

NATURE DIARY for January by Brian Webster

January is the time when the armchair naturalist comes into his own. Settled back, close to a warm fire he can browse through his books to his heart's content. Perhaps a wild flower book to relive past finds, or to raise hopes of new species yet to be seen. Before long we at Country Eye hope to have for sale a range of nature books suitable for all tastes. But there is no substitute for being out and about, whatever the time of year, and there is always plenty to see.

Tawny owls often find good hunting in January, so long as the ground stays free of ice and snow. Vegetation has been scythed back by winds and frosts, making small mammals easier to find and catch. Tawny owls are among our most strictly resident birds, and depend on getting to know every square inch of their territory. If they are successful they can rely on finding enough to eat, even in the severest conditions.

The mistle thrush is the largest of its family found in Britain. It lives in open woodlands, parks, churchyards, and large gardens. Its name in full is mistletoe thrush, because of its fondness for the whitish berries. When it wipes the sticky juice from its beak onto the branches the seeds are pushed deep into the crevices, and here they may germinate and grow. Another of its folklore names -stormcock- comes from its habit of singing in the foulest of weather, shouting its wild simple song into the teeth of a January storm. For those who would like to learn its song, along with song thrush and dunnock, and a selection of other common species, BIRDS AS SOLOISTS, an audio tape, is on offer in our bargains section.

Its smaller relative the song thrush also sings regularly in January, although it stays silent during hard weather. When it sings it seems the song thrush is so pleased with its short insistent phrases that it repeats many of them several times over, a sure way of telling it from other thrushes.

Another January songster is the dunnock or hedge sparrow, which is found in many gardens, but is often overlooked due to its dull colouring and its habit of skulking about amongst vegetation, only occasionally venturing out into the open. Every now and then it flicks its wings in a nervous sort of way; shufflewing is an old country name for it. Its song is a brief, stuttering affair; to my ears it seems to stop just when it ought to be getting going.

In the mild winters of recent years, there may still be plenty of fungi about, especially on old timber, and in sheltered spots under trees. They help to add a little colour to an otherwise drab winter landscape.