



## Mentmore Parish Council

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### Wildlife 2015

#### [Mentmore Update, June 2015 by Steve Thomas](#)

I'm writing this on the longest day of the year after a Spring which seems to have been richer in wildlife encounters than I can remember for some time. Quite why it should feel that way, I'm not sure. Is there actually more going on out there this year, or have I just been spending more time looking? The latter is certainly a factor as, from my small involvement with the Bucks Owl & Raptor Group (see <http://www.giveahoot.org.uk/>) I am well aware that **barn owls** are experiencing a poor year this year, with the vole population (their main prey) being low in abundance – yet I have managed to photograph barn owls locally, in the wild, for the first time. The excitement that has engendered has been tempered today by learning that one barn owl, quite likely one I have photographed, was seen dead by the road south of the village over a month ago.

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Barn Owl by Steve Thomas

There's no doubt that some species excite us more than others. Having seen a **barn owl** from my car, on the way to work at around dawn, one week in March, it wasn't too difficult to get out of bed at dawn that weekend and stake out the same place. I was very lucky to be rewarded with the sight of a pair of owls hunting over a strip of grass close to the road, and luckier still to get some pictures. At one point, while doing my best to look inconspicuous while lurking under a tree, one of the pair flew past me no more than 10-12 feet away from my head. As it came from behind me, with no warning (have you ever heard a barn owl in flight? No, neither have I!) there was no chance of getting a picture, but it was one of those occasions when the physical experience of being there trumped any pictures I might have taken anyway.

I had a similar feeling a few years ago when I went out late one summer evening to reconnoitre the local brown hare population and, having no camera with me, got to within about 15m of a hare and watched it munching away happily on the crop for about a quarter of an hour. Had I had the camera with me I'm quite sure the sound of the shutter at that range would have spooked it anyway. As it



was, the memory of that evening will stay with me and spur me on to keep trying when I see yet another hare running away from me at high speed!

Happily I've been able to see more **hares** this year than I have for some time. Not only have they returned to my side of the village this year (they do seem to like the broad beans, planted as a rotational crop, much more than wheat or oilseed rape) but also I have recently found a couple of other locations which are proving reliable for sightings. **Brown hare** is one of my personal favourite species and I keep dreaming of the day when I manage a picture to compare with Manfred Danegger's amazing backlit shot of boxing hares which won him the Wildlife Photographer of the Year award in 1998 (<http://www.nhmshop.co.uk/prints/view-all-prints/boxing-hares-wall-print.html>).



Brown Hare by Steve Thomas

I spent a short time last month staying on an arable farm in Kent, and it made an interesting contrast to see how their local wildlife population compared with what we see here. The big contrast was the

huge number of **rabbits**. It was commonplace to see more than 20 in a single wheat field, and one of our number on one occasion counted over 60. We used to see a reasonable number of rabbits around Mentmore (I recall them in the front garden many years ago) but recently we've seen only relatively small numbers. One former local stronghold seems to have been over-run with **brown rats**, attracted by a grain dump, and I'm guessing they have done for a good number of baby rabbits in recent years.



European Rabbit by Steve Thomas

Another beast the local population of which fluctuates seemingly unpredictably is the **hedgehog**. I know they are around the village at the moment as I've seen others' snaps (taken after dark) and there's been evidence of them in my own garden (in this case "evidence" means "poo", by the way!), but I haven't managed any pictures yet. The only snap I can offer is a "cheat", taken at St. Tiggywinkle's Wildlife Hospital (<http://www.sttiggywinkles.org.uk/>) – close examination will show you that this poor beast was blind in at least the eye nearer the camera.





Hedgehog by Steve Thomas

One other mammal we've seen in the garden this Spring – pretty much for the first time, though they are common enough in the woods close to the house – is a **muntjac deer**. I was in two minds as to whether this visitor was welcome given the way it tucked into the cowslips and at one point got into my strawberry patch. But tolerance resulted in the picture you see here, which was taken from inside the house!



Reeves's Muntjac Deer by Steve Thomas

Finally I'll round this report off with a shot of the other 'exotic' deer species which is relatively common locally, the **Chinese Water Deer**. I was lucky to get very close to this one while hidden by long grass. I've written about these two deer species before – both escaped from captivity and have become residents locally. The male water deer "tusks" (actually long canine teeth) are always a surprise when seen this clearly!





Chinese Water Deer by Steve Thomas

### **Peter Brazier's 2014 wildlife review**

Living at the other end of the village from Steve, I back onto open farm land and benefit from a large garden and paddock. This brings in a slightly different set of birds and animals than they get from the wooded area around the church. In previous years I have set aside a portion of the paddock for wild flowers. I didn't do it last year but I will do so this year as the display is not only fantastic to look at, it provides flowers for the table and is a vitally important habitat for insects and small mammals. The

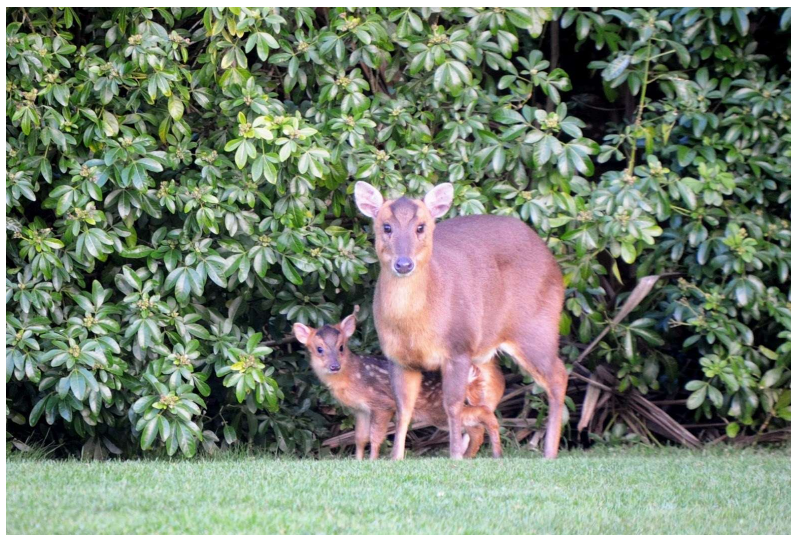


soil there is really too good for wild flowers so it does take some work to keep the dock and other dominant weeds away. This is how it looked at it's peak in 2012.



Wildflowers

The highlights of the year included our regular visiting Muntjac giving birth at the bottom of the garden. She often hides in the (rather unkempt) shrubs and comes and feeds on the lawn in the early evenings. I was lucky enough to get this shot of her with her fawn.



Muntjac



We also had Brown Hares using the garden as a nursery. They leave their young, called leverets, hidden during the day and we come across them in all sorts of places; after dark the mother brings them out and feeds them. These two were on our driveway late one night waiting for their feed.



Brown Hare Leverts on the drive

The parents are happy to soak up the sun during the day.



Brown Hare

Less common is the hedgehog, a night visitor. You can always hear them first and when they are hungry they make a sound much larger than their size. This chap was not worried by my presence or even by the flash going off!



Hedgehog

So onto birds; Spring brought many new arrivals in that department too. We had a Wren build a nest under the outlet pipe of our oil tank. She took advantage of the fact I was too lazy to clear the leaves and in this picture you can just make out a little mossy cup with a small brown egg in there. This area became a no-go zone for several weeks (fortunately we didn't need oil!) and I think there were at least 3 young which fledged.





Wren nest

We also had a pair of Mistle Thrush in the garden daily and I believe they nested in the ivy on one of the Horse Chestnuts out front. We were able to witness the young being fed on the lawn.



Mistlethrush

We also saw a pair of Green Woodpecker raise their brood; I was able to get a picture of this juvenile waiting to be fed on the lawn.



juvenile Green Woodpecker

One evening, I got a call from next door to say they had seen a Little Owl sitting on my retaining wall. This was a first for the garden list and sure enough we had a pair roosting in the fir tree. They are still around and can be seen hunting in the garden.



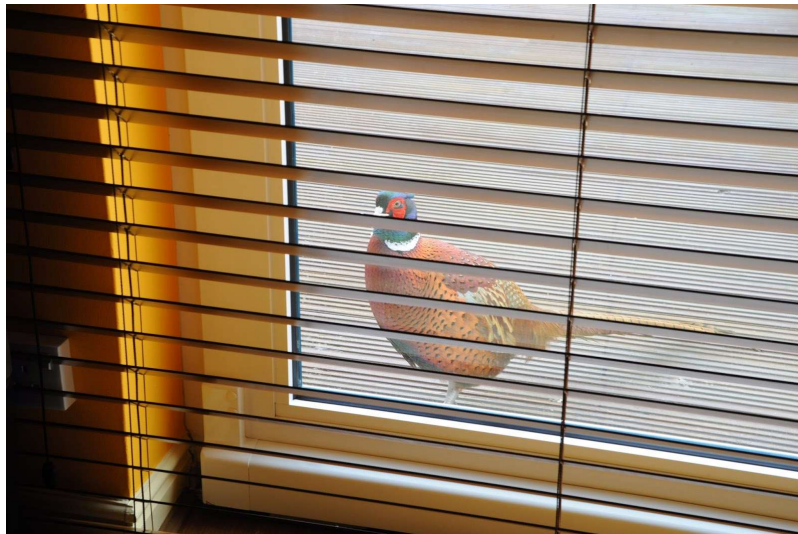
Little Owl



Another regular visitor to the garden are our Pheasants. They know we are a soft touch and get fed (by next door too) but it's a bit much when they come to the window demanding breakfast!



That's what you call a Hen Party



We call this one Stuart for no particular reason.

I am an avid bird watcher and keep a list of birds seen. This is my complete list of birds seen in or from the garden in 2014. I'd be interested to hear from anyone who has seen anything unusual around the parish.



Yellowhammer



Blackcap (female) the male has the black cap





Starling on my feeders

Peter.

Blackbird, Blackcap, Reed Bunting, Buzzard, Chaffinch, Chiffchaff, Carrion Crow, Collared Dove, Dunnock, Fieldfare, Goldcrest, Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Blackheaded Gull, Herring Gull, Jackdaw, Jay, Kestrel, Linnet, Magpie, House Martin, Moorhen, Nuthatch, Little Owl, Barn Owl, Pheasant, Wood Pigeon, Meadow Pipit, Red Kite, Red-legged Partridge, Redwing, Robin, Rook, Skylark, Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, House Sparrow, Sparrowhawk, Starling, Swallow, Swift, Blue Tit, Coal Tit, Long Tailed Tit, Pied Wagtail, Willow Warbler, Common Whitethroat, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Green Woodpecker, Wren, Yellowhammer.

Peter is Chairman of the Friends of Tring Reservoirs a local charity and conservation organisation formed in 1993 to promote the conservation of this important Site of Special Scientific Interest.

[www.fotr.org.uk](http://www.fotr.org.uk)