

NATURE DIARY for March by Brian Webster

Watch the coots, moorhens, and mallards on the lakes in our town parks. Long since they have sorted themselves into pairs, sometimes trios with one female and two male hangers-on in the case of the mallard. Fierce fights and noisy chases take place as they parcel out the water between them.

A flash of luminous blue and a high-pitched needle-sharp call-note are often the only signs of the kingfisher's passing. Not common in the lowlands, look out for it along quiet unpolluted streams and backwaters.

Springtime, when nature quickens into urgent life after the winters' layoff, can seem bewildering in the sheer variety of wildlife to be seen. A basic need is for a good book on identification. Later we will have one for sale on our Special Offers page. In the meantime, if you would like to get close to wildlife, it is a good habit just to find a comfortable place to sit, quietly and still. After only a few minutes the birds and beasts will start to emerge to get on with the urgent business of living. I have had a badger walk by within feet of me, in broad daylight, while birds like the wren will come within a foot or so.

At Broadlands we have added a stunningly beautiful young vixen to the list of regular visitors to our gardens. She comes every evening, about 7pm to seek out her reward of nuts and other goodies, and stays for some time. She has stolen the heart of Jane. On one occasion she (the fox, not Jane) shared the garden with the badger, from the sett about 300 yards away, who has visited us for two or three years. We hope to have pictures of them to share with you before long.

One of the first butterflies to emerge in spring is the spectacular bright yellow brimstone, the original butter-coloured fly, so it is said, from which all butterflies are named. It has slept the winter away as an adult, exquisitely camouflaged, deep in the ivy on a wall or tree-trunk. Warmed by the early rays of spring sunshine it awakens, to fly rapidly along country lanes or woodland edges, in search of a mate. Then the females look for buckthorn shrubs on which to lay their eggs.

The tits and other hole-nesting birds generally choose a suitable site for their nest early. For some weeks now a pair of great tits have been looking closely at a nestbox in the garden, going in and out, and spending long periods just peering out from the entrance. Given an assortment of nestboxes scattered around your garden, you could attract, in addition to great tits, blue and coal tits, house sparrows, robins, starlings, and wrens, to name just a few.

This month the male yellowhammer, brightly-coloured gem of the hedgerows, begins his famous song, which country folk assure us sounds like 'a-little-bit-of-bread-and-no-cheese'.

Not until towards the end of next month do nest building and egg laying begin in earnest. Tragically the yellowhammer is one on the long list of countryside birds that are in steep decline.

As the rays of spring sunshine warm the earth, plants which have lain dormant through the winter begin to stir. The flush of growth soon becomes rampant. The race to reach the sky is on, the prize for the winners being the chance to flower and set seed; for the losers a slow withering and yellowing in the shade of taller competitors. Our message for the month is clear and simple. On no account pick wild flowers, indeed picking many of them is rightly against the law. Enjoy them where they grow, and leave them for others to enjoy.

Most of the species mentioned in my monthly diary are available in our picture library, while many of the birds may be heard on our audio tapes and CDs. Details through our Prices, Special Offers, and Contact Us pages