

BRIAN'S NATURE DIARY for May 2007.

It looks like we are on track to fulfil the predictions of the weather pundits – that this year will turn out to be the hottest on record. Certainly the month just past has been not just the warmest, but also the driest April, and it has played havoc with nature. It looks as if the great, blue and coal tits will have yet another poor breeding season. What seems to be happening is that the birds have got out of kilter with the hatch of spring caterpillars in the trees, which they rely on to feed their young. So instead of a beakful of tasty green larvae, all the nestlings can look forward to are meagre rations of greenfly. The tits usually have large broods, ten to twelve being quite normal, and this means that many of them will starve to death in the nest. Quite regularly of late, whole broods are known to perish in this way.

My garden robins, on the other hand, had fledged a nestful of young well before the end of April. For two days beforehand the adults divided their time between feeding their burgeoning brood, and following the cat about, scolding it, and even at times dive-bombing it, much to the annoyance of said cat. The nest was in a disused garden shed next door, which had the door left slightly ajar, and the cat well knew where they were, despite their secretive comings and goings whilst the young were being fed. I feared the worst, but am relieved to say that the young flew successfully, save for one pathetic spotted-breasted corpse which turned up on my lawn – a gift from the cat, doubtless to persuade me how clever he is!

Where have all the cuckoos gone? I used to hear them from my garden until three or four years ago, when they appeared suddenly to become much scarcer. Likewise on the allotments at the other end of the village. Our neighbour ploholders tell me that they too have noticed their disappearance from what was ideal territory.

There continue to be many brimstone butterflies about, and the past week or so they have been joined by a few orange tip butterflies. I have also seen a single holly blue butterfly. This latter species has ups and downs in its population levels. In some years it is far from common, whilst in others it may become abundant around the holly and ivy, which are foodplants for its caterpillars.

As I write this a small party of starlings are jostling for food on the lawn. I purposely cut my lawn as little as possible, removing all the clippings, and this has the effect of making the soil poorer, favouring the growth of grassland wild flowers. To date I have recorded over thirty flower species, most of them common, but all of them welcome. There are also thriving colonies of two species of ant there, and I am sure it is these that prove so attractive to the birds.