

BRIAN'S NATURE DIARY- April

This month sees the main surge of arrivals of our summer resident birds. Many of them would have started their journey weeks ago in Africa, moving northwards steadily, until suddenly the hedgerows and woodlands are enriched by their songs and calls. Early arrivals include the chiffchaffs and willow warblers, little grey-brown jobs that hide expertly amidst the new spring greenery. Both species are featured on our new CD, now available.

Many of them will appear at local birdwatching hotspots, before continuing their journey to the far north. Towards the middle of the month the sand martins, swallows and house martins will be with us, welcoming harbingers of warmer weather to come.

A little fish that is pure aggression, armed with needle-sharp spines, and ready to fight anyone for a meal, is the ruffe, also known as the pope. Of a nondescript brown colour it has the most beautiful lavender-coloured eyes. Not often seen, it nevertheless is quite common in lakes and reservoirs, and the canals. It tends to hide away in the gloomy depths. I used to catch them regularly in fish traps set in 25 feet of water at my local reservoir. They are easy to keep in fishtanks but I can't pretend that they are the most interesting fish to observe.

The delicate white umbels of flowers of two plants of the carrot family appear on our roadside verges this month. Commonest and most attractive is the cow parsley, also known as Queen Anne's lace. Around here they call it keck. The other is the larger and coarser hogweed, which can grow to be more than five feet tall. Both species attract many insect visitors including bees, butterflies, and the brownish soft-bodied beetles known as soldier beetles. Also hiding skilfully away may be the flower spider. Exquisitely camouflaged, and shaped like a crab, it will grab an unsuspecting insect as it settles in search of nectar.

In the warm sunshine the temperature of the water begins to rise, stirring the water plants into new life. And when this occurs the hordes of aquatic creatures that browse upon them also come out of hiding. Many kinds of mollusks live in fresh water, in size ranging from swan and duck mussels that filter particles of food from the water, to the tiny ramshorns that live their entire lives on the water plants. All of them have different, but vital, jobs to do in the underwater community.

Not that many years ago the tufted duck was known mainly as a winter visitor to lowland waters. These days it is quite a common all year round resident, breeding on many lakes, reservoirs, gravel pits, and rivers. The black-and-white plumage and jaunty crest of the male has earned it the nickname of magpie diver. Look out for little rafts of both sexes – the females are much duller – on any larger waters.