**Mike’s Musings: environment and conservation**

**High summer: June and July 2015**

***Weather reports***

***June***

The month’s weather was characterised by it being relatively cool, having very low rainfall, and a large number of dry days suffering from rather strong winds.

Except for the 12th, over the first 15 days temperatures were mostly in the teens between 15 and 20 degrees Celsius. It was not until the end of the month that the weather was warmer, reaching the mid twenties on the 23rd to the 27th, only being hotter on the 29th and 30th. It rained on seven days but the amounts were small, the most significant rainfalls were on the 1st (7.0 mms.) and the 12th (8.0 mms.). The total rainfall for the month was 25.5 mms. (just over one inch) well below the amount expected for June.

As was the case in the two previous Musings (April and May), on the majority of days the wind direction in the month was from a northerly quarter (NE/NW), partially accounting for the lower than average daytime temperatures, notwithstanding that on many days there were quite prolonged sunny periods.

**July**

Until its last week (the 24th to 31st ) the month’s weather was similar to June’s, with fresh to strong and blustery mostly NE/NW winds, very little rain, but higher daytime temperatures. Again, it was quite chilly in the mornings especially as it tended to be cloudy, it only becoming sunnier as the sky was clearer in the afternoons. Temperatures were in the teens or low twenties, except between the 18th and 21st when the thermometer reached the mid twenties with quite high humidity. It seems as if these days were the only truly summer ones as in the last week of the month temperatures fell below 20 Celsius.

It rained on nine days there being small amounts, apart from 13.0 mms. on the 12th, a very wet day on the 24th (28.0 mms.) and 12.0 mms. on the 26th. The total rainfall for the month was 57.85mms. (2.36 ins.).

**High summer: a contrast of pleasurable, sombre and reflective moments**

There is much to experience and see in June and July in the countryside, given the warmer days and light evenings, it not being dark until well after 9 pm. This was despite the fact that the longest day had occurred more than five weeks before this piece was written. The most conspicuous and striking benefits of high summer is the high diversity of colours of flora currently in bloom and the activity of the insects and birds. However, as indicated below, to some extent it is a sad time of the year as there are already a number of signs of the coming autumn and winter, identified below.

***The highlights of the high summer***

***Plants***

In people’s gardens it is undoubtedly the period when bedding plants are still in their prime and perennials such as hydrangeas, lavenders and roses are a magnificent sight. Even the seemingly ubiquitous and long-lasting blooms of mauve, purple and white buddleias are a pleasing sight. Wild flowers also add to the riot of colour. On the banks, road verges and in the fields the most numerous and noticeable plants now in full flower are birds foot trefoil, clover, mallow, poppy, thistles (field, musk and spear), toadflax and the vetches. In both rural and urban areas, the great hairy willow herb, which is often concentrated in ditches and around water courses, is beginning to bloom and so complementing the rosebay variety which is still in flower, having first appeared early in July.

However, in the writer’s view, the bloom of the year must be the proliferation of bindweed (*convolvulus*) of what might be termed the ‘common’ one and the field specie of the plant. The former is actually quite attractive, formed of pink petals with white lines emanating from the centre of the flower head, which is about two to three centimetres in diameter with heart-shaped leaves. Remarkably, this year the plant has colonised grass borders, fields and lawns, rather than entwined around a host vegetation. The field bindweed is white and can be almost the same size as the common one, but there is a specie of it that has a larger flower. This, too, has appeared in the same places as the common bindweed, rather than its more usual tendency to be a hanging plant.

Two other prolific plants are very widespread, namely the oxeye daisy and ragwort. Ragwort which, is poisonous to livestock, has always been a problem for farmers to eradicate. In recent years, removing this plant seems to have ceased to be a priority and so it is now widespread in fields and on verges and banks. An indication of the variety of wild flowers now in bloom, referred to above, can be ascertained by visiting the Lawrence Field in Kintbury, where there is a section set aside to encourage their growth. This site is opposite the Jubilee Centre in Inkpen road.

***Insects***

The fine sunny weather has favoured the emergence and sighting of insects, such as butterflies foraging for nectar. The species most commonly seen, in open grassy areas, fields, hedges and gardens, are marbled white, meadow brown, orange tip, painted lady, peacock, red admiral, small and large white, small tortoiseshell. Also, abundant are bumblebees, honey bees and hover flies, especially in gardens containing lavender and buddleias.

***Birds***

The numbers of house martins and swallows in the area have been much the same as last year, but it is heartening that there appear to be more swifts and it is evident that the first two species are having quite a few second broods. It is saddening, however, that the swifts will soon be leaving to return to their winter habitat. Nevertheless, a happy feature of this time of the year is to observe the young chaffinches, dunnocks, gold and green finches, jackdaws, robins, sparrows and starlings begging for food from their parents and for the smaller birds to begin to master the skill of taking food from feeders provided by many householders. It is indeed quite interesting that several former ground-feeding birds have adapted in order to use hanging feeders. At times even blackbirds attempt, unsuccessfully, to do the same!

**This Musings’ bird: the house sparrow**

It has been disturbing that the population of sparrows *(Passer domesticus*) has declined dramatically, mostly in urban areas, particularly in London where the RSPB has set up a project to provide environments that will attract them and restore the population. It has been estimated that the reduction in numbers since the 1970s is as high as 60%. Nevertheless, there are still around five million sparrows in the UK.

This decline is certainly not the case in our area, nevertheless acknowledging that whether they are present or not depends on the extent of possible nesting sites; thus sparrows are drawn to where there is human habitation as the most desirable place to find them. In Inkpen, with its scattered houses and extensive woodland, sparrows are not that numerous, whereas Kintbury, possessing many older properties, offers suitable sites. Accordingly, there is a wide distribution of this bird throughout the village.

Sparrows are very sociable and tend to live in groups of up to 20 or more and nest in colonies in close proximity with each other, using cavities in buildings and trees, or in hedges or thick vegetation, such as Ivy. The female lays 2 to7 eggs, both her and the mate incubate them. The eggs hatch in about 12 days and the young fledge between 11 and 18 days.

They can hardly be considered to be songsters as they chatter noisily and continuously in cheerful, chirps, tweets and squawks, frequently squabbling over territories, status and food. They are endearing birds which can become quite tame and even take food from the hand. They are aptly described in London as ‘Cockney Spaddgers’.

**Snippets**

* In a survey of wildlife present in gardens, 79% contained common frogs.
* A study of a hedge in Devon recorded that 2070 species lived in it or used it for shelter or to forage for food or to breed in (the wildlife in hedges will be examined in the next Musings).
* The painted lady butterfly migrates from the sub Sahara to as far as the Arctic Circle in the spring and returns south in the late summer, a round trip of 9,000 miles (15,000 kilometres).

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