

BRIAN'S NATURE DIARY FOR January 2007

The weather people have just made it official. 2006 was officially the warmest year on record. A mere statistic but one which ought to have us all quivering in fear. As a population we face one of two stark but simple choices. We either take charge of our own and the planet's destiny, and rapidly move to correct the imbalances caused by human-induced climate change, or we wait for nature to do it for us. Believe me the latter course is too terrible even to contemplate. So why not make a contribution by turning your computer off and unplugging it when you have finished browsing, and then go around the house or the office doing the same with all those unnecessary appliances. Not only would you be helping the environment but you would also save money, a double bonus. Such an act may seem trivial, laughable even, but if everyone did this a couple of oil or coal-fired power stations could be shut down.

Forgive me, I don't normally go in for outbursts like the above, but I hope you will agree that our situation is serious enough to justify it. In future months, if you will allow, I would just like to make a few suggestions along the lines of the above.

Already on the first of the month the catkins of hazel are beginning to appear. When fully opened the slightest breeze will send clouds of golden pollen towards the minute scarlet shaving brushes that are the female flowers, which will eventually produce the cobnuts of autumn.

The berry crops of last season have lasted well, and there seem to be many flocks of the Scandinavian thrushes, the redwing and fieldfare, feeding on them along with their blackbird and song thrush cousins. Is it my fancy or does the mistle thrush, largest of the group, seem to be less common just now? Is it a long time since one appeared in my garden, and they are absent from the garden across the way, with the berry-bearing shrubs which have hitherto proved a magnet for this pugnacious bully of a bird.

The badgers still come for their nightly hand-outs to the garden of Dave and Jane. Depressingly I still come across their roadside corpses all too frequently as I drive around the district. Our local grey squirrels seem to have bounced back, after a shoot some two years ago had decimated their numbers. If you live in the lowlands, and especially if you spend much time in town the wild mammals you are most likely to see are grey squirrels, feral cats, perhaps rabbits, and if you are lucky the little muntjac deer. The one thing these have in common is that none of them are native to this country. All have been, deliberately or accidentally introduced by humans.

In a week or two masses of snowdrops will be appearing, to be closely followed by crocuses, and the delightful yellow celandines. If the temperature keeps above 10 degrees C for more than three or four days in a row, some of our hardier birds will be thinking about nesting. I have already observed song and display behaviour in woodpigeons, collared doves, and stock doves, and for several days the neighbourhood song thrush sang from the lime tree in my garden. The rooks, whose populations locally seem to be burgeoning, are making almost daily visits to their old nests, and very soon they will be

actively repairing them. New rookeries are spring up everywhere it seems, in places where I have never known them before, and several colonies long since deserted have been re-founded. So things are definitely on the up for this resourceful species. Its cousin the jackdaw also seems to be on the increase in the village, so there will no doubt be many complaints of blocked chimneys, as they seek to build their nests, in the coming breeding season.