NATURE SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Now including Bee & Mammal news

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NATURE SOCIETY
Making a real difference

QUEEN BEES

Many of you are reporting seeing bumblebees about. These are almost certainly Queens which have just came out of hibernation. With the uncertainty of the weather at the moment there are things we can do to help them, especially if they seem groggy and weak and just lying on the ground.

Bumblebees can cope quite well with the cold if they have enough energy. While they get most of this energy from nectar in the flowers, this isn't always available in winter. Because of the scarcity of flowers in winter, these bumblebees sometimes use a lot of energy in flying, but don't have any food to replace that lost energy. These bees can be helped though, and the easiest way to do so is to make a sugar solution (50/50 sugar and warm water). Put this in a small saucer or plastic drinks lid, and place it near the bee's head. She should then lap this up, and she'll use the energy to heat her body up and fly off.

If she is wet you can gently move her to a sheltered spot but please do not take her indoors.

RED MASON BEES

The cocoons we cleaned out in November have now been put out again in the release chambers of the bee nesters.

There are three nesters in the cottage garden and two by the wildflower drift.

Here is Pam & Jo busy with the screwdriver making sure everything is secure.

Each nester has both male and female cocoons. We would expect the males to hatch over the next 2-3 weeks. When they do they will hover around the nester waiting for the females. Please DO NOT BE ALARMED these bees are completely gentle and the males have no stings anyway. Do not expect to see big bees the Red Masons are very small only measuring 0.6 – 1.1cm in length.

Some more nesters without release chambers will be put up around the marina very soon. We have lots of fruit trees and bushes and these little guys are invaluable in pollination.

HIGHLIGHT ON BIRDS

REED BUNTING

This is an excellent time of year to spot this handsome bird. The male is now in his full colours so quite distinct from the House sparrow, which he can often be confused with.

The Reed Bunting is of similar size and appearance to the House Sparrow, but the underparts are streaked and the outer tail feathers are white. The legs and bill are dark brown.
The male Reed Bunting has a dark head and bib, which are black in the summer and dull brown in winter. A broad white collar is evident in the summer as is a thin white moustache.

The female can be confused with the female House Sparrow, which has a shorter tail, and no moustache. She has a has a brown head, buff throat and buff-coloured lines above and below the eye. When they fly the white outer tail feathers are noticeable. The song can sound rather dreary but a good way to remember it is it sounds like “tree, tree, top of tree” because it is usually delivers its song from a perch at the top of a tree, bush or reed. They are traditionally birds of reed beds and wetlands wher they feed on seeds and invertebrates.
The nest is a cup of grass and moss built on the ground but usually among reeds or grasses in a wet or marshy place. Fine grasses and hair are used to line the cup.
The female incubates the eggs (20 mm by 15 mm), which

are smooth, glossy and pale lilac or olive with black scrawls or blotches. The young are fed by both parents.

They suffered a severe decline in the 1970’s when there were many egg failures and poor survival rates and still remain on the Amber, at risk list.

OTHER SONGSTERS

Now is definitely the time to hear many lovely birdsongs. It is easy perhaps to think, ah! that’s a Robin, as we know they have a tuneful song. However, have a good look and you may be surprised.

The Dunnock, another unobtrusive little brown bird with a lovely sweet warble of a song. Often mistaken for a warbler.

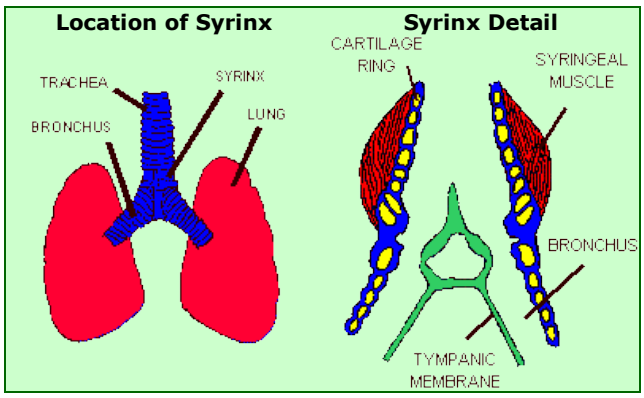
The Wren, yet another little brown bird but what a song! It trills and trembles and explodes with a loud full-throated warble with lots of fast, ringing tones.

The Goldfinch, much more noticeable this chap. They have a beautiful liquid, lilting, musical song which is very noticeable at this time year.

All these birds can be confused with warblers unless you have a good look at them. We take our more common birds for granted and are often surprised by their songs. So, keep your ears and eyes open.

This next bit is on the scientific side but fascinating. We assume that birds have vocal chords like us, but no, they do not, so how on earth can they produce such wonderful sounds.

How Do They Sing? A bird's vocal cord, or syrinx, is simpler than that found in humans. Instead of being located in the larynx (Adam's apple) at the top of the wind-pipe (trachea), it is located at the bottom, much closer to the lungs. The avian larynx at the top of the trachea does not serve any purpose in vocalisation and only prevents food and water from entering the lungs.



Sound is generated when air flowing through the narrow syringeal passage causes the tympanic membrane to vibrate in the same way a drum skin vibrates when struck. The muscles alter the tension of the tympanic membrane, like tightening a drum skin, and this alters the frequency or pitch of the notes. The position of the syrinx, at the top of the two bronchi, means that birds can sing two different notes simultaneously. The reason a bird a small as the Wren sings so loudly is because the syrinx is a resonant cavity which maintains or amplifies the notes.

And we think the human body amazing.

WILDLIFE EVENING

We had 'Mercia's Wonderful Wildlife' evening on the 16th and very interesting it was. Especially as we looked at what had been recorded on the wildlife camera last year. We saw a cheeky Wood Mouse stealing all the bait from a footprint trap. It actually returned every three minutes until it had had all the food. A Hedgehog having a good snuffle around. A Wood Mouse walking off and a Worm seeming to be waving it goodbye, trying to work out if it was two worms or two ends of the same one! Charles Darwin commented that worms are the most important animals in Britain. We also caught a large centipede walking along the underside of the pontoon. It really is surprising what is going on in the middle of the night. But perhaps the biggest surprise we got was one of the Fox, which we know to be about, but in the background was another pair of eyes closer to the ground. What on earth?

Well the next recording answered that, as we filmed a Badger lumbering along and having a good snuffle about. We could not believe our eyes, as far as we know this is the first clue that Badgers are even here. It or they returned three times during that night at about 1-2 hourly intervals. Perhaps they are using it as a thoroughfare as we have no other evidence of them. It was certainly an eyeopener and everyone was delighted with the films.

As well as wildlife film we also had a session of dissecting owl pellets, which as usual had all the participants having a second childhood moment.

It is definitely a fascinating thing to do and I had a lot of questions which I could not answer fully, such as how often do owls produce pellets? So after a bit of research this is what I found out.

Owls form the pellets gradually as the soft tissues of their prey are dissolved. The formation of a pellet is generally complete a few hours after an owl eats. An owl does not regurgitate the pellet immediately, often storing it up to 20 hours first. They have a special pouch near their gizzards to store pellets until regurgitation. When startled, however, owls often regurgitate their pellets immediately, sometimes before they are fully compacted.

Owls use their gizzards to process food items and deliver digestive enzymes and acids. The gizzards have small rocks and sand inside to aid in this process. Bones, teeth and feathers, however, cannot be processed in this way and are dangerous to the lower parts of the owls' digestive tracks. This is why owls must form pellets to be regurgitated, rather than simply passing the indigestible materials through the rest of their digestive tracts to be excreted.

Most owls produce one or two pellets a day, and these are usually found at roost sites. When fresh, Barn Owl pellets are wet and black. Those lying undisturbed in dry places (e.g. outbuilding or dry tree cavity) usually take about 2 years to fall apart. When e use them to dissect they are dry, firm and not at all nasty to handle. The best ones come from Barn Owls as they are found mostly found under cover. Pellets from Tawny's, Little owls etc. often disintegrate quickly when exposed to the elements.

What actually comes out of one pellet is amazing. All the pellets we had that night had at least three skulls and associated bones and fur.

Everyone totally engrossed and below the contents of a pellet showing how much fur there is.

NATURE QUIZ

The last quiz of the season was held on March 29th and run by the Nature Society. We also had a raffle with lots of lovely prizes. The grand total of £84 was raised for our chosen charities. So many thanks to those who came along and those who donated prizes. A good night was had by all.

There were questions on collective nouns, football team names, U.K. places and music as well as many other topics. One way or another they all had a link to animals, birds etc.

Wood Cranesbill

Wood Sage

All plants are chosen to attract and encourage insects, bees, butterflies and to give a long flowering period. With plans afoot to also sow wild flower seed by the footpath we hope we to see a colourful display in a few months' time simply buzzing with insects. Which in turn will of course attract insectivores and so the cycle goes on.

WILD FLOWER PLANTING

A number of wild flowers have been planted along the side of the footpath from FB1. This area was just where the soil had been put from construction of the path. Being poor quality, it is ideal for native wild plants which do not like fertile soil.

Some of those planted are English Bluebells (which probably will not flower this year),

Betony

Yellow Archangel

Winter Aconite

Greater Stitchwort

LATEST NEWS

Brimstone butterflies both male & female seen by FB1 26.03.18

Green woodpecker constantly calling (laughing) 26.03.18

Chiff chaff in full voice again.

There has been a reported sighting of a Barn Owl quartering the weather station field.

On returning to the boat after the quiz on the 29th a Tawny Owl was calling from across the fields.

The Mute swans are busy getting ready for nesting again but seem undecided which nest to use. They are on their usual island but to date have tried making four nests.

Everyone complains about the mess the geese make but there was a program on BBC4 recently about Superbugs v antibiotics. A group is actually experimenting with, wait for it! Goose poo. Apparently, it contains a parasitic virus and bacteria and the virus works on killing the bacteria. When the virus is extracted and treated it actually kills MRSA. Of course, there are many hoops to jump through and funding to be found before it would be viable.
Amazing what the natural world has in store.