



Mentmore Parish Council

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Wildlife 2014

Autumn 2014

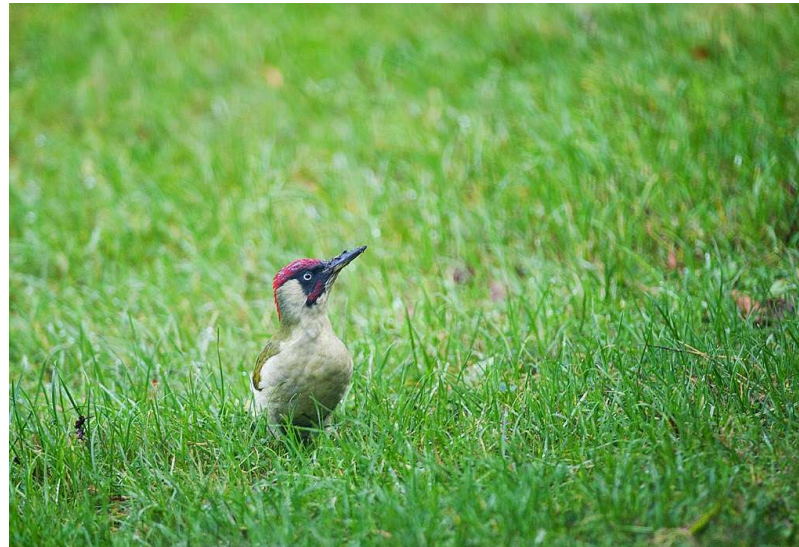
Words and Photos By Steve Thomas

Firstly I should apologise for the length of time it's taken me to write this latest update. Autumn was arguably still with us as I began to write this – at the end of November there were still leaves on some trees – but I can't really use that as an excuse. The truth is that I just haven't found the time to do much photography in the last few months, and haven't felt I had enough to write about. So please forgive me if the theme is a bit more landscape and local view than wildlife, this time!

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Sunset over Mentmore Village Green by Steve Thomas

Perhaps the best local wildlife image I can offer is a grab shot of a green woodpecker in my garden, taken through glass from within the house.



Green Woodpecker by Steve Thomas

We commonly see great spotted woodpeckers on bird feeders, but a glimpse of the green variety is a rarer treat. While we all associate woodpeckers with what the name suggests, commonly hearing the drumming noise they make while

they're at it, green woodpeckers don't get much of their food that way and excavate holes in wood primarily only for nesting purposes. Their favourite food is ants, so the best chance of seeing one is to leave all those ants' nests alone and just stay out of the way!

With the first frosts of winter now behind us, if you're not already doing it, it's a good time to think about putting out winter food for the resident birds. We typically use stocks from [CJ Wildlife](#), but there are plenty of alternative sources including of course local garden centres such as [Wyevale](#) (at Bulbourne, near the canal) and local pet shops.

Having said that, it occurs to me that this is related to the reason behind my opening sentiment on not having taken many pictures in the last few months. We have perhaps been too profligate in putting out food and have succeeded in attracting some perhaps less desirable wildlife – brown rats.



Brown Rat by Steve Thomas

While my first reaction on seeing a rat in the garden was to want to photograph it (the image here is from a few years ago when we had a similar problem), perhaps wiser counsels have prevailed more recently and we have cut down on the food – so also cut down, sadly, on the number of feathered visitors. My counsel is still to feed birds, but not to scatter food so generously that it becomes easily accessible to things you may prefer not to attract. I know one of our neighbours across the village has a similar problem with rats and is setting what I think of as a political model as the answer – a bird table mounted on top of a well-greased pole. I love the idea of thwarting ambition with a real “greasy

pole"! Personally, I do find brown rats photogenic, but I have to recognise that neighbours, especially neighbours with small children, would not thank me for encouraging them into the outdoor "studio"...



Watch your speed by Steve Thomas

I hope you enjoy the landscape shots – some marginally autumnal, others definitely with a wintry feel; they were all taken in and around the village in late November. I think my challenge this coming winter is to get some more wildlife images for my next update. Watch this space...!



Damp Cyclists by Steve Thomas

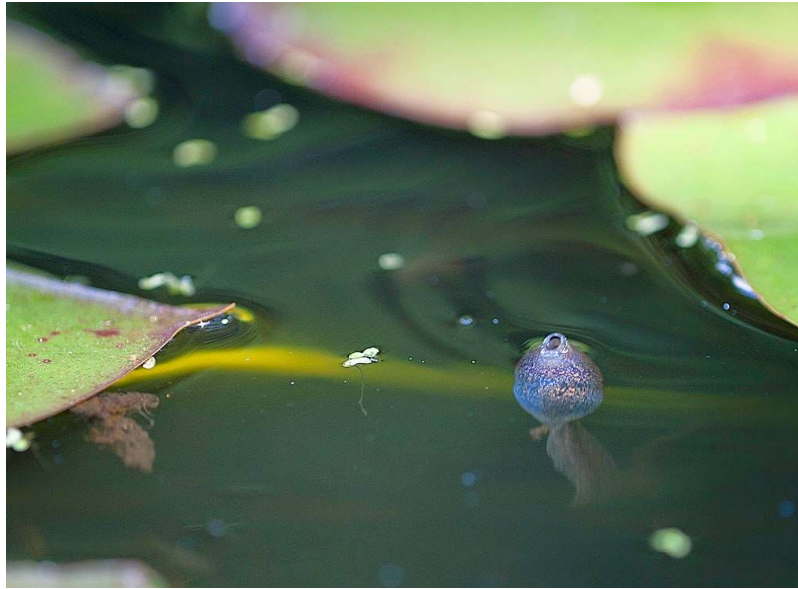


Autumn Colours at the back of the golf course by Steve Thomas

Summer 2014

Words and Photos By Steve Thomas

I thought I would write about two themes this time – pond-life and birds. No, I'm not talking about TOWIE but about the real deal. We have had a garden pond ever since my good lady persuaded me of the benefits by the simple expedient of digging it herself, while I was away on business. I found that a pretty cogent argument. Of course, as in all things, she was right all along. It took a couple of years to get established, but this year it seems to have reached a level of maturity. I wrote in my Spring update (reproduced only in the Newsletter, q.v.) about the arrival of spawning frogs, and since then the pond has been alive with developing tadpoles. This last weekend I watched many of them, now complete with tiny rear legs, rising to and gulping briefly at the pond surface. I infer that they are part-way to becoming air-breathing, as the adult frogs are, and this is their first step. Given their size, the speed at which they move and the very short time they spend at the surface, the moment of emergence was particularly difficult to capture. The image you see here is the best of a poor bunch!

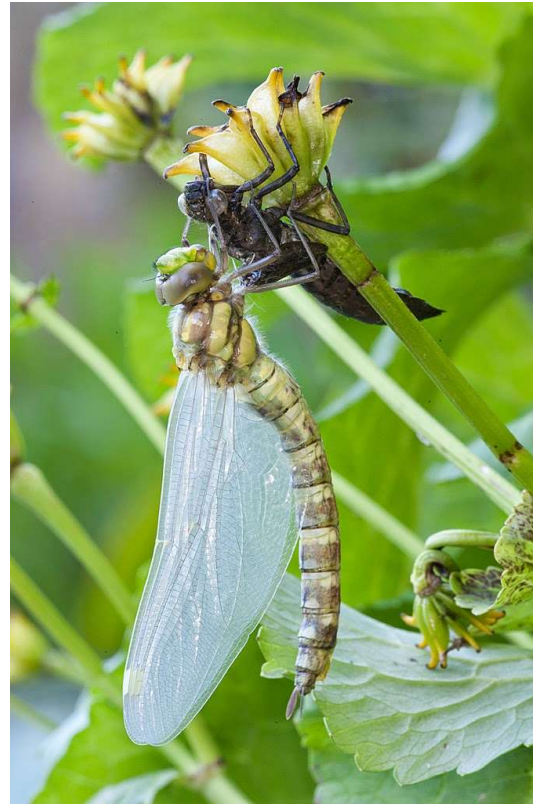


Tadpole coming up for air.

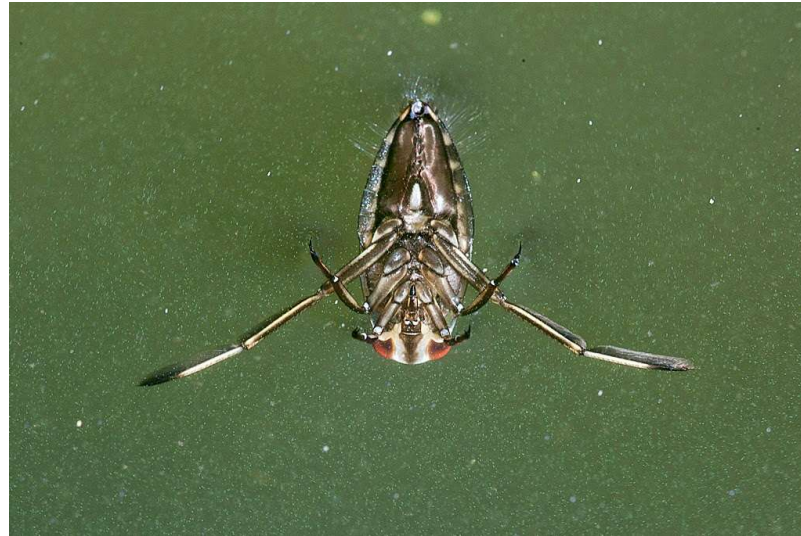
Not only are there scores – probably hundreds – of tadpoles enjoying the amenity, but also a wide variety of species from the incredibly small (I’ve seen white mites the size of a pin-head) through the commonplace (pond skaters, water boatmen) to the spectacular (bright red damselflies which transfixed me on a recent Saturday afternoon). We’ve also seen common newts, water snails, and a variety of wriggly creepy-crawlies which have so far defied my limited identification and photographic skills. I offer a few images which illustrate the variety. Perhaps my favourites so far are the damselflies, which I believe are *Pyrhosoma nymphula* or, more prosaically, the Large Red Damselfly. See, for example, <http://www.british-dragonflies.org.uk/species/large-red-damselfly>, for more details. For what is apparently a relatively common species it has a most striking appearance, especially against green late spring foliage.



Large Red Damselflies



Southern Hawker



Water Boatman



Pond Skaters Mating

More recently we have been blessed to see the emergence from their larval form of a number of dragonflies and, indeed, spent the greater part of a

weekend watching and waiting. I say we've seen the emergence; actually so far we've seen the larvae in the water and we've seen the dragonflies just after emergence while drying out in the sun; frustratingly we've missed the actual moment of coming out of the larval case. They are an amazing sight, and very approachable while in the vulnerable state of inflating their wings and drying out. I was particularly struck by how the colours darken and deepen over a period of a few hours after leaving the larval case. One poor creature remained with one of its four wings only partially-formed and I fear it will not survive for long. My inexpert eye makes them female Southern hawkers, *Aeshna cyanea*, and again this site <http://www.british-dragonflies.org.uk/species/southern-hawker> will provide more information.

So to birds. In spring I wrote about feeding robins; now we have youngsters being fed by their parents. I haven't had as much time as I might have liked to photograph them, and I wasn't around on the occasion my good lady swears she had a fledgling robin eating out of her hand. Nevertheless I offer a portrait of a young robin taken just outside the house which shows how different they look from the familiar red-breasted parent.



Juvenile Robin

This year seems to have been dominated locally though by two bird species – jackdaws and wood pigeons. We'll draw a veil over the wood pigeons, which have been busy scrumping the pea and broad bean seedlings from my vegetable patch, and pass on to jackdaws. I have always found these birds very photogenic – those pale blue eyes are so striking – but a few weeks ago I snapped a pair perching on our TV aerial with one of them landing in a pose looking almost sinister.



Jackdaw

Finally, I was very pleased a few weeks ago to get some respectable shots of a species we have seen many times but rarely before managed to get close to. I am talking about the yellowhammer – now listed by the RSPB as a “Red List” species meaning it is severely declining in the UK. These are very striking birds and we have often seen them in the hedgerows along the Ledburn – Mentmore Crossroads road while out for an early morning run. More recently we have seen a reliable number coming down to feed on discarded seed near a local public footpath, and so I set out to ambush them one afternoon by skulking under a camouflaged cover with my long lens, and the result is what you see here.



Yellowhammer

I'm now looking forward to what the rest of the summer has to offer!

March 2014

Words and Photos By Steve Thomas

It's a great relief that we can all finally agree spring has arrived, after a miserable wet winter I think many folks would like to forget. It certainly didn't inspire me much to get out with the camera, and the only pictures worth showing are some simple shots from December and January of birds in my garden, mostly taken when testing a second-hand lens I had just acquired. Not exactly the right motivation! Anyway, here for your viewing pleasure is the poor record of a poor winter – featuring dunnock (or hedge-sparrow), wood pigeon, jackdaw and great-spotted woodpecker. None is going to win a prize for quality or for rarity!



Dunnock



Great Spotted Woodpecker



Wood Pigeon

Equally common as a species, but one of which we never seem to tire, is the robin. I've written about robins before, noting how tempting it is to anthropomorphise their behaviour. There's little doubt they owe their continuing success to their ability to exploit whatever niche they find, up to and including human hand-outs. We feed birds throughout the winter, and as an occasional 'treat' that includes mealworms, which seldom fail to attract our local robins. So we set out this year to see whether we could persuade one of the more regular feeders to take mealworms directly from the hand – and of course to photograph the event. After several frustrating attempts I got a few nice shots of the robin but nothing really as I'd hoped, a clear shot on the hand. The shot you see here was as close as I came, somewhat blurred due to the bird's very fast movement – no question of sitting there posing nicely, it was a quick in-and-out dash to get the food, thank you very much. The shot was in shade, and even at full aperture and pushing the camera's ISO speed as high as I dared I

could only manage a shutter speed of 1/250th of a second – clearly not enough to freeze the action. Attempts on brighter days got nothing like this picture, so it will have to do for the moment!



Robin

I wrote last autumn about the edible dormice (glis glis) which had invaded the loft. As expected they vanished from our ken over the winter – they hibernate so even if there were any still left in residence we didn't expect to hear or see anything. Time will tell whether they are still around this year – I rather expect they will be.

So, that was the winter. Now, what about the spring? There's always something uplifting about seeing new life emerge, from the snowdrops (did you see the amazing display in the churchyard last month?) through the daffodils – much in evidence on the village green as I type – to spring lambs (also in residence on the Crafton side of the village) and young wildlife. We have been privileged this month to watch about half a dozen frogs spawning in the pond in our garden, and I spent most of a happy weekend lying around the pond snapping them. This is wildlife photography at its most civilised as one can sip tea and nibble a biscuit while waiting for that "something interesting" to happen. In the event the frogs themselves stayed only for a few days, laying and apparently

'guarding' the spawn, and we are now watching the development of the tadpoles with interest.



Frogs