal grey colour, others have a red streak down their backs but their heads bear shades of grey through to black. They are all usually invisible amongst the trees.

The garden is used by a number of birds for nesting each spring and the raising of young during the year, some get entangled in the fruit bushes. In the summer I have sparrows, bullfinches greenfinches and recently a pair of goldfinches. We a lot of blue tits, including a 'pygmy' family , much smaller than the normal which demand feeding by tapping on my bedroom window.

The blackbirds have a procedure where they leave their young in a secluded spot by the walnut tree, fly off but return to claim them at the end of the day. They are perfectly safe as we do not appear to have any predators. The blackbirds appear to dismantle their nests when no longer used. A bird I cannot identify has a black edge to its redbreast and a long tail - it is not a long tailed tit of which I have a pair.

With the variety of fruit trees (plum, pear, apple and cherry) the garden attracts bees, mainly bumble bees and wild honey bees. Other species are mice, harvest and house plus dormice. I have only spotted large white butterflies so far but expect bats and hedgehogs later.

Elizabeth Bendle

New Swift boxes ready for guests at Ferndown Road!

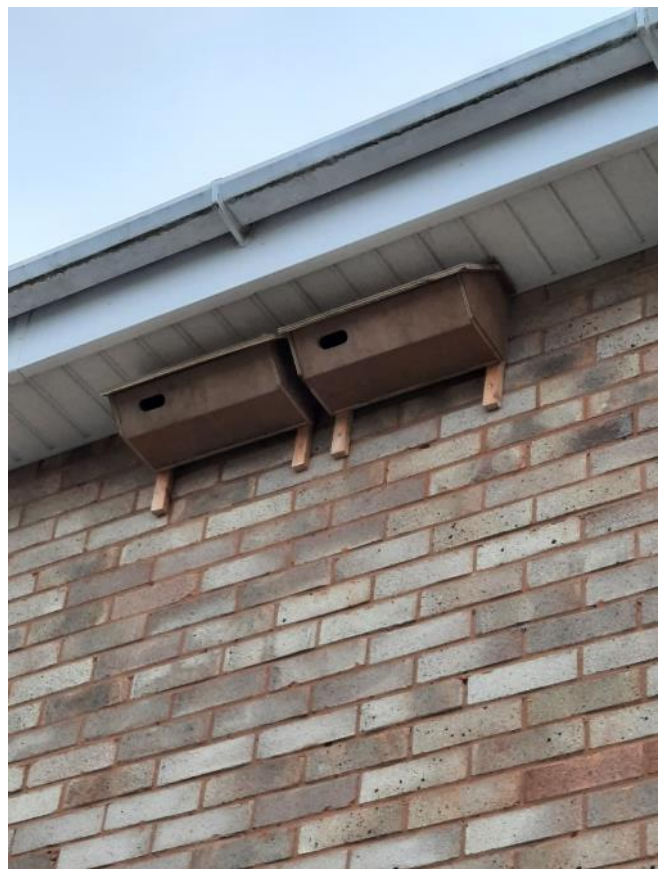
Having only moved to Ledbury in December 2021, we have been enjoying finding out about the wildlife in the area, and are looking forward to seeing what's in our garden in the coming months whilst improving the garden habitat for wildlife. We have already dug a pond and introduced a range of wildlife friendly plants like Valerian, Scabious, Knapweed, Comfrey and Pulmonaria, but its early days and we have a long way to go!

We joined the field group in January and when we saw the article about Swift conservation we contacted Steve Betts. Steve provided two Swift nest boxes on Monday; my husband Kim set about building the kits and by Tuesday morning they were ready to be put in place on the north west facing wall of our house. We found lots of fluffy pigeon feathers and added these to the boxes, in the hope that will encourage Swifts to consider moving in. We are having some roof repairs carried out and our lovely roofers popped the boxes in place for us today.

Because of the build design of our house, we had to modify the fixing slightly to allow for drilling lower down the house wall. So Kim added batons to support the boxes, which left a useful narrow gap between the back of the boxes and the house wall. Kim added 2 slim horizontal strips of wood in this space, allowing space for access so there is now the opportunity for bats to roost as well.

Our neighbours who live opposite are now excitedly watching the boxes as they have a super view of them, and hopefully we will see some guests this year. It's an exciting experiment; if it works we will expand our housing stock for next year! Watch this space for updates...

Di Bulley



BIRDBOX DIARY

There was no interest shown in our camera bird box early in the year, but a couple of other boxes were in use by early April, then bad weather halted much activity and plant growth, which would affect their food source for the young. I had given up hope that it would be used.

18th April Checked box at about 10.30 last night and was surprised to see a covering of nesting material, fluff and dried grass. This morning a little more had come in, but I had not seen a bird until 8am, when a blue tit came in briefly.

19th April Nest material increasing steadily but no sign of any birds when I have checked.

20th April More nesting material has built up and more fluff arranged in a nest area, but no birds seen all day. Last check 10.30 and a bird was in there asleep!

22nd April Bird was in the box all night, but left at 7.25 am.

26th April Bird has been in box each night but not seen any other time.

27th April Bird still in box at 7.30am, unusual, but she left at 7.50, and I saw 3 eggs, possibly more under the fluff.

28th April Bird in box each check through the day, but early evening she had left and I saw clearly 6 eggs. She was back later.

29th April 8am she had left and I thought I saw 7 eggs, but one may have been a feather!

30th April Definitely 8 eggs today.

4th May She has been sitting on eggs most of the time, just leaving them to go and feed herself. No other bird seems to be about.

12th May Checked several times as usual during the day and she was asleep on the eggs. At 7.45pm there was no bird and the eggs all scattered, but the signal was very poor. When it im-

proved slightly, I saw movement, so some eggs have hatched, but hard to see how many, then picture went off altogether. If the bird is on her own I hope she can find enough food – still no sign of a mate.

13th May 3 eggs not hatched, 8am. Mother in and out with food, no sign of another bird yet. It has rained all night and continued today, but about 14degrees C. Hope the bird finds enough food.

15th May The bird is in and out feeding, quite quickly, so it seems food is available and close by in spite of the rain most of the time. She seems to be the sole provider. Chicks moving about, one egg unhatched yesterday, but today I can't see it under the bundle of chicks. Hard to see how many at the moment and cobwebs across the camera don't help.

18th May Checked last night, no bird in the nest, and no movement. This morning still no bird, or movement. I believe the bird has either abandoned the nest or has perhaps died. The young were not thriving and I never saw more than 3 gapes, but visibility not good. It looks as if the bad weather combined with single parenting took its toll before today. Maybe the food she did find was not nutritious enough or enough in quantity, but she tried hard.

Not a good year but later on there were many chicks about in the garden, so some had been successful.



LEDBURY NATURALIST'S FIELD SURVEY 2021

In 2020 Ledbury Naturalists' survey team was asked by members of Colwall Orchard Group if it would be willing to carry out a baseline survey of wildlife in the orchard area of the Village Garden and at Luggs Mill. The team (fewer members than normal) visited the sites once a month from April to October 2021 and recorded the species encountered on each occasion.

Colwall Village Garden (purchased in 2011) and Lugg's Mill (purchased in 2016) are located off Old Church Road, Colwall. The sites lie within the Malvern Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Colwall Village Garden covers an area of six acres and consists of a community orchard planted with 250 trees, mostly fruit, 60 allotment plots plus associated buildings, beehives and a wildlife pond in the southwest corner.

The nearby Luggs Mill is 2.5 acres in area and in the 19th century was the site of a corn mill powered by water from the stream (a tributary of Cradley Brook) which meanders through the site. This has been planted with a cherry orchard to the northeast of the stream and an apple orchard on the other side.

The most interesting records were species with UK Biodiversity Action Plans and included Great Crested Newt, Slow Worm, House Sparrow and Otter. A few moths, recorded by trapping in previous years, are regarded as nationally or locally important.

The information is currently being written up into a report but in summary the findings show that the sites with their diverse habitats are abundant in wildlife and with further projects being undertaken by the Orchard Group will no doubt improve over the coming years.

Hilary Ward



The important task of identifying a specimen down to species level



Purple Toothwort, a rarity for Herefordshire



Beautiful Demoiselle Damselfly

OCHRE HILL DIARY 2021

January 1st Awoke to a sharp frost -4C, followed by rain which froze on contact, so bird feeding delayed. I put out mealworms, suet, seed, bread and apples, and several chaffinches came, but ravens, magpies and jackdaws are quick to move in, and put off the small birds, so I have to wave them off several times. A flock of long-tailed tits visit daily and redwings and fieldfares come in for the apples, as they have long since eaten all the berries. A squirrel joined the birds later, and a very large muntjac trotted from the top of the garden, the biggest I have seen, and ambled past the window down the hill. Two badgers had been in the night.

January 7th We are now in full lockdown again. It has been very cold, with some snow falls and biting winds. More birds on feeders. The pheasants regularly come, up to 7 males but only one female. Two nuthatches were on the feeders, not allowing other birds in, and many chaffinches on the ground. A fox has been a nightly visitor, eating seed from the ground.

January 10th A little warmer, so I spent time outside clearing snow and ice, and set our camera trap to watch a hole in the hedge. This revealed the hole as a main route for many animals. The fox used it a lot, as did several muntjacs and badgers of various sizes, a tight squeeze for some! Pheasants used it a lot, as did smaller birds. I moved the camera onto a path at the bottom of the hill, and that was even busier, with fox, badger, muntjac, squirrel and pheasant constantly using it. Later I watched 3 robins on our cider house roof, all seemed to be friendly, so was it 1 male and 2 females?

January 18th Whilst working outside a red kite flew over, bound for Coddington, where they have been nesting for several years. Later I saw my cat running across the garden fast toward the back door, at the same time a muntjac came from the same place and ran down the hill. I think they had startled each other in the flower bed and both bolted in opposite directions!

January 19th Storm 'Christoph' arrived further north, bringing much rain, fields already under water and Hereford will be again by the end of the week.

January 21st Dry after a frosty start and bird-song lovely to hear. It went silent as a sparrowhawk flew through, but restarted soon after. About an inch of snow later, which froze overnight.

January 29th We have had several snowfalls, dry and powdery, but freezing at night, so new snow on top of hard packed ice has made moving about unsafe, but we now have rain, making it slushy and messy and the rivers are rising again. No winter visitors to the feeders, but recently a coal tit, a male blackcap, and two female pheasants have been.

January 31st Yesterday we had rain, sleet or snow all day. It barely rose above freezing, so when I saw a red flower on my camellia bush this morning it quite cheered me up.

February 1st Birds singing everywhere, but cold and foggy. Great-spotted woodpeckers drumming nearby and a male pheasant chased a female round and round the Ginkgo tree until she ran off down the hill, which was amusing to watch.

February 4th Dry and milder for a few days encouraged me to work outside and enjoy the increasing birdsong, including a song thrush, but more snow forecast. I have put some seed on the cider house roof, which has attracted two robins who may be nesting in the ivy on the wall, a blackbird, and a very handsome male pheasant who fed for about 10 minutes. Later I saw a male bullfinch in the orchard.



February 7th Cold east wind and some snow flurries, but the feeders are very busy with all the usual visitors. A bird of prey flew low across the valley, showing up very white against the dark fir trees in Frith Wood, which put all the birds into a panic. I think it may have been a Goshawk, but too far to be certain.

February 10th Snow had settled overnight, dry and dusty but frozen on the ground. The pheasant is still enjoying the seed on the cider house roof and has not told his friends! Now a blackbird has joined him searching in the snow. A blackcap has been feeding on a suet ball for a few days and what seems to be a pair of great-spotted woodpeckers are chasing up and down the Ginkgo tree, entertaining to watch.

February 18th After a very cold week with damaging cold wind it is now milder. On our way home this evening we saw a frog hopping off the road into the grass verge. All the water is still frozen so it may have trouble finding a suitable pond yet.

February 22nd It is now about 12C and has been wet, windy and sunny at times. Whilst gardening I dug up a very large torpid toad, unexpectedly – a very lucky toad, but sleepy, so I re-buried him in a safer place, but good to know they are about, as there have been very few recently. We saw a large frog in the lower small pond, and after dark a large frog near the top pond, and a newt, suddenly a lot of activity. Hereford is flooded again.

February 23rd We sat and watched the sun go down, and the temperature at 4C, but we saw a bat flying, a large frog in the top pond, and many newts in all three ponds, pond skaters and water boatmen, so very busy places.

February 27th Dry and sunny days, 12-15C have encouraged much frog and toad activity and record temperatures around Europe – 16C in Sweden, 22C in Poland and 18C in Lincolnshire. No wonder the plants and wildlife seem confused, as am I! A wasp followed me into the greenhouse and many honeybees were on hellebores, and a humming bird hawk moth on a Daphne bush in full bloom.

March 6th March has been murky and damp so far, and no frogspawn yet, late for us. I saw a treecreeper on a holly tree in the hedge, the first I have seen for some time.

March 8th Lovely sunny day and whilst enjoying a tea break on a bench, we saw a lot of activity in our top hedge. Several house sparrows were in the bushes, then I saw a male blackcap, then another, then a female and another. In the end 8 blackcaps which seemed to be four pairs, then they all flew along the hedge, settled in another tree and appeared to all be fighting from the noise! This was a real spectacle and I have never seen so many of these birds at the same time – usually I see one or two, usually one pair. Later we drove down to Ledbury and a sparrowhawk came from a hedge in front of us and flew down the road for about half a mile just a foot off the ground, and faster than us – amazing skills.

March 13th Frogspawn at last! Three large clumps in our little stream, far too shallow. A large frog was being bothered by our cat, so I lifted the spawn into a pond plant pot and placed it in deeper water in the pond, and covered it with wire netting to deter the cat, who had lost interest by then. The frog returned to protect it later, and more was produced overnight in the stream again, so I moved that to the lower pond.

March 15th Recent gales and rain seem to have put birds off nesting, but today two male blackbirds had a serious fight on the cider house roof, then moved into the cherry tree and continued on the ground. There were no females about, but one was extremely aggressive and I thought it may be a fight to the death, but fortunately they gave up. Later saw my first yellow brimstone butterfly and more frogspawn appeared.

March 17th A red-legged partridge ran through the garden and all day I could hear several in our neighbour's garden. I also saw a bullfinch and a blackcap on a plum tree in the orchard.

March 26th I heard my first chiff chaff today, but not much activity in nest boxes yet. A great tit was showing interest in the summerhouse box, but other boxes seem empty.

March 29th A nuthatch spent most of the day defending the bird feeders against all comers and a pheasant was patrolling and defending his territory fiercely. Nuthatches are claiming several areas noisily from tree tops, the chiff chaff is calling daily now and a red kite flew over today. Two mallards have been on the pond several times. Up to 19C today, but windy.

March 30th The red kite was overhead again, gliding up and down the valley before returning to Coddington. Long-tailed tits seem to be nesting near the rowan tree, but still nothing in boxes. More yellow brimstones about and I have seen a small tortoiseshell and peacock butterflies today. A mistle thrush was singing in the trees downhill by our bottom path. Our camera trap has revealed the path by the hedge I had set it up to view was an animal motorway at night! It is a narrow path behind shrubs, so animals have to walk in line. Muntjacs came, three at a time, and two badgers at least. Cats and dogs use it also, so it is a well-defined track.

April 4th It has been up to 25C recently, but only 13C today, with snow, sleet and/or hail forecast for tomorrow -winter is returning! Today I saw 2 holly blue and 1 peacock butterflies. The kite has been daily for a week. A wren and a blackcap were in plants by the top pond. Tadpoles all hatched now, so can shelter from the cold to come without my help.

April 7th Snow has fallen several times, another half inch fell overnight and has frozen. Many trees now in blossom, so not good. Not a lot of birds, but the two ravens, one pheasant, a couple of robins and a great-spotted woodpecker have visited briefly. Two pied wagtails on the grass, but did not stay.



April 8th I saw my first swallow, which flew over as I sat by the pond.

April 11th More snow has been falling and building up as it freezes on the ground. A biting north wind makes it very unpleasant. Tadpoles seem to be safe so far. My plants are really suffering. I have probably lost a lot, but in France it has been colder, wiping out many vineyards. So different from last year. Birds are coming to

feeders, but not many. Goldfinches are increasing and the pied wagtails are hopping about on the snow-covered cider house roof, where there is some seed. Blue tits are using the summerhouse nest box at last.

April 17th We awake to another two inches of snow, but were able to make our first outing to Wales to visit our daughter and family as we are at last allowed to cross the border. On our return the snow had all gone.

April 19th At last blue tits are moving into our camera box, but only one seen so far. It is now 12-15C by day, but still almost freezing by night. The common spotted orchids are coming up in our grass, early this year, and I have counted over 100. Peacock and orange tip butterflies about daily, but in small numbers. Three nest boxes now in use and two swallows overhead.

April 26th Many plants I can now confirm are dead, so a chance for some changes perhaps. The blue tit in the camera box seems to be a single parent and sleeps in the box each night. Meadow brown and orange tip butterflies about now. I had heard a cuckoo two days ago and occasionally since, but at a distance. Several swallows now about daily, but no bats in the evenings, unusual up here. It has officially been the frostiest April since records began, in 1960, and one of the coldest. Spring is at least two weeks behind.

May 4th Weather has not improved, still cold with Arctic winds, about 10C by day and frost at night. The bird in our camera box now has 8 eggs, but not much activity in other boxes. Some birds are coming to feeders, and I have seen a pair each of greenfinches, pied wagtails, long-tailed tits, mistle thrushes. Other birds include nuthatch, chaffinch, goldfinch, blackcap, blue and great tits, blackbirds, a song thrush, feral pigeon, wood pigeons and pheasants as usual. The red legged partridges are often to be heard if not seen. All the usual corvids visit daily, now 4 ravens, several magpies and crows, jackdaws and rooks. They often deter the smaller birds by the sheer numbers that arrive, but they do not stay very long. Orange tip butterflies still plentiful, and a few damselflies now appearing.

May 10th Slightly warmer, but blustery with showers. We went to Crickhowell bluebell woods for a walk with family and dogs. We were revived by the lovely smell of the bluebells around us and were lucky to have some sunshine. On our

return home I went to check a bee house we were given for Christmas, for solitary bees, and I was surprised to find it was well used. Several tunnels filled up, and another half full, so I shall keep watching. Several holly blue butterflies about regularly now.

May 18th Camera nest box seems to have been abandoned. I don't know what happened, but lack of food must have contributed to the decision, due to weather conditions and timing. I did hear my first swifts today and eventually was able to see a group of three.

May 23rd No more swifts seen, but it is wet and cool again. Swallows are plentiful and house martins have joined them overhead. We are still not seeing any bats. There are several frogs and many newts in the small ponds and stream now.

May 31st After many days of rain we are now enjoying a spell of warm and sunny weather, up to 24C. I have been watching 'Springwatch', which seems to confirm my experiences with a variety of wildlife this season. I am not seeing or hearing any young birds, so I think any early nesters could not feed their young and they could not survive. A sparrowhawk has been over a few times lately.

We had a barbecue with our son, granddaughter and a friend, but just as they all arrived a swarm of honey bees landed in an apple tree a few yards from where we were sitting. It was very noisy to start with but after a while they settled down, hanging like a large jelly on a branch, much to the fascination of our 4- year -old granddaughter. We continued with our plans and ate, watching all the time, but all seemed quiet, and the day passed into evening, still no change. Our visitors left, and we rang someone to come if interested to collect the swarm. He said he would come up after his dinner and arrived about 8.30 in the evening. He put on protective gear and climbed up to the swarm with his box. He gently shook the swarm into the box, with the queen and smoked them to calm them. More small groups gradually went into the box. He sprayed the branch with a mixture designed to discourage the bees from returning to it and came down the ladder. This process took about an hour and as we watched from a short distance we found it a very calming experience, with the gentle humming of the bees and all seemingly in slow motion. We had a very inter-

esting conversation and learned a lot about bees! Unfortunately one got down his boot and stung him as he walked back to his car. He said there were about 20,000 bees in that swarm. The swarm had probably come from a nearby orchard, the owner living in Wales as we found out later had not thought it worth his time to come and collect them, so they were found a new home. The weather had apparently caused many swarms to move, so bees have been confused also! When we went indoors, strangely we found about 100 dead or dying bees in our living room, on the floor, chairs and windowsills, sheer coincidence and no connection to the other bees, a sad end to the day. Many honey bees stayed on that apple tree in the orchard for most of the week, several hundred each day, then they were gone.

June 3rd A kestrel has been hovering near the house for several days and I wondered if they were again nesting in the oak trees at the bottom of the garden, as they had done before. I saw a red admiral butterfly today and many holly blues, as well as frogs and a small toad.

June 7th Our son showed us a video he had taken of a hedgehog in his garden in Hereford, using the hole in the fence he has made for the purpose – his daughter did not believe they would use it, so he had to show her! On our return home I was pleased to see the summerhouse nest box has new residents – blue tits were busy feeding young, which must be young as we could not hear them. Hopefully many other birds will try to nest again, as so many have failed. I found part of a long-tailed tit nest on the grass, which looked as if birds had fledged. The nest just looked well used and I have seen several about lately, so maybe one successful family at last. Painted lady butterflies now appearing.

June 9th I was awoken by a cuckoo in the cherry tree outside our bedroom window, which was open. It called for several minutes then flew towards Ledbury, where I could still hear it. This seems late, a normal call, not the double sound heard later in the season. I thought they would be leaving by now. This was followed by the sound of geese and a flock of Canada geese flew in V formation very low overhead. The sky went dark as they flew over, down the valley then veered right towards Burtons Lane, where they stay by the lake at the fruit farm. Two peacock butterflies appeared later.

June 10th I was pleased this evening to hear, then see a family of blue tits flying towards the feeders. This seemed to be the family from the summerhouse box, now fledged and flying strongly through trees in the orchard. Still no bats seen.

June 19th After dry and warm weather the ground is now hard and very dry, but everything is twice its usual size due to all the rain. There are now several families of blue tits around and at last we have seen several bats each night. Swallows are very active and I have seen 7 swifts in a group.

June 15th Temperatures up and down, sometimes 24C, sometimes 12C, and frost in the north! Swallows are often on the ground in the vegetable garden, after watering, so I think they are using the mud to keep their nests together. I have not seen them on the ground so much before. Many blue and great tits and finches now around the feeders. A variety of butterflies – painted lady, small tortoiseshell, peacock, red admiral, large and small white and a lovely scarlet tiger moth, and a mass of buff coloured plume moths. A few hornets about, showing interest in the roof above our bedroom window. Something has attacked our bee house, opening up and damaging the entrances. Some tunnels are empty, but some seem full and one bee was in there. I don't know what



did this, but it will require a metal strip to repair it, which should make it safe for next time.

June 28th Cooler, wet and gloomy. 18C. When bringing some leaf mold up the hill through the orchard we saw a very large hole had been dug, possibly by a rabbit. A large brown but unidentifiable animal was seen coming out of it later, which could have been a dark rabbit, or perhaps a large brown rat. Later our son saw a very large

grey rat, by the cider house, and I had looked out of the window at the same time – it was the size of a small rabbit and seemed unconcerned as it ran under our car to hide. There have been several seen lately by neighbours, some dead. This one we had seen was very much alive and at home in the ivy by the cider house. It ran up it onto the roof next-door, probably attracted to their chickens nearby.

July 6th We are busy doing many last-minute jobs to prepare our garden for an 'Open Gardens' weekend in the village. One of these jobs was to complete rebuilding and moving the compost heaps. We had an old carpet on the old heap, which had to be removed and when we unfolded it we found a grass snake curled up very comfortably, so we introduced him to the new heap, now ready, and covered it with a new piece of old carpet. It did not seem to mind too much and soon disappeared into the warmth of the heap. It was about 3 feet long. The garden is now full of families of young birds, hopefully making up for earlier in the year. A family of 5 magpies, being fed by parents, also eating a young dead rabbit which appeared on the grass. I have seen 7 rabbits recently, so this one was one of the unlucky ones I think, with cats and foxes about.

As we waited for our first garden visitors we were entertained by a red kite over the garden for several minutes, lovely to see so closely.

July 12th Our son found a shed snakeskin near the compost heap when visiting with his daughter, so we showed her. She found another part, which completed the skin, about the size of the one we had put into the heap recently. She handled the skin but was not very happy about it, so when our daughter came a few days later with her son we gave it to him to take to school and he was very pleased. We have to do some repairs to the pond and there are many flying ants about, but where we need to work there is a very active wasp nest, so that is on hold! Plenty of newts, all types, and dragonflies and damselflies around the pond. A bullfinch flew over and the red kite returned for a while overhead.

July 13th After a hard day in the garden we decided to go for a drive and walk, heading towards the Wye. We ended up in Fownhope, where we walked for a while along the river, then sat on a bench near a bend in the river. It was a beautiful peaceful evening, and we were enjoying the mo-

ment when we heard a short sharp call nearby. It was a dipper, replied to by another, then the two came on to some rocks within a few feet of us. They did what dippers do, hopping from rock to rock and onto the fence right by us, for about 20 minutes. It was a truly magical experience, added to by a beautiful sunset developing, so we just sat in silence and took it all in. Even our dog stayed quiet!

July 22nd We have been having a heat wave, with an 'extreme heat' warning, over 30C for over 7 days. This has not been good for the garden, or us, but we have been able to repair the pond, which should be tested for leaks later, as today it is only 21C, with thundery showers to come! The wildlife in the pond seems to be OK after our repairs, so not too disturbed by us. There are many swallows about now, and noticeably less biting insects – is there a connection? Hopefully they are finding plenty of food. There seem less house martins than other years, but I regularly see 7 swifts together, and other smaller groups, so it looks like a good year for them. There are a lot of rats around, mainly grey, some dead, but our camera trap has been picking up the large one by the cider house each night, following a regular route through the flower bed, and along the paths.

July 31st We have had a week of storms with some very heavy rain which has filled the pond up, but still too low, so more work to do – at least we now know exactly where the problem is, and it is easy to fix. I have heard swifts but not seen any for a while, but still many swallows and small groups of house martins. A red kite flew low over a few days ago, and I saw two over a field in Bromsberrow. A green woodpecker flew through the herb garden, soon followed by a sparrowhawk flying very low, but too far behind to be a threat to the woodpecker. We have a wasp nest above our bedroom window which is very active, and another by the chimney, so we cannot open the windows. We now have meadow brown, gatekeeper, peacock, painted lady, and occasional holly blue butterflies, and skippers in the longer grass. We leave a lot to grow longer now, and this seems to have increased the insects and butterflies over a few years.

August 7th We have had to remove the last of the old pear trees, which had become unsafe, and had been dying over a number of years. This is sad, but an opportunity to plant some new trees,

with wildlife in mind. I have planted a hornbeam and some spindle bushes, and a spindle tree, and a lilac, so hopefully in time these will attract a variety of wildlife. We have honey fungus in the garden, so have to bear that in mind when doing any new planting. Swallows and house martins are increasing in number daily, and I did see 5 swifts recently, but they have probably all left by now. More bats are about now, coming out of our roof above the light sensor, so the outside light is coming on and off all evening! I found a newly hatched blackbird's egg in an urn under a holly hedge – a bit late I fear? A red kite and a kestrel have been overhead several times.

August 14th Cooler here, 19C, but heatwaves in Europe causing wild fires in Greece, Czech Republic, Algeria and Turkey, destroying Olive groves etc., so very damaging. I have now planted a columnar cherry tree, which I hope will follow on from our old cherry tree, a main feature in the garden which is declining rapidly. I have had to have a lot of dead wood removed for safety reasons, but it is not destined to last very much longer, as honey fungus has taken a hold, and it is



probably about 200 years old or more, one of the oldest in the area, according to the tree surgeon who checks it for me.

August 22nd Returned from holiday to begin a big tidy up, and plenty of butterflies around – tortoiseshell, peacock, speckled wood, gatekeeper, red admiral, and holly blue. Frogs and toads in some flowerbeds as I worked, and many bats about in the evenings, as well as muntjacs and owls calling from Frith Wood. No swifts about, but plenty of swallows and house martins daily, low overhead and congregating in the cherry tree. A family of pied wagtails often around, having nested in the garden, entertaining to watch.

September 6th

August had ended cool and gloomy, feeling as if winter was coming early, but now 30C with more thunder storms forecast! Swallows often in the cherry tree, chattering and I did see 2 swifts a few days ago. Yellow brimstone, peacock, red admiral and holly blue butterflies still about, and a chiff chaff landed on the kitchen windowsill. A shrew ran across our new path, the first I have seen for a long time. Tawny owls calling a lot at night. I saw hedgehog droppings on the grass - a sign they are still about, but I do not see many.

September 9th We went to the Elan Valley, where the water was so low we were able to walk across where the river should be, and under the bridge by the Pen-y-Gareg Dam, and climb on the rocks in the river. We could see some of the buildings that would be under the water.

We checked mole damage in the orchard and found a huge mound of earth dug out, where badgers had dug out a very large wasp nest at least the size of a football. Many angry wasps were still in and out of the remains of the nest, so we kept clear. Less swallows now, but the pied wagtail family still in the garden, also a family of about 6 long tailed tits. The pond repair has yet to be tested, but a large toad had taken up residence where the water comes into the pond. The recent hot weather has caused the many wasps in the roof above our window to spend a lot of the day fanning the nest to cool it down. This is a very noisy activity, with a constant humming noise like a ship's engine, which does stop in the evening.

September 18th Rain has now filled the pond again, but not enough to check our second repair. Swallows have mostly gone, only about 100 left, probably the young ones waiting to go. Some people have recently had active nests, a third brood, but these are unlikely to survive. A garden warbler has appeared and the chiff chaffs are noisy, as are many blue tits. A robin is already claiming territory around our pink berried rowan tree, wanting to guard the berries from others I think!

September 20th Two large hornets are in the garage, buzzing around each evening, possibly nesting in the roof. They seem attracted to the lights if they are on. A lot of dragonflies have appeared, late in the season, but lovely to see. Moles have been very active in the orchard, mak-

ing apple picking difficult and hazardous, but not a very good crop this year, and no pears. The plums and damsons mostly fell off before they were ready, the squirrels and badgers have had a feast.

September 29th After a lovely hot weekend today is cool, 16C, after a night down to 3C. Heavy rain has at last filled the pond to overflowing and so far it has not gone down, so I think we have won.

October 3rd I found a tail-less slowworm outside the back door and thinking it was dead took it to show our son, but as I walked it wrapped itself tightly round my hand, put out its tongue several times, then gradually unwrapped itself and slithered up my arm, so after allowing its picture to be taken for our granddaughter I put it under a thick hedge to recover.

October 5th Messy bits of green by the pond attracted my attention and I discovered that squirrels had bitten off and eaten every single one of my sunflowers, which I was waiting to cut for the birds. They made a terrible mess and not one seed was left – about 20 flowers. As it was a bit colder we decided to light the fire in our living room. This caused chaos for some time, as it seems the second wasp nest in the roof was right by the chimney. The heat drove them outside, so the air was filled with many angry active wasps! Those that did not get out through the roof ended up over many days in the living room, escaping through any gaps by the beams or stonework, so it was not a comfortable room for a long time. The wasps above the window were not affected and the nest still very active. We rescued a small toad which was in our hall overnight.

October 18th A lot of wasps in the living room, very dozy and a lot dead. We had them in other rooms also and later diving on us in bed – no peace, or sleep! We tried to block any holes we could find, but this problem continued for a cou-



ple of months. Bird feeders now topped up and attracting more blue tits, a couple of nuthatches and a jay on a fat ball. Sunsets have been lovely, as we listen to the birdsong last thing. The pond is still holding water at the right level.

November 2nd First frost of the year, we have had some rain and strong winds have brought a few branches down. A few pheasants have returned, two males and three females. A great-spotted woodpecker and the nuthatches are all daily visitors. At times, especially if I have put out bread, the garden seems full of ravens. They have nested successfully this year and the population has grown – they look very big in a group on the grass. The jackdaws look very small beside them. Leaves are still staying on and Frith Wood still looking quite green, but autumn colour appearing elsewhere and in the garden.

November 7th A flock of starlings went over today and, in the evening a flock of fieldfares, the first I have seen yet. This morning several redwings were on the grass after apples. The cherry tree had about 20 blue tits, two nuthatches and several blackbirds in it this morning. We had cleared some holly from under this tree, so maybe we disturbed a lot of insects which have climbed into the tree. Yesterday, when gardening, a frog was croaking at me from within plants by the top pond, for half an hour or more, returning later to do the same – a little late in the year?

November 10th Many owls as we sat out at dusk – only down to 13C overnight. A red kite circled overhead in the day and ‘quartered’ over the garden and hill for about half an hour, sometimes close and low against the cloudy sky it looked beautiful.

November 25th It has been colder, with several night frosts and quite gloomy. Yesterday I watched a squirrel running up the garden, followed by a muntjac, followed by a male pheasant, all moving quite fast in a line, odd to see. The squirrel diverted up the cherry tree, the muntjac stopped behind the pampass grass and seemed to disappear out of sight and through the hedge. The pheasant stopped to eat in a flowerbed. This was our dominant male of four regular visitors. A sparrowhawk flew inches off the grass along our entire top hedge later, at great speed, but did not catch anything.

November 26th Much colder, a red kite flew over but did not linger. A heavy sleet shower in

the evening and strong winds especially further north.

December 4th After a cold day with a cold wind, the blackbirds found the apples in crates near the back door and had a feast, but I do not blame them in this weather!

December 15th After two named storms it is now mild again and damp, 14C by day and 11C by night. Many plants still flowering, including roses. Feeders full of the usual birds, several coal tits now coming also. Bees still quite active, but wasps have nearly all gone, much to our relief.

December 21st The longest night ahead – it has been so grey and gloomy for weeks it is hard to tell day from night, but it stays mild.

December 26th As Christmas visitors were leaving a red kite circled overhead again, lovely to see with sun shining on it. Feeders busy and more chaffinches now on the ground.



Two robins were having a ‘stand-off’ in the pink rowan tree, although no berries left -this must be over territory for next spring! Five male pheasants now, all looking very smart, but no females.

December 29th One female pheasant today. Not much other activity in the garden but camera trap has shown a few muntjacs. Moles are very active elsewhere in the garden.

December 31st The warmest New Year on record at 15.8C, but only 14C here! Birds singing beautifully at dawn and dusk, a pleasure to hear. Bulbs coming up everywhere, some snowdrops in flower.

Carolyn Evans

LEDBURY HALT WILDLIFE GARDEN

You are probably aware of the history of the Town Trail being both canal and railway and there is a plethora of information out there, this is just one link with some super photos:

<http://malvernrailway.blogspot.com/2017/01/ledbury-town-trail.html>



Here is an old photo of Ledbury Halt, you can see the building that is now Shane Howells in the background. Ledbury Halt Wildlife Garden is along this strip where we are endeavouring to slowly turn it into a more floristically diverse area. This is thanks to the invaluable efforts of volunteers who meet 10am every 2nd Wed of the month.

Insect numbers were very different from when the last train stopped at the Halt, in the 1960's to the present day. Many articles and scientific analysis on the exact numbers, all of which tell the same sad tale, are not hard to find. The increase in floristic diversity, along with habitat/compost piles made by weaving willow and other prunings, will hopefully have a positive effect on the biodiversity of

the area starting with insects and thus working its way up the food-chain.

The reduction of insect life is affecting all food chains, including ours, it's up to us, the human species, to help prevent more loss.

We hope that Ledbury Halt will not only sup-

port more insect life and other wildlife in general, but also be educational; highlighting small ways that we can make a difference.

As Sir David Attenborough says:

"No one will protect what they don't care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced"

As private gardens alone in Britain cover over 660,000 acres, what a difference we could make to wildlife if we were to be a little less tidy, stop using 'chemicals', use peat alternatives and plant with wildlife in mind. This would help link all green spaces in towns and urban areas with nature reserves and the countryside.

Please do bear with us as we work towards

improving Ledbury Halt and move from 'looking messy' to organised chaos, a wildlife haven and a greater understanding!

We are hoping the copious amount of yellow rattle seed, collected from Janet and Alan Parrys field, will, in a few years' time, keep the lush grass growth down. However, leaving some grass is beneficial as many species rely on grass for their food.

No doubt we will be harvesting and scattering more yellow rattle seed again in late summer. The sapling trees we planted are doing well

as are most of the other plants we have put in.

Do come along if you want to join in at any point for **any** amount of time or to just come and say hello and support us in our efforts.

10am every 2nd Wed of the Month - weather permitting.

We will be there on Community Day too with activities for all ages and plants for sale.

Amanda Lambourne



Garden Survey 2021 and The RSPB Big Garden Bird Watch 2021

2021 was another peculiar year of ups and downs; lockdowns, vaccinations, and at last the gradual return to some resemblance of “normal life” ...for now.

We had a small number of our Garden Survey forms returned this year so our sample size is therefore small, meaning the results will differ from those from the RSPB’s Big Garden Bird Watch (all the results and more information is available here at [Big Garden Birdwatch | The RSPB](#)).

The first RSPB Birdwatch took place in 1979 and so the RSPB has over 40 years of data to help understand how garden birds are faring in the UK. Their table below shows the long-term trends for some of our most familiar birds, as well as the positions for 2021 and 2022.

House Sparrows stay as the most common species, along with Blue tits and Starlings. The next 7 most popular and the other most common species are still pretty much the same for 2022 as for 2021, which you can see in the RSPB table below:



Rankings and trends: RSPB Big Garden Bird Watch 2022:

2022 rank	Bird	Number of birds seen	2021 rank	Long term trend
1	house sparrow	1,778,764	— 1	↓ Down 57.9% since 1979
2	blue tit	1,178,156	— 2	↑ Up 14.3% since 1979
3	starling	1,162,553	— 3	↓ Down 81.7% since 1979
4	woodpigeon	1,041,709	↑ 5	↑ Up 1132.8% since 1979
5	blackbird	958,917	↓ 4	↓ Down 43.3% since 1979
6	robin	622,493	— 6	↓ Down 26.3% since 1979
7	goldfinch	591,129	↑ 8	↑ Up 18.3% over the last decade*
8	great tit	587,024	↓ 7	↑ Up 54.4% since 1979
9	magpie	527,125	— 9	↑ Up 212.0% since 1979
10	chaffinch	402,236	↑ 11	↓ Down 68.3% since 1979

* comparisons with 1979 are not available

The most common bird seen in our gardens were Robins; these were seen in garden surveys every month. Following this were Black bird, Great Tit and Blue Tit. House Sparrow, Collared Dove, Chaffinch (which were seen much less last year) and Dunnock were also among the most common birds across our gardens.

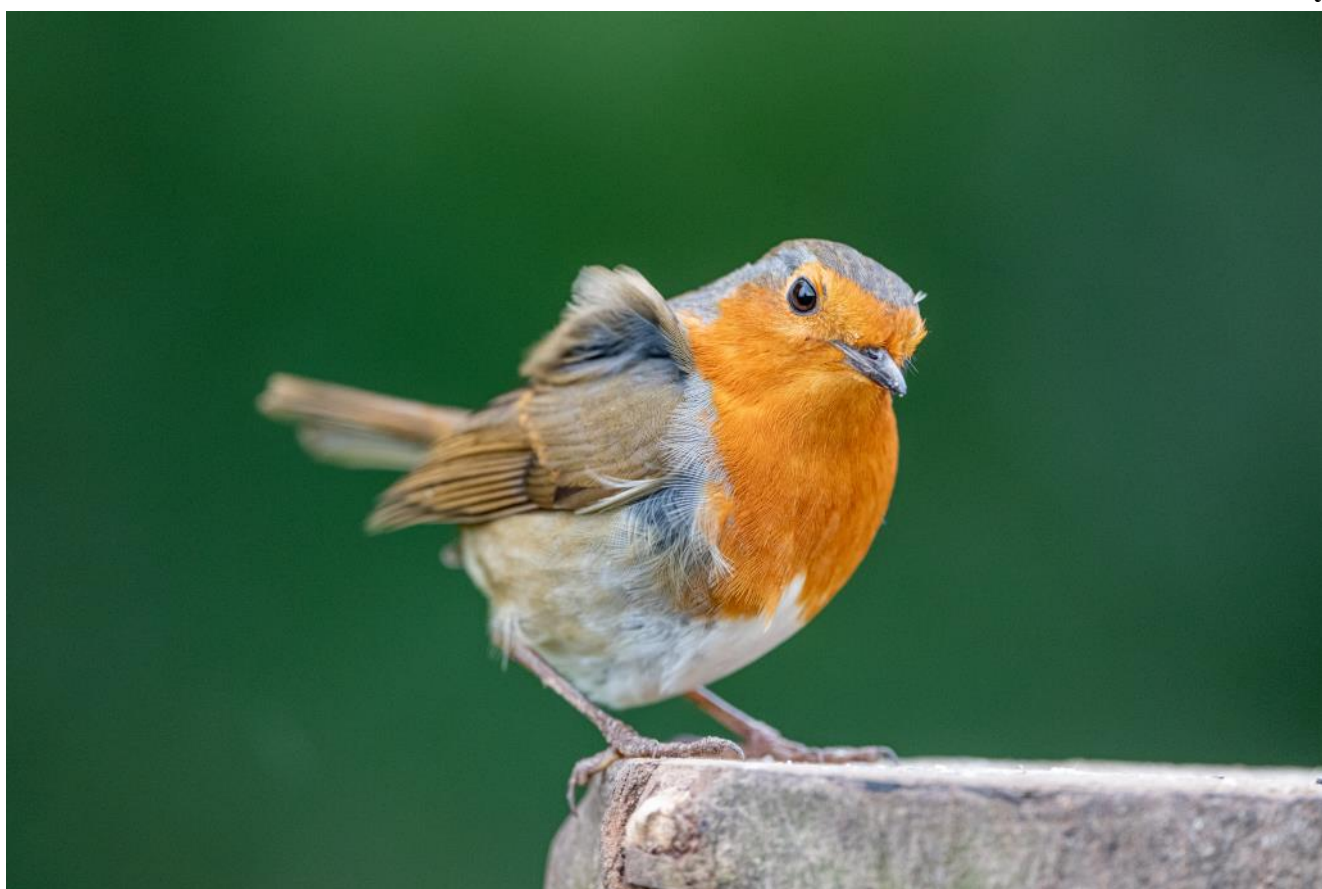
Some of the more unusual birds seen include Mistle Thrush, Nuthatch, Marsh/Willow Tit, Tawny Owl, Swift, Cuckoo and Siskin, as well as Sparrow Hawk, Red Kite and Buzzard.

The first Swallows were noted 2 days earlier this year, on 8th April 2021. The first cuckoo was heard on 24th April, 2 days later than in 2020. A male Bullfinch was spotted in February, along with Black-caps of both sexes, who were first seen in January and then through March.

Other creatures recorded include Hummingbird Hawkmoth and Scarlet Tiger moth, Squirrels, Hedgehogs, Frogs, Toads, Newts of all types, Grass snakes, Slow-worm, Muntjac and Voles. A range of butterflies was also noted, particularly Brimstone, Holly Blue, Peacock and Orange Tip, but it was good to see quite a variety recorded.

The one thing that the Garden survey showed clearly was that an extremely wide range of different birds are seen in our gardens, with most of the birds listed in our survey form being seen in at least one garden. It is exciting evidence of the wide diversity of birds around Ledbury, which is very positive news!

Di Bulley



The Robin No 1 in Ledbury Gardens

HEREFORDSHIRE IN SPRING

Here we are again in Spring! Everything is bursting into life; the birds are singing, insects appearing in time to feed bird broods and the plants are unfurling. I'm still taking photographs and am looking forward to sharing just a few of my favourites that I've taken in Herefordshire this Spring.

I heard the 'tacking' alarm call of a Blackcap in some Willow near Mathon and looked up to see the female (with the brown head) and the male. I was pleased to get a photo of a female as they usually skulk in the shrubs even more than the males.



Early one morning I noticed this very small fly (?) on a Grape Hyacinth. I got down really low and photographed the fly backlit so as to make it stand out.

Ahhh – how sweet! I discovered a newly fledged Robin in a hedge in Ledbury who was being fed by its parents. After taking a few photos I moved on so as not to disturb it any more.



A beautiful male Kestrel on a recent Ledbury Naturalists walk on Castle-morton Common.

If you look very closely at his talons you can see he's caught a small rodent.

A Pied Wagtail with nesting material on a wall on the same walk.





When I was trying to photograph White-throats off Hancocks Lane, Welland, they stayed right in the middle of bramble patches, eventually though this male came up to the top to sing.

On a very recent walk for a Hidden Herefordshire event, I was really pleased to see my first ever Yellow Wagtail, on the banks of the River Wye, near Sellack. The plumage of this male is so vivid that I don't think it would look out of place in an Amazonian Rain-forest!



A fantastic bird to finish off my article.

William Lambourne (aged 13)

COMMON TERNS

One of our favourite places for a nature walk is Ripple Lakes, the large lakes which you can see from the M50 at the bridge over the River Severn as it approaches the M5 junction. It is a good place for birds at any time of year and for dragonflies in the summer. In July 2021 we led a Lednats meeting round one of the lakes and on the small island we saw two common terns behaving as if they could well have chicks hidden in the lush vegetation. On our regular visits we keep a close watch on the island and eventually caught a glimpse of two small chicks and from then on it became a priority to check out how they were doing whenever we visited the lakes.



We regularly spent time sat on the bank watching the parents fishing for the chicks. They also were very alert to the presence of potential predators, if they suddenly took off and looked agitated there was usually a gull or a crow flying over. In spite of their diminutive size they would fearlessly mob the intruder until it moved away.



As the chicks grew they spent more time out in the open and showed no fear of the geese and swans which also used the island. The larger birds probably provided additional protection from predators. In mid-August both chicks fledged successfully and we could watch their early attempts at fishing for themselves.



The birds returned again this year and in spite of a relative lack of vegetation on the island they have at least one chick.



Eden Tanner