

BRIAN'S NATURE DIARY FOR MARCH

What a strange, frightening winter this has been so far. Apart from one spell when it felt bitterly cold, but it was in fact entirely normal, temperatures have been consistently a degree or so above average. Rainfall has been so high that the reservoirs nearby are full for the first time in two years. And the forecasters say this summer is likely to be the warmest on record. Which is all very worrying. Make no mistake, climate change is here.

But enough of doom and gloom. The Country Eye team have been given an allotment. Literally within the past few days, whenever there has been a let-up in the rain, a flurry of activity has seen us digging and cleaning the soil of weeds, playing catch-up in an attempt to have it ready for planting. Jane has been sporting a fetching pair of luminous green gardening gloves, and wielding a full-sized fork nearly as big as herself, as if she was born to the task. Jokingly I have suggested the gloves might be useful to scare of cabbage white butterflies later on (don't we wish!).

On our very first day we spotted a buzzard soaring on languidly flexed wings over our patch. Not many years ago this species was a rare visitor around here, but recently as part of a national expansion of its range across the lowlands, it has become a regular sighting in Northamptonshire. The latest news I have is that more than fifty pairs are now resident in the county. Rabbits are its first choice of prey, and they are certainly in superabundance around here. To watch this broad-winged broad-tailed raptor in its effortless flight is still a rare privilege to me.

Whenever a buzzard turns up we always look closely in the hope of glimpsing the deeply-forked tail of the much larger red kite. In truth there should be no way of confusing the two species. The red kite has long, narrow wings with a span of almost five feet. These with the extraordinary tail give it an elegance and power almost beyond belief. We are no more than about thirty miles from the centre of the successful Northamptonshire reintroduction, and each year its spread brings it gradually closer to us. I have seen it in woodlands no more than ten miles from our base. Hopefully in a very short time it will be back along the valley, breeding for the first time in nearly two centuries. What a day that will be.

Yesterday we looked up just in time to see a female sparrowhawk take off from its perch in a nearby hedgerow, and head down to the valley of the Brampton Nene. Its short, broad wings and long tail are typical of a predator that combines speed with extreme manoeuvrability. Death comes swiftly when these birds have captured their prey. Razor-sharp hooked talons into the brain ensure that this is so. Soon these and all the other birds will be actively nesting, indeed some species are already doing so, in no small measure due to the exceptionally mild winter.

Climate Change tip of the month. As soon as the weather picks up, if you do not already do so, why not hang your washing out to dry in the fresh air. Not only will it smell and feel fresher and brighter, but if all of us did it, experts say, there would be no need for nuclear power stations. Now there's a thought!

