



Bristol Naturalists' Society

Registered Charity No. 235494

Wildlife News: Week 46 – November 18th 2007

Weather.

Until Sunday, another week dominated by high pressure, with three frosts and an average temperature of 9.7C, a little below the recent average for the week. The year to date average is 15.3C and falling, and the figure for the last twelve months is still 14.6C but falling. November average so far 12.2C, still 2 degrees above the long term average for the month. Autumnal average (Sept-Nov) so far is 15.2C, above the average of 14.1C.

8mm fell on Sunday, so nine mm has fallen in November and an autumn total of 126mm, compared with the long term average of average of 87mm for the month and average autumn total of 255mm. This bodes trouble because, although this year's total rainfall is 1036mm, 110mm ahead of the average for this date, a dry autumn and winter, when reservoirs normally fill, creates problems if they are followed by a dry summer. In 1975/6 poor rainfall in October January and February was followed by low rainfall in April and June to August, and this was enough to create a serious drought. Summer rain is absorbed by vegetation and trees transpire tons of water. At the present rate this could be among the ten driest autumns since 1853.

Nature in Avon.

Every year I hope to get the Society's journal out earlier, and every year something happens to delay it. It will be with you by the end of the month, but the Bird Report in a new format will not be delivered until the January bulletin, though copies will reach me in early December. Anyone who has articles they would like to see printed on any natural history subject should contact me. The earlier I receive manuscripts the more likely it is I can get to press earlier in the year. And please do not be shy. Our members have a huge wealth of experience which should be shared.

In particular it helps if records for 2007 are sent in now, for Birds to Harvey Rose, plants to Pam Millman, mammals to David Trump and insects to Ray Barnett, as creating the annual Biota is a huge labour of love by those who do it.

BTO Atlas.

This is going very well. Of the 400 local tetrads we intend to cover 248 are already booked, and 45 have received their first visit. 109 species have been recorded in the region in the first two weeks. It is clear that the numbers of some species are low- especially Blue and Great Tits, and Greenfinches. There are also few Redwings around yet. All this may change in the course of the winter.

Nationally the figures are amazing with 290 species seen, 2.3 m birds counted, and over 2000 tetrads recorded.

The purpose of the Atlas is to describe national distribution and density and to compare it with the Winter Atlas of 1980 and the breeding Atlas of 1990. All records are valuable, and to find out how to help if you are not yet involved go to www.birdatlas.net and follow instructions.

Plants in flower

As I have been walking around the city of Bristol counting birds I have also noted plants in flower. I have found 119 species still in flower since Nov 1, over a quarter of all the plants present in more than 10% of the regions 1-km squares. Because of the combination of an exceptional spring and a cool summer plants have had an exceptionally long flowering season, and I hope to create for all species an accurate first and last flowering date. This would be an easy way to monitor climate change on an annual basis.

Garden birds and Blackcaps.

I have had no reports of over-wintering Blackcaps yet, and numbers at my feeding station are still very low, which is probably the result of the poor breeding season. We will see; but keep a sharp watch for Blackcaps as we have monitored them for over thirty winters.

The Severn Barrage part 5 Navigation.

Were a barrage to be built it would have to have at least two locks in it, a small one for leisure craft to give them access to the Severn, Avon, and the canal system, and a very large one to enable the Avonmouth Cardiff and Newport docks to continue in operation. At present they can handle ships up to 70,000 tons, and they handle annually some 17m tons of goods, 3% of the nation's trade. Avonmouth in particular is the main port of entry for cars, and for 5m tons of Australian coal, which helps keep our power stations in the midlands working. Such a lock would need to be 360m long, 50m wide and 20m deep. Its construction would involve extensive dredging because it could not be put in the main deep channel at present used by ships, as that is where the turbines would be. The plan is for it to be on the Welsh side, which would involve dredging some 18m cubic metres of sand and rock, both for the dock, and for a new navigation channel across what are at present shoals to join the normal deep water channel to Avonmouth. It is likely that these would have to be continuously dredged because the tidal currents in the basin would be different from those at present and much less rapid. There has been no 3D computer modelling yet of what these currents might be. It is possible that a substantial proportion of the estimated 30million tons of mud at present in suspension would settle out.

There are two further problems. Ships would be able to lock in to the upper basin at all states of the tide, whereas at present the biggest ships have to wait for high tide conditions to get in to Avonmouth and Royal Portbury, But because the tidal range would be half that which exists now, and because the highest tide would be lower than the present, the operation of both Portbury and Avonmouth might actually be more restricted than at present, because no tide would ever be as high as the level inside the docks, and all ship movements would involve a great deal of pumping to enable ships to rise to the dock level.

Secondly the Port of Bristol has plans for a new dock to handle the next generation of cargo ship of up to 120,000tons and a 16m draught. This would require both a much larger lock and a deeper channel, and might restrict the times of day or even month when these ships could actually enter the basin. The Barrage proposal would probably render the Port of Bristol's expansion plans impossible.

Two other comments might be made. Firstly the existence of the dock more or less precludes the idea of using the barrage as the basis for a major road or rail link, because either operation would be intermittent, or there would have to be a very high viaduct over the lock, whose cost would be hard to justify. Secondly it might be sensible to abandon the large dock, which would keep the cost of the barrage down, and end the operation of the three ports. Ships could travel further to deliver their coal and cars, and the scrap metal, which is the main export, could be sent out elsewhere. Whether that would be regarded as an advantage of the barrage or not depends on some very complex calculations about size and costs, as well as employment.