



Bristol Naturalists' Society

Registered Charity No. 235494

Wildlife News: Week 16 – April 21st 2008

Weather

What a contrast with last year, when the average temperature for this week was 18.0C. This year it has been 11.1C, with two frost nights. Last year the average temperature to date was 11.1C. this year it is 9.9C. The Average temperature over the previous twelve months last year was 15.6C, this year, because of last year's cold summer and this years cold April, it is just 14.2C, and falling very fast. The weather has been dominated by an unusual combination of high pressure over Iceland and low pressure in the S Atlantic and over Spain. This has given strong NE and E winds, originating high in the arctic.

It has been a dry week, just 5mm falling, but we are still 100mm ahead of average for the time of year.

Spring events.

Despite the cold conditions, spring has not stopped unrolling, but it has slowed down a lot. There are now 24 spring events on my list that had happened by this date last year, but have not happened yet this year. My calculations of the average date of events suggests that this spring overall is still two days earlier than last year, because it was warmer earlier, but fairly soon the impact of two cold weeks will begin to appear. However it is also the case that it will only take a few warm days, and bright sunshine, for plants to burst into life, because there is now so much more daylight, over 14 hours a day. And the sun gets higher in the sky every day so that the energy plants receive from it grows exponentially.

First flowers.

I have recorded 22 first flower dates in the past week, including Lilac, Horse Chestnut, Hawthorn, Sycamore, Garlic Mustard, Oak, Red Campion, Salad Burnet, and, at the foot of the Gorge, Harebell. Many trees are still leafless, but one Beech has burst into leaf in Clifton, and Lime tree buds are breaking, as are Whitebeam.

There were 62 plants in flower on the Downs this Sunday, only three more than last week, because several have already finished, but that compares with the average since 2002 of 50. Of course last year there were 76 species.

Spring migrants.

This coming week usually sees the peak of migration, and it has certainly been held back by the conditions of the past week. On Sunday Swallows were winging their way northwards across the Downs in Clifton, the first Whitethroats have been sighted and Garden Warblers heard, but both Chiffchaff and Blackcap numbers are still low, and several other warblers have yet to be reported though a Pied Flycatcher has been seen. I suspect that as soon as the wind direction changes there will be a huge rush

Plants that may come into flower this week.

Bugle, Dames Violet, Holly, Elder, Common Poppy, Ragwort, Laburnum, Beech, Leopards Bane, Yellow Flag, Caper Spurge., Rowan, Birds Foot trefoil, Cut-leaf Cranesbill, Rosy Garlic, Welsh Poppy, Herb Paris, Great Celandine, Common Comfrey, Spindle, Pignut, Black Bryony, Whitebeam, Green-winged Orchid, and Early Purple Orchid. These predictions are based on last year's dates. Each week I take the previous week's list, delete those plants I have found in flower, and add from last year's dates. It does help to know what to look for.

Silver changes to gold.

Travelling up the M5 I was struck by the way the silver of Scurvy Grass was being transformed to gold on the central reservation as Oxford Ragwort and Rape took over. This is partly the date, partly presumably the fact that parts of the central reservation are not so salty that they restrict the growth of these two species.

Swifts

Swifts will be with us soon, and we are planning an attempt to survey them by noting down every low-level screaming party that is seen. The Swifts that arrive first are the breeding birds, and they will tend to return to their old nest sites as soon as they get here. The first egg is usually laid around May 15th. Low-level screaming parties are closely associated with nesting pairs, and may consist of all the birds nesting in a loose colony in an area. Finding a Swift's nest is very difficult as they arrive and leave at very high speed, but recording a screaming party gives a very good indication that Swifts are nesting close by. There will be a recording form on the website shortly- but what we need for every Screaming Party is date, time of day, and site- either a road name or a postcode or a grid reference- and the number of birds in the party. Just send them to me, or note them down and send in at the end of the season. And if you have a Swift nest in your property and have not told me or John Tully please send me the address, and number of nests if more than one. We hope to plot all the local Swift sites that we can, and this is part of a wider scheme being carried out in Cambridge, and by a national Swift e-group.

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