

Spring transition

As Winter gives way to Spring, we have a few weeks over overlapping where winter birds linger and the first spring migrants arrive. On sunnier days, resident birds go through breeding rituals.



Amongst the first to breed are Rooks, Grey Herons and Tawny Owls (pictured left). The first two species are colonial breeders with nests generally in the treetops. Tawny Owls tend to nest in cavities in trees (or nest boxes) but around now, the males can often be seen during the daytime in sentry duty, at or near to the nest site. They will often call to each other during the day, as was the case in Cockaynes Wood yesterday. It was amusing to see people stop in their tracks as they walked past.

Lengthening daylight hours tend to trigger spring activity. Clear mornings emphasize the effect and even wintering birds can start singing before departing. Now is a good time to hear the songs of Redwings, Siskins (right) and Redpolls. The latter two diminutive finch species are more likely to visit bird feeders as they bid to put on fat reserves for migration. I was lucky enough to have a very close encounter with a Lesser Redpoll which dropped out of the birches to feed on seeds that had fallen to the ground. Recently, I was able to hear the beautiful, plaintive wheezing song of Siskins as a male fed on one of the feeders at Sunnymead Farm.



Many have been to see the Starling murmuration at Keelars Lane, which has now built up to over 6,000 birds. Thanks to everyone who has maintained good viewing etiquette by sticking to the hedge line at the edge of the site, thus not disturbing birds already on breeding territory in the lagoon. Soon, these birds will disperse to Russia, leaving just a handful breeding locally. You can see a video [here](#) of the murmuration, set to music by local virtuoso, Tim Whitnell.

In recent years, there have been more wintering Blackcaps and so it is rather difficult to determine whether those heard singing this week are new arrivals from the South or whether they are lingering birds from the population in central Europe. Chiffchaffs have also been heard of late, with my first one heard singing on 27th February! Butterflies are now showing on sunny days with Tortoiseshell, Peacock and the resplendent Brimstone all having been seen along the South Edge of Cockaynes Wood.

In the coming days, when winds are favourable and weather is good, we will see more early spring migrants arriving, such as Sand Martins (right), Wheatears, Little Ringed Plovers and possibly more unusual species on passage, some of which are “overshoots” from breeding grounds much further south. Easterly winds can bring in continental birds as well. Arctic breeding species such as Whimbrels can come through in May, as the Arctic spring does not start until June...





Lucky observers in the early Spring may even find male Emperor moths (left) searching for females in the heathlands where there is bramble and/or heather, where they can pick up the scent of female pheromones up to 5km away. Watch out for a rapid, looping flight which looks rather like a butterfly, but there is no mistaking the moth if you see one!

Great Crested Grebes (right) are also staking out territories locally. You may even be lucky enough to see their courtship dance – often performed with an offering of pond weed as nesting material!



Cllr Glyn Evans