



Bristol Naturalists' Society

Registered Charity No. 235494

Wildlife News: Week 45 – November 11th 2007

Weather

Yet another warm dry week dominated by high pressure, which has been in control since August 22nd. Average temperature for the week was 12.9C, just above the recent average for this week, and the year to date figure is 15.4C and falling slowly. The last twelve months figure is steady at 14.7C. The November average so far is well above normal, so we may be in for a colder second half.

1mm of rain fell in the week, so the figure for the year is only 120mm above average. The record for the driest autumn is held by 1978 with an average of 24mm a month. So far this year the average is 39 mm, so we won't break any records.

The winds have become stronger, and blown leaves off many species. For a while the Norway Maples were a spectacular gold, and in the Avon Gorge many Silver birches are standing out gold as well. Oak trees have generally turned, but retain their leaves, and Hazel leaves are mostly still green. Turkey Oak and Sessile Oak tend to keep their leaves green for the longest period.

But it has been an early autumn, with the average of 15 days early being maintained.

Plants in Flower

A combination of very warm spring and cool summer has meant that many species have had an exceptionally long flowering period this year, and an amazing number are still in flower. I have recorded 91 wild species still flowering since Nov 1, and am still finding new ones every time I go out. I am attempting to create a last flowering date for as many species as I can, to complement the first flower date that I got for 400 species in the spring. On the Downs there were 40 species in flower this weekend, including several which have come back into flower such as Ivy Broomrape, Clary, Rock Rose and Mouse-ear Hawkweed.

Also Stinking Hellebore is in flower, as is Corsican Hellebore. This first is a wild plant widely planted in gardens and the second a garden plant that has not established itself in the wild. These count as the first flower of spring. Hazel catkins are already a centimetre long, and the top shoot of daffodil bulbs has appeared in my lawn. Spring is here already.

The Severn Barrage part 4. Flood control.

The impact of the barrage on flooding is a complex issue. There are two sides to it- the danger of flooding from the sea and rising sea levels, and the danger of flooding from the land and high rivers levels. Putting a barrage across the estuary should protect those above the barrage from tidal surges or the impact of sea level rise, provided that is part of the plan, which at present it does not appear to be. But there is a downside. The existence of the barrage may cause the tides seaward of the barrage to be higher, because of the inevitable constriction caused by the barrage. The modelling that has been done surprisingly suggests there will be a tidal reduction, but this would appear intuitively to be wrong. The worst affected

area of a higher tide would be the whole of Bridgewater Bay, which might also silt up more rapidly as a result of the construction of the barrage. This might mean massive new flood defences all around the bay, which is, of course, also crucial to the drainage of the Somerset levels. But there are also problems upstream of the barrage. Because there would be no low tide the foundations of the existing sea walls would be permanently below sea level, and if the wall needed renewal that would add very significantly to the costs. The maximum tide level inside the basin would be lower than at present, and the impact of waves would be much less, because they would be generated over a far smaller area, so that there would be no future danger of the existing sea walls being breached in a major storm, as has happened in recent years. But because the tidal range would be halved, the amount of time that storm waves were attacking a specific level of wall would be greater, which might cause far more rapid damage than at present.

The problem of draining flood water from the land is even more difficult. At present some 800 square km of low level land is drained by gravity at low tide through flap-valves. It is thought that there are 100 of these, and they work very effectively in almost all situations, but, because there will be no low tide in the basin, some or perhaps all of them would be rendered ineffective or partially effective only. To insure that the risk of flooding was no greater than at present all would have to be converted to pumped systems rather than gravity systems. The cost of this is estimated at £62m, a fleabite compared with the cost of the barrage, but no estimate is made of the energy costs of pumping, which essentially reduce the value of the barrage. A pumped system would allow drainage of excess water 24 hours a day, which might be more effective at removing land water than the present system, but it would have to have enough capacity to deal with extreme events. Bristol itself is at risk because the River Frome, which floods every time there is a heavy rainfall on the Cotswolds, drains through a flap-valve at Sea Walls, via a tunnel running under the Downs. If that filled with water or became blocked the Frome would overflow across the centre of the city. It has been suggested that the River Axe should be diverted south of Brean Down so that its outflow, which drains a huge area, would not have to be pumped but could continue to use the gravity system. No estimate is made of the costs of this.

BTO Atlas.

The New Atlas has got off to a splendid start. Nationally over 1000 tetrads have been surveyed, and over a million birds of 290 species counted. Locally almost 60% of the 399 tetrads now have observers and one in ten have had their first winter survey. If you want to see the full national details and maps go to www.birdatlas.net. And if you want to participate either by surveying a tetrad or simply by sending in observations follow the instructions on the website and get involved.

Bird numbers are still very low in gardens and one reason became apparent this week. The BTO's Constant Effort Survey monitors the success of the breeding season among small passerines. It was clearly a disaster, and this is unsurprising given the exceptionally cool wet period from May to July. Blue Tits are down 45% and Great Tits 33%. Other species such as Finches, Wrens, Blackbirds may also have been badly affected, but are not monitored by this survey. It is probable that the low numbers in gardens represent a steep fall in common bird populations. This is not a disaster, as the greater quantity of food available will mean good survival for those that remain, and birds are very good at building their numbers up rapidly again. The cold winters of 1963 reduced some populations by 95%, but numbers were back to normal after a few years. We can now monitor such changes with precision. So don't be surprised if your peanuts are eaten more slowly this winter, but don't stop putting them out.

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