



Bristol Naturalists' Society

Registered Charity No. 235494

Wildlife News: Week 34 – August 25th 2008

Weather.

A slightly warmer week at 18.7C, but still well below the recent average for the week of 21.2C, and below last year. The year to date is 14.6C compared with 15.1C last year, and the past twelve months is 14.2C. This time last year it was 14.9C. This year is likely to be the coldest since 2001.

Weekly rainfall was 28mm, bringing the monthly total to 140mm, the wettest since 1997, and the 16th wettest since 1853. The total for the year to 790mm, 220mm above average for the date. The last twelve months now totals 1105mm.

August is likely to be the coldest since 1993, but will not break any records.

Plants

Cool wet weather encourages plants to keep flowering, but it also allows for some annuals to produce a second generation of flowers. I found new flowering Field Pennycress along side the dried up remnants of the first generation in an abandoned field near Salford. Hairy Bittercress is a very common small garden plant that flowers very early in the spring, and produces thousands of seeds that rapidly germinate, and new plants are now in flower. The common veronica *V Persica*, is doing the same thing, and of course Daisies and Dandelions are also very successful for the same reason. In this way many plants are in effect in continuous flower throughout the year. Many perennials also continue to produce flowers after their main flowering season.

There were still 100 species in flower on the Downs on Sunday, well above the average for the previous five years of 77. In normal years the number of species has begun to fall off rapidly. One new species has come into flower, Ivy, on the same date as last year. It flowers right through to the end of December, and its fruit ripen from December through to March. Its flowers produce a lot of nectar, so that it is a very important plant for insects throughout the autumn, and then its fruit are a key food for a wide variety of bird species, including the Blackcaps that now over-winter here. I re-found Pale St John's Wort, which I thought had come to the end of its season, and found a small plant of Musk Thistle, which had managed to push up a flowering stem between successive mowings, and a Red Deadnettle, which is an annual that flowers with great rapidity. A few plants appear to have gone, some as a result of strimming of some of the wilder areas, but they may yet reappear.

Moult.

This is the deadest time of the year for seeing birds; there are almost none in my garden, though I notice that fat that I squeeze into holes in trees disappears with great regularity, so that birds are actually still active, but probably in the early morning. One reason why there are apparently so few birds is that many species are moulting their feathers. Magpies look especially scruffy at present, and Crows have a scraggy look because their head and neck feathers are being re-grown. Many juveniles also change from the feathers they developed in the nest into adult dress, ready for the breeding season next year. Robin's famously start life without the familiar red breast, though the juveniles from the first brood have already adopted it, but late broods are still spotty. The period of moult produces stress for two reasons. Firstly it

needs a lot of food to enable birds to re-grow all their feathers, and the process is necessarily drawn out over many weeks because birds cannot afford to lose the insulation that feathers provide, and secondly it affects their ability to fly. As a result they are far more vulnerable to predators between July and September, and they need more food, but they cannot afford to take risks. Of course the moult period is also the warmest in the year, and the one with the most abundant supply of invertebrate food, and seeds and berries. However for juveniles it is also the period when the death rate is highest. So during these months birds don't sing, as they have no need to defend territories, and often even avoid calling, so that they can't be detected by sound, and they skulk around in the deepest cover to avoid being seen. Once they are again fully feathered, and when the hours of darkness become greater than those of daylight, after September 21st, they need to fatten up to be able to face the winter ahead, and they begin to take more risks, and to reappear in gardens. Many species also increasingly flock together, because there is safety in numbers, and good food sources become harder to find, and hence they are also easier to see.

The difference in numbers seen can be considerable even for species that have essentially stable populations such as Wrens, Robins, Blackbirds and Great Tits. My figures for my regular walk on the Downs shows that the average numbers for such species varies by a factor of between 6 and 8 over the course of each year, with the minimum around now, and the maximum in the breeding season

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