

Urban Countryman

Monthly Field Notes

January 2022

As another extremely challenging and concerning year ends, thoughts and hopes turn to a better year ahead. I always believe that it is a sign of the true optimism that runs through the heart of most of us that we always have faith that the coming year will rebalance the challenges of the past. It is a time of new beginnings as we try to put trials and tribulations behind us and move towards a bright future.

January brings in the New Year with resolutions and wassailing - the offering up of a toast to drive out evil spirits (and the evil spirits of 2020 and 2021 could certainly do with being sent packing!) and to encourage a good cider orchard crop in the coming year.

Representing the frozen height of winter, January is a month often marked with hard frosts, snow and ice, although here in the South-East snow has been an infrequent and fleeting visitor in the past few years (the last significant snowfall occurring in 2010). There is throughout a feeling that spring is still a very long way away.

However, the shortest day is now behind us and the daylight is lengthening, and if you look closely you will often see the first signs of the countryside awakening as the month progresses – the tiny crimson fronds of hazel flowers starting to open, ready to catch the wind-blown pollen from the opening catkins; the fresh green shoots of bluebells pushing up through the crisp leaf litter; the fresh quilted leaves and pale yellow flowers of primroses; the bright yellow flowers of lesser celandine (one of the first woodland flowers to emerge); fragrant winter heliotrope filling the air with a hint of vanilla; cheerful snowdrops and maybe even the first crocuses. And while the buds of most trees remain tightly closed, the leaves of the elder are already unfurling, along with those of honeysuckle and buddleia.

With the lengthening daylight, birds start searching for suitable nesting sites. So, if you have any nest boxes, this is the time of year to put them up (preferably in sheltered spots, out of the prevailing wind, and out of the reach of predators).

Despite the cold I often look forward to starting work again in the countryside (with woodland work very much on the agenda) after the festive break (even more so after another year in which so much time was lost due to the lockdown during the first 3 months), especially to work off that extra mince pie or glass of something festive. There's nothing like a bit of physical work and a roaring wood fire to drive out the bitter cold of January.

If I could offer one resolution suggestion it would be to get out into the countryside as often as possible and take the time to immerse yourself in the endless cycle of the natural world. Our countryside is under

threat like never before and the more we value it the better chance we have of ensuring we leave it as a valuable legacy for the generations to come.

January 1

The warmest New Year's Day on record, with London registering a high of 16.2 degrees C!

Walking among the stand of towering beech trees on Tillingdown, planted in rows, straight, smooth and grey, like endless rows of cathedral columns.

The muddy paths through the crisp deep carpet of once copper-bronze leaves, now a dirty brown.

Looking up and turning around beneath the complex pattern of the bare canopy, tens of thousands of twiggy fingers against the grey sky.

The low sun breaks through for just long enough to cast brief, long shadows.

The hollow beneath the trees contains just enough water to capture the reflections of the surrounding giants.

Winter is filled with mesmerising beauty for those who take the time to see it.

Capturing the bare canopy in black & white counters the grey dullness and adds atmosphere to the arboreal scene. The branches and twigs, silhouetted against the sky, look like so many blood vessels and capillaries, just like those in the eyes that stare upwards.



Plenty of examples of marcescence – the natural process whereby a number of trees – in this case young beech – retain their dead leaves instead of discarding them in autumn. It is believed that this may be to discourage animals from foraging the fresh young leaf buds in spring.

January 3

In the garden the male and female Blackcaps seem to have become regular visitors to the suet block hanging in the Forsythia.

Wonderful sight of a pair of foxes in the garden. One has a lovely thick red-orange coat and a limp it has had for a long time that doesn't seem to have impacted it too much. The other also has a rich, thick coat but with darker markings.

Amazing how many people simply view these lovely animals as vermin and cannot tolerate them, berating them for being 'too noisy', 'too destructive', 'disease carriers', 'not welcome in urban areas', 'just rats with furry tails'. They are regarded as nasty, cunning, evil murderers. Interesting how people label them with strictly human traits – maybe they are more a mirror of our own failings. Should foxes have the ability to judge us they may well view us the same way. No wonder we are making such a mess of the natural legacy we will leave for future generations.

A tawny owl hoots in the woods at the top of the hill behind the house as the sun goes down.

January 4

Scrub Clearance on Hutchinson's Bank Local Nature Reserve

Just as we arrive for the first day back to work after the Christmas and New Year break the heavens open, delaying the start as we shelter from the deluge, especially as we will be working on the site's exposed chalk grassland slope, cutting back the encroaching scrub line – hawthorn, blackthorn, wild privet, wayfaring tree, prickly holly and densely packed dogwood. Much of the vegetation is a twisted tangle, all tied up with long strands of wild clematis.

Thankfully, the heavy rain doesn't last long, but the remainder of the morning is one of light rain and drizzle, with a light smattering of sleet and it is noticeably colder than of late. Still, it's great to be out again! Honest.



The fire is quickly going and this brightens the spirits and takes the chill from the morning. The arisings from the scrub clearance quickly build up and keep the fire going. And by the time we stop for a quick lunch the rain has stopped and there is even a brief encouraging burst of sunshine and blue sky.

A pair of thick-coated foxes emerge from the scrub cover at the top of the slope and saunter across the site to disappear into the scrub at the bottom.

A red kite circles high overhead.

The resident conservation grazing sheep, Herdwicks and Beulah Speckled Face, are highly inquisitive and quickly come over, no doubt in search of sheep nuts, of which we have none. Disappointed, they soon wander off again to make do with the grass.

As I wander across the site during the break for lunch they follow and are never far behind, clearly not believing that my pockets are empty of delicious titbits. The Herdwicks are particularly bold and inquisitive.



Dandelions, the humblest of all flowers, adds dots of lone bright colour to the bare grassland, providing a vital source of early nectar for the insects that brave the harsh conditions at this time of year.

I used to share the general view of most gardeners to this 'pernicious weed' until the day I looked out the window to see a pair of colourful goldfinches holding the stems down while picking off the seeds. Since that day, dandelions are OK in my books!

January 5

Scrub Clearance on Hutchinson's Bank Local Nature Reserve (cont.)

Lovely to awake to the sight of a male and female blackbird in the garden.

A cold, frosty morning leads into a chilly, but very sunny winter's day. In the shaded areas where the sun fails to reach the frost remains throughout the day. For the most part the sky is a clear blue, with just a few clouds gathering in the afternoon. After so many days of grey the sun is most welcome and makes for much more pleasant conditions for working on the exposed grassland slope.

The scrub clearance continues. The thorny hawthorn and blackthorn, and the prickly holly are challenging, but I had forgotten just how much I hate clearing wild privet! Extremely long and spindly, whiplike and fiddly, it grows up and through everything and it takes ages to clear even a small patch. Add in the rope-like vines of the wild clematis tying everything together and the vicious, curved, flesh-tearing thorns of wild rose and a simple clearance task becomes an exceptional challenge to even the mildest person's patience!

Even the hawthorn is a greater challenge than normal. Having been previously cut, the stumps have thrown up multiple stems that, over the intervening years, have become entangled with each other. Cutting one stem, 2, 3, 4, a half dozen, has very little impact. It is only when every stem has been cut that the tangle of thorns can be removed to the fire site.

Still, the sun is out and the views from the upper slope are wonderful. The site is a real oasis among the surrounding busy roads and urban sprawl, with Croydon so close by.



And the improved weather makes for better photography opportunities, the lunchtime walk brings back memories of the nearly 15 years since I first worked on the site, a time when much of the open grassland was covered in dense scrub.

January 6

A clear night leads to a hard morning frost under a clear blue sky. The frost leads to the unusual experience of my brain being confused by mixed messages from my senses, my ears telling me one thing and my eyes telling me something completely different.

I can hear rain so heavy that it sounds like running water, yet when I look out the window the ground is dry and there isn't a drop of rain to be seen. I venture outside, where the 'rain' is even louder, but not a drop falls on me. It is only when I reach the bottom of the garden that I see what's happening.

The heavy frost has turned the needles of the Scots Pines white, almost like a dusting of snow. With the sudden rise in temperature the frost is melting rapidly and huge droplets are cascading from every branch. Now that I am standing directly beneath the trees I am getting wet, where all around me remains dry.

Sadly, the sunshine is short-lived and the grey soon rolls in to repeat the conditions of the past few weeks.

Walking through Caterham's Old Park Wood, where the continued mass felling for diseased ash trees is again in full swing. It is sad to see the impact upon the ever-shrinking woodland. By the time the clearance has been completed the wood will be greatly reduced in size. Just as few children today will have seen a majestic elm – so devastated by Dutch Elm Disease in the 1970s – I wonder if future generations will grow up never seeing an ash tree – our third most numerous tree, behind only oak and birch! Everywhere the ground is littered with brittle broken branches and felled trees awaiting collection. It is like a giant dinosaur graveyard!

On the plus side, the first bluebell shoots are pushing through the leaf litter and dog's mercury has created lush green carpets, a plant that singularly is easily overlooked, but in dense clusters are quite attractive, especially when bathed in winter sunshine.

Meanwhile, there is still a good collection of woodland fungi on show:



Crimped Gill



Hairy Curtain Crust

- Lumpy Bracket
- Birch Polypore
- Scarlet Waxcap
- Green Elf Cup
- Candlesnuff

- Yellowing Curtain Crust
- Cramp Balls (King Alfred's Cakes)
 - Yellow Brain
 - Glistening Inkcap



Oyster Fungus



Dead Man's Fingers



Turkey Tail



Purple Jellydisc

The dampness has made the plentiful mosses really vibrant, standing out in the winter bareness.

At the same time the lichens have also come into their own.

January 7

Nuthatch feeding on the seeds I threw down for the mostly ground feeding birds – blackbirds, robins and dunnocks – outside the kitchen door. This is the first time I have seen a nuthatch feeding on the ground, especially when the usual hanging feeders are available.

A dull grey day is brightened by a few spirit-lifting encounters –

The intense violet-blue colour of a patch of Periwinkle that seems to hardly ever be out of flower.

The sweet vanilla fragrance of Winter Heliotrope beside the footpath.

The first early shoots of Wild garlic.

The densely packed deep yellow petals of the underrated Dandelion, visible from great distances.

Increasing Bluebell shoots emerging through the woodland leaf litter.

Patches of glossy spear-shaped leaves of Lords and Ladies.

Feathery leaves of Wood Anemones.

Winter may still have a way to go, but the signs of the spring to come are all around.

Every season has its joys and inspirations and everyone will have their favourite (mine is autumn), but it is only winter that holds the promise of all that is to come, very much like standing at the start of a journey that is much anticipated. Whereas all the other seasons are seasons of fulfilment, winter is the season of hope in new beginnings.

January 8

Love a quote I found in relation to the unsubstantiated and unfair allegations that magpies are to blame for the decline in songbirds (and also related to a recent discussion I had on foxes being vermin):

“Nature does not exist in order to seek the moral approval of humankind.”

January 11

Scrub Clearance at The Knoll, Chipstead Downs

A mild day, but oh so misty and grey, with no hint whatsoever of any sun and drizzle setting in by the middle of the day.

A good fire is soon dealing with the arisings from the latest clearance of scrub, as we continue to clear this former nuttery, ahead of replanting with walnut trees to return it to its former glory (when it was part of Dene Farm, which ceased to be a working farm in the 1930s). The heavier stems are piled to form a wildlife habitat that will be home to myriad insects and small mammals, which in turn will attract birds into the site.

Over the past few years, the clearance work has had a major impact upon the biodiversity of the small site. Before we started work it was a dense, impenetrable mass of hawthorn and blackthorn, beneath which was just bare ground, with nothing able to thrive in the permanent shade. Now it home to a mass of wildflowers – in spring and summer of 2019 I recorded in excess of 70 wildflower species – which have attracted masses of bees, butterflies, and many other insects, some rare and new finds for the site.



The peace and tranquillity is broken by the roar of the chainsaw as it removes a couple of the larger hawthorns. Thankfully, chainsaw use is kept to a minimum and only tends to be used where hand saws aren't suited to the size of the task.

The recent wet weather has really brought out the mosses that are quickly colonising the log piles left behind from previous clearance work. Moss is amazing and can grow on the most inhospitable of surfaces, bare rock, tree bark, roof tiles, the poorest of soils and even upon glass. It stores water, provides shelter for myriad insects and forms the basis of our peat bogs, which are capable of absorbing more carbon than trees. The UK has in the region of 750 species of moss.



Alongside the mosses is an impressive collection of lichens, especially on the old blackthorn on the bank that forms the edge of the former nuttery. Like mosses, lichens are amazing organisms, formed of a symbiotic relationship between a fungus (unique to each lichen species), an algae and a variety of bacteria and trace elements. The UK is home to around 2,000 lichen species, of which 50% can be found on trees.

It is in January that our mosses and lichens really come to the fore amongst all the bareness. They are really worth taking the time to explore, so always have a magnifying glass or, if possible, jeweller's eye-glass in your pocket on your walks.

One log pile is also home to the first Velvet Shank fungus of the season.

January 12

Small Scrub Clearance on Kenley Common

A frosty morning, dense mist and temperature just below freezing. By late morning the mist has mostly burnt off to leave a clear blue sky and glorious sunshine. Where the mist hangs on it makes for lovely images from the open grassland slope on Kenley Common, especially across the valley, where a finger of white lays across the opposite Riddlesdown slope. Along the valley towards Caterham the woods appear in layers, clearly defined in the foreground, with successive layers gradually disappearing behind the grey veil. With the sun out the day even feels warm.



A day of tree-popping the young hawthorn scrub (up to 4ft tall) that has been colonising the open grassland. The wet ground makes for more successful use of the tree-popper, which has a frustrating tendency to snap the stems off when the ground is dry and hard. This time it proves mostly effective at removing the roots along with the stems, the longest root being over 4ft long and leaving behind an impressive trench where the soil was forced to relinquish its grip. After a while it can look as if pigs had been let loose. The downside is that it can take quite a lot of effort – which has the danger of sending you flying when the stem suddenly snaps! – and time to tease the root out. The more painful disadvantage is ending the day feeling like a human pincushion, having been stabbed all over by the vicious thorns!

The morning session isn't so bad, with the scrub sparsely spread across the slope, making progress appear quite fast. The afternoon session is an entirely different matter, with dense hawthorn growing as though planted as a crop! However, because these had never been cut – resulting in multiple small stems growing from a thick base with a tough, mature root system - the tree popper has a better, if slower, success rate. The trick is to never look up at the masses of thorny growth that lie ahead.



And, having been stabbed by the thorns getting the hawthorn out of the ground, it then has a second chance when carried over to the fire platform to load onto the fire.

In the afternoon we are joined by a half-dozen Sussex cattle that are moved into the field from the adjoining field to continue their conservation grazing. However, unlike the recent inquisitive sheep, these were more contented to keep themselves to themselves. They were, however, quite amenable to being approached for a photo – Sussex cattle are known for their calm temperament, which makes them suitable for conservation grazing on land where the public have access.



A largely enjoyable day, mostly because of the weather and views, but 1 day of tree-popping hawthorn is more than enough for now.

January 13

Scrub Clearance at The Knoll, Chipstead Downs (cont.)

Another morning of hard frost, with the temperature just below freezing. The morning mist is very quick to clear, leaving a gloriously sunny day, with not a hint of cloud to mar the welcome blue.

At The Knoll, where the early sun fails to break in, the crisp frost whitens the ground, vegetation, tree stumps and the mossy log piles. As the sun gradually rises higher it burns off the frost, the vapour rising lazily into the chill air.



We continue with the clearance work among the tangled mess of storm-blown trees. However, it soon becomes apparent that the massive tangle of thick branches and bramble will take more effort to clear than the little gain it will afford. Also, the ground beneath is a thick carpet of vibrant moss, indicating that the sun rarely ventures into this part of the site. We therefore decide that our efforts are better spent continuing to clear the remaining area of standing hawthorn scrub.

With so many log piles now forming we also decide to remove some, either adding the logs to the other remaining log piles or disposing of them on the fire. Sometimes you can simply have too much of a good thing.

Given that I can see my breath in front of my face it's amazing just how much warmth is in the late morning sun. At one point while loading the fire I am encouraged to dispense with fleece and sweatshirt and am down to a t-shirt. These are my kind of January days. I just wish I'd bought my cap instead of the thick woolly hat.

January 14

Another frosty and gloriously sunny day, with not a cloud in the pale blue sky.

A lovely day for the first visit of the year to nearby Manor Park, where the low sun is highlighting one side of the trees, while casting extra-long shadows across the open grassland.



Spot my first Lesser Celandine of the year, the stunning glossy yellow flowers believed by many ecologists to indicate that we have reached the latter stages of winter. I'm not sure about that, but they are one of the month's spirit-lifting sights. A colourful Marmalade Hoverfly quickly alights upon its petals to drink in the important early nectar.



Not sure what's going on but the Jackdaws have been making one hell of a racket all afternoon.

The cheeriest birds in the garden – the Long-tailed Tits – have suddenly descended upon the suet feeder hanging in the Forsythia outside the kitchen door, which affords me a great view of these lovely feathery balls of joy, with their black, white and pink plumage and their unfeasibly long tails. As always, I hear them before I see them, their constant cheeping and squeaking announcing their imminent arrival. The first suddenly arrives on the feeder, followed by a second, then a third, then another, until there are eight of them vying for position. I love watching them feed, as they pluck a suet pellet from the feeder, hang upside down by one foot from a nearby branch, grasping the pellet in the other foot while pecking at it with their tiny beaks.

January 15

A return to the grey of earlier in the month. However, the day is much brightened by the prospect of meeting up with good friends to explore somewhere new.

Croxley Common and Croxley Green Moor – SSSI and Local Nature Reserve - with its section of the Grand Union Canal – with its lock gates and moored canal boats – the River Gade and its flood plain, and the River Chess (both important chalk streams) and the flat bed of the former narrow gauge railway is very different environment to that I am used to exploring and is full of wonder, even in the depths of winter.

The open character and special plants of the 100-acre moor are a result of centuries of commoners grazing livestock. It is the action of the flooding river scouring across the plain, combined with centuries of grazing, which has produced the rich and diverse plant life that call the moor home. For obvious reasons, apart

from Gorse (which according to the saying: when gorse is out of flower, kissing will be out of fashion) there is nothing in flower today. Summer will be the perfect time to return to search for some of the rarer plants that are recorded here, such as Large Thyme, Fen Bedstraw, Dyer's Greenweed, Smith's Pepperwort and Purging Flax. The site also contains a rich variety of birds, bats and insects, but again this was the wrong time of year. Definitely somewhere to put on my list of places to visit in summer.



January 16

A pair of robins are feeding together at the suet block in the garden. Hopefully, they are a nesting pair. I wonder if they are the same birds that nested in the garden last year – the first time robins had chosen the garden.

January 17

The morning frost has returned, along with another gloriously sunny day.

The 3rd Monday of January has been calculated to be the gloomiest day of the entire year and has hence been dubbed 'Blue Monday'. Not sure what the science is behind this – more probably a scheme devised by the travel companies to get us thinking about booking a holiday!

Allegedly, with the highs of Christmas and the New Year fading fast and winter far from over it is the day most people are said to feel down. Personally, it seems to be a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy, as nothing is as likely to make people feel down as having a 'scientifically' recognised day for feeling down. And, let's face it, after the past couple of years do we really need a day to make things appear worse than they are!?!

The clear evening sky is perfect for capturing the first full moon of the year – known as the Wolf Moon. It was a time when the severe weather brought ravenous wolves out of the woods and closer to villages in search of food. Sadly, wolves no longer inhabit this country and we are the poorer for having removed this top predator and having subsequently tipped nature out of kilter.



January 18

Hornbeam Maintenance at The Knoll, Chipstead Downs

Working on a stand of three large fan-shaped hornbeams at The Knoll, starting with the one in the worst condition. At a distance they look fine, but close up reveals a different story. A number of the branches are broken and hanging down to the ground, some are torn or split, while many are scarred and have sections of bark missing. Most of the lower branches are affected, so the first job is to get to work with the pole saw to remove what eventually turned out to be most of them. All the timber is stacked to form another wildlife habitat.

It's great to have a new, sharp Silky pole saw that cuts through the hard hornbeam wood with ease – so unlike the blunt ones I've used elsewhere!

The hardness of the wood also makes it fairly brittle, with a tendency to snap rather than tear as the saw slices through the branches, some of which are quite substantial.

Find a couple of deer skulls, picked clean, although there are no signs of any other parts of the skeletons.



After the morning's work there is still plenty of time to explore the site, taking pictures of the substantial collection of lichens and mosses, especially to be found on the old brittle blackthorn.



January 19

Scrub Clearance on Botterill's Field, North Downs

Working in a fenced grazing field beside Park Ham on the Chaldon section of the North Downs, clearing a dense patch of scrub to make way for the chalk grassland wildflowers that are suppressed beneath the thorny tangle.

The enclosure is home to a quartet of very friendly and inquisitive goats that keep us entertained throughout the day. All of them stay around us as we battle with the tangle of hawthorn, bramble and wild rose, vying with each other to get at the tasty fresh leaves as we remove them. They even follow us

as we decamp to the top of the slope for lunch – showing great interest in our sandwiches and biscuits – and then back down again to the work site. Clearly, they quite like company.





Red Kite and a Buzzard circle overhead in the blue sky.

The scrub is another tangled mess – we rarely seem to deal with scrub that is otherwise! – with thorns catching everywhere, clothes and exposed skin alike!

In the field above the one where we are working a herd of Herdwick sheep and a trio of Sussex cattle have shown no interest in us throughout the day. That is until we are leaving, at which point they come over, determined to help by continually getting in the way as we pack the tools into the work vehicle.

January 20

Scrub Clearance on Botterill's Field, North Downs (cont.)

Another hard morning frost, with the morning temperature a couple of degrees below freezing. However, the cold was more than made up for by the sunshine and blue sky. And then there are the goats for company again.

Another day of battling with the thorns as we continue to clear back the mature scrub. As we push further into the tangled, thorny mess, the hazards increase in the shape of the large access holes of an abandoned badger sett.

The brambles, entwined high into the mature hawthorn, are a constant source of frustration, continually snagging and proving particularly adept at plucking my woolly hat from my head. All the dry, brittle sticks and bramble create a thick crunchy carpet across the growing clearing and requires raking into piles to add in armfuls to the fire, the dryness of the wood acting like petrol, causing the fire to spontaneously flare up to dramatic effect. It's quite fascinating watching the fire explode into life.

A gentle breeze across the grassland slope also helps to really gets the fire going, consuming the arisings in no time at all.



January 21

The coldest morning so far, with the temperature at -3 degrees C – which I accept is hardly worthy of note compared to the temperatures in some parts of the country!

With little, if any rain, rain in the forecast for the final days of the month this is set to be one of the driest January's on record.

January 22

Cheery start to the day listening to the garden birds singing at 7:30. There is a definite feeling that spring is on its way.

January 24

The hazel catkins along Tillingdown are opening to disperse their pollen, but I can't see any signs of the tiny scarlet flowers emerging yet.

The Snowdrops are starting to open, surely one of the most eagerly awaited flowers.

Pair of male Fallow deer are drinking at the cattle trough in the middle of the field. They stop as I enter the field but are far enough away to pay me little attention, although they never take their eyes off me as I cross to the far side.

Walking across presents me with one of great bugbears in the countryside. A pair of large circular metal cattle feeding stations have been placed right on the official footpath. The resulting poaching of the

ground has made it impossible to stick to the path, forcing walkers to venture further into the field. I have to wonder if this has been done to discourage walkers! Thankfully, there are no cattle in the field, but I have used this field when dozens of them have been at the feeding stations, which many walkers would find extremely intimidating, even more so when they are present with their calves. The feeding stations could easily be placed elsewhere, away from the footpath.



I totally get that not all members of the public are respectful of the countryside – lockdown saw a shocking increase in litter at local beauty spots – but if landowners really want people to stick to the designated footpaths then they must ensure that they don't act in a way that makes it impossible for us to do so.

There are only a few fungi on display at this time of year:

- Oyster fungus on a fallen tree.
- Lumpy Bracket fungus, bright green with algae on a horse chestnut.
- Tiers of Turkey Tail on a standing dead ash (pictured).



January 25

Scrub Clearance on Farthing Downs

Days don't come much more grey and gloomy than this! The end of the day looks exactly the same as the start. The temperature barely rises above a couple of degrees Centigrade all day. At least it is dry.

Another day of tackling scrub, this time on Coulsdon's Farthing Downs, removing mostly hawthorn and bramble.

With not a breath of a breeze, even on what is normally a permanently breezy exposed slope (just trying to take flower pictures on what you think is a still day!), the fire is extremely sluggish and very slow to catch, which is not much help as the arisings rapidly pile up beside the fire platform. The platform itself doesn't help, with the fire continually dying down, and the limited platform space means that everything is loaded into a small area, swamping the fire every time it looks like it might get going.



January 26

Scrub Clearance on Farthing Downs (cont.)

A brief burst of blue sky, not as gloomy as yesterday and not quite as cold. It is noticeable how the days are starting to lengthen now that we are a month past the shortest day.

A second day of clearing mostly hawthorn scrub from the chalk grassland slope on Farthing Downs.

Adding a couple more corrugated iron sheets to the fire platform doubles the fire site surface, making it a lot easier to load the arising without them spilling over the sides. At the start of the day the coals beneath the mound of ash from yesterday's burning are still red hot and it takes no time at all to get the fire going again.

A kestrel and a red kite circling overhead.

During a break for lunch I take the opportunity to go lichen hunting amongst the nearby stands of trees

- Xanthoria sp. Parientina
- Ramalina cf. fastigiata
- Ramalina sp. – possibly farinacea
- Physcia sp. – possibly adscendaens
- Hypotrachyna cf. revoluta
- Punctelia subrudecta
- Parmotrema

I am still very much a beginner at identifying lichens, so this list is my best attempt at identification. Unlike wildflowers, when it comes to naming, lichens rarely have a common name.

January 27

Scrub Clearance on Farthing Downs (cont.)

Complete the large stand of scrub that was our target for this week. Work on the next section starts next week.

A milder but changeable day: grey mist, drizzle and clear blue sky. At one point in the afternoon a heavy, brooding slate grey cloud passes over, like a scenario from an end-of-the-world movie. Very impressive.



Red kites, buzzards and a kestrel add to the joy of being outside.

January 28

A couple of hours of moss, lichen and fungi hunting in Caterham's Old Park Wood, which continues to look like an increasingly devastated battlefield as the heavy forestry machinery trundle and cut and slice and chop and transport and stack the mass of diseased ash trees.

Mosses:

- Common Smoothcap
- Bank Haircap
- Common Pincushion
- Common Feather-moss
- Creeping Feather-moss
- Big Shaggy-moss
- Waved Silk-moss
- Wood Bristle-moss

Lichens:

- Xanthoria sp. Parientina
- Parmotrema perlatum
- Cladonia caniocraea
- Ramalina sp. – possibly farinacea
- Evernia prunastri

Fungi:

- Purple Jellydisc
- Yellowing Curtain Crust
- Hairy Curtain Crust
- Turkey Tail
- Oyster fungus
- Lumpy Bracket
- Split Gill – the first time I have encountered this species.

January 29

RSPB Big Garden Bird Count

As seems to happen to many people, most regular garden visitors suddenly disappear over the weekend of the count!

This therefore is a list of the birds I have seen recently –

- Blackcaps (having first arrived last year, both male and female have become regular visitors, visiting a number of times daily).
- Bluetit (at least 4, possibly 5).
- Great Tit (regularly 2, sometimes 3).
- Long-tailed Tit (regularly see 3, but have seen as many as 8).
- Coal Tit (until this year there has regularly only been 1, but this year I have regularly seen a pair).
- Robin (having nested in the garden for the first time last year, there is now a resident pair).
- Goldfinch (regularly 1, sometimes a pair).
- Dunnock (the number seems to have dropped from last year from a dozen to 2 or 3).
- House Sparrow (1 often seen arriving and leaving with the dunnocks).
- Jay (a pair have become regular visitors to the peanut feeder).

- Blackbird (a male and female are regular visitors).
- Magpie (regularly 1, but sometimes a pair).
- Wood Pigeon (regularly 3, but from the feathers they often seem to fall prey to a fox).
- Jackdaw (regularly a trio in the garden, although plenty more inhabit the roofs across the road).
- Nuthatch (regularly a pair).
- Great Spotted Woodpecker (both male and female are regular visitors).
- Wren (only ever seen 1, but see it almost every day hopping around the flowerbed).

January would probably not rank too high on a pole of most people's favourite month, but if there is one thing to commend it, it is surely the sight of birds visiting the garden feeders.

Of the birds that have visited, these are the ones I haven't seen recently –

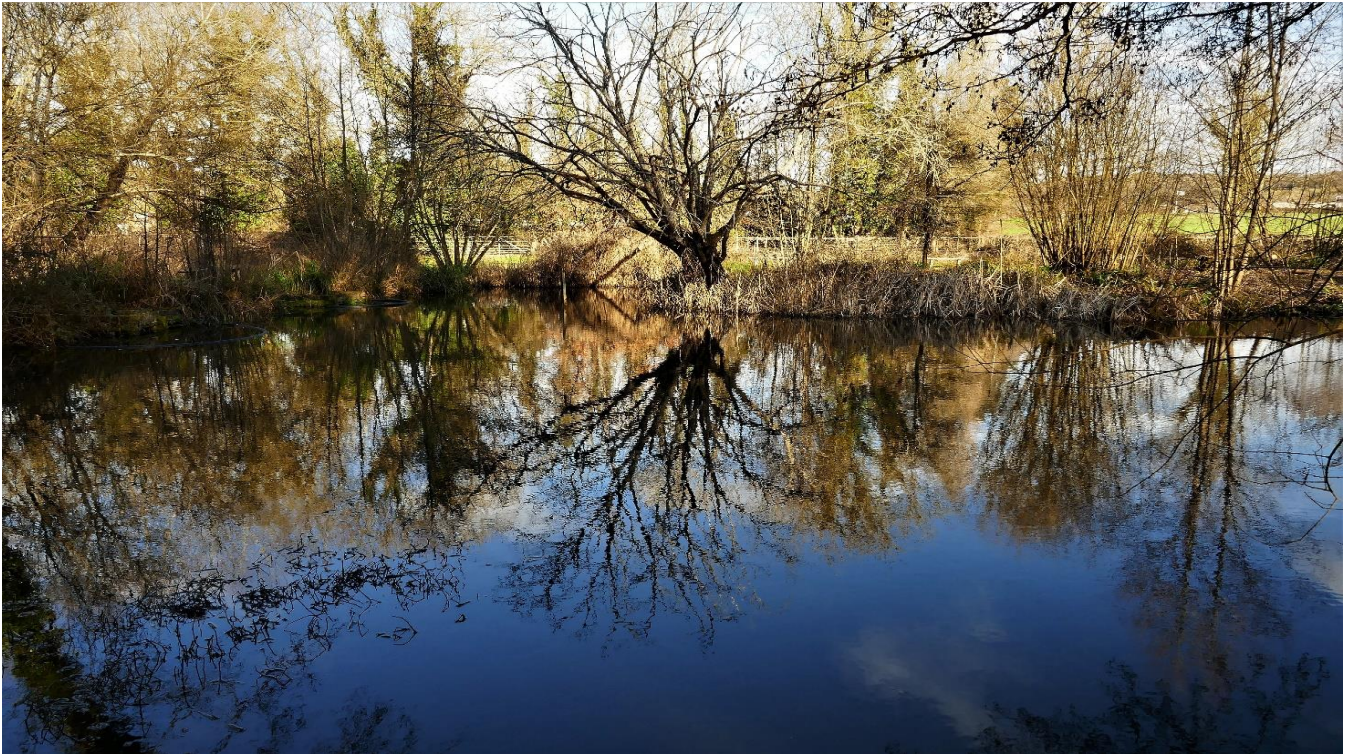
- Redwings (the usual trio haven't appeared this year – good news for the berries on the holly).
- Song Thrush (has become an infrequent visitor).
- Feral Pigeon (3 or 4 regularly visited for a while but seem to have disappeared).
- Greenfinches (once a very regular visitor but now infrequent).
- Collared Dove (a bird that seems to have disappeared completely having once been a regular visitor for a number of years).
- Starling (visits annually from about March to July, then disappears once the youngsters have fledged until the following year).
- Parakeet (see them about but they don't seem to visit the garden, except on rare occasions).
- Chaffinch (sadly I've not seen one for a couple of years).
- Siskin (only ever seen this once at the birdbath).
- Pheasant (a surprise visitor just before Christmas).

A gloriously sunny winter's day, with a welcome late January warmth to the sun. A lovely day for a walk around nearby Godstone, taking in Bay Pond, Glebe Water and Leigh Place Pond. The bright conditions and stillness made for great reflections.



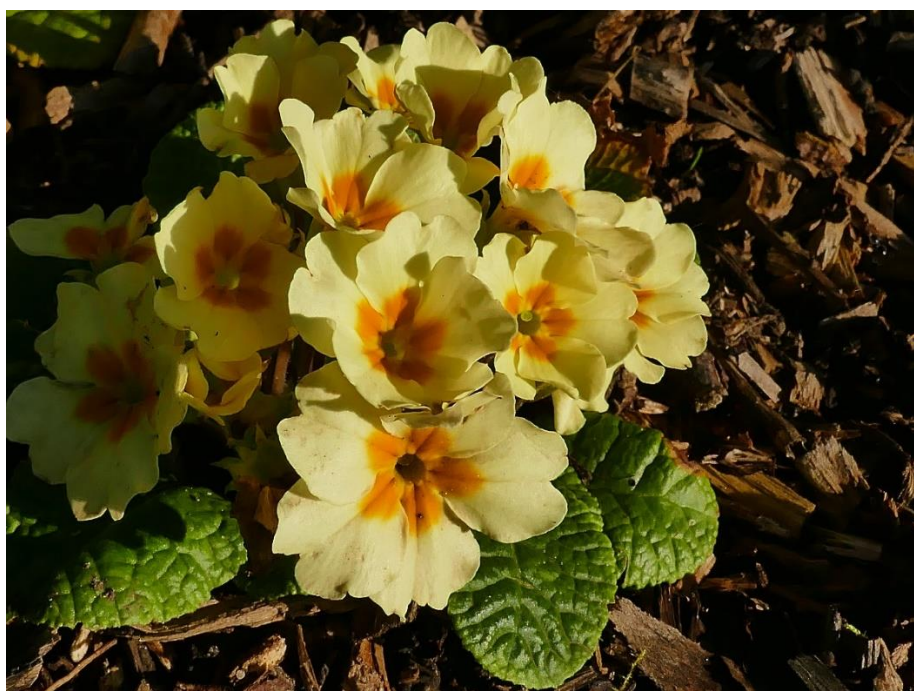
A flock of Cormorants gather at one end of Bay Pond, perched on the branches, hanging low over the water. A single swan glides effortlessly across the surface. Nothing seems to be in a rush on this lovely day, not even me, I am happy to sit by the water's edge where for once anglers are absent.

Around me, winter gnats form an ever-changing, ever-shifting translucent haze beside the trees and vegetation, as they feed upon dead and decaying vegetation. Without the sunlight they would be invisible, but the light picks out these tiny creatures, making them visible.



January 31

While working in the garden I notice that the first Primroses have appeared.



The Stinking Helleborines are also coming into flower in a couple of clusters.

Install a new bird nest box to replace the old rotten one on the side of the shed.

With the shortest day well behind us and with the days lengthening birds are turning their thoughts to the breeding season and are starting to search out suitable nesting sites. Now is therefore the perfect time for installing nest boxes.

For those new to purchasing and siting nest boxes here are a few pointers that may be helpful.

- Site nest boxes in a sheltered location, away from strong sunlight and damp winds.
- Because fledglings will not be able to make long flights at first it is worth siting the nest box quite close to cover to allow them to gain confidence from short flights.
- Nest boxes need to be waterproof and well-insulated. Be wary of some of the many ceramic and plastic boxes on the market – ceramic boxes can be poorly insulated and plastic boxes can produce condensation, which makes the young birds cold and damp. Also be careful of boxes with a metal roof as they can seriously overheat on hot/sunny days.
- It can be a good idea to tilt the nest box slightly forward to deflect rain away from the entrance hole.
- Different birds are attracted to different entrance hole sizes, so make sure you have the right size for the birds you are hoping to attract. Robins for example prefer open-fronted nest boxes.
- Nest boxes with perches may seem like a helpful addition but nesting birds don't need them and the perches may be more helpful to predators.
- If your boxes are in danger of predation (especially from woodpeckers and squirrels), the addition of a metal plate around the entrance hole will act as a good deterrent, as it prevents the hole from being enlarged for easier access to the chicks.
- Brightly-coloured nest boxes may be a lovely addition to the garden as they attract the eye, but they will probably also attract the attention of predators.
- Ensure that nest boxes are well out of the reach cats. Sadly, our furry companions are one of the biggest killers of garden birds, killing millions of birds every year. I once had a neighbour's cat that loved to sit on top of a nest box trying to catch the birds as they flew in and out!
- Some species can be very picky over nest sites, so if you have a box that hasn't been occupied for a couple of years it might be worth repositioning it.
- And once you have resident parents and chicks it can be very tempting to take a peek, but it's best to restrain yourself as you will risk the parents abandoning the nest.