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Wildlife 2013

October 2013

Words and Photos By Steve Thomas

I've been feeling guilty at having missed out a summer update this year. My best wildlife experience of the summer was undoubtedly a visit to the northernmost tip of the UK, the island of Unst, in Shetland, which is home to magnificent seabird colonies and a host of other wildlife like otters and even, this year, a rare visiting bearded seal. Great stuff but not very relevant to an update on the wildlife in and around Mentmore! So if I have any regular readers I apologise for the break in service. Summer is definitely over and what I'd really like to talk about this time is a current visitor, the dreaded "glis glis" – those who know what that means will already understand the menace these gentle creatures offer; others feel free to skip to the end if you're intrigued!

First I will take a quick look back. Summer wasn't entirely spent up north and I do have a few images which may be worth a quick look. Away from the usual

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shots of birds and mammals I've picked out a few taken around our garden pond. This has been in place for a few years now, and seems to be maturing nicely. As well as attracting the usual insects and birds, this year it's also been home to a good number pond snails and young newts. The snails can be quite obliging, especially as they need to surface for air, so pictures are relatively easy to come by, with a little patience. The newts are another story. Clearly nervous, they keep mostly out of sight, and when they do appear their brown skin against a dark background, and amid shadows of pond vegetation, make them very difficult to track. So while I offer no apology for the moderate quality of the newt picture, I hope the others – pond snail, pond skater, hoverfly and crane-fly – will give a feel for the variety of life that can be attracted simply by digging a hole and filling it with water. All the pictures were shot within feet of our pond, often while sitting in the sunshine and sipping a cup of tea. Who said wildlife photography has to be arduous?

Now, back to those "glis glis". Better known, perhaps, as the edible dormouse (the Romans used to eat it), this little beast was introduced from Europe by Walter Rothschild when they escaped from his private collection in Tring in 1902. This collection has since become the outpost of Natural History Museum, at Akeman Street in Tring. If you haven't visited it, it's high time you did!

So why did I earlier use the word "menace"? Dormice are cute, right? They sleep in teapots in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Yes, but... these are not the native "hazel dormouse" (otherwise known as the "common dormouse"), which lives mostly in woodlands and spends long periods of time asleep. These beasts like to get into houses where they have a distinct penchant for chewing water pipe insulation and electrical cables, the latter habit making them a distinct fire hazard. So, sadly, they are a distinct domestic pest.

We have been hearing the scurrying of rodent footsteps in the ceiling spaces of our house for many years. We even occasionally spot the odd mouse or shrew darting across the floor – it's an occupational hazard of living in an old house on the edge of woodland. But recently there seemed to be a larger, heavier, more urgent edge to the noises off. We suspected rats – which I love to photograph but don't really want inside my house, thank you very much. So we set some traps and waited to see what would happen.

Here's where it gets complicated. The edible dormouse is a non-native, accidentally-introduced species. Its range is apparently limited to within a few tens of miles of its original release point in Tring. One might reasonably assume that as a foreign invader it would not be welcome. Nevertheless, it has the distinction of being a protected species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. That means that one is not allowed knowingly to set traps for it without having an appropriate licence. You guessed it, when we inspected the rat trap a couple of weeks ago, there was the unmistakeable corpse of a glis glis. It looks a little like an under-sized grey squirrel, with a sharper pink nose which puts me in mind of the illustration of a 'squonk' from the 1970's Genesis album A Trick of the Tail. None of the detour into my musical youth disguises the fact that now we knew we had glis glis on the plot, we were no longer legally allowed to set traps. So after a little research with AVDC we found our way to a local firm, SDK Environmental, who are duly licensed to deal with them. It has meant setting traps which capture, not kill, the dormice (they do seem to like apple which is the usual bait), and paying a fee for their collection and humane disposal. We have trapped about 5 so far, including one resilient adult which moved the cage trap in the loft a good 18 inches while stuck inside it, and after being placed in a bigger secure container while waiting for the licensed operative to call, also managed to escape the trap altogether. Despite its feistiness I'm afraid it did not escape its doom.

At the time of writing we know of several villagers who are playing host to these unwanted guests; if you suspect you have them, be aware that you may only do anything about it under an appropriate licence, which you yourself will almost certainly not hold. You need to call in professional help. And don't be fooled if everything goes quiet in the next few weeks as the dormice hibernate from late October, so could still be comfortably resident even after all noises have apparently ceased.

So what do we learn from all this? It's great to love wildlife unless and until it encroaches on one's own home? Or, more subtly, that some is tolerated, maybe even welcome, while some is not? Who wouldn't get a momentary thrill from a robin hopping through an open door? But something which makes inconvenient noises in the loft at night-time can't be tolerated? For me the real lesson isn't about wildlife at all, it's about people. How inconsistent we are. Yes, me too. I guess recognising that is at least a start.



Pond Skater



Hoverfly



Crane Fly



Newt



Hover Fly



Glis Glis

May 2013

Words and Photos By Steve Thomas

It seems incredible that my last report, with a firm “winter” theme, was only two months ago. While you’d think it was a bit late to talk about winter in March

(and I was late, no two ways about it), this year we were still in the grip of sub-zero temperatures at the time and spring seemed a long way distant. Since then we've had a rapid turn-around, with temperatures in April even topping 20° c on occasions. So here we are in mid-May, the season of candles on the horse-chestnuts and apple blossom (both visible from where I'm typing this, at least if I crane my neck a little).

Spring is of course the season for optimism with all new growth and everything fresh. Something else has made me optimistic this year. Last time I dwelt on the non-too-palatable subject of wildlife death in winter, and commented that: "the only blackcap I have ever seen in Mentmore was dead by the side of the road". I'm very pleased to say that that is no longer true. At the bottom of my garden is a pond, created by my wife a couple of years ago, and while it is not so wide as a church door nor so deep as a well, it has certainly been attracting wildlife. Perhaps most spectacularly (if you regard that kind of thing as a spectacle) a pair of mallards has been mating on it. It has also been home to frogspawn, dragon-fly nymphs, more pond-skaters than I could shake a stick at, and all sorts of smaller birds coming in for a drink or a bath. From time to time I set up a portable hide close to the pond and sit there to see what will turn up.



Mallard Pair

A couple of weeks ago I saw a small bird flitting in and out of the laurel bush behind the pond and coming in to drink, balancing over the water on the stems of a water plant. It had a very distinctive brown top to the head, with colouring otherwise reminding me of that dead blackcap. And so it proved; this was a female of the species and my very first sight of a live blackcap – not only in Mentmore but at all. No, it's not that rare a species but I am no bird expert!



Female Blackcap

Having seen her once, it wasn't long before the male of the pair also turned up in front of my lens, but it seemed appropriate that the best shot of either of them I got turned out to be of the female. How much more pleasure there is to be had out of sitting watching the live bird than over inspecting a damaged corpse.



Wood Pigeon

What else has turned up so far this spring? We have our fair share of jackdaws and wood pigeons – the former, it turns out, thriving better in the nest boxes my good lady has been monitoring locally for the [Buckinghamshire Owl & Raptor Group](#) than the species for which the boxes were intended. Having questioned

whether mallard mating is a spectator sport, I confess I have also been a voyeur in the case of a pair of wood pigeons engaged in the same activity in my back garden. A pair of collared doves has also been a regular visitor – they appear to be nesting above a floodlight next door! – as have great spotted woodpeckers along with robins, dunnocks and the usual varieties of tits and finches. We won't talk about the robin I saw being predated by a jackdaw without, sadly, being able to photograph it. Perhaps not a shot for wide circulation anyway.



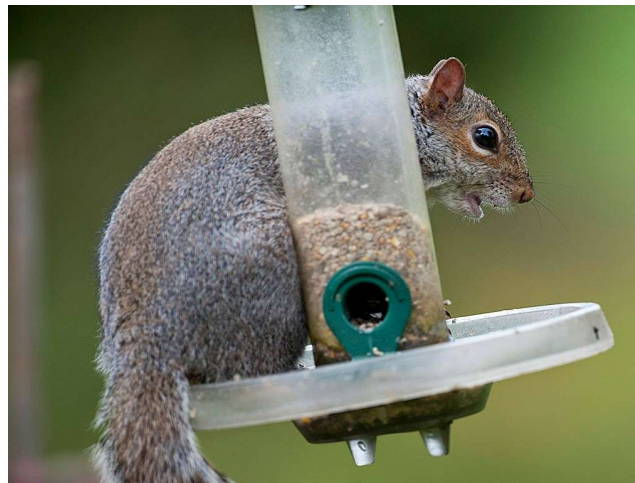
Jackdaw

One other species has not thrived as well as we might have hoped, however. A family of bank voles has been regular visitors to a peanut feeder in our back garden – see last autumn's report for a picture – but this year they seem to have been ousted by a fiercer competitor, with a disturbingly large brown rat showing up from time to time. While my personal reaction to rats is to photograph them, others are perhaps more sensible to the health problems they pose and so the feeder has been removed in an effort to cease providing succour for a species with – perhaps rightly – more of a PR problem than its smaller cousins.



Collared Dove

Their larger “counterparts” – referred to by some as “tree rats” – have also been in evidence. I’m referring of course to the grey squirrel. Having seen and attempted to photograph some very adventurous red squirrels in Scotland in February, leaping across a mini assault course set up for the purpose ([here](#) is where to find out how you could do the same, though access is limited so you may need to plan well in advance!) it’s tempting to emulate that with the greys, which while not a native species and consequently without quite the same “aah” factor certainly have every bit as much intelligence and ability to cope with gymnasia en route to food. Whether we have the time to set up something appropriate remains to be seen.



Grey Squirrel

So, predated robins apart, all a bit more optimistic and fulfilling than the gloomy tale I shared last time around. I hope this helps to put a bit of "spring" in your step as you lift your eyes to the skies!

March 2013

Words and Photos By Steve Thomas

Winter is a tough time for wildlife. Food is scarce, the cold weather demands higher energy just to stay warm, days are shorter and parts of the food chain are not growing, hibernating, or maybe have migrated for the duration. As if that's not enough, they have us to contend with as well. The short days compel homo sapiens, who recognises the clock but not the sun as their measure of time, to get more active during hours of darkness. While that gives drivers commuting to and from work the chance to see some animals out and about on and around the roads and verges which in summer-time daylight we wouldn't normally see, like foxes or badgers, it also means they are themselves more subject to the hazards of traffic. Who hasn't seen the corpse of some poor unfortunate animal lying in the road, perhaps most tragically in some ways being run over again and again by drivers too busy – or, to be fair, too intent on their and others' own safety to stop and move the body out of the way. Pheasants are a common victim locally; smaller birds an occasional addition. The only blackcap I have ever seen in Mentmore was dead by the side of the road, almost certainly hit by a car.

This winter has been no different. Although it feels like we must be close to spring – some daffodils are already in bloom, even if those on Mentmore village green itself haven't quite made it yet – as I write (the second week of March) it is actually snowing and the week ahead has a "beast from the East" wintry forecast. In the last couple of weeks I have had the grim sight locally of three very dead animals – two foxes and one female, and doubly tragically, apparently pregnant muntjac deer. On my route to work in the last few weeks I have also seen more than one dead badger and narrowly avoided myself adding to the toll only this week when a brown hare – one of my personal favourites locally – ran across the still-dark road directly in front of me.



Dead Female Muntjac

All the species I've mentioned come with some emotional and cultural baggage in the human world. Foxes divide opinion like few other species. We've heard the news stories of urban foxes apparently attacking children – see [this story on the BBC News site](#) for the most recent. To some they are aggressive vermin; to others their behaviour is a natural consequence of human behaviour in encouraging scavenging by liberal distribution of half-eaten food over our urban living spaces – a view [this Daily Telegraph article](#) espouses. Rural foxes, which can seem almost like a different species in terms of their behaviour, being much more wary of man, are seen by some as a threat to livestock which should be hunted down and destroyed, and by others as a wonderful wildlife spectacle whose presence as top predator is at least a partial indication of a healthy ecosystem. The emotionally-charged debates over the laws around hunting with dogs owe some of their force to these opposing views. Without trying to take sides in this I will report simply that we have recently come across two dead foxes, within yards of one another, close to a public footpath within the parish. There were no visible signs of trauma on them and we concluded that they were very probably poisoned, and probably (given their co-location) dumped at the site where we found them. Whether they were deliberately killed is uncertain; it's entirely possible they ate bait intended to kill rats – a species without perhaps the PR position of the fox. Let's stick to facts again. Hunting with dogs (whether of foxes or hares or indeed anything else) is currently illegal in the UK. Killing foxes is not, provided a legal method is used. [This web site](#) summarises the position neatly as follows, "*In the UK, the Wild Mammals (Protection) Act (1996) prohibits the use of poison to kill foxes and, while the act of gassing*

mammals is technically legal, there are no legal gasses that can be used on foxes. Under Section 11 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981), it is illegal to use all but free-running snares to trap foxes and there are strict guidelines as to where and how these snares should be set and how frequently they must be checked." So if the two we found had indeed been poisoned, that would be illegal. And if you're still interested at this point – yes, we did report it to the police.



Fox

If you want to read more around the debates which surround foxes, [this site](#) provides a great place to start.

The muntjac deer is another species which, while less well-known than the fox, exemplifies another hotly-debated wildlife argument, that of "exotic species" i.e. non-native to the UK and artificially introduced. In the UK they are reported by the [British Deer Society](#) as limited mostly to south and central England and Wales, having escaped (or been deliberately released) from Woburn in the early 20th century. What may surprise you more (though not if you are a regular reader of this update as I have mentioned it before!) is the number of species we commonly see locally which have also been introduced over the centuries – rabbits, brown hares, pheasants, red-legged partridge and Chinese water deer, to name but a few. And, finishing where I began, I have seen individuals of all those species dead on the roadside as victims of the internal combustion engine. Welcome to the UK.

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