

# Urban Countryman

## Monthly Field Notes

### *February 2022*

With the start of February thoughts begin to turn towards spring, although winter is far from finished with us. Grey, chilly days, frost, ice and snow flurries can still make it feel as though the season has taken a backward step and, despite being tantalisingly close, it can appear that the longed-for spring will never come. February is nature at its most stubborn and intransigent, a time when the need for a return to warmth becomes a hunger. But the evenings are getting lighter, the sun is rising higher in the sky with every passing day and some northern parts of the country will see an increase of nearly 2 hrs of daylight by the end of the month. From here on the contest between light and dark, warmth and cold, winter and spring is only going one way.

February is very much a month of change, as the signs of awakening first spotted in January start to gather pace. Daffodils, snowdrops, primroses, lesser celandine, coltsfoot, winter aconite and crocuses gladden the heart, as does the sight of the first of this year's lambs. The fresh green of bluebell shoots has multiplied to carpet the woodland floor, as have the pungent leaves of wild garlic and the less eye-catching dog's mercury. Early queen bumblebees emerge from their overwintering nests (especially look out for Early Bumblebees covered in crocus pollen) to search out vital nectar before finding a suitable place to build a new colony. The first butterflies are also flitting about, with Brimstones often being the first to emerge, the male's butter-coloured wings picked out by the winter sun, and Small Tortoiseshells. The silky catkins of pussy willow start to open, a magnet for the early bees and insects desperately seeking a nectar-rich foodsource. On our ponds frogs are spawning.

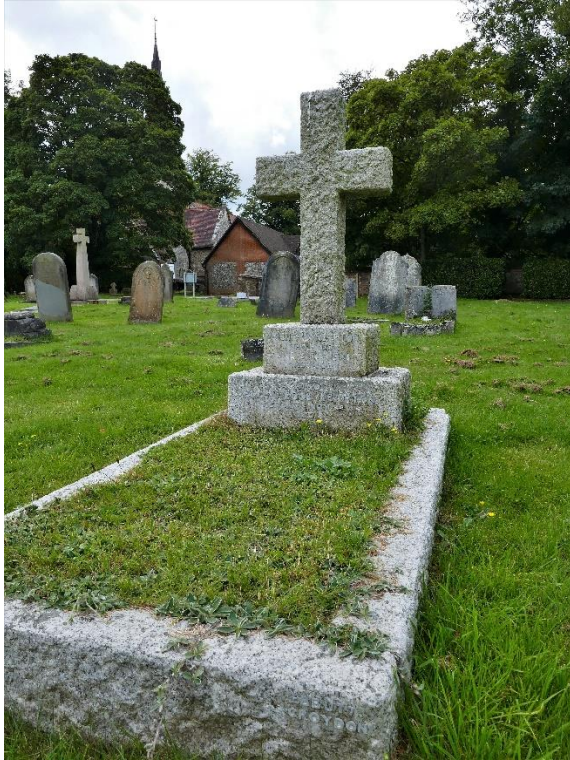
February can also be a surprisingly unpredictable month, as was proven in extreme fashion in 2019. The month began with snow and plunging temperatures and ended with Scotland, Wales and England all setting individual record winter temperatures, with the 21.2C recorded at London's Kew Gardens (Feb 26) being the warmest ever UK winter day. The Scottish Highlands also recorded the UK's highest daily minimum temp of 13.9C. Two days later the temperature in the south-east was back down to 12C. In 2021 the Thames (at Teddington) froze for the first time in 60 years! while a few days later the overnight temperature was above the average daytime temperature. Mid-month in 2021 saw a succession of storms hitting the country, including one of the strongest storms for decades, with winds in numerous areas gusting at 90+ mph (with 122 mph recorded off the Isle of Wight) and heavy snow in Scotland. It will be very interesting to whether any new records are set this year, which could

possibly indicate an upward trend rather than a one-off event. It is impossible to predict what February will bring.

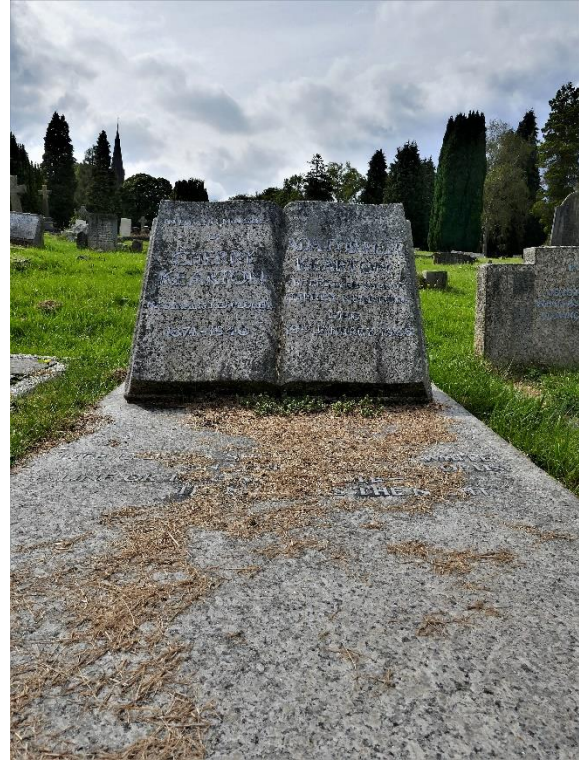
I often find February the hardest of all months to photograph – it is almost as if winter is sulking at the thought of having to relinquish its frozen grip and is determined to present a succession of iron-grey skies and washed-out landscapes. I have therefore found that I tend to concentrate more on the detail, rather than the grand picture, which helps me to more readily appreciate just how much is happening in the countryside at this time of year. It is also a time of year when I find switching to black & white photography, concentrating upon composition, textures, atmosphere and contrasts, compensates for the overall lack of colour.

### Special Note – Richard and Cherry Kearton

Whenever I wander up through Caterham's St Mary's church (Caterham Hill) I stop to pay my respects to Yorkshire-born brothers, naturalists and pioneers of wildlife photography Richard and Cherry Kearton.



*Richard Kearton's grave*



*Cherry Kearton's grave*

The Kearton brothers were among the world's earliest wildlife photographers, developing innovative methods for capturing their subjects in their natural environment – something that had never been done before. In 1895 they published the first natural history book to be illustrated entirely with wild photos.

Richard lived in Caterham Valley – not 100yds from where I'm writing this - from 1898 until his death in 1928 - initially in an apartment at Ardingly Villas and then for the most part at the 10-room 'Ashdene', which was sadly demolished. During this time, he extensively walked, photographed and recorded the local countryside – **his field notes have been wonderfully reproduced in the Bourne Society's 'Richard Kearton's Surrey Field Notes 1900-1927'** - visiting many of the same place I walk today (at least the ones that aren't now hidden behind Private Property and Keep Out signs). That he is so little known - especially in the local area - is a constant source of amazement.

It is a huge shame that the local nature reserve named after him is now in private ownership and not accessible by the public. I wonder how he would have felt about this.

Both brothers were also instrumental in developing the idea of photographic hides - something taken very much for granted today. Cherry also made history with the first recording of

birdsong (a nightingale and a song thrush) in 1900. He later moved into the field of wildlife documentary film making - something quite revolutionary for the time. Richard went on to become a Fellow of the Zoological Society of London and Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society and even lectured to the US President at the White House.

So, every time you take a photo or video of wildlife in its natural environment you are following in the footsteps of the pioneering Kearton brothers.

As I am following in Richard Kearton's footsteps in recording my own observations of the local area I thought it would be interesting to include some of his own observations from over a century ago for comparison with a very different world – these are highlighted in the following entries.

## **February 1**

### **Scrub Clearance on Farthing Downs (cont.)**

A lovely sunny day for continuing with the scrub clearance (started at the end of January) on the chalk grassland of Coulsdon's Farthing Downs. Removing some of the spreading scrub will encourage the wildflowers to re-emerge.



The upside of the constant stiff breeze is that it soon gets the fire going, the downside is that it pushes the fire into one corner of the fire platform, from where it stubbornly refuses to shift, meaning that the mass of arising can only be loaded in one direction – upwards instead of across the platform. Eventually, after many failed attempts to get the fire to spread, and with the mass of arisings far outstripping the fire's ability to deal with it, we start a second fire in the opposite corner of the platform. How we would love to be able to pick the platform up and turn it around! Thankfully, the breeze now works in our favour, spreading the new fire across the platform to meet up with the first one. Once they have merged, they rapidly consume the growing pile of cleared scrub and the clearance work can continue apace.

Nice cluster of pale blue Common Field Speedwell close to the cattle trough, a heart-warming sign that Mother Nature is awakening from her winter slumber.

Plenty of sightings of red kites, buzzards and the wonderful spectre of a hovering kestrel (although I suspect not so wonderful for whatever has attracted its attention).

## **February 2 – Imbolc/Candlemas**

In old English folklore Feb 2 (the Celtic festival of Imbolc or the Christian festival of Candlemas) was regarded as a significant day in forecasting the weather for the remainder of winter. It was believed that if the morning weather was fine and clear, then cold and stormy weather would reign for the remaining weeks of winter, whilst grey and wet weather was said to foretell of a milder end to winter and an early thaw.

*If Candlemas be fair and bright,  
winter has another flight.  
When Candlemas brings cloud and rain,  
winter shall not come again.*

In the days before the first published weather forecasts signs and omens were taken very seriously, especially in a rural environment where the local economy was greatly impacted by the weather ahead.

The Celtic fire festival of Imbolc (pronounced im-olk) marks the middle of winter (occurring roughly midway between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox). The festival commemorates the rebirth of the sun, signalling the successful passing of winter and the beginning of the agricultural year. As winter stores of food were getting low Imbolc rituals were performed to harness the energy that would ensure a steady supply of food until the harvest six months later. It is also a festival of light and of fertility, once marked in Europe with huge blazes, torches and fire in every form (from where the much more sedate Christian celebration of Candlemas evolved). The lighting of fires celebrated the increasing power of the Sun over the coming months.

Feb 2 was traditionally also the day when livestock was removed from the meadows that were destined to be cut for hay later in the summer.

Over the past few years, looking outside to predict the remainder of winter has been somewhat confusing, as sunshine at one moment has rapidly given way to grey skies the next, as if nature is playing a secretive game and is keeping its hand very close to its body. Last year's changeable morning led to winter extending its grip for weeks to come.

This morning is mostly sunny, so according to folklore we can look forward to another 6 weeks of winter, although the mild weather feels very un-winterlike. We shall see.

### **Scrub Clearance on Farthing Downs (cont.)**

Today sees the completion of the clearance of the area of dense thorny scrub we have been clearing from the chalk grassland over the last 5 days – apart from a lone buckthorn we have decided to leave. The bare ground makes it easy to see the extent of the clearance work – a kidney-shaped patch measuring approx. 40m x 15m.



An amazing, colourful evening sky over the valley – blue, indigo, yellow, orange, pink. One of winter’s many highlights is that it can produce some wonderfully colourful sunsets.



### **February 3**

The temperature remains unseasonably mild, as though making up for the harshness of last year when winter proved very reluctant to go. It is a perfect day for wandering through Banstead Woods after a morning’s hazel coppicing.

Winter is a time when it is all too easy to bury oneself behind a scarf and turned up collar, face to the ground and thoughts upon getting to the end of the journey, undertaken more as a challenge than for pleasure. However, to take the time to look up at the natural world around you is to realise that even in the depths of winter you are surrounded by the spirit-lifting signs of the spring to come. Everywhere, trees are sporting the buds that will burst open with fresh green leaves –

- the green, scaly buds of the sycamore
- the dark sticky buds of horse chestnut
- the small red buds of hawthorn
- the brown, pointed, needle-like buds of beech
- the tiny green buds of white beam that seem impossibly small for the size of leaf they will give way to

Meanwhile, elder buds have been unable to contain themselves and many have already burst open to give way to fresh green leaves.

A squirrel scampers noisily through the dry coppery beech leaf litter, scratchily scampers up a trunk and leaps acrobatically through the canopy, chattering as it goes, as though verbalising its displeasure at being disturbed. Quick behind is a second, then a third.

Blackbirds, their orange beaks bright against their black feathers, rustle amongst the leaves, flipping them over and tilting their heads to one side to inspect underneath.

Robins, great tits, blue tits and chaffinches fill the air with their song and the sudden flutter of wings, their flight easier to follow through the bare branches. It seems that every step triggers an eruption of winged bodies that leave the relative seclusion of dense brambles to take to the air. The last to laboriously rise are the wood pigeons, their wings struggling to lift their bulk like some sluggishly over-laden air-transporter.

A magpie stops its intense investigation of a rotten trunk to look up at me with intelligent eyes before deciding that we have little interest in each other. I can never see one of these magnificent birds without quietly reciting the lines of the well-known rhyme: one for sorrow, two for joy... Just like the grey squirrel they are much maligned, although they are just doing what nature intended them to do. The magpie gets a bad press for raiding bird nests, while domestic cats, which kill far more birds each year, have a far easier time of things – maybe cats have better PR. A neighbouring cat certainly causes more stress and alarm to the birds in the garden than any number of magpies. We have certainly developed a hate/hate relationship – but I digress...

The limbs of a giant beech are revealed in all their structural majesty, towering above, dwarfing the neighbouring sycamore, hazel, hawthorn and birch, which appear scrawny in comparison. The thick, smooth grey trunk divides into three limbs, any one of which would make a respectable tree. These divide again and again, the branches reaching up and out before gently curving under the tremendous weight. Only the larger limbs continue their relentless push upwards towards the light.

Yew tree branches end in tight clusters of unfolding needles.

Hazel catkins have already started to open to deposit their pollen, hoping to be captured by the tiny scarlet flowers that will combine to produce the nuts so loved by the endlessly foraging squirrels. The flowers are so difficult to spot at first, but once I get my 'eye in' I soon start to see them.



*Hazel catkins opening to release their pollen*



*Hazel flowers opening to capture the released pollen*



And among the towering trees and shrubby understorey the narrow fresh green shoots of bluebells are full of the promise of the mesmerising spring display to come.



One of the things I love to do when photographing a winter woodland is to switch to using black & white to try to capture the character of the trees. Removing the colour aspect allows me to concentrate of shapes, textures, contrasts and perspectives.



### **The Importance of Trees**

While walking the woods, looking at the amazing trees that have been around for so long, I got to thinking again about why trees are so important and why they should be afforded protection in planning laws that currently seem to place such little value on them.

Studies continually show that having easy access to woods, trees and green spaces is not just beneficial, it is critical to our physical and mental wellbeing. Is it any wonder that mental health issues have increased at an alarming rate as we force people to live in crammed

shoeboxes with little access to the natural environment (or in many cases not even a garden).

The Japanese Forestry and Forest Products Research Institute concluded that 15-20 minutes in a natural environment, especially woodland related, led to a significant reduction in blood-pressure, pulse rates and cortisol levels (elevated cortisol levels are linked to stress). In a survey for Natural England, 85% of those visiting woodlands said it made them feel calm and relaxed. In another survey, the National Forestry Commission found that 95% of people said woodlands were "places where I can relax and de-stress".

Some of us are very fortunate to have beautiful woodland and countryside within easy walking or cycling distance, but sadly that is not true for the large majority of people who live in this country. Thankfully, thanks to the Victorians, we at least have our parks, with their wonderful avenues of trees, because they at least were able to understand the link between access to nature and our wellbeing. Sadly, despite the weight of evidence, it is something that we have forgotten, especially where profit is concerned.

Woods and trees help to reduce pollution, absorb carbon from the air (which they store in their roots), improve air quality, reduce over-heating in our cities and protect us from harmful UV rays. And, in so doing, they also produce the oxygen we breathe as a by-product of their absorption of carbon and water (which leads to excess oxygen molecules that the trees then release). How do we so readily undervalue something that makes life possible?

Yet half of the UK's ancient woodland has been lost or damaged in the past 70 years. Since 1999, 276 ancient woods have suffered loss or damage, with another 588 still under threat, while 85% of ancient woodland is unprotected by government legislation.

Meanwhile, the government's own findings have made poor air quality responsible for a staggering 40,000 deaths per year. Heat-related stress accounts for about 1,100 premature deaths a year in the UK. Informed selection and strategic placement of trees and green infrastructure in cities can cool the air by between 2°C and 8°C. According to The Charter for Trees, Woods and People an estimated 595m tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> is stored in UK forests, and net uptake per year is between 9m and 15m tonnes.

By providing shade for buildings trees also reduce the need for air-conditioning, which must be good for the environment. You just have to walk through woodland on a hot summer's day to experience the cooler conditions provided by the shade. Conversely, woodlands are slower to lose heat and will be warmer than the surrounding landscape when temperatures drop.

Trees also act as a windbreak and provide security around properties and prevent soil erosion.

They also absorb noise pollution from busy roads and motorways – although less roads and more trees would be a far better balance for our environment.

The horrific flooding that hits the headlines every year could be greatly alleviated by planting more trees and woods to absorb rain water. Planting trees and hedgerows has been estimated to reduce rainfall run-off by as much as 78%. All town planners and officials have to do is look at the existing data.

Woodland habitats are vitally important for a wide variety of wildlife, which is finding it increasingly hard to survive. Oak is one of our most important trees when it comes to providing a richly important habitat and food source for wildlife: birds and squirrels build nests in the crown; some 280 different insects such as wasps, moths, aphids, spiders, gall mites and beetles feed upon the leaves; ivy, lichen, mosses and fungi invade the branches and bark; and birds, insects and mammals feed on the acorns.

It's about time that we realised that we could produce many of the wood products that we currently import, boosting employment and the economy. One simple example is that we still import an estimated 95% of the charcoal burnt in this country, mostly from non-renewable and unsustainable sources! Yet we could meet all our own charcoal needs if we had a mind to. Overall, an estimated 66% of Britain's wood demand is met through imports. This level of imports is probably not surprising when you consider that in the last century Britain lost 90% of its coppiced woodland.

Trees and woods also play an important role in our national identity, culture, history and psyche. Just think of many of our fairytales and folklore, from Little Red Riding Hood to Robin Hood.

The defence of our country depended for so long upon our navy, the anthem of which is still, 'Hearts of Oak'. A new Elizabethan warship took approximately 2,000 mature oaks to build - equivalent to 50 acres of trees - and during Elizabeth I's reign nearly 30,000 mature oaks, each taking approx a century to produce, were felled for this purpose alone.

Historically, our woods played an immensely important role in this country's economy, from ship and house building to tanning leather and making charcoal, from furniture making and farming (sheep hurdles, hedge laying and crop supports to name just a few) to aircraft frames and coach building. Many rural economies were based around the highly versatile hazel. Straight poles are still commonly used for bean poles and pea sticks, and fencing and hurdle-making. Cut and split, hazel poles would have been used by thatchers, twisted and bent in half and pushed into thatch to keep it in place - the average thatched house would require about 5,000 of these spars. As far back as Tudor times, until the introduction of wire fencing, hazel would have been used to create moveable hurdle-fencing, in great demand when wool was the mainstay of the country's wealth and foreign trade. Hazel was also used for cotton reels and salmon traps and bundles of rods were also used as ship's fenders and were used by engineers for providing drainage beneath roads and revetment work. The brushwood was also bundled into faggots that were used for the firing of bread ovens.

Every tree type has its inherent properties (of which the above are just a few examples) and these were exploited to the full. Maybe as the availability of oil decreases and with it the ability to mass produce plastics, these inherent properties will once again gain in importance.

You just have to think back to the massive public outcry when the government proposed to sell off our public woods into private ownership (2010) to see how much we relate to trees and how much they mean to us.

You would think that given all these positives we would be planting and protecting our trees and woods with a passion. Sadly, this is very far from the reality that faces us today. With around only 13% land coverage the UK is one of the least wooded nations in Europe.

Surprisingly, our woodland heritage is not adequately protected through the planning system and irreplaceable ancient woodland is coming under threat almost every day through increased pressure for such things as airport expansion, quarry expansion and vanity projects like the HS2 train line. And, despite what one government minister said, you can't just take a piece of ancient woodland, with its complex bio-diversity formed over many hundreds of years, and move it elsewhere. There are times when I really despair when I hear supposedly educated people talk about the environment!

Talking about the pressures from development reminds me of a definition of 'suburbia' I came across – it is the place where developers bulldozed all the trees then named the roads after them.

And then there is just the simple beauty of trees, whether they stand alone and towering over the landscape, whether they are covered in blossom or whether they form a woodland that adds colour, form and interest to our countryside. Sometime that value of something lies in the simple fact that it enriches our lives.

Imagine if everyone in the country was to plant just 1 tree. That's over 60 million trees. A whole new forest. Imagine what a difference that would make to our environment and to our lives.

#### **February 4**

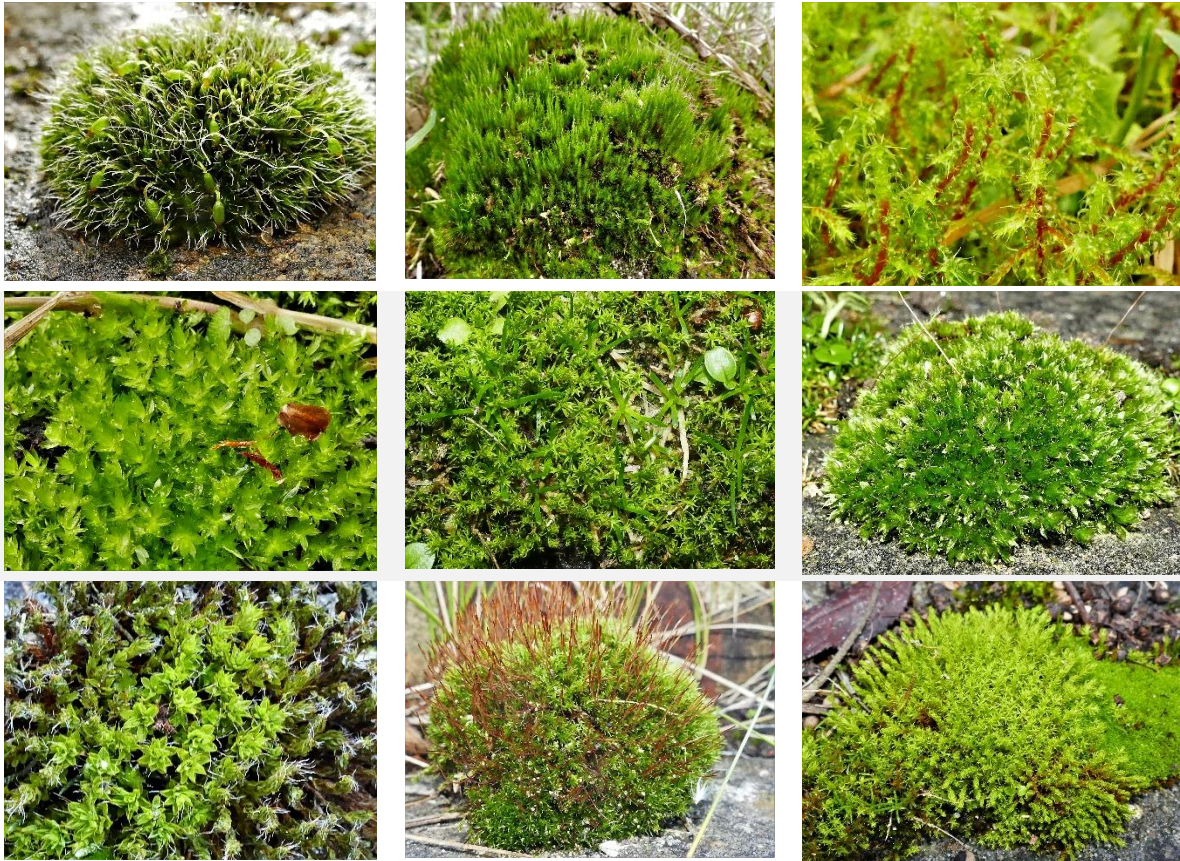
A splash of bright green from a Parakeet on the nut feeder in the garden brings a bit of colour to the dull, grey day. These are irregular visitors that may appear for a few days in a row and then not visit again for weeks or months.

#### **Richard Keaton's Field Notes: February 4 1919**

Dr Davey saw some kind of a hawk (presumably a Sparrowhawk) kill a Little Owl in Stafford Rd [Caterham Valley] immediately behind my house [Richard Kearton lived in Croydon Rd, Caterham Valley].

## February 5

For the first time I have truly noticed the wonderful array of mosses in the garden, growing on soil, brick, stone and even glass. Much hated by obsessively neat gardeners who will do just about anything to eradicate them from their pristine lawns – a pointless exercise I gave up on some time ago – when you really take the time to look at them closely you realize just how fascinating and varied they are, like miniature Alpine worlds.



## February 6

When it comes to public footpaths there are 2 things that I hate to see (although I'm sure I could come up with a few others if I took the time). The first is where landowners deliberately block or fail to maintain them, or make them unusable. The second is the use of barbed wire to hem the walker in along a very narrow path. All it takes is a trip or a slip on a muddy winter path and a hand to be automatically flung out seeking stability... you can imagine the rest. I have seen such injuries and they are not pretty! Not to mention the number of items of clothing that get snagged and ripped.

Nothing says, "Keep Out of the Countryside," better than wire fencing. The use of barbed wire just adds a brutish element to our countryside and adds the line, "You Are Not Welcome."

More aptly known as the 'Devil's Rope', barbed wire came to prominence in the US in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a cheap and effective way of fencing miles of open land. Today, more than 450 patents exist for barbed wire and more than 2,000 types and variations of barbed wire have been found by collectors (I wonder if there is an official name for people

who collect barded wire). In Kansas there is even a museum dedicated to barbed wire. Despite my dislike of the stuff, if ever I am in Kansas this is one place I simply have to visit!

Working on the restoration of long neglected sites often means coming across strands of discarded rusty wire from broken fencing that lie in wait, hidden beneath vegetation for an unwary foot or hand. On many occasions I have come across the rusty remains of a fence, the barbs of which can easily rip through protective gloves, let alone exposed flesh. Blood poisoning beckons!

I therefore welcome the modern thinking in conservation that has started to do away with permanent fencing, including the use of barbed wire, replacing it with either temporary fencing (that is only present when animals are on the site) or invisible fencing (which involves buried cables sending a signal to collars worn by cattle - allowing for a more targeted system of conservation grazing). Unfortunately, these initiatives have yet to become commonplace.

For these reasons I always refuse to have anything to do with the erection of barbed wire, which has rightly earned the alternative name of 'Devil's Rope'.



*The only time the sight of 'Devil's Rope' was anyway acceptable.*

## February 7

Daffodils in flower outside St John's church in Caterham town centre. A welcome and spirit-lifting sight at this time of the year and a hopeful sign that spring is not too far away.



Also notice that the Stinking Helleborines (right) are out in the garden.

There are also a couple of Snowdrops I planted in the autumn, alongside the increasing number of Primroses.



**February 8**

**Hedgerow Rejuvenation at Warlingham's Blanchman's Farm Local Nature Reserve**



*Blanchman's Farm Local Nature Reserve*

Today we start work on the overgrown hedge that has spread to encroach upon the edge of the path that runs across the reserve from the main entrance to just before the pond. What started out as a single row of hedging plants on a low bank when planted 30 years ago, is now a dense thorny mass, covered in bramble and tangled with ivy, with a number of large willows spreading their now substantial limbs and dead or dying blackthorns. There is also plenty of dead elder that needs to be removed.

The thickest part of the hedge has expanded to a width of close to 4m. Once cut back the aim is to replant the gaps where the hedgerow plants have died to recreate the original hedgerow.



*Spirit of the Tree – fungal staining in a blackthorn cross-section*



One massive tangle of ivy takes me most of the day to deal with. Caught up between trees either side of the boundary fence, some of the vines are easily the thickness of my wrist. The dense tangle, reaches from the ground to well over head height. Disentangling it is a long, challenging task before it is possible to employ the pole saw to remove the final strands and branches holding it up. Once on the ground it is still of substantial size and weight, so we decide it is best left where it is.



It will no doubt form a valuable habitat for myriad invertebrates.

Patches of White Dead-nettle beside the path provide some winter colour. One of our under-rated wildflowers that gets its name from the nettle-like leaves, although unlike nettles they have no sting (hence 'dead-nettle'). Look closely and you will see a square stem encircled by white flowers, the lower lip of which is a perfect landing pad for the early bees searching for vital nectar.



The arisings from the clearance work are piled in the field for collection. As the 3 piles grow in size I can only hope that whoever has agreed to remove them has a large truck, preferably with a grabber!

A red kite circles overhead, eventually alighting at the top of one of the trees on the opposite side of the reserve. It is soon joined by a second and they circle off together. Only a few years ago red kites were unknown in the area but now they are a constant sight and I recently saw a group of 6 not far away from where we are now.

### **Richard Keaton's Field Notes: February 8 1919**

Snow on the ground and a hard frost. Birds ravenous. Starlings, Blackbirds, Thrushes, Robins, Hedge Sparrows [Dunnocks] and Chaffinches in great numbers, but never a Tit of any kind has been to feed from my monkey nuts.

### **February 9**

### **Hedgerow Rejuvenation at Warlingham's Blanchman's Farm Local Nature Reserve (cont.)**

A sunny, mild day. It's tempting to abandon the sweatshirt for the t-shirt underneath. However, that would expose flesh to the vicious blackthorn spines.

With much of the clearance work complete the replanting can begin, filling the gaps left by the removal of the dead and damaged scrub.



*Overgrown hedgerow cleared back to its original line and ready for the gaps to be replanted*

With the hedgerow cleared, we can switch to an area of mature willows beside the main entrance. A number of branches have reached down to the ground where, as is characteristic of willow, they have rooted to throw up multiple new stems. If left this will be repeated again and again and the willow will march its way across the open grassland. The aim is therefore to keep the willows in check by removing the lower branches and the new growth.

## **February 10**

### **Hedgerow Rejuvenation at Warlingham's Blanchman's Farm Local Nature Reserve (cont.)**

Continue with the cutting back of the row of large mature willow trees. As well as continuing with the removal of the lower branches to lift the crown, there are also a number of split branches to be removed.

All the arisings from this work are used to create a dead hedge across the newly opened area to prevent it being used as a cut-through for walkers. This is my favourite task of the week, especially as I'm working alone so am able to construct it how I want. The selecting, laying and weaving of branches and brash to form a solid, dense fence is a really pleasing and relaxing task, a bit like weaving a giant basket.



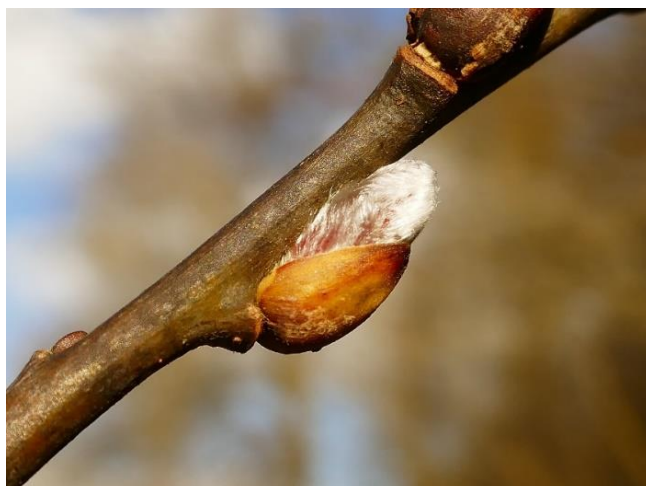
The end result is a functional wildlife habitat, it blocks the area beneath the willows from becoming a new path and is aesthetically pleasing, with all the branches laid left to right in woven layers. Sometimes, it's the really simple things that give me the most pleasure.

### February 11

Further signs of Mother Nature awakening, with masses of colourful crocuses all along the grass bank at Caterham's Timber Hill – white, egg yolk yellow, lilac, deep purple, candy-striped. And lots of Buff-tailed Bumblebee queens crawling from flower to flower in search of nectar before finding a place to settle down to start a new colony.



Lesser Celandines, one of the first flowers to appear and regarded by many ecologists as a sign that we are entering the last days of winter, are flowers that are easy to love. The petals are a glossy yellow that shine unbelievably brightly in the sunshine, the merest appearance of which is cause for them to open in celebration. They are also a vital source of early nectar for the increasing number of insects that cannot wait for the appearance of spring.



Goat Willow buds (left) are starting to open, revealing their tiny silky catkins.

**February 12**

A lovely sunny afternoon walking around the lake at Reigate's Priory Park.



**February 14**



Crosscut hawthorn stem – perfect for Valentine's Day.

## **February 15**

After a winter of long dry periods the weather has suddenly changed to something much wetter, with rain and very strong winds forecast for the week ahead.

Driving home over the North Downs I am stopped by a fox snuffling around the side of the narrow road. Not wanting to startle it into running into my path I pull up, at which point it stops its searching and raises its head to look at me, seemingly totally unconcerned that I am only a few feet away. It is a wonderful animal, healthy looking, with a thick, very dark coat, tinged with a deep red-orange. It watches me with fixed patient eyes. Its bushy tail hangs in the air, where it had been when I first spotted it, as though it is prepared to carry on its searching as soon as I move on. Luckily, this is a quiet road and there are no other vehicles. For what seems like an age, but is probably no more than a couple of minutes, we watch each other. He – although I'm only assuming that it was a 'he' – shows no signs of fear at all. Eventually, as though realising that one of us has to move, it turns and wanders slowly across the front of the car to the other side of the road, totally unhurried, totally unflustered. Having reached the other side... just, it stops and looks back at me, as though enquiring whether I have enough room to be on my way, so he can continue about his business. I pull slowly away, glad that I have chosen to take this route home.

## **February 16**

### **Woodland Restoration on Riddlesdown (part of the South London Downs National Nature Reserve)**

A dry but very grey day, with the temperature at 8am already 10C!

We continue the work we started a few years ago along Yew Tree Walk on Riddlesdown, restoring the storm-damaged strip of woodland below the main track that runs north to south across the site.



*One of the site's many large storm-blown yew trees*

This is the densest section of woodland so far, with numerous fallen mature yew trees – many probably dating back to the Great Storm of October '87 - and dense stands of mostly dead ash trees – sadly, ash dieback disease had not spared a single one.

The rot of many of the ash trees can be seen in the dark fungal colouring running through their stems, creating 'ink blot' patterns on the cross-cut stems. The dark shading comes from the invading fungus that will break down the wood, returning the nutrients back to the soil. The dark, tracery lines around the various shadings are boundaries put up by the individual fungi to protect themselves from predation from rival fungi.



*Pattern of fungal rot in a dead ash tree cross-section*

Thankfully, the predicted 40mph winds fail to arrive, which is just as well, as working amongst trees in high winds is a scary task, even more so given the brittle branches of the dead standing ash trees just waiting to come down!

Spend the day concentrating on a densely packed stand of ash trees – mostly 20 to 30 years old – that have grown up in the space created by a pair of large fallen yew trees – possibly the result of the Great Storm of '87, following which the management of this wood (along with so many others across the south-east), was abandoned as too costly and resource intensive to undertake. The massive upended root plates of a number of the yews look like giant fans.

Below the rough, flaky yew bark the smooth skin is a rich pink.



The bark of one large fallen tree is covered in an amazing set of swirling patterns, like Celtic knotwork. Nature is full of endless wonder.

The first job is to fell a stand of dead ash trees to clear a path through to the fire site, which will negate having to drag everything the long way around the fallen yews. After that it's a case of widening the gap, removing at least 15 trees by the end of the day.

Not for the first time, the corrugated iron sheets upon which the fire is supposed to be contained (in an effort to prevent the woodland floor from being damaged by the fire) are totally ineffectual as they are far too small to contain the volume of arisings that we create. Someone needs to realise that we invariably work at a far greater pace than they think we will!



*Sunlight through the wood smoke*

A blustery evening, but a nice clear night for a view of the latest full moon – the second of the year. Because of its short length, February is the only month that can pass without a full moon. However, this is not the case this year. Tonight's full moon, for obvious reasons, is known as the Snow Moon.



*February's Snow Moon*

## **February 17**

### **Woodland Restoration on Riddlesdown (cont.)**

A nice sunny day – the apparent calm before the proverbial storm, as Storm Eunice is forecast to hit the entire country tomorrow, with winds predicted to be in excess of 60mph, with the possibility of 90+mph in some parts of the country.

Continuing with the woodland clearance work along Yew Tree Walk on Riddlesdown, taking down some of the larger ash trees to clear the central area of this year's work site. Hard hats are compulsory for woodland work, even more essential when dealing with the brittle overhead branches of dead ash trees, which could break off and fall at any point during the felling process. This is not a job for the inexperienced or foolhardy! At the same time we are clearing a way through the dense holly – mostly at the top of the site – that has taken full advantage of the gaps created by the demise of the storm-blow yew trees.

With the larger trees down the whole area is suddenly opened up, allowing the light to pour in.



Brown, decaying Collared Earthstar fungi are dotted around the woodland floor, visible now that they are exposed to the light.

Colourful Green Elf Cup fungus also stains a number of rotting branches a wonderful blue-green. The fruiting bodies appear in autumn as tiny green shallow discs. For the most part, however, it is the staining that gives away the fungi's presence.



With so much clearance work required we haven't had the opportunity to coppice any of the overstood hazel. Not for the first time we could really do with another week, but the packed task schedule doesn't allow for it.

The larger logs are piled to form a number of wildlife habitats, mostly against the trunks of the large storm-blown yew trees.



## **February 18 – Storm Eunice**

Following on from Storm Dudley earlier this week – impacting mostly the north of the country, with very little impact here in the south-east – Storm Eunice is forecast to batter the entire country, with wind speeds now expected to reach 80-90mph along the Bristol Channel and 70-80mph across London and the south-east. Yesterday's amber warning for the capital has been upgraded to a very rare red warning, indicating a severe danger to life! The advice is clear – stay indoors unless you absolutely have to travel out.

- 08:00 – A calm sunny morning, with no signs of the impending storm that has started to hit the West Country.
- 09:30 – Blustery conditions are short-lived.
- 10:15 – The red alert was due to come into effect 15 minutes ago, but currently all is calm beneath a clear blue sky.
- 11:00 – Blustery, but so far nothing more than that here in the south-east. However, winds of 110mph have been recorded on the Isle of Wight! In a typically understated British way the island ferry has been suspended.
- 11:45 – Wind picking up, although the Met Office has reduced its forecast for the local area to 60mph. Have we dodged the worst of the storm??
- 14:00 – After a blustery period things have calmed down again. There are reports of a few trees down in the local area but nothing on the lines of the Great Storm of '87 when woodlands were decimated and an estimated 15 million trees came down.
- 16:00 – A period of calm, possibly indicating that the worst is over and that we have gotten away relatively unscathed.
- 17:00 – Blue sky, calm. The storm appears to have passed. The red alert has been downgraded to amber and will be in force until 21:00.
- 18:00 – Breezy, with blustery gusts. Potentially blustery again tomorrow.
- 20:00 – The worst has definitely passed and those largely unaffected can breathe a sigh of relief, although thoughts go out to those less fortunate.

It is highly likely that the upcoming woodland tasks could be impacted by fallen and dangerous trees resulting from today's winds.

## **February 19**

Following on behind Storm Eunice is the blustery rain. The tree danger is not over, as trees weakened by yesterday's storm can still come crashing down without warning.

Immediately the rain stops a quartet of Long-tailed Tits appear in the garden to brighten the day. Whatever happens, nature goes about its business. It's amazing watching them hanging upside down from a branch by one foot, while pecking at a sunflower heart clutched in the other foot.

## **February 20**

Following hot on the heels of storms Dudley and Eunice, Storm Franklin is expected to bring rain and gusts of up to 40mph to the local area today and tomorrow. After a winter of so

much settled weather things have certainly changed! What did I say about February being unpredictable?

### **February 21**

Only occasionally blustery – Storm Franklin seems to be mostly restricted to the northern part of the country, where there are 85mph winds and 100 flood warnings in place! The northern areas have been hardest hit this February.

### **February 22**

Having disappeared at the end of last year's breeding season – where they go to is a mystery - the Starlings have again returned, just as they do every year, only earlier this year. Another sign of spring returning.



### **February 23**

There are lots of frogs and masses of frog spawn on the woodland pond on Coulsdon Common.



## February 24

For some reason I find myself awake at 5am, not a time I am all that familiar with! Looking out the window at the dark, quiet world outside I spy a fox sitting in the middle of the road, silhouetted by the street light. Hard to tell with the blackened body where the body ends and its shadow starts.

It spots me at the window and turns, its eyes reflecting the streetlight and shining a bright silver, almost demonic against the blackness of the rest of it.

Having been disturbed, it trots lazily away along the centre of the road and disappears into the darkness at the corner.

## February 25

A cluster of Lungwort at the end of Coulsdon's Happy Valley is another encouraging sign that spring is coming.



Lungwort gets its name from the blotched leaves, which were said to look like a diseased lung. During the Elizabethan period (when most plants were named) it was thought that their appearance provided clues as to their medicinal properties (known as the Doctrine of Signatures). According to Culpeper's *'The English Physitian and Complete Herbal'* of 1653 it was used to treat coughs and wheezes as well as lung disease. The leaves are astringent and have also been used to staunch bleeding. It was also one of the plants used to try to treat the Black Death of 1348–50, which is reputed to have killed over 4 million people in England alone.

## February 26

The Starlings have discovered the garden feeders. They are the only birds not intimidated by the grey squirrel competing for the suet block stuck in the branches of the Forsythia. They seem far more concerned with squabbling with each other.

Meanwhile, the sunflower hearts appear to have replaced the suet pellets as the favourite of the other birds.

In the garden the crocuses have started to open and the first yellow blossom is appearing on the forsythia.

A pair of Red Kites glide effortlessly across the far side of the valley in the morning sunshine.

## February 28

Signs of the approaching spring on nearby Manor Park –

Plenty of Crocuses of various colours beneath the line of trees along the verge beside the road.

Not as many Primroses as I would expect to see, but enough nonetheless to raise the spirits. A lone Snowdrop.

For a flower that is so associated in England as one of the first signs of the end of winter, snowdrops are not actually a native plant. They are believed to have come from Europe (possibly around the Mediterranean) in Elizabethan times. Indeed, it is not until the 1700s that there are any written references to it in England. If it had been commonplace before then it would surely have not gone unremarked upon.



Patches of Lesser Celandine, mostly closed in the overhead grey.

The first Common Toothwort emerging at the base of one of the lime trees that form the avenue of trees known as The Cloister. This is the earliest I have seen these parasitic, pale, alien-looking flowers.

An inability to synthesise gives this plant its pale colour – it does not contain the chlorophyll that gives other plants their green colour. Instead, it gets its nutrients by tapping into the roots of nearby trees.



The deathly pallor of this plant has given it the alternate name of 'Corpse Flower' – it was believed that such a plant could only grow on the site of a buried corpse.

Beneath the trees are the shoots of bluebells, wild garlic, dog's mercury and the shiny spear-like leaves of lords and ladies.

Glimpse my first butterfly of the year – possibly a Small Tortoiseshell or a Comma, it is only a brief glimpse of orange.

**We are just 3 weeks away from the Spring Equinox, when light and dark will once again be in balance before the light begins its ascendancy once again.**