

COUNTRY EYE DIARY FOR DECEMBER by Brian Webster

Some of the leaves that fell from the trees in October and November have already started to rot, to become part of the rich humus from which next year's plants will draw some nutrition. Worms drag plant matter into their burrows to eat.

Some leaves take longer to decay than others. Pine needles for example can take up to seven years to break down completely, and they help to turn the soil beneath the trees very acid. Craft workers know that poplar leaves have soft tissues that go quickly, leaving behind the hard veins to make a pretty leaf skeleton.

Moles are carnivores so even in winter they must find worms and grubs underground to keep them going. If the soil freezes hard they simply follow their prey by burrowing to deeper levels. This has its dangers, though, for a snowfall, followed by a rapid thaw can flood their burrows, and then they have no choice but to come to the surface.

Above ground they are defenceless against the many predators, like the fox and the carrion crow; the latter dines well on the unfortunates of the animal world, like the mole and the small birds that fail to make it through the long bitter December nights..

The bare bony twigs of alder and silver birch provide no hiding place for the parties of tits and other small birds that crowd into them. Many pairs of sharp eyes are on the lookout for food. Alders especially are visited by the charming siskin, a tiny finch that is as acrobatic as a tit as it hangs beneath an alder `cone` to extract the seeds. Siskins come from the north, and are much commoner in some winters than in others.

December and holly are inseparable in many people's minds, but not every year yields a good crop of berries. The old country belief that a heavy berry crop precedes a hard winter is not true. It means that last spring the weather was good when the trees were flowering, so most were pollinated, and this has been followed by a good growing season for the fruits. But the birds certainly welcome them in midwinter, and thrushes feed greedily on them.

Dave, Jane and Brian at COUNTRY EYE IMAGES would like to use the holly as our Christmas symbol, and to wish you peace and prosperity now, and for the future