

WILDFLOWERS • ABERNETHY • REVIVE OUR WORLD • VAGRANT BIRDS

NATURE'S HOME • SPRING/SUMMER 2021

Nature's Home

THE RSPB MAGAZINE • SPRING/SUMMER 2021

BIG GARDEN BIRDWATCH RESULTS



HATCHED

FOLLOW BABY BIRDS' LIVES FROM EGG TO ADOLESCENCE



WHY MINSMERE'S
ICONIC AVOCETS
FACE A NEW
THREAT



giving
nature
a home

MEET THE KEYSTONES • GARDEN BIRD GUIDE • YOUNG ACTIVISTS

Nature's Home

THE RSPB MAGAZINE • WINTER/SPRING 2021

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THE SCOOP ON SPOONBILLS

Why they're making
a magnificent comeback



giving
nature
a home

“The coming year will be crucial in our fight for nature, with global summits on biodiversity and on climate. We need an ambitious global deal to save the planet and safeguard our future. Nature deserves no less.”

Beccy Speight, page 7

Wild about JANUARY

Look for flocks of linnets on farmland.



Get up at first light to see barn owls in daylight.



Look out for scarce ducks such as smew.



If snow falls, head out early to look for tracks.



Seek early primroses in gardens and woods.



NATURE NOTES NICOLA CHESTER

Take a close look

There is beauty to behold in the everyday if you seek it out.



We are a little changed since this time last year, when the losses, sacrifices, restrictions and disappointments of a global pandemic were unimaginable. We've become more aware of our surroundings and local communities and are more appreciative of what really matters: the everyday extraordinariness of noticing.

This time of year, I love starting the day outside with a mug of tea, watching the steam curl, rise and evaporate like mirror writing against the late, warming sunrise. There are moments where I've watched its plumes mirrored in the breath purred from a singing wren on the shed roof, or from a crack in the gatepost from which a troupe of ladybirds emerged from hibernation. Moments like that set you up for the week; the world becomes a sort of poem, condensing on air.

It's not always the grand spectacles that affect us, or are even available to us. The pandemic has made us look locally, and environmental responsibility bids us consider longer journeys. The looking, the noticing becomes more personal.

Gilbert White, the evergreen (would be 300-year-old) parson-naturalist, has grown his fanbase this year. It already encompassed Charles Darwin, David Attenborough and Chris Packham. Incapacitated by (coach) travel sickness, he was restricted to observing his natural parish in great detail and his observations revealed groundbreaking discoveries about everything from earthworms to bird migration.

To note what is on your doorstep is a powerful act of mindfulness and a way to belong. It might be the timing of the daily gull commute, or the tenacity of a wild pavement plant growing against the bus stop. To acknowledge these things, with all your senses, makes them part of you, and you part of them. Nature is us, here, right now. We need it and it needs us. It is why we find birdsong, unrolling the coming spring, so beautiful and moving, and not just a biological function of survival in another species.

We must strive to notice, more. We are living half a life if we don't, and that's never going to help the state we're in. We must be more Gilbert.



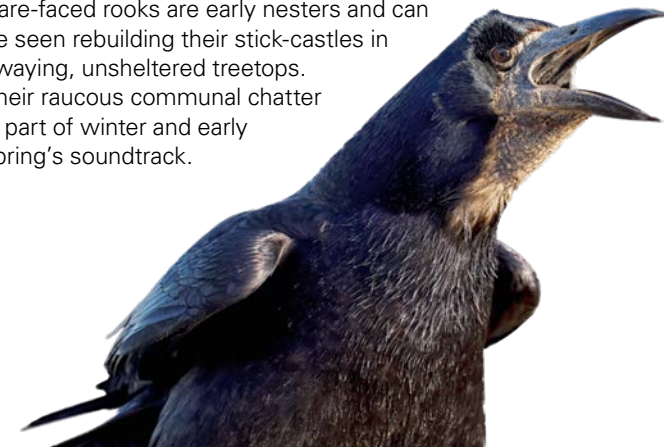
Nicola Chester lives in Wessex with her husband, three children and dog. nicolachester.wordpress.com or Twitter [@nicolawriting](https://twitter.com/nicolawriting)

THINGS TO SEE

Rooks

*Over the land freckled with snow half-thawed
The speculating rooks at their nests cawed
And saw from elm-tops, delicate as flowers of grass,
What we below could not see, winter pass.*

Bare-faced rooks are early nesters and can be seen rebuilding their stick-castles in swaying, unsheltered treetops. Their raucous communal chatter is part of winter and early spring's soundtrack.



EVENTS BIG GARDEN BIRDWATCH

Join the Big Garden Birdwatch 2021 from your garden (see page 29 for your guide). It only takes an hour, and helps conservation scientists to work out which birds need most help, and where. We're also planning a series of Covid-safe events on some of our reserves – so head on out to join the fun and learn something new! Visit rspb.org.uk/events to find one near you.

rspbShop.co.uk

Big Garden Birdwatch best buys



CATWATCH CAT DETERRENT
Keep your garden birds safe with this clever, harmless ultrasonic cat deterrent that runs off batteries or mains. **From £55.99**



MUG & COFFEE
Buy the 2021 Big Garden Birdwatch mug and get a bag of free shade-grown coffee! Add both to your basket and the coffee will go through free. **£9**



WINDOW BIRD FEEDER
Bring your garden birds right up close to you with this clever window-mounted bird feeder. Tough, clear and easy to clean. **£10.99**

SKILLS PHOTOGRAPHY

Garden birds

The Big Garden Birdwatch is a fascinating citizen science project, but it can also be a great time to take stunning photographs. Here are my top tips for capturing your garden visitors.

Food

Placing food out for birds can entice them into your garden and lure them into a more photogenic area. If your garden has a particularly nicely lit area, with soft morning or afternoon sunshine, then you may want to consider moving your feeders there. The same goes for an area that is more natural-looking or less cluttered; feel free to move the food around as the day goes on.



Nuthatch

Perches

Once your feeders are in a good place then try placing beautiful-looking perches next to your bird feeder. This allows you to photograph the birds on something natural, rather than on the feeder itself. Make sure to choose a perch of suitable dimensions for them to happily sit on and also think about your backgrounds – a diffused and natural-coloured background works well, as does a perch that complements the background colour.

Use existing props

Photograph your garden birds on what is already in your garden, putting them into context with their surroundings, whether that be on some guttering, the shed roof, the fence or even a garden spade.

Weather

There really is no bad weather to photograph your garden birds in. So come rain, sun or even snow, get out there and create images! Rain can add something to

an image; shoot against a dark background so the rain shows up well and slow your shutter speed right down to capture longer streaks. If we are lucky we might get snow. Think about capturing a familiar species such as a robin in a pure white world.

Use your house or a shed as a hide

Garden birds are often tamer than birds in more wild places, but that doesn't necessarily mean you can stand outside in plain sight without them flying off! Make use of shooting out of one of your windows, just make sure to position your feeders close enough and think about your backgrounds. You can also consider using something such as a shed, shooting from the doorway or a window using some camouflage material with a hole cut out for your lens. The great

thing about a shed is that if it's been in your garden for years, the birds will already be used to it.

Bathing birds

Birds will predominantly be coming into your garden to feed, but they may also visit for other reasons. Make sure you have a bird bath topped up with fresh water for bathing shots. Or, if you prefer something more natural, have a regularly filled puddle or even a reflection pool. Build it at eye level (on a table) to get perfect reflections.

Look out for behaviours

Birds will often squabble over prime feeding perches on the bird feeders, offering a great chance to capture birds in flight and birds fighting, so be prepared for these sort of disputes. Make sure to use a fast shutter speed to capture the action sharply, but don't be afraid to be creative – a slow shutter speed can also show the dramatic movement of the birds.



Blackbird



Goldfinch



Ben Andrew is an award-winning wildlife photographer. These are his photos.

Will it be a waxwing winter? Watch berry-laden trees.



See marsh harriers skimming over wetlands.



The first sunny days of the year may tempt out water voles.



Clouded drab moths should be on the wing at the end of the month.



Enjoy the humble crocus on a spring walk.



SECRET LIVES DOMINIC COUZENS

Sleeping winter wildfowl and waders

On winter days, you may find a surprising number of water birds simply snoozing. Why are they asleep so much of the day?

We tend to think of birds as fast-moving organisms, with lightning quick reactions, astonishing flying skills and impatient demeanours.

However, if you visit a nature reserve and look out of a hide at almost any time of day – especially one overlooking a lake, marsh or estuary – you will be surprised how many individuals seem to be not doing anything at all.

Even on a cold winter's day, gulls, ducks and waders may be standing still, head tucked on to the breast or back, or floating motionless on the water, apparently asleep.

Cormorants might be drying their wings, and herons might be standing upright, hunched and with an expression apparently casting disdain on life itself.

What are these birds doing? Are they resting? Why aren't they feeding? Don't they have pressing matters to attend to?

There are several reasons why birds sleep during the day, and the most obvious is that some preferentially feed at night.

Take the pochard, for example, a diving duck that seems to be forever slumbering on freshwater lakes. In the winter, especially, it will often commute at dusk to feeding sites full of bottom-growing vegetation and attendant invertebrates, which it can presumably graze upon without

looking in the darkness.

Lapwings are also common night-feeders; in winter on moonlit nights, they may feed all night long, searching the soil for earthworms and insects, some of which they detect by sound.

Wigeons and other ducks also commonly feed at night. They do this to avoid disturbance from people and, in the case of lapwings, to reduce food-stealing by gulls.

Another reason why birds loaf during the day is the state of the tide. Many birds wintering on estuaries depend on intertidal mud for their food, and if the foraging grounds are covered by the high tide, they simply rest to save energy, often in tight flocks which may create their own microclimate.

Yet another reason for daytime roosting is a surprising one. Some birds such as herons, cormorants and some birds of prey can obtain all they need for the day in one (or two) short feeding sessions. A good fishy meal at dawn means that a heron can loaf around and do nothing except preen for many hours. Perhaps it is doing crosswords in its head all the time, but nobody knows!



Dominic Couzens is a wildlife writer and tour leader living in Dorset.

DESIGNED BY NATURE

Curlew

Roosting birds tuck their heads on to their backs.

The bill is usually immersed in the back feathers, preventing heat being lost through the mandibles.

Many birds, including ducks and gulls, sleep with **one half of the brain active**, the other resting.

The resting position keeps the eyes clear. Sleeping birds constantly **open their eyes**, "peeking" every few seconds to check for danger.

Many birds have **denser feathering** in winter.

Roosting birds face into the wind to avoid their **feathers ruffling**.

Feathers themselves are in several layers, including layers of down over the skin. They provide exceptionally good for insulation, keeping the bird's body at a high temperature inside.

Birds often rest on **one leg**, while the other is tucked into the plumage. This prevents heat loss through one bare leg.

The warm arteries travelling towards the legs briefly run parallel to the veins leaving the legs. This counter-current ensures that much of the arterial **heat transfers to the veins** before reaching the legs, thereby keeping heat within the bird's body.

DID YOU KNOW

Many birds sleep in flocks. Experiments show that wakefulness is catching. Individuals don't just scan for danger, they also scan to watch how vigilant their neighbours are.

rspbShop.co.uk

BOOKSHELF



■ *The Consolation of Nature: Spring in the time of Coronavirus* **Michael McCarthy, Jeremy Mynott and Peter Marren** £14.99

This lovely nature diary evokes the three authors' once-a-day walks through last spring's lockdown, which opened their eyes to the nature around them. One author even discovered a previously undiscovered woodland near the home where he'd lived for 25 years! This book reminds us how to look, listen, learn, flourish and just be with nature.



■ *Back to Nature: How to Love Life - and Save It* **Chris Packham and Megan McCubbin** £20

Springwatch's familiar pover-duo kept busy during lockdown creating this exploration of UK nature and how we connect with it. With uplifting stories, discoveries and experience, it's an inspiring way to move forward from 2020.

THINGS TO SEE

Busy blackbirds

Male blackbirds are busy marking the boundaries of their territories. In a built-up environment, watch for their low, head-down runnings in straight lines like linesmen. They will use path edges, walls and shed roofs to mark out their spaces and patrol it, seeing off any other males that step over those lines, with shrill whistles.

DID YOU KNOW

Blackbirds have declined by 15% in the past 40 years.



THINGS TO SEE

Coltsfoot flowers

The bright yellow stubby-stencil brushes of coltsfoot flowers are an early spring delight. On reddish, scaly stems, the flowers appear (like blackthorn) well before the leaves. From the daisy family, the stems bow like umbrella handles before straightening and opening up to the sun. Monty Don described them perfectly, as 'stargazies'.



Tawny owl chicks leave the nest and start 'branching' up to a week before they can fly.

BABY BOOM

With the bird breeding season in full swing, **Mike Unwin** looks at youngsters' perilous and exhilarating worlds.



There's no ignoring it. Scruffy, squawking and squatting on the pavement: a baby herring gull. Its parents' piercing cries ring out overhead. What happens now?

If, like me, you live in a seaside town, this scenario may be familiar. From late June, these unkempt urchins appear in force, waddling over roofs and sometimes crash-landing among us. And it's not only baby gulls. Youngsters of many species are making their first inept sorties into our world, from starlings on the patio to fluffy ducklings on the park pond. Faced with such apparent helplessness, it is tempting to get involved. But before we interfere, we need to understand what's happening.

BABY STEPS

The process through which a bird leaves the nest is called fledging – thus, a juvenile that has recently left is known as a fledgling. Most fledglings are barely smaller than their parents, but are easy to distinguish by their scruffy plumage, stubby wings and tail, and dull colours. It is also clear from their begging and fluttering behaviour that these youngsters are still far from the finished article.

For many fledglings, it takes a day or so after leaving the nest before their flight

Herring gull chicks hatch fully feathered and mobile. They may leave the nest after just a few days, but won't roam far.

feathers are developed enough for their first, wobbly flight. For some, flying is a prerequisite for leaving: blue tit fledglings usually have a predator-detering sheer drop outside their nest hole so must be able to flutter to the nearest branch. Before they leave, they've been flapping their tiny wings to build up strength. When the moment comes, typically early in the morning, they flutter out one by one to take their chances.

BRINGING UP BABY

The speed of the fledging process is impressive. When the chicks hatched two or three weeks earlier, they were blind, naked, and wholly reliant upon their parents – typically, the female keeping them warm while the male brought in food. They grew quickly, soon opening their eyes and acquiring their fluffy 'natal down'. By the time they were big enough to leave, staying behind was no longer an option. The nest

"Fledglings are easy to distinguish by their scruffy plumage and dull colours."

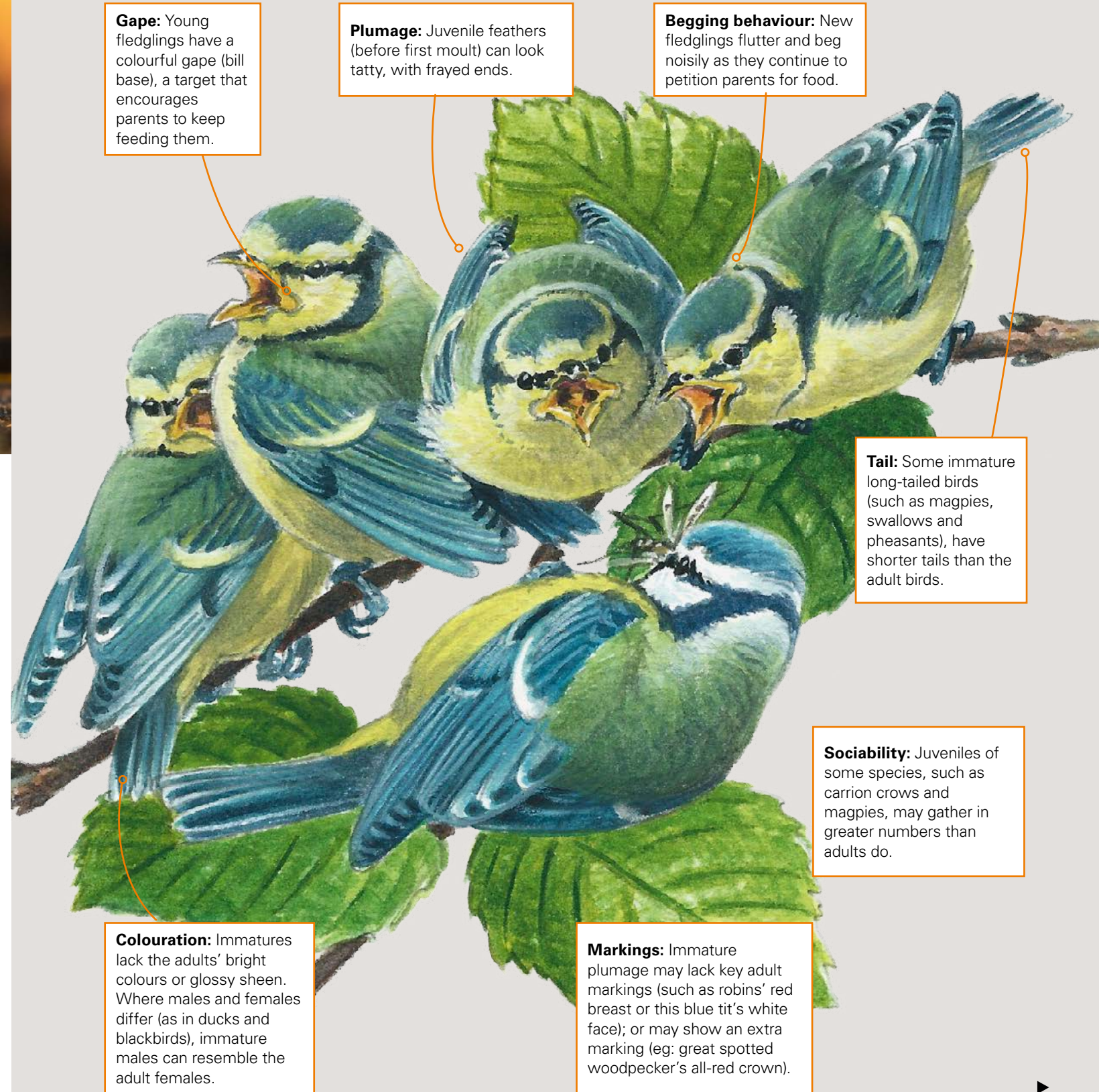
had become too cramped, smelly and parasite-infested. Besides, their exhausted parents wanted them out: they had stopped the food parcels and were calling to them enticingly from outside the nest.

This development strategy – remaining in the nest from naked hatchling to feathered fledgling – is typical of many bird groups, including songbirds, pigeons and raptors. Such species are termed 'altricial'. Others, however, take a different approach. Wildfowl, gamebirds, waders and other ground-nesters are termed 'precocial' birds. Their chicks hatch with eyes open and a covering of camouflage down, ready to rumble and raring to go. Within 24 hours of hatching they are out of the nest, running or swimming behind their parents. They are still much smaller than the adult birds, however. They are vulnerable, and it will be another two weeks or so before they can fly or stay warm by themselves.

Photo: Richard Bowler (rspb-images.com). Illustration: Mike Langman (rspb-images.com)

DESIGNED BY NATURE FLEDGLINGS

As youngsters leave their nests, they appear alongside their parents. But which is which? These blue tits offer some clues.



Gape: Young fledglings have a colourful gape (bill base), a target that encourages parents to keep feeding them.

Plumage: Juvenile feathers (before first moult) can look tatty, with frayed ends.

Begging behaviour: New fledglings flutter and beg noisily as they continue to petition parents for food.

Tail: Some immature long-tailed birds (such as magpies, swallows and pheasants), have shorter tails than the adult birds.

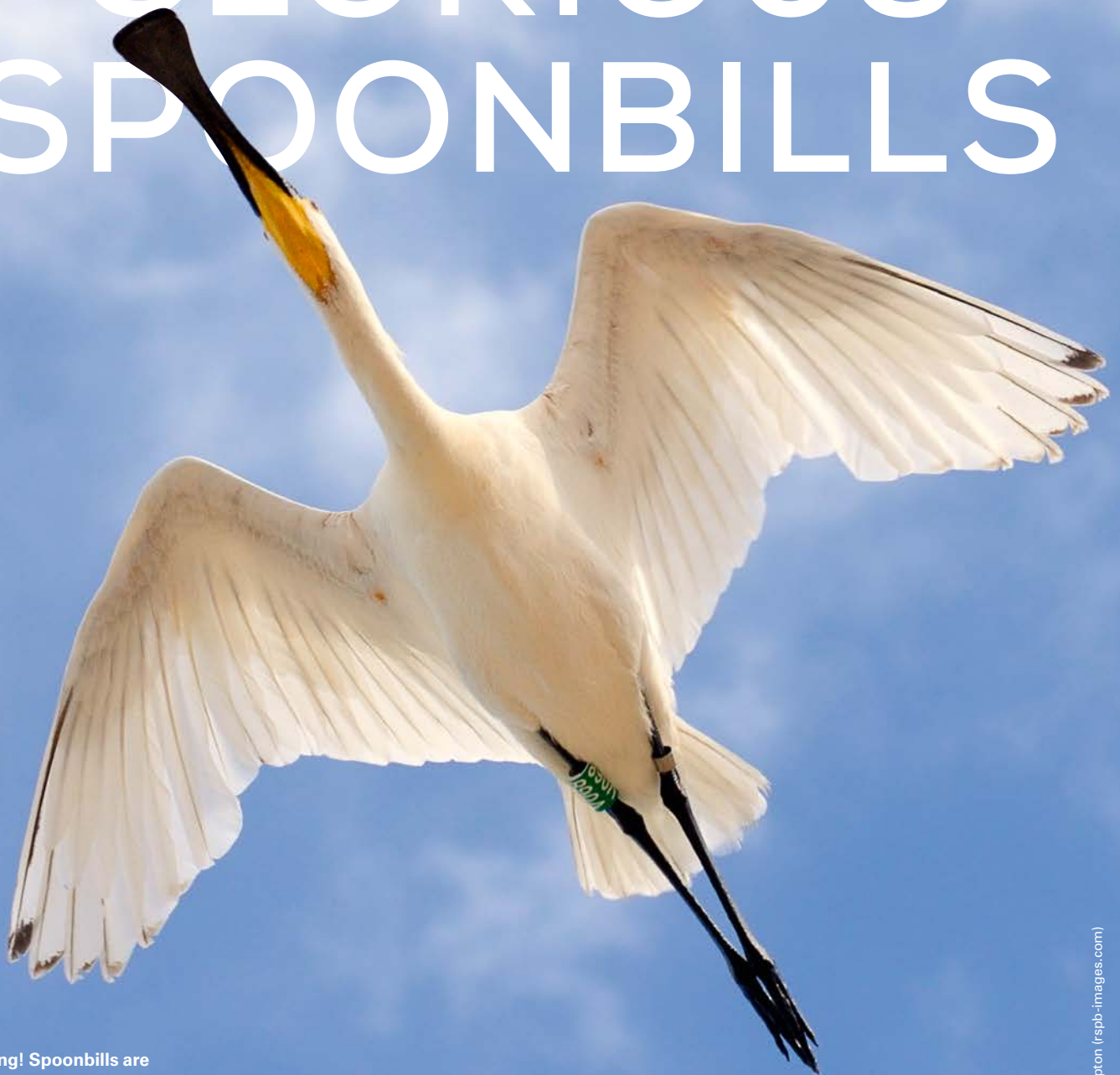
Sociability: Juveniles of some species, such as carrion crows and magpies, may gather in greater numbers than adults do.

Colouration: Immatures lack the adults' bright colours or glossy sheen. Where males and females differ (as in ducks and blackbirds), immature males can resemble the adult females.

Markings: Immature plumage may lack key adult markings (such as robins' red breast or this blue tit's white face); or may show an extra marking (eg: great spotted woodpecker's all-red crown).

After a 300-year absence, spoonbills are returning to our shores. **Dominic Couzens** reveals how your support of conservation work has helped them – and explains the purpose of that cutlery-shaped bill...

GLORIOUS SPOONBILLS



Incoming! Spoonbills are recolonising the UK, returning to breed in wetlands after three centuries' absence.

Photo: Nick Upton (rsfb-images.com)

August 1521, and Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, being at the very height of his powers as Henry VIII's right-hand man, attended a banquet in King's Lynn, Norfolk. Among the recorded delicacies brought to his table were 10 cygnets, three bitterns, 13 plovers – and two tender spoonbills.

Back then, in the 16th century, spoonbills were a familiar sight in parts of the UK, having been present since at least Anglo-Saxon times. There was even a colony at Fulham, in Middlesex, just down the Thames from Wolsey's Hampton Court Palace. The following century, however, brought widespread drainage of the bird's habitat, including the Fens, as well as continued hunting for the pot. The population crashed – and the last recorded nesting was at Trimley in Suffolk in 1668. For more than 300 years, not a single spoonbill chick was raised in Britain.

Then, in the 1980s, something extraordinary began, the effects of which we still see today. Birds with long legs, and

usually with white plumage, suddenly started to march into the UK from the near continent. They liked it here and stayed. Little egrets were the trailblazers, first nesting successfully in 1996, rapidly expanding and now with a population of about 1,000 pairs. More recently cattle egrets have colonised (first breeding in 2008 and expanding) and so have great white egrets (2008). There are inklings that purple herons and little bitterns may follow. With some help, cranes are also thriving, and introduced white storks may follow in those tall, elegant footsteps.

RETURN OF THE SPOONIES

“But what people don't realise,” says Graham White, the RSPB's Head of Ecology, “is that spoonbills almost beat little egrets to it. They attempted to breed in eastern England way back in 1997, and there have been sporadic attempts in several places since.” In 2010, a regular colony was firmly established at Holkham National Nature Reserve in Norfolk.

“As egrets have gained the headlines, spoonbills have also been quietly attempting to recolonise,” says Graham.

2020 might have held little cheer for humankind, but it was a breakout year for breeding spoonbills in the UK. Not only has the Holkham population thrived, with 28 pairs producing 56 young, but they have also bred successfully on two RSPB reserves. Six pairs produced three young at Fairburn Ings in North Yorkshire, and three pairs produced four young at Havergate Island in Suffolk. The Havergate birds are perhaps especially poignant, located just a few miles – if 350 years – away from the lost Trimley colony.

It seems that the march of the long-legged birds gathers pace every year. It is great news for birdwatchers and birds alike. But what is behind this Glorious Revolution, this expansion of so many species on to our islands?

“Many people immediately latch on to climate change as the explanation,” says Jo Gilbert, RSPB's Deputy Director of Conservation Programmes. “But it is more

complicated than that. Milder winters undoubtedly help large wading birds to survive here into the spring, but there are other factors at play.”

One of these is that, as far as spoonbills are concerned, the increase in the UK is directly related to the bird's fortunes on the continent, where populations in northern Europe, especially the Netherlands, have significantly increased. Many, if not most, of our colonising birds are thought to originate from here. Another bloodless revolution has therefore reached our shores from Holland (in the original Glorious Revolution, William of Orange was invited to be king in 1688).

“But we shouldn't overlook the fact that much of the spoonbill's recent success is down to conservation work,” comments Jo Gilbert. “Spoonbills have particular ecological requirements, it has taken some time to get this just right.”

BEAK UNIQUE

Anybody who has watched spoonbills in the wild can see that they are unusual.

Spring is a great time to watch spoonbills sparring for mates and territory.

“Spoonbills feed by sweeping their bill – which is kept slightly open – from side to side in the shallows.”





André introduces Adrian to the famous Square Garden at Waltham Place, which has all the features that garden wildlife loves: abundant plants, water, shelter, flowers, diversity.

Many of the plants seed themselves into cracks in the paving in a glorious free-for-all.

What were once formal ponds are now dragonfly and damselfly heaven in this chemical-free environment.

TOP TIP
Louisa says: "The garden is a dialogue – discover when to stand back, and when to intervene. There's no recipe; it's a conversation."



Floral wonders

Louisa (above) has worked in the ornamental gardens for 16 years. "We try to give people the feeling they're walking through a nature reserve," she says. She does what she calls 'grazing' the borders in summer, lightly editing and dropping the spent material wherever it's cut.

Beautiful collage

Blue cornflowers and reddish Amaranthus combine in a glorious mix (left). Seedheads are left over winter and cut at the very last moment before new growth comes through.

GIVING NATURE A HOME

As one with nature

Adrian Thomas visits a remarkable garden in Berkshire which joins forces with nature to achieve astonishing results.

"Welcome to Waltham Place. We ask that you look with a different eye." So says Strilli Oppenheimer, the renowned conservationist, on her website, to introduce her famous and innovative wildlife-friendly gardens. I was delighted to be invited to come and see them for myself; while they are much bigger than most residential gardens, there is so much we can learn from them to inform our own outside spaces. It was an added privilege to be

allowed to take photos to share with you, because Strilli's philosophy is for her visitors to experience everything with their senses and not through a lens. My guide for the day was André Tranquilini, the estate manager, who – with Strilli's steer – oversees the entire 220-acre farm, woodlands and gardens. Management throughout follows what are called biodynamic principles. The term is sometimes described as 'organic plus', but actually pre-dates

the organic movement. "The health of the land starts in the soil," André explains. "So we nurture it, incorporating a lot of organic matter, and integrating animals, crops and soil as part of a holistic system." I started my visit in the large kitchen garden, which produces masses of fruit and veg for sale in the local community. Every bed, mulched and tended by hand, includes 'diversity islands' of flowers to draw in pollinators and beneficial predatory insects. "This year, the

ladybirds were amazing," André says, "So no problems with aphids!" Next, into the ornamental walled gardens, which date back to the 17th century but were brought right up to date by Dutch garden designer Henk Gerritsen, using his trademark naturalistic style. The Square Garden is perhaps the most iconic image of Waltham Place, with its lookout tower giving panoramic views. On my visit, the beds were alive with all manner of bees, plus comma and peacock butterflies feasting on swathes of herbaceous flowers. You get the feeling the plants are in the act of taking over, self-seeding as they wish in exuberant abandon. Meanwhile, in front of the main house, the long borders have a 'live and let live' lesson for us all in our gardens. The billowing yew hedges either side are festooned with hedge bindweed – on purpose! ▶



Massed effect

This forest of red *Persicaria* and mauve *Veronicastrum*, together with creamy *Polygonum* and common hogweed, was awash with bumblebees when I visited.



TOP TIP
 Many of the veg beds use the 'no dig' method. Just put a thick layer of mulch (such as rotted compost) onto the soil each winter and let nature do the rest.

Home juicer

"Our worm juice is unbelievable!" André says. This, plus worm compost, is produced in an old bathtub (left)!

Happy endings

Companion planting of nectar-and pollen-rich flowers bookend the vegetable plots.

Perfect pitstop

Marjoram, here amid lady's-mantle, is one of the best flowers for nectaring butterflies, such as this peacock (below).



► For most people it is a dreaded weed; here it is embraced.

"Weeds belong in the ecology of the garden," André maintains.

The wildlife at Waltham Place shows how successful the approach is; 564 moth species have been recorded and 73 species of bird breed on the estate. When I visited, butterflies bounced through the borders in numbers you rarely see these days.

"In part this is because there are no chemicals," André explains. "Plus we allow the natural cycles to complete, and only interfere where necessary.

"Our role is to take care of the land and help it reach its full potential, balancing our needs with those of nature." ■

Garden tours and courses are planned at Waltham Place when restrictions ease. Find out more at walthamplace.com

JOBS TO DO THIS SEASON

Adrian's top wildlife gardening jobs for spring into summer, inspired by Waltham Place.

● Make natural fertiliser infusions

Dunk nettle leaves, comfrey or horsetail in water for a few weeks and then dilute the resulting liquid for use on plants. Oh, and use a tight lid as the smell can be quite overpowering!

● Make as much compost as you can

Adré's compost heaps are long piles on the ground, called windrows. In our gardens, the scale may be smaller but the principles are the same – careful mixing of 'green' (leafy) and 'brown' (woody) materials, turned occasionally to add oxygen. If you can, shred the material first to make decomposition speedier and hotter.

● Seek out seedlings

Many of your favourite wildlife plants will have dropped seed around them – learn what they look like when they first germinate and pot them up or transplant them all around the garden.

● Be relaxed about weeds

Yes, some need to go, but there are others that can be tolerated or even welcomed.

● Overall, join forces with nature

Just as at Waltham Place, see what you do as your legacy, your investment for the future.

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Garden ideas 3 ways to help hedgehogs



Brambles hedgehog food + bowl £7.98

Help your hogs build up their strength with this hedgehog food and bowl set.



Hedgehog crossing £12.99

Help keep hedgehogs off the road with safe passage between gardens.



RSPB Spotlight Hedgehogs £12.99

Delve into the life and behaviour of this garden favourite.

Over to you...



DOING YOUR BIT FOR WILDLIFE?

We asked about your homes for nature, their successes and challenges. Here is a selection from the postbag.



Lifeless pond

I inherited a small ornamental pond when I moved to Dorset six years ago, with a few koi and goldfish in it. A year ago, I gave away the fish in the hope that the pond would attract some wildlife, but to date I have seen none and the pond seems dead of all life other than the plants. No bugs, no tadpoles, no dragonflies, no frogs or newts. I have a filter system and a waterfall and there is pondweed. What can I do to bring some life to it? I use no pesticides in the garden and the bank behind the pond is left to grow wild.

Carolyn Summers

Adrian says: Many people are fond of having goldfish in their ponds, but in her mission to attract more wildlife, Carolyn has done the right thing by passing them on – they can Hoover up most aquatic invertebrates and turn ponds into a no-go for other wildlife. However, what she now has is a blank canvas, with the added issue that her pond is under a magnolia tree – shady ponds are typically less rich in wildlife than those in sunnier positions. Nevertheless, the pond looks great – it has plenty of pond plants, the rocky bank beyond has plenty of cover, and so I'm confident that wildlife will colonise. The magic ingredient now is time!

Cutting conundrum

This is the area of my garden lawn that I have left to grow long. It was only started at the beginning of the lockdown. I think it finishes off my wildlife garden nicely – it's been a great addition, and the birds seem to love it. But what do I do next with it? **Kevin Illingworth**

Adrian says: Lawns are often on fertile soil, so with no intervention the grass is likely to grow so tall that it outcompetes any wildflowers there and quite possibly flops over. So, a typical approach would be to cut it in late summer, and then keep mowing as you normally would through autumn, removing all the clippings each time. After a couple of cuts in early spring, it can then be left to grow long again next summer. Keep doing this year after year and the fertility of the lawn should gradually decrease, allowing more wildflowers to flourish.



Gold star

This was a surprise – a goldcrest that visited our birdfeeders for a couple of days. Also, I have managed to photograph a blue tit snipping off the tips of lavender leaves and taking them to the nest box – I've never seen this behaviour



before. I'm out with the camera every day and share my pictures by email with neighbours and family.

Keith Noble

Adrian says: As Keith says, seeing a goldcrest visiting a feeder is incredibly unusual – I have yet to witness it in my garden. However, just as blackcaps, long-tailed tits and siskins have adapted to use feeders in recent times, maybe this pioneering goldcrest will spread the behaviour to others and it will become more frequent! The lavender-snipping blue tit is also fascinating – they are known to bring the tips of aromatic leaves such as ground-ivy and wood sage to their nests as a natural insect repellent but to observe it is very rare.

ARE YOU GIVING NATURE A HOME?



We'd love to hear your stories of what you've been doing to improve your garden for wildlife, or unusual creatures you

have seen there thanks to your efforts. Plus, we're still on the lookout for inspiring wildlife-friendly gardens to feature, large or small, weird or wonderful! Email adrian.thomas@rspb.org.uk.

YOUR WILDLIFE QUESTIONS



with our panel of experts Emily Bignell, Siân Denney and Mey Duek

We are the RSPB's resident Wildlife Team. We come from a variety of backgrounds with knowledge of conservation, animal behaviour and science. We love talking to wildlife enthusiasts, and the quirkiest questions, the better! Write to us at wildlife@rspb.org.uk



IDENTIFY ME
Which bird does this feather come from?

RACHEL ARTHUR

It may be surprising, but this is a great spotted woodpecker feather! The shape of the feather and its pointy tip makes it unique. Although their most common feathers are black with large white spots, some have this pointy shape with warmer coloured spots or barring. This bird was spotted in St David's Head, on the Welsh coast. This is not their usual habitat as woodpeckers are mostly found in areas with lots of trees. Looks like this individual shed this feather while passing through.

Photos: David Tipling (rspb-images.com); Getty Images

I heard there can be nests with both blue tit and great tit eggs. What's going on there?

SCOTT PATTERSON

Studies have shown that a small percentage of great tit and blue tit nests have mixed eggs. Great tits can occasionally take over blue tit nests and make them their own. Some blue tit eggs can remain in the nest or one can sneak in to lay an egg in the great tit nest. This is called interspecific brood parasitism and results in the young from one species being raised by another. Although this has advantages for the parent not having to raise its own offspring, it does create some confusion for the chicks. Most

great tits raised by blue tits live their lives believing they are blue tits, and fail to choose an appropriate mate because of misimprinting. However, blue tits often learn that they cannot mate with the more dominant

great tits and start behaving like a blue tit later on. In this case mate choice is a learned behaviour, rather than an innate one like cuckoos.

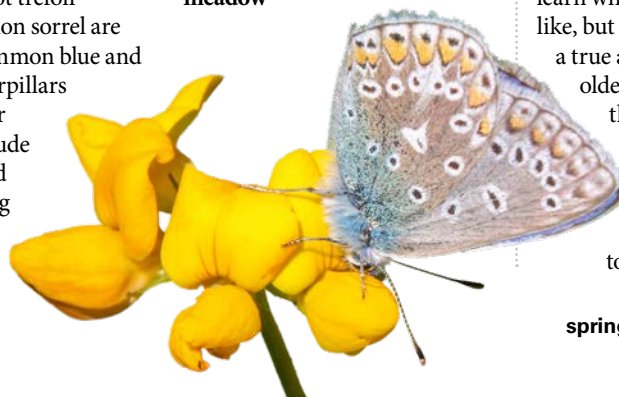


Which wildflower species should I plant?

RESHAUN MUNESHWAR

Wildflowers are an important resource for all wildlife. Bees, for example, will benefit from plants such as bluebells, comfrey, clover and great knapweed. Individual species of butterfly favour different plants, so variety is essential. Birdsfoot trefoil (right) and common sorrel are important for common blue and small copper caterpillars respectively; other good choices include cuckoo flower and clover. Seed-eating birds will be keen to snack

on deadheads in the autumn and winter months, and will benefit from the presence of teasel, burdock, field scabious and great knapweed. See our feature on page 66, or visit rspb.org.uk/startawildflowermeadow



Who teaches the cuckoo to speak 'cuckoo'?

LUNA POTTER

This is a really interesting question! Only sexually mature cuckoos will sing, as the main purpose of this is to attract and locate a mate. However, juvenile birds will practise calling to learn what their 'voice' sounds like, but they would not develop a true adult call until they are older. By calling out to themselves, juvenile birds recognise how a cuckoo 'speaks' and will listen out for this when they are ready to find a mate and breed.

Visit bit.ly/2PB1nZq for our videos answering more of your wildlife questions.



A blackbird chooses nest materials with care and consideration

I've noticed a female blackbird stripping bark from a tree and putting it in the water, going back and forth – why is she doing this?

JAÏS DORCIAC

Blackbirds are well known for practising good hygiene and even more so during the nesting season. This blackbird will be gathering bark for nesting material – by dipping it in water, she is making sure it is clean before constructing her nest. This helps create a safe environment to lay eggs and reduces the risk of harmful pathogens that might affect her chicks' survival.



Willow warbler

How can birds make so many different sounds?

KERRY MOSS

Birds can make more complex sounds in comparison to other animals. Unlike humans, they have a double voice box. The syrinx, the vocal organ of birds, has two pipes, one connected to each lung, which birds use to sing. Humans make sounds using the larynx, which has a single pipe. Birds can create sound from each pipe separately and simultaneously, adding variation to their vocal ability. However, they need lots of practice to use each pipe properly and learning songs takes time. Listen out for young birds who haven't quite got it!

What is bilateral symmetry and why is it important for birds?

JACK LANCASTER

Bilateral symmetry describes the left-right mirror image observed in animals. This is essential for birds as most species use their wings for flying and if one of those wings was larger or smaller than the other, this would cause difficulties during flight and would be a very poor adaptation. Bilateral symmetry is caused by gene expression along the sagittal (longitudinal) plane. This divides the body roughly into left and right halves so that cells develop into an organism that looks 'symmetrical', as we see in birds.

Interestingly, it has been shown that female birds prefer 'more symmetrical' males as this indicates good health, which would be passed on to any offspring.

HOW TO... Help an exhausted bee

A bee's diet comprises of nectar and pollen, so if you come across an exhausted or bedraggled bee, the best thing to do is find a nearby bee-friendly flower to place it on. This will mean that it can get the natural food it needs to restore its energy, and be on its way again as soon as possible. Flowering bee-friendly plants include species such as wild strawberry, sunflower, verbena, cosmos, crocus and geraniums.



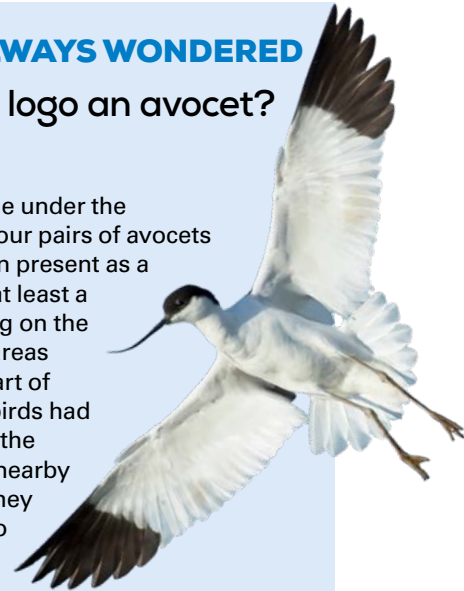
Bees love the sweet nectar of the betony.

THINGS YOU'VE ALWAYS WONDERED

Why is the RSPB's logo an avocet?

ROXANA ALUART

Shortly after Minsmere came under the management of the RSPB, four pairs of avocets – a species that had not been present as a breeding bird in the UK for at least a century – were found nesting on the reserve. Making use of the areas that had been flooded (as part of our WWII defences), these birds had successful broods and over the following years bred at our nearby Havergate Island reserve. They would return to Minsmere to breed in 1963, following the completion of the scrape. Since then, they have bred and dispersed into many areas of the UK and are no longer of serious conservation concern. The RSPB took on the avocet logo in 1970 as recognition of this conservation success. Find out more on page 31.



Name this!

What are these strange little donuts?
Answer on page 98.



Photos: Mike Lane, Richard Brooks, Sue Kennedy, Kevin Sawford, Nick Upton (all rspb-images.com)

BIRDCRIME LIFE ON THE MOORS

Meet the RSPB's Investigations field team emerging from lockdown to help defend our precious moorland birds from illegal killing.

“It’s not a glamorous job”, says Tom Grose. “There’s a lot of waiting around, early starts, and long, sweaty walks with heavy bags. But when you’re on the moor, watching a short-eared owl hunting overhead, that’s pretty special.”

Tom is one of the RSPB’s Investigations Officers who gather evidence of bird of prey persecution to pass to the police.

“Our work is intelligence led,” Tom explains. “The information we receive helps build a picture of what’s going on so that we can target our fieldwork. Much of the job involves surveillance of problem areas – lying in the heather with a camera or installing remote cameras,” he adds. “The ultimate win is for our evidence to help secure a conviction, but that’s rare. We might find bodies or traps, but it’s very hard to catch someone in the act.”

For Tom and other fieldworkers, most of their working life is spent on moors where birds of prey often come into conflict with those managing the land for the commercial shooting of red grouse.

“There are those within the game-shooting industry who aren’t prepared to tolerate birds of prey doing what they do naturally,” explains Tom.

Niall Owen joined the team in April to investigate the problem in Wales.

“Being able to help make a change on the front line was always what I wanted to do,” says Niall. “The signs show that lockdown has been really bad for birds of prey.



RSPB Investigations Officers spend most of their time on moors, watching for evidence of illegal activity such as pole traps or the bodies of birds such as River (below).



It seems that some people have been killing birds under the impression that they’re not likely to get caught.”

This is a job of extremes, with moments of elation followed by crushing disappointments – finding an abandoned nest, or learning that a court case has been discontinued. “Everyone has their own ways of dealing with tough moments,” says Tom. “But going through these things together helps you bond – a bit like being part of a competitive sports team.

“The highs for me are the variety and being able to spend work time outdoors,” he continues. “We sometimes have to sleep on the moor, so we see some amazing sunsets and sunrises. And being able to visit a hen harrier or goshawk nest to install cameras under license, coming eyeball to eyeball with an amazing raptor, is a real privilege.”

Is the work dangerous?

“You’ve got to make sure you don’t put yourself in danger,” Tom explains. “The best way to do that is to avoid confrontation, which means avoiding being seen. It’s the same as when you’re trying to monitor a wild bird: try to be as unobtrusive as possible. You have to keep

it in the back of your mind that you’re dealing with armed individuals, but for me, the biggest risk is falling over on the moor!”

Over autumn and winter, fieldworkers will be monitoring hen harrier roosts, ready to film anyone who may be disturbing them, and following up on reports of missing birds.

“Last year, the satellite tag on a hen harrier named River stopped transmitting,” says Tom. “We visited a site where she had been regularly roosting and, just before dusk, a man carrying a shotgun appeared and sent his dogs back and forth through the roost; we think he was attempting to flush the birds. Months later, we got a signal to show that River was dead. So we went out with the police and were able to find her body – she had been shot. Although it’s tragic to find a shot bird, this sort of result proves what we know is happening to harriers.

“Self-regulation within the industry has failed,” Tom concludes. “We’ll get legislative changes only if there’s the political will to do so – and that’s influenced by public opinion. So we will continue to bring raptor persecution to the public’s attention. The more people who know and care, the closer we come to achieving meaningful change.” ■

→ HELP FIGHT BIRDCRIME

There are lots of things you can do to help protect upland birds from persecution, from reporting suspicious activity to becoming a Bird of Prey Defender. Find out more at rspb.org.uk/birdcrime