

Natural History Notes

By Philip Radford

On a chill morning in early January I was glad to watch a colourful male Grey Wagtail as it walked or ran along the side of a hard-frozen Quantocks lane. Occasionally, it paused to pick up some minute food morsel; the bird was beautifully coloured with a black bib, blue-grey upper parts and a contrasting, bright yellow belly. One hoped that the wagtail found enough food for survival in those freezing conditions, but I did not see another Grey Wagtail for several weeks and bird mortality must have been considerable at that time. Pied Wagtails were coming into gardens for food scraps, but Grey Wagtails seem to disdain household hand-outs. Still, by mid-February bird song was beginning to return and cheer us, particularly that of Wood Pigeons; also prominent in local woods were the songs of Stock Doves. Compared with the musical cooing of Wood Pigeons, Stock Dove song is rather monotonous, being just a repetition of one note, run in series. Blackbirds also began to sing in February, although short, warming up snatches of sub-song were given before the development of complete musical phrases; in contrast, Song Thrushes uttered their strident cascades of notes at dawn and dusk, really enlivening the scene. Mistle Thrushes too, although scarce, sang well with clear, musical and repeated notes; on the ground, the Mistle Thrush is conspicuous with its large size and upright stance.



At night, Tawny Owls hooted even when temperatures were really low; one wondered how much mouse and vole prey was available last January. I know that Barn Owls, in particular, fare badly, and more so during snow cover. Anyway, most people seem to welcome bird song, and especially so when emerging from a harsh winter and, of course, this has long been a favourite topic for poets. In the 16th Century, Edmund Spenser evidently appreciated the joyful song of the Sky Lark: 'The merry Larke hir mattins sings aloft.'

Here, I think we must excuse Spenser, being a poet, for mistaking the bird's sex! Happily, several Sky Larks sang well in February over Somerset's moorlands, although few were heard over the lowlands. In village gardens, cock Chaffinches began to give their cheerful, rattling song phrases, so springtime was truly with us. This was confirmed when I saw a Robin, no doubt a hen, carrying dead leaves to a hedge-bank on 26 February, although that nest was not completed until 14 March, a remarkably long building time. Normally, a Robin can construct a nest in four or five days, usually working for two or three hours in the morning and then later in the day. Anyway, the Robin only laid three eggs (normally four or five) and started sitting on 28 March, with two young flying on Easter Day. What had occasioned so long a nesting period?

Some Common Frogs, unwisely it seems, began croaking and mating in January, but spawn was largely destroyed by freezing and many frogs died as well. Nevertheless, repeated mating attempts eventually led to an unexpected and quite healthy tadpole hatch. Common Toads bred as usual in March, but many were inhibited by overnight frost. In consequence, breeding was protracted but, in due course, I saw several strings of eggs at one deep pond. Several toads were killed and partly eaten; maybe Tawny owls or rats were responsible. Toads are often rejected, because of the poisonous nature of the warty skin.

April was warm and dry as summer migrant birds arrived and there was increasing bat activity. Interestingly, around dawn on May Day, I saw at least 15 small bats, probably Pipistrelles, wheeling at a surprising speed clockwise round a chimney at the end of a cottage; the bats deviated or darted from their route on occasions, I assumed to catch gnats or small moths. Gradually, the bats decreased in numbers as individuals landed to disappear under a roof tile, evidently through some tiny crack. After about ten minutes, all the bats had disappeared, doubtless to become snug in their daytime roosting site. Of course, Pipistrelles can be gregarious, with roosts of hundreds at times; even so, to watch the circling bats progressively decline in numbers was quite fascinating.

The warm late March and April induced an early crop of Speckled Wood butterflies over the Quantocks, presumably insects which had overwintered as chrysalids; perhaps it is not widely known that this is the only Somerset butterfly to spend the winter either as a pupa or a larva. Colourful Orange-tips, helpfully distinct for each sex, emerged early too, attracted especially by Cuckoo Flowers which are a main food plant. I saw my first Small Tortoiseshell for the year on 6 March, a cold day; I thought that it had been disturbed at its hibernation site, perhaps my garden shed. Brimstones are hibernators as well and I noted a scattering of the bright yellow males in mid-March, with at least a few of the pale green females; the second hatching should be flying in late summer. Another winter hibernator is the handsome Peacock; I saw several about in late March, together with Commas. Moreover, both Holly and Common Blues were on the wing in mid-April, which is early for the Commons. Over the Mendip moors several of the beautifully patterned Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries were in flight, as well as nectar feeding, wings spread, from various flowers. No Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, I understand, have been identified in Somerset recently; the two species look very similar, except that there is more white spotting on the underside of the hind wing of the commoner butterfly. Yet another well-coloured butterfly in flight over the Mendips in June was the Large Skipper,

orange-brown and showing a black band on the front wing, at least for the male.



Turning to dragonflies, I was fortunate to watch the fluttering display flight of a male Beautiful Demoiselle by a Quantocks hill stream in June. The male is an iridescent blue-green with dark wings, while the female has paler wings and a brownish to dark green abdomen; being



iridescent, the colouring of both sexes depends so much on light incidence. Also strikingly iridescent are Downy Emeralds, always a scarce species in Somerset. However, I was pleased to watch a few individuals flying in June on the Mendips; flight was rapid, low, and close to the pond edge. Downy Emeralds do not settle to rest often but, with binoculars, the large green eyes and dark green-brown

body can be admired as the insect hovers, which happens fairly frequently.



Following the winter sub-zero temperatures, I was hoping for compensation with an abundant flowering of spring plants and I was not disappointed. In March, clumps of Wood Anemones were attractive locally; the white flowers are often tinted pink, while the thin, delicate leaves are a notable feature. Again in March, Marsh Marigolds flowered in marshy places; often the plants with their large yellow cup flowers were quite spectacular. The unusually warm April caused many plants to flower early, with Bluebells an obvious example; Somerset Bluebell woods have never looked better. Somehow the graceful curve of the



Bluebell stem, with flowers on one side, is so preferable to the garden or Spanish form. Summer-like April temperatures meant that Hawthorn flowered early, with plenty of blossom out well before May. The dry conditions didn't favour the common Navelwort with its fleshy round leaves; even so, Pennywort (a better name, I suggest) is always a feature of Somerset walls and cliffs. When

overdry, Pennywort leaves turn to an unattractive yellow-green.

Birds started to nest early this year, at least the residents. One feature of our woods was the large number of Blackcaps in song, although I am doubtful if they could all attract mates. In some woods, undergrowth was overgrazed and trodden by large numbers of Roe and Red Deer, all contributing to poor breeding chances for warblers



such as Blackcaps. Garden Warblers, with their mellow contralto-toned runs of song, were less common than Blackcaps locally; as the birds often nest low in dense brambles and nettles, it is likely that they were affected as well by too many deer. Happily, Linnets appeared to be in reasonable numbers over the moors but I did not see many in lowland parts. Moorland Linnet nests are typically sited



in gorse bushes; the nest is very neat, with a lining of hairs and sheep wool. The eggs, usually four or five, have a pale blue ground and are speckled in red-brown.

Sadly, many woodland birds, especially long-distance migrants, have declined in numbers in Somerset. But there

is one bird which has returned to the wetlands after a long absence. This is the mysterious Great Bittern, one of the heron family; it is smaller than the Grey Heron and camouflaged in browns and blacks which, quite remarkably, resemble a bunch of reeds. In its protective posture, with its dagger bill pointing upwards, the bird is almost invisible. The bird is certainly a reed-bed specialist, and a favoured food item is eel, although it will readily take frogs, small birds, voles or beetles. In the breeding season it is largely nocturnal, at least the male. In May, I was intrigued to listen to a Bittern booming from a Levels reed-bed although rather distant; however, later in the month what was probably the same bird moved its booming pitch, and I found I could listen almost close-by.

I thought that the Bittern had successfully attracted a mate early on in the season and, when she was sitting on eggs, he had hopes of luring in a second wife. Given still conditions, the sound is remarkable; repeated inspiratory sounds are heard, while the booms which follow are all produced on exhalation, with the bird quite hidden by reeds. Perhaps unsurprisingly, old country names for the Bittern include 'bog-bull', 'mire-drum' and 'night-raven'. The Bittern's boom is the most far-carrying of all bird vocalisations; apparently, in the breeding season, the male's upper oesophagus becomes modified to form a resonating chamber. The booms are highly vibratory; I think the old term of 'thunder-pumping' is an excellent description. While I have never met anyone who has eaten Bittern meat, I understand that at the time of Edward II the species was so esteemed for food that the taking of its eggs was prohibited while, in Victorian bird books, I have read that shot Bitterns, especially young ones, fetched a high price on the market. No doubt, Bitterns were becoming very scarce in the 19th Century in England; let us hope that the present small increase in numbers will be maintained. Somerset could not boast a more fascinating breeding bird than the Bittern.

Captions

1 Tawny Owl, *Strix aluco*, Young

- 2 Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, *Bolaria selene*, June
- 3 Large Skipper, *Ochlodes veneta*, June
- 4 Beautiful Demoiselle, *Calopteryx virgo*, Female, June
- 5 Wood Anemone, *Anemone nemorosa*, April
- 6 Marsh Marigold, *Caltha palustris*, April
- 7 Bluebell, *Scilla non-scripta*
- 8 Hawthorn, May Blossom *Crataegus monogyna*

- 9 Blackcap, *Sylvia atricapilla*, Nest and eggs, June
- 10 Garden Warbler, *Sylvia borin*, June
- 11 Garden Warbler, *Sylvia borin*, 5-day nestlings, June
- 12 Linnet, *Carduelis cannabina*, May