

## BRIAN'S NATURE DIARY FOR DECEMBER 2006

Good news, I hope! Many of you seem to like my Nature Diary, so we have decided to continue it.

The chill winter winds drive along the River Nene valley, causing the dry stems of the tall reeds to rattle and rustle together. Almost as if they are quietly talking – of times past or of the year yet to come? The seeds are retained by the graceful spikes until the first warm days of spring, when they are shaken loose to drift away, each on its own feathery parachute. Many small creatures, like spiders, aphids, ladybirds and other beetles, seek sanctuary by tucking themselves deep in the seed heads, or into the shriveled foliage.

Even here they are not safe from prying eyes of birds like wrens, great and blue tits, as they seek the high-protein food necessary to sustain them through the cold winter nights. The seeds are sought out by finches and buntings, especially the increasingly uncommon reed bunting. In some reed beds the delightful bearded reedling may be found. A work of art in grey, warm brown, black and white they keep in touch with one another through calls which sound just like a tiny banjo being 'pinged.' The male in his breeding dress is especially striking with his impressive Che Guavaro moustache (not a beard, despite the name).

In past years severe weather caused the rivers and streams to freeze solid and the dynamic kingfisher was often an early casualty. The ice effectively locked its food, small fishes and other water creatures, away from it. At such times many of them died – they were almost exterminated by the 1963 winter. The few survivors struggled to the coast in search of open water.

Roast turkey or chicken may have been traditional Christmas fare as long as many of us can remember, but it wasn't always so. Before it roast goose was the choice, while in mediaeval times carp was often the seasonal dish. They were widely cultivated in special stewponds to provide a welcome source of fresh meat in the winter.

As always Dave, Jane and I would like to wish you and yours a peaceful Christmas, and a Happy New Year, and hope we may have the pleasure of serving you soon.