

## **NATURE DIARY for February by Brian Webster**

At my local reservoir on a grey February morning I scanned my binoculars to find a small raft of ducks, far out on the water, and indistinct in the mist, but looking mainly black-and-white. Alternately they appeared and then they were lost to view as the mist swirled. They turned out to be golden eyes, winter wanderers from the far north that visit us every year in small numbers. The almost luminous eye, from which it gets its name, may be seen only on close view. Ask to view the images that we hold in our library.

The mainly mild first half of the winter has left some fruits still on the trees and bushes of the hedgerows. A few hips and haws and even crab apples remain here and there, but they will soon be cleared by the birds and small mammals that hungrily seek them out. The wind and rain usually buffet the fruits of wild clematis, or old man's beard, tearing them from the plants to waft away on furry parachutes, perhaps to sttle in a suitable spot, there to germinate and grow into a new plant.

Crossbills are irregular visitors to our countryside from their homelands in the northern pine forests. Large invasions occur only if a successful breeding season is followed by failure of the autumn cone crop, on the seeds of which they depend for food. The twisted upper and lower mandibles of the beak, which look so deformed, are perfectly made to prise open the scales of the cones to get at the nutritious seeds. In legend it was said that its beak became mis-shapen as the bird struggled in vain to wrench out the nail from the cross of Jesus.

Our National Parks cover some of the most beautiful remaining areas of our countryside. Millions of folk visit them every year, with interests as varied as walking, climbing, caving and potholing, riding, fishing, sports, observing wildlife, or merely to satisfy the urge to be in the open air, to get away from it all. But our National Parks are fragile, vulnerable places, subject to all these and other pressures. If they are to continue to provide wild places for us to enjoy, they need to be respected, to be carefully watched over by those charged with their care.

'February-fill-dyke', So goes the saying, yet weather statistics show that this is one of the driest months of the year. It can certainly appear to be one of the dreariest times in the countryside. Yet there are wild flowers to be found in sheltered spots. Winter aconites, Christmas roses, dandelions, alder and hazel catkins, coltsfoot, willow buds, gorse, speedwell, and ground ivy are among the species to look out for.

[We have images of most of the plants and animals featured in Brian's diaries. E-mail us for details.](#)