

WILDLIFE NEWS

MAY 2021



The weather this Spring has been unusually cold, unusually hot, unusually windy, unusually wet and unusually dry. Although these changing extreme weather conditions have adversely affected some wildflower species, what a wonderful show the cowslips and primroses have provided this year.

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Wycombe Wildlife News is published 3 times a year to promote the Group and wildlife issues, and to inform members and the public of its activities.

Edited and produced by Roger Wilding.
Proof reading by Frances Wilding.

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Views expressed in this newsletter are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Group.

For the purposes of management of the Group, membership information is held on computer.

Editorial

By the time members receive this newsletter it will be around 14 months since Wycombe Wildlife Group has held a meeting or arranged a walk or other outdoor event. We have kept in touch with our members by means of our newsletter and satisfied the Charity Commission's requirements to submit an annual return without holding an AGM.

Provided the easing of restrictions proceed as planned in the Government's road map, we expect to be in a position to make a start in getting back to arranging some activities from the Summer onwards. We hope to restart by holding a daytime AGM which should make it easier for some of our members who find it difficult to turn out for evening meetings to be able to attend.

The last three issues of the newsletter benefitted from contributions in the form of articles submitted by members. On this occasion I have not received any articles from members, which has made it more difficult to think of new subjects to write about when the Group is not undertaking its normal activities.

Following the sad news of the recent death of Barbara North, one of our longer-serving members, an article about her contribution to our Group and her promotion of conservation in Cadmore End where she lived has been included as a tribute to her achievements. I am extremely grateful to her daughter for providing me with lots of useful material and a couple of photographs that I could use.

Roger

Wycombe Wildlife Group is a registered charity No.1075175 with the following objects:

To conserve the environment, mainly using volunteers, for the benefit of the public.

To educate the public in the principles and practice of conservation.

Within and around Wycombe District the Group :

Surveys wildlife habitats and their associated flora and fauna, giving those taking part plenty of opportunities to increase their knowledge and identification skills.

Resources permitting, helps manage local wildlife sites by undertaking practical conservation work. Resources permitting, provides advice to schools, other bodies and individuals on all aspects of wildlife.

Stimulates public interest in wildlife and its conservation, organising walks, talks and other activities covering a wide range of wildlife topics.

Provides advice on and encourages wildlife gardening.

Co-operates with other groups with similar aims.

New member

We are pleased to welcome as a new member Alison Leathart who lives in Beaconsfield.

Obituary

It was with much sorrow that we heard that one of our long-standing members, Barbara North, had passed away in the early hours of Saturday 27 March 2021 aged 91 following a rapid advance in the Alzheimers Disease she was suffering from. Family members were able to be with her in her care home as her condition worsened, and we were informed that she appeared to be in no distress.

Barbara was an all-round naturalist and a keen photographer. She and her late husband Jim had a large garden at their Cadmore End home and much of it was managed with wildlife in mind. Barbara was also involved in managing the local churchyard on a wildlife-friendly basis.

Following Barbara's move into a care home, we had made arrangements for her copy of our printed newsletter to be sent to her daughter so that she could take it to her mother when visiting her. We had also awarded Barbara Honorary Life Membership of our Group.



Barbara North - Family photograph taken in her garden in 2020

Tribute to the late Barbara North

Some of our long-serving members will remember when Barbara was able to attend our members' meetings, including the occasion when she gave a talk entitled "Nature in my Garden" at our Group's AGM on 28 April 2003. Barbara entered her garden in one of WWG's earliest garden competitions and it stood out as being the obvious winner, but the professional garden designer who judged the competition jointly with me agreed with my view that another much smaller garden that had been entered into the competition and had a wide range of features of benefit to wildlife should not be penalised by its small size. As a result Barbara was awarded First Prize for the Best Large Wildlife Garden and the smaller garden was awarded First Prize for the Best Small Wildlife Garden. Subsequent wildlife garden competitions organised by our group had separate categories for large and small gardens.

Several members took advantage of the opportunities offered to visit Barbara and her late husband Jim's large attractive garden,

including when the garden was included in the Wycombe Wildlife Group's open gardens programme in 1997.

Barbara was very interested in moths and a moth trapping event held in her garden in July 2004 recorded a total of 25 species.

The most interesting and unusual feature of the garden was the huge pond which was created by converting the family's swimming pool when no longer used for its original purpose. The conversion project was not an easy task as is clear from a detailed description of what was involved in an article written by Barbara which was published in "The Gardener" magazine in 1989. A wide range of both native and garden plant species attracted a wide range of fauna to the garden and Barbara, being a keen photographer with a good quality SLR camera, took many 35mm slides which she used to give talks to local organisations.



Pond created from former swimming pool in Barbara's Cadmore End garden

An interesting article on Barbara's garden appeared in the Bucks Free Press Limited Edition magazine in 1992. The article contained some interesting photos of Barbara and the converted swimming pool pond, which we would have liked to reproduce in this tribute. A letter to the Bucks Free Press requesting permission to reproduce these photographs in our newsletter, with a suitable acknowledgement, did not get a response. Fortunately Barbara's daughter managed to locate and send me a suitable family photograph of the pond to use in this article.

The conversion of the family swimming pool into a wonderful wildlife pond was the garden feature that I remember most about the garden. Learning how this was achieved is a clear indication of the extent of Barbara's commitment to the conservation of a wide range of local wildlife. The first task involved returning 50 barrow loads of clay, which had been dug out 20 years earlier when the swimming pool was built, to the sides and shallow end of the pool. This provided somewhere for amphibians to enter and leave the pond and also provided a suitable habitat for marginal plants. Three 50 gallon drums were then filled with clay and sunk into the deep end to provide a suitable habitat for water lilies. When completed, the new pond was rapidly colonised by frogs, toads, newts and numerous water invertebrates. Seven species of dragonfly/damselfly were recorded, and goldfish introduced into the pond provided a food source for a visiting Kingfisher. Bats

were regularly seen hunting for mosquitoes over the pond in Summer.

WWG newsletter coverage of the talk entitled "Nature in my garden" given by Barbara at our AGM in April 2003 was very limited, but Barbara did retain the notes she made for her talk and these have been copied to me for information. The notes show that Barbara's talk was very comprehensive and illustrated by some of her 35mm slides of plants, birds, mammals, insects, amphibians, dragonflies and damselflies.

Barbara's wildlife conservation activities extended beyond her garden as she was very much involved in Cadmore End Church's "Living Churchyard Project" which managed its graveyard as a wildlife friendly habitat.

My thanks go to Barbara's daughter Bernadette, whose help in producing photographs, magazine articles and talk notes, enabled this detailed account of Barbara's contribution to wildlife conservation both on behalf of Wycombe Wildlife Group and her local area to be recorded.

Roger

Looking back and looking forward

Looking back at the period since WWG's last members' meeting in March 2020 when Covid 19 has prevented our Group from organising any indoor or outdoor activities, I am conscious that there was probably more we could have done to provide an ongoing service to our members using available technology. However, taking into account that contact with around 40% of our members is still by means of a printed copy of our newsletter, which is hand delivered apart from a few copies which are sent by post, email and printed material remain the only means by which we can easily communicate with all our members. The lack of email addresses for many of our members and the problems of undertaking the hand delivery of newsletters during the lockdowns certainly caused a few difficulties as the usual delivery arrangements rely on the use of public transport to get and to the start or back from finishing point of the delivery rounds which cover an area between Penn, Totteridge, Micklefield, Loudwater, Hughenden, Downley, Naphill, Upper Sands, Booker, Marlow and Bourne End. Only members living beyond these locations receive their printed copies by post.

During the period of WWG inactivity, our members have still been able to enjoy the natural world in their gardens and take advantage of the limited opportunities for going for walks or visiting local areas of wildlife interest within the conditions imposed by the lockdowns and the subsequent limited easing of some of the restrictions. Many of us will have used the additional "spare time" resulting from the lockdowns to undertake tasks that had been outstanding for years: this has certainly kept me busy and left me with a number of started but, as yet, unfinished jobs.

I have appreciated the contributions I have received which have enabled our recent newsletters to continue to be issued on schedule during the long period of group inactivity.

Looking forward, the indications are that Covid 19 is at last coming under control in the UK, although the gradual easing of restrictions, and wider world problems could result in an increase in infections and the need to reimpose some restrictions.

Taking as positive a view as possible, I think that we could start to make plans to reintroduce our indoor meetings from September 2021 when we would have normally restarted our Autumn and Winter programme of meetings. I am hoping that we can arrange an AGM in advance of such a programme and would like to consider the possibility of holding a daytime meeting at a location accessible by public transport: this might make it easier for more of our older members to join us and have an input to our discussions on the future of our Group.

The planned lifting of restrictions is likely to make it easier to arrange outdoor activities such as walks, but on-going social distancing rules might prevent invertebrate, plant and fungi identification activities taking place, whilst allowing bird walks and other walks that do not include close examination of species to go ahead.

Any comments from members on these and related issues, suggestions for future talk subjects and themes for future outdoor activities would be most welcome.

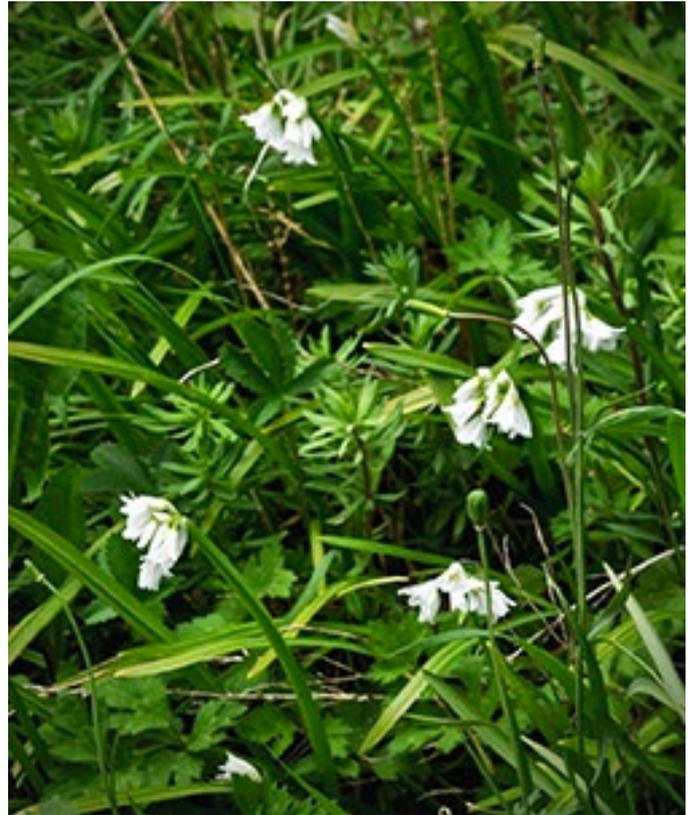
Roger

Has the loss of wildlife corridors reduced urban garden wildlife?

The last year has provided plenty of time for those with gardens, large or small, to reflect on changes to the species seen and the reasons for such changes. The weather so far this year has been unusual and it has had an adverse effect on some plant species, although birds and invertebrates do not seem to have suffered as much.

We have experienced very hot days for the time of year and we have woken up to see our gardens white with frost and even snow. Cold winds have not been uncommon, requiring plenty of layers of clothing to work in the garden even on some of the sunny days. It is not surprising to find that some plant species that normally cope with the normal weather variations in the early months of the year have suffered badly this year from frost damage. The worst affected species in our garden have been Tutsan and the native Tree Mallow: I have cut down the damaged plants confident that others will take their place as both are well established in the garden.

One plant species that is doing well again this year is the Three-cornered Garlic (*Allium triquetrum*). I introduced this species into the garden in the early days of Wycombe Wildlife Group when one of our members, who had opened her wildlife garden, had potted up a number of species, including the Three-cornered Garlic, for sale in aid of group funds. The plants soon became established but did not become a nuisance. After a few years they stopped appearing each Spring and I thought I had lost them. Last year the species reappeared after an absence of many years and attempted to colonise the whole garden. I spent a lot of time digging out the bulbs before they flowered and then made the mistake of putting the dug up plants on my large compost heaps which I use to dispose of Indian balsam plants taken out of the Wye chalk stream during annual Revive the Wye tasks organised each year to remove these invasive plants. This disposal method has always worked well without resulting in balsam plants appearing all over the garden. The composted Three-cornered Garlic bulbs survived the heat generated by the composting process, however, and so this year I have tried crushing the bulbs prior to composting them to see if that is a more effective method of disposal.

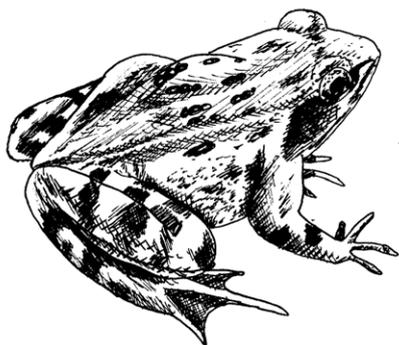


The weather has had little effect on the bird life in our garden and the bird food put out soon disappears and needs to be replenished frequently. We have had plenty of hive and other bees coming into the garden and butterfly numbers seem to be normal. Provided there are enough suitable habitats with sufficient food supplies, all of these can fly into and out of urban habitats from the surrounding countryside without difficulty. However, the same cannot be said for the terrestrial wildlife.

In past years our garden and the garden we manage next door each have had in the order of 60 breeding frogs producing huge quantities of frog spawn.

Frog numbers have been decreasing each year for some time and this year only a single small clump of spawn appeared in one of the two gardens and that was killed off by frost, despite placing some protection over it.

The loss of our resident frog population is unlikely to be overcome by the arrival of new populations as there has also been a gradual loss in recent years of adequate local wildlife corridors.



The loss of local wildlife corridors also seems to have had an adverse effect on other wildlife that used to be common in our gardens. I am not too concerned that we no longer get badgers in the garden as it was almost certainly a badger that ripped a hole in the pond liner exposed at the edge of our garden pond when the water level had dropped to a very low level one hot summer. I am almost certain a badger was the culprit as shining a torch out of the bedroom window shortly after that incident to investigate the cause of a noise at the edge of our garden in the middle of the night revealed a badger damaging our boundary fence. We still get a fox in the garden occasionally but not as often as in the past. Muntjac Deer often came into our garden up to a few years ago but we haven't seen or even heard one for some time,

The mammal we really miss, however, is the hedgehog which was a frequent visitor to our garden. There are plenty of places along the sides and at the rear of our garden where a hedgehog can get in and out without difficulty and for a number of years I have created log piles along our rear boundary, using wood from garden tree maintenance tasks. These log piles and other logs scattered around the garden were intended to cater for the needs of hedgehogs and other wildlife to use for shelter or hibernation purposes.

So why do we not now get hedgehogs in our garden? There are of course a lot less around than there used to be, but I suspect the main

reason is the lack of suitable wildlife corridors linking urban gardens such as ours to the surrounding countryside.



When the housing area in which we live was created, a tree belt was left along the back of the gardens to provide a screen between the houses and the Cressex Industrial Estate (now known as the Cressex Business Park). When this tree belt was created it provided an effective link around the boundary of the industrial estate to local public parks and to the Chairborough Local Nature Reserve in one direction and to the large rear gardens of houses in Desborough Avenue in the other direction. In the days when Desborough Avenue was not as busy as it is now, the then common sight of wildlife road kills there was an indication of the frequency of wildlife movements across that road to and from the chalk grassland and scrub on Carver Hill from where there is an excellent wildlife corridor as far as Marlow Hill. This main road is of course the next major obstacle to the movement of wildlife between Keep Hill, Wycombe Abbey School grounds, the Rye and the river and woodland corridors which extend as far as the eastern boundaries of our town.

With the current emphasis on increasing the number of housing units in our area and meeting the ever changing commercial needs, it does seem that the need to cater for the needs of wildlife movement gets ignored. Individual planning applications incorporate a requirement to answer basic questions relating to any impact of the proposed changes on wildlife, but there is no overall local plan for meeting the need for wildlife corridors linking town centres to the surrounding countryside. If this need could be met, it would benefit our local wildlife and the local residents who enjoy having wildlife in their gardens.

Roger

Sheepridge revisited

In the days when Wycombe Wildlife Group was an active conservation group, one of the locations where our volunteers used to undertake tasks was in the land between the Little Marlow Cemetery and Sheepridge Lane which was set aside for future cemetery use. Our Group obtained permission to manage the land as a nature reserve and one of the major tasks there was to create a pond on the site. The late Maurice Young, one of the founder members of Wycombe Wildlife Group created a hibernaculum on the reserve and, as the Group's Education Officer used the reserve for wildlife education activities. When at a later date the pond liner needed to be replaced, our Group installed a new pond liner with the help of another conservation group Earthworks Conservation Volunteers.

Now that WWG has been in existence for over 30 years, the number of members able or willing to undertake practical conservation tasks has reduced considerably and we have been unable to carry out any recent tasks at the Sheepridge site.

We were contacted a few years ago by Harry Hitchman, a local beekeeper who had been given permission to keep hives on the site and he donated jars of honey which we sold to members in aid of group funds. More recently Harry has provided funding to purchase suitable plants which would benefit the bees visiting the site. We initially purchased some plug plants of suitable native species but found that it was difficult to get such small plants established in the dry stony conditions on the site. We then planted more established wild flowers around the site, mainly on the banks and around the edge of the car parking area that was created on the site.

Because of Covid restrictions we were unable to use the outstanding funding which had been set aside as restricted funds for further planting in 2020, and having received a further donation recently we felt we needed to consult the Parish Council to discuss planting options in the light of the much reduced scope for planting on the site.

I visited Sheepridge in early May to assess some of the possibilities for further planting, possibly including flowering shrubs (including non native species) which provide a nectar source for bees.

I then contacted the Parish Clerk about the matter and received a reply saying the matter would be discussed at the next meeting of the Burial Ground Committee on 17 June after which the Parish Clerk would arrange to meet me to discuss the options available. I have since been contacted by the Chairman of the Burial Ground Committee who would like to hear my views on their future plans.

Unlike in the past when there was plenty of space for planting, the cemetery is rapidly filling up, and the area that has been levelled and grassed over to cater for further burials now extends almost to the pond. The woodland area has been thinned but that area would be too shady for planting for bees.

I will arrange to discuss these issues with the Chairman of the Burial Ground Committee and await the views of the Committee before this matter can be considered further but I will provide an update in the next newsletter and keep Harry Hitchman informed of developments.

Roger



Using public transport again to get to the start of a walk and back from the finish

Three weeks after having my second Covid vaccination, I decided it should be safe enough to travel by bus to complete a walk that I had partially undertaken at an earlier date but had not got round to finishing before the first Covid restrictions were introduced. The walk concerned is the Thame Valley Walk which runs from the Oxfordshire Way, where it passes through the Ryecote Estate east of Tiddington, to Aylesbury. As the name of the walk indicates, it passes through the Thame Valley but it is not a riverside walk for most of its route. My earlier walk had started from Thame and finished at Aylesbury, both of which have good bus links to High Wycombe. Tiddington can also be reached quite easily by using the 280 Aylesbury to Oxford bus service to get there from Thame.

The walk is not difficult but the OS Explorer map 180 is essential to make up for poor signing of the route in several places and, unlike in the Chilterns where many stiles have been replaced by gates, some of the Thame Valley stiles are quite high, many with three steps.

The ancient chapel at Ryecote is worth visiting and, although the restored house and gardens are strictly private, the path to the Chapel does provide a good view of part of the house and gardens.



There seemed to be more signs around the Ryecote Estate to say where you cannot go than where you can. There is even a sign telling walkers to keep to the public footpaths which includes advice to beware of snakes. The lack of heathland and the amount of damp habitats and streams suggested to me that any snakes present were far more likely to be harmless grass snakes than venomous adders.

Apart from poor signage, the route of the Thame Valley Walk is easy walking and it includes a short stretch of the former railway line that in the past connected Princes Risborough and Oxford via Thame. It is easy to walk past a flight of steps leading off the former railway track to the left through a hedgerow. If you find you are walking past woodland on your left you will realise you have missed the turning you needed to take, and have to retrace your steps.

On reaching the A418, the Thame Valley Walk continues on the opposite side and soon reaches the River Thame for the first time on the Walk.

The footpath to Shabbington takes the walker along a section of the River Thames which I consider to be one of the most attractive sections of the river that has public access: its winding course provides a delightful walk and as with most rivers it has swans to talk to in the absence of other walkers.



The walk back to Thames from Shabbington is mostly across farmland away from the course of the river. The first field I came to was divided into a number of smaller enclosures with complex fencing to negotiate, and the remaining fields were large and irregularly shaped. As very few people seemed to have used the paths recently, it was not easy to see the route of the public right of way and I found it necessary to use my OS map and a compass to make sure that I reached the right spot where there was a stile to exit the field onto the road. This walk provided an opportunity to learn how to pass through gates which required a long metal rod to be lifted out of a hole in the ground as well as through a number of metal rings on the gate post, and then to unclip two lengths of electrified fence holding the insulated handles provided. To make this task more of a challenge, the two lengths had the safety handles at opposite ends making it tricky for anyone like me, that had removed both of the handles at the same time one in each hand, to replace them. I will know in future that unless you remove one at a time, you need a third hand to deal with the problem. The walk also made me realise how lucky we are in our area to have gates rather than tall old-fashioned stiles. (I realise this is an admission that I am getting older.) At least I didn't have to look for a red cloth to control the bull that the sign at the entrance to one of the fields said was present. The rest of the walk into Thames was uneventful apart from having to wait for some time before a gap in the fast moving traffic provided an opportunity to cross the busy A418.

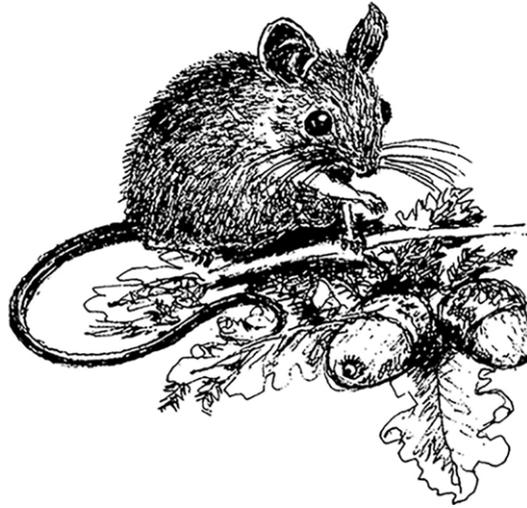
The most noticeable feature of the fields I had crossed was the absolute silence. It is not often nowadays that you can walk where there is no noise whatsoever - no traffic, no aircraft and even the birds and farm animals were silent, probably on account of the cold wind blowing from the North East.

Whilst certainly not the best of walks I have undertaken, The Thames Valley Walk does provide an opportunity to enjoy some peaceful countryside and a few gems such as the Ryecote Chapel and the accessible sections of the River Thames.

Roger

Garden Tweets

In February, a baby Wood Mouse came indoors and ran around behind the furniture and over my hands, until I managed to put him out. He was very sweet and furry with big black eyes, and did not seem to be afraid in the least.



There seems to be a change in the Dunnocks' behaviour in that they are no longer furtively scuttling between shrubs and generally under cover. They are coming quite openly for the food that I put out and hop around with the rest of the birds. Their flirting behaviour has not changed in any way. Even with snow on the ground they were chasing each other and flicking wings (a sign of courtship).

From the 6 April onwards, when I have been walking in the Hughenden woods, Jays have been making high flute like calls. I have heard this call before at this time of year, and think it is a courtship call. It is very different from their usual harsh nasal calls.

In mid April two Great Spotted Woodpeckers were drumming one at a time and listening to each other (again in the Hughenden woods). One of them was so close to me that I could see his whole head vibrating. Then he sat back and listened to the second one's reply.

On 19 April a male Blackcap was singing in the garden with a female very attentive, seeming to be very impressed!

I have noticed frequently that our pair of Collared Doves can easily see off a too nosy Magpie. Their mild appearance belies their courageous nature.

On the morning of 17 April a huge row was going on above my head. Lesser Black-backed Gulls were chasing each other, and suddenly a piece of toast fell from the sky and landed at my feet!

On 28 April the first baby birds were visiting our bird bath- one fluffy Collared Dove and one speckled Robin. All young birds seem to be very interested in water.

On 29 April the Blue Tits that nest right by our kitchen window have babies. I'm afraid they have got their timing wrong in our cold Spring this year. It is very sad to see them searching in vain for greenfly or tiny caterpillars.

One of our baby Robins has found where the fat nibbles emerge from! He (or she) waits for its Mum (or Dad) to feed him (or her), but it certainly knows the door the food comes from.

Frances Wilding

- 17 January First Blackbird singing in Deeds Grove garden
 1 February Blackbird singing full song in Deeds Grove garden
 2 February Crocus and Snowdrop flowers (wild type) full out in Deeds Grove garden
 16 February Several Redwings seen in Deeds Grove garden
 20 February First Bumblebee and Honey Bee in Deeds Grove garden
 24 February First Brimstone butterfly seen in Deeds Grove garden
 1st Cherry Plum blossom out in Deeds Grove garden
 25 February Flock of over 250 Redwings on and around Wycombe High School playing fields
 27 February First Brimstone butterfly in Hazlemere garden
 4 March 3 Little Grebes on the Rye Dyke
 16 March First Small Tortoiseshell butterfly in Deeds Grove garden
 24 March First Chiffchaff in Deeds Grove garden
 31 March Small clump of frogspawn in Deeds Grove garden pond
 3 April Robins and Blackbirds feeding nestlings in Deeds Grove garden
 13 April Baby Robins fledged in Deeds Grove garden
 Red-legged Partridge heard making a noise outside the back window of a house in Downley, either trying to get in the window or trying not to fall off the sill. It then went to the front window and repeated these actions there.

Friendly rivalry

Harry Wheate usually has a good show of orchids on his lawn each year and on 5 April he reported finding 17 young plants, despite a trench being dug across his lawn to repair a gas leak. I replied saying that I had found 19 plants in the garden Frances and I manage next door to our house. Harry has since reported that something is eating his orchids, so I might beat his record this year, although I have noticed some frost damage on two of my plants. There might of course be other members who have even more orchids in their garden but haven't told us.

Contacting Wycombe Wildlife Group

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Joining Wycombe Wildlife Group

To join our Group, please complete a copy of the form on the right and send to

The Membership Secretary,
 15 Cherrywood Gardens,
 Flackwell Heath, HP10 9AX

Subscription £6 per annum, if paid by Standing Order, or £7 per annum, if paid by cash or cheque.

Please enrol me as a member of Wycombe Wildlife Group

Name

Address

Telephone

Email

EITHER Payment by bank standing order
 To Bank
 Branch
 Address.....

NEW standing order instruction:
Account to be debited (your account details)

Sort code

Account number

Account name

Beneficiary bank and payee details
 HSBC, 1 Corn Market High Wycombe HP11 2AY
 Sort Code: 402417 Account number: 92116685
 Account name: Wycombe Wildlife Group

Payment details

Amount of payment: £6.00 Six pounds
 Frequency: Annually

From:
 Number of payments: Until further notice
 Signature Date

OR Payment by cheque or cash

I enclose cheque/cash for £7.00,
 payable to Wycombe Wildlife Group.