

BRIAN'S NATURE DIARY FOR JUNE

Natural oakwoods are among the richest and most valuable of wildlife habitats. Among the uncommon species they support are birds like the lesser spotted woodpecker and the wood warbler; butterflies such as the brown hairstreak and purple emperor; mammals including several species of bats. In fact the oak tree supports something like five hundred species of small animals, more than any other species in our flora.

Ancient woodland is generally thought of as having existed for at least four hundred years, but many of them go back much further than this, being felled and allowed to regrow over and over again. Here in Northamptonshire, Salcey, Rockingham, Whittlewood, and Yardley Chase existed at the time of the Domesday Survey.

Wet-my-lips: according to country folk this is what the tiny quail is supposed to be calling as it shouts its tri-syllabic whistle over the cornfields in early summer. But nowadays its far-carrying cry is only rarely heard, as this migratory gamebird annually turns up in smaller numbers. Cleaner, weed-free crops and wetter late-spring weather mean less food for the quail, while many thousands of them are trapped or shot as they pass through the Mediterranean or near-east countries on their travels.

Every large sheet of water and many lesser ones are home to the coot, all black save for its white beak and a shield on its forehead, and of course its size 12 green legs. To make its nest it piles up water weeds, leaving a depression in the top for its eggs. It is generally well-hidden among water plants, but occasionally out in the open. Its large stone-coloured black speckled eggs are often predated by carrion crows.

One of our most attractive fishes is the perch, banded in green, rusty-red and deep bronze. It is still common in most rivers, lakes, ponds, and the canals. Although it can grow to a considerable size, most are only about six inches or so in length. Its armour of sharp spines on the back fins protects it, although small ones are often eaten by grebes or herons. The perch lays thousands of eggs in long strings, which are twined around water plants.

Song thrushes eat many snails, favourites being the banded ones of hedgerows and rank vegetation. The thrush smashes them open on a convenient anvil stone. Blackbirds are also fond of a nice juicy snail but they have not learned this trick. Instead they hide nearby until the thrush has dealt with the snail, then they nip in to steal it. Piles of smashed shells scattered around a large stone are a sure sign of a thrushes' anvil.

Our new CD 'Birds as Soloists' is now out. Details are in the prices section. If you would like to learn the songs and calls of some of our favourite birds, look no further.