**Craigentinny Allotments Wildlife News (Spring 2022)**

There have been frequent comments in the press and elsewhere this year that the weather this Spring has been far from ideal for much of our wildlife. I’ve not been able to find a set of weather reports for our site’s part of Edinburgh, but the ones I have looked at seem broadly to agree that, after a fairly mild February with just five days of frost, almost right from the start of March the peak day temperatures started to rise. Over the month as a whole there may have been more than twenty days when the maximum exceeded 10 degrees, and from the 23rd to the 28th the high every day reached at least 15 degrees, with a peak of 18 on the 28th. But this was followed by five days when temperatures never rose about 9 degrees. Only in the last fortnight have we seen peak temperatures much above 10, and even then not every day. Also, over the whole of the last two and a half months, there have been few days with really heavy rain, so there have been considerable periods when the soil surface has been dry or only a little damp – and the last few days have been consistently dry (and the immediate future forecast suggests a continuation of this for a while yet).

Not surprisingly, the warm weather in March encouraged Spring wildlife activity to start very early compared with many years. The first report of a bumblebee that I received was on 13th March, the first Small Tortoiseshell butterfly and also a possible Red Admiral were seen on 20th, with more on 26th. A Small White butterfly and also a Peacock were seen on 25th. More queen bumblebees (both white and red-tailed, and possibly another species also) appeared. Even earlier, the first singing Chaffinch that I heard on our site was on the 1st March, and by the 21st at least one Blue Tit, Great Tit, Coal Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Robin, Blackbird, Chaffinch, Wren and Dunnock were either making strong territorial claims by their song or were actively prospecting our immediate area for a nest site. Occasionally, Goldfinches could also be seen and heard, notably singing from the semi-dead Rowan on the communal plot. On 23rd I even saw a Carrion Crow clearly carrying a small branch for nest building. On 29th the first migrants from Africa, the small green warblers, Chiffchaffs, were reported to me as making their ‘chiff-chaff’ calls in trees on the golf course, though, as far as I know, none have been heard from our site. And, as March went on, more overflying Herring Gull started to appear, and, from 21st, also a very few Lesser Black-backed Gulls, returned from their migration to the south of England or even further away.

In this same period, many Frogs were in the Communal area pond, and a large amount of spawn followed, and pond snails were soon all over it - do they eat it? Several Frogs, possibly from their size last year’s hatchings, were also seen on at least one plot with a small pond. Digging out our compost bin on 21st revealed Woodlice, two species of Centipedes, and, perhaps surprisingly, many workers of the small black ant (*Lasius niger*) – I had always thought that nests of this species did not survive the winter because their queens died, and new nests were established each year by last year’s young queens – I will need to investigate further! And the first Ladybird was reported on 21st.

And then, at the end of March, the temperature fell. Since then there seem to have been many fewer of the large queen bumblebees on our site. Queen bumblebees, having mated as they left their mothers’ hives last autumn, then hide away somewhere secure and frost-free over the winter. When they emerge, encouraged by a warm spell of weather, they need lots of nectar quickly for energy, and pollen for protein, so that they can start to make nests and lay some eggs, the first of which will become the female workers that will then allow the colony to develop further. A cold spell at just the wrong moment can stop the new queens finding food and they may well die. Frost and hunger can also easily kill many of the newly emerging butterflies, either species like the Small Tortoiseshells or Peacocks which have survived the winter semi-dormant in our sheds or other sheltered places, or species which, like the Small Whites, are encouraged by warm weather to emerge from their chrysalises. Incidentally, this year’s very early sightings of Red Admirals does seem to suggest that, as I speculated last Autumn, a few of those that were about on our site then may indeed have been part of a recent new pattern of behaviour where some butterflies of this species now manage to hibernate successfully in mild winters in southern Scotland.

However, in spite of the cold spell, a few queen bumblebees have now started to reappear. The first tadpoles were seen in the pond on 2nd April and some at least still seem to have been doing well. Though few actual nests have been reported to me so far, the behaviour of at least three species of tits, at least one Dunnock and Chaffinch, a pair of Blackbirds, and probably two male Robins, all suggest breeding somewhere near. And we still have regular Woodpigeons, Carrion Crows, a Wren, over-flying gulls and, more than in either of the previous two years, more regular Starlings

A few butterflies have also reappeared: Small Tortoiseshells on 17th and 18th April, Peacocks on at least two days (photo from 17th April by Ruth at end); also a moth, not much more than one centimetre across, provisionally identified as a Light Brown Apple Moth (photo by Elspeth on 10th at end). So far, though, no Orange Tips. Not many other insects so far, except for a ‘fly with a beautiful metallic green body’, reported by Laurel, which she thought might have been a rather early male Soldier fly (we certainly had them last year). More Centipedes of at least two species have appeared quite frequently when digging; I also found a Millipede early in April (Centipedes run away when revealed, Millipedes coil in a tight circle). And Laurel also spotted, on 17th, a rather splendid spider (photo at end) which she thought looked a bit like a Black Lace Weaver or possibly a zebra jumping spider (but neither of us claim real knowledge about spiders – so, ideas anyone??).

All the bird species mentioned so far in this News vigorously defend territories in which they both nest and feed, so we in most cases only get one pair on the whole of our site. We do still seem to have two very tame singing Robins, but this almost certainly means that each has a territory at the opposite ends of the site, and there may also be two Blackbird territories, but again each defended separately by its own male.

But, as I’m sure we have all noticed, by the gate there is almost always a flock of House Sparrows and there is a second ‘hotspot’ in the bushes on and near Norma’s plot. Unlike most species, House Sparrows not only feed all year round in flocks, but they also breed colonially, ideally with multiple nests in quite close proximity to each other, most commonly in holes in house roofs or sometimes in thick bushes. At one time, House Sparrows were considered very much a city centre bird, though they were also in the suburbs. But now they are extremely rare in the centres of all British cities, including Edinburgh. Many explanations have been offered, including the disappearance of horse transport with its ready supply of spilled grain, increased competition from urban gulls and foxes for dropped scraps, and vehicle pollution. But, as with city centre Swifts and also Starlings, somewhat better maintenance of city buildings and the closing off of potential nesting holes have probably also played a part – and in Edinburgh at least we do actually still have quite good House Sparrow numbers in most of the suburbs, including the area around our site.

Other than the sparrows, most of the winter flocks of birds that were on our site (including the immigrant Blackbirds, and Goldfinches, Long-tailed Tits, Wood Pigeons and occasionally Starlings) have now dispersed, leaving us with just one or two pairs of each. But what we do still very obviously have is a flock of Magpies, anything up to eight birds together on some days. I initially wondered whether our Magpies were like Australian Magpies, which look quite similar and where the previous generation stays around to help with rearing their ‘nieces and nephews’ in the following year. It would be a nice story, but in fact I have discovered that not only are Australian Magpies a completely unrelated species, but that the Magpie flocks like the one that we have on our site are normally made up of last year’s birds, especially males, who, like between 25% and 65% of their peers, have been unable to find nest sites or mates. Instead, they live in what can sometimes be quite unruly gangs that may even steal food that otherwise would have gone to their relatives.

However, what I also did discover is that Long-tailed Tits, which last winter were sometimes in flocks of more than twenty birds passing through our site, do sometimes have ‘helpers’ at their nests. These are usually siblings of one of the nesting pair, who, if their own nests fail, do sometimes then help to feed young in their brothers’ or sisters’ still surviving nest. And, as I noted last year, Dunnocks are well known as particularly promiscuous birds. Many females mate with more than one male and then encourage both males to help to feed their young. So, if you see three Dunnocks around one nest, that is what is going on!

One good piece of news, after last winter’s sad experience with at least two Foxes, is that we still do have one regular visitor (photo thanks to Glen). This one seems darker than any we have had before, so it may be a new arrival. As I think I may have noted before, young urban foxes, once they become independent, have on average very short expectations of life - a most common maximum of around a year (in rural areas the comparable figure is believed to be at least three years). But we do nevertheless have a big Fox population in Edinburgh, including right in the centre up to a few hundred yards from John Lewis. So, as with many other species of mammals and also birds (notably Robins where it was first demonstrated in the 1930s in a wonderful book by David Lack called *The Life of the Robin*), any vacant territory will normally be taken over very quickly – and this may be what has happened on our site. And this Fox has already been seen carrying a dead Rat. Hopefully, it will also eat some of our Wood Mouse population. This could be important for the Fox because, what with the Flatworms and the dry weather, earthworms, which are an important item of Fox diet throughout the year, will have been very hard to find on our site recently (this will also be a problem for our Blackbirds).

Finally, last week, the bottom of our plot was covered in feathers from a well-plucked (and presumably consumed) Wood Pigeon. What may have caught it is uncertain, but the plucking seemed to be too efficient for a Fox, and the most likely predator is probably a female Sparrowhawk. I did spot a possible Sparrowhawk very quickly flying across our site on 21st March, so it is very plausible that one or more is around. Most Sparrowhawk food is normally in the tit to thrush size range. However, as with almost all other raptors, female Sparrowhawks are significantly bigger than males, and checking shows that Wood Pigeons are sometimes taken by them, even though female Sparrowhawks on average weigh only about 250 grams, while Woodpigeons at this time of year weigh about 500. [The alternative predator could be a female Peregrine which is a more frequent killer of Wood Pigeons; we have once had one on our site, but there are still only a very few pairs in Edinburgh, so maybe less likely?]

So, why are female Sparrowhawks (and the same for female Peregrines) so much bigger than males? When their eggs first hatch, the smaller males are very agile at catching a good supply of small birds like tits, warblers, finches and sparrows, ideal for feeding the new chicks. Meantime, the females stay on guard at the nest (other raptors, which nowadays include Buzzards in the Lothians and Peregrines in Edinburgh, and also crows, quite frequently try to rob Sparrowhawk as well as Kestrel and other nests). As the young grow, however, they are more able to defend themselves, and they also need much more food. At this point, females of both species also start to hunt, bringing back larger prey, with female Sparrowhawks mostly taking thrushes, blackbirds, and starlings, but also at times much bigger prey up to the size even of Partridges and Jays!

That is all I have to report so far for this Spring, but if anyone has seen anything else recently, do please let me know.

Best wishes

Mike