

## COULD THIS BE SPRING?

Tony Boardman

**R**EG., OUR NEIGHBOUR, has been seen working on his allotment - all is right with the world! Could this be a sign, is he the harbinger of spring?

Certainly we should not be lulled into the false impression that winter is now well behind us, for it would be extremely unwise to assume that we have cruised through the dark months reasonably unscathed, and it's going to be sunshine and flowers all the way.

For us the portends of an easy winter were early, our girl Bantams started to lay around Christmastide, which was a pleasant surprise and very useful at that time. The first snowdrops were noticed a week earlier (Jan. 7th.) than in 1992 (Jan. 15th.). How can I be so sure of these facts? Because I am one of those boring people who keep diaries, and have done for years. It is full of inconsequential matter except to myself. I will never be looked upon as a future Samuel Pepys!

Sometimes it is useful, such as when asked when one of our dogs went to the vets for a booster injection, for instance, or what month Auntie Gladys went down with shingles. Actually we haven't got an Aunt Gladys, it was merely a facetious comment to illustrate the immense possibilities diaries have in keeping members of the family informed with bits of absolutely useless information.

Fresh with this knowledge I hope you will all rush out and purchase a 1993 diary, which in some selected establishments can now be purchased at a reduced price.

Daffodils have unfurled their golden banners, coltsfoot, that delicate roadside weed has made its appearance and greets the sunshine with its bright yellow flowers, closing again rapidly when the clouds return. In gardens, forsythias add another splash of golden colour to augment the early springtime scenery. These shrubs festoon their branches with flowers before the leaves appear. The pink flowering currant, or ribes shrub, is also to be seen in cottage gardens, and certainly adds a contrast to the predominant gold.

The shy sunshine may bring forth from hibernation, the beautiful sulphur coloured brimstone butterfly, which is really unmistakable as it flutters along the hedgerow and waste ground. At this time the colourful peacock with its bright eye markings and the equally coloured small tortoiseshell butterflies can be seen sunning themselves after their winter sleep.

Both the latter mentioned butterflies frequently hibernate in garages and even sometimes in attics etc. The caterpillars feed voraciously on nettles, so although they have definite similarities they shouldn't really be confused.

Incidentally there is a large tortoiseshell, but unlike its smaller cousin, is now extremely rare.

Feeding the birds as we do throughout the winter months you can often be rewarded with attracting unusual birds to your garden.

This year we have a cock blackcap obliging us with sporadic visits, usually helping the blackbirds out with the rotten cooking apples that we put out. We had them winter feeding with us when we were at Bourton, so we are naturally delighted that we now have a Shipton representative too.

What's so special about them? you may ask.

Well this delightful dapper dove-grey song bird with the appropriate black head in the cock bird (the hen bird has a rust coloured cap) normally flies south with the other migrants like the swallows. However, as I can certainly verify, some birds, and I would imagine mostly the males, do take a gamble with our winters. Many ornithologists reckon that their song is rated almost as beautiful as the nightingale's.

Talking as we did briefly about swallows, my wife Sue swears she saw one sweep across the fields as she drove to work the other morning; it's early, but this year I believe she was probably correct in her assumption.

Anybody heard the cuckoo yet?

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