

NEWS FROM HOLYFORD WOODS - January to Early April 2015

My first visit of the year was on a sunny blustery day at the very beginning of January. The recent stormy weather had not brought down trees, but the paths were littered with twigs and small branches and it was wet underfoot. As I opened the gate I was greeted by a Mistle Thrush singing from the top of an Ash tree, tossed by the wind. Hence its country name of Storm Cock.

The first signs of spring were there to enjoy. Many already well developed Hazel catkins, a few smothered with pollen, danced in the wind and everywhere the tips of Bluebell and Ramson (Wild Garlic) leaves were poking through the rotting leaf litter. Its relationship to cultivated Garlic is evident when stepped on, to release that unforgettable smell. Very much a loved/hated wild plant which redeems itself when forming a perfect white carpet beneath the trees. Honeysuckle leaves, enjoyed by the Roe Deer in winter were unfolding. There were plenty of deer prints in muddy places but few sightings. Unless I come upon them on the paths or in the few open places it is thanks to Paco that I see them. As the month progressed high winds brought down a small number of trees and limbs, cleared from the paths and left in piles for the benefit of the smallest members of the wildlife community that inhabit the floor of the Woods.

At any time, in the tops of the trees and floating above on the turbulent air there are Rooks, Crows and a few Ravens and Buzzards calling, and so early in the year theirs are frequently the only sign of bird life. On only one occasion did I see a large flock of Redwings and Fieldfares flying through in search of holly berries, unlucky as they had long fallen.

By the beginning of February there was a carpet of Bluebell leaves, with well-developed clumps of Primroses nestled amongst them, and a sprinkle of the first bright yellow Lesser Celandine already in flower. All the Ferns were beginning to die down, the earliest Catkins had lost their pollen, and Pussy Willow buds had filled out. On the edge of the path at the top of Holyford Coppice the first spotted leaves of the Early Purple Orchid had appeared. Bird calls from such as Wren, Robin, Great and Blue Tit were increasing.

Most of the month came with rough weather interspersed with sunny days, but always accompanied with a very cold wind, felt particularly along the Hangings track and at the top of Holyford Coppice. On a few occasions fallen timber had to be dealt with by the EDDC Countryside Team. Nathan Robinson the Nature Reserves Ranger has regular work parties in the Woods including a team of AV&DC members. They have continued clearing the Old Orchard, and the glade overlooking what was the old reservoir/Top Pool but renamed Lamb's Pool, as a way of thanking Mr. and Mrs Lamb, new owners of The Old Pump House, for gifting it to the Woods. New seats created from large fallen timber are now gradually appearing all over the Woods.

All month long the pungent scent of Dog Fox was everywhere, left as it travelled through the Woods in search of a mate. Paco was most interested in the Badger sett in the conifers, telling me it was occupied, most probably by a passing young male in search of new territory. In many places were signs of Badgers digging for worms and grubs, always nearby a neatly dug latrine.

March, on the whole, was showery, windy and cold with odd days of sunshine. As the month progressed bird calls increased, including the first from returning Chiffchaffs. Cries of the Green Woodpecker (named Yaffle for its laughing call) came from the fields around the Woods, and a Great Spotted Woodpecker was seriously drumming. One day I heard the call of a Tawney Owl, which is not unusual. Bluebells were growing ever upwards, Primroses flowering, and leaf buds swelling on many trees.

And so into early April; there are buds showing on both the Bluebells and Ramsons, and looking across the valley from The Hangings track the tree tops are greening as sap rises. Bright yellow, almost glowing Golden Saxifrage carpets the damp places. Clumps of Red Campion and Foxglove leaves stand proud, and in drier spots it is the golden Lesser Celandine that puts on a brilliant display. The dainty little Wood-sorrel too is coming into flower.

The biggest disappointment has been the lack of Frog Spawn. Three years ago Lamb's Pool had been crowded with hundreds of mating Frogs, making use of the mat of Parrot Feather as well as around the edge of the water. Their croaking could be heard some distance away. No Frogs for two years. Does anyone know why?

Over the month the work parties began tackling the task of clearing and partially restoring Lamb's Pool, which has always been central to the Woods. Work will resume in late summer.

Soon the Bluebells will be out creating that magical blue carpet and the heady perfume enjoyed on warm sunny afternoons. We now look forward to Bluebell Day on May 3rd. This is when we will celebrate the very special Woods. I hope you will join us.

Jean Kreiseler