

COUNTRY PIE

Tony Boardman

SUMMER, LIKE THE PARTY, is over. In life a successful party is planned, anticipated and normally enjoyed by all in attendance. All good things however come to an end, one by one the guests express their thanks and with cheerful chatter pour into their cars and are away leaving their hosts to gaze about them at the disarray. Eventually an air of normality is reached as the last dish is put away and they can slip quietly to their rest with a satisfying feeling of achievement.

Rather like the seasons isn't it? We plan and look forward to spring and summer —may be by adding something new to enhance the garden to make it more attractive. The migrant birds and butterflies arrive and help to beautify the surrounding countryside and in many cases our own garden too. The warm summer days become mellow autumn and like our party guests the twittering swallows gather on the telegraph wires as if to say "we've had a great time but it is time to go".

Gradually as the leaves begin to fall those gardens begin to look sad, the lawns get their last cut, spent flowers are reduced and those leaves are composted. Some however may be formed into clumps in out of the way sheltered parts to provide winter protection for our creatures in the wild, like the hedgehog for instance. All nature then prepares for its own winter slumber to be refreshed again when the pure white snowdrops make their first appearance in the New Year.

About a fortnight ago I heard the familiar chack chack call of fieldfares as they flew high overhead in search of their favoured open grasslands and hedgerows.

They and their smaller cousins the redwings are members of the thrush family that spend the winter months in the British Isles coming mainly from Scandinavia where, as we know, winters can be quite frigid. They are shy birds preferring to hop around looking for food in the fields and it is only when the snows arrive usually that hunger will drive them in to our garden to gobble up our cotoneaster berries and, of course, suitable foods that we put out for the birds.

You know it really is very rewarding feeding birds in winter because you can never be sure what stranger you may attract in, particularly when desperation and starvation drives them your way. The reward is that you may well be saving their lives. You may well be familiar with blue tits and our old seasonal friend the robin, but can you differentiate between a greenfinch and a siskin or chaffinch and a brambling? All could possibly be at your winter bird feeding station, particularly when it starts to get colder. I can recommend to you the Mitchell Beazley Birdwatcher's Pocket Guide. A slim but very informative little book to keep handy for recognition purposes.

Now then, do you like success stories? Of course you do. Allow me to tell you the tale of our next door neighbours and their respective cats. Gazing through our sitting room window we are frequently entertained by the sight of Reg Ray, he of the majestic gait, marching past rattling a small box of cat treats. Some time later from the other direction Charmian Worker will come into view also rattling her box of cat treats and occasionally intoning the call "boy" in the hope that her charge

"Dixie" will appear from inspecting his manor with food firmly in mind. Having been located he is taken indoors where he remains until Reg's "Fred", a ginger gent of tender years, has been allowed his spell of freedom.

This performance each day, which is rather reminiscent of those Tyrolean Clocks with the figures appearing from the sides usually to strike the chime before retreating, has been a solution to hefty vet bills and anguish. This change-over system has worked for some time now since young "Fred" fell foul of "Dixie", the Godfather of the local district tom cats. The black and white "Dixie", understandably the apple of Charmian's eye, has been the top cat in the locale for several years, suffering the odd dust up on occasions with any other red blooded Tom who deigns to challenge him, but generally he considers himself as Moggie Mafia Numero Uno veritabily the Godfather.

Young "Fred" however is lithe and his physique is that of a cheetah, coupled with the fact that youth is on his side he may be playing the waiting game. Unlike Edward the Black Prince he has yet to earn his spurs. The live theatre past our house could go on for some time yet, but it's all very civilised and one thing is for sure it's preferable to paying those vet bills.

Bonfire night is just over and very soon now we are going to be frequently reminded that there is only so many days of shopping until the stores close for the Christmas festival itself. We will get out the address hook and go through the Christmas card list only to find that we should have sent that card to Auntie Florrie in Australia weeks ago. Of course you could send a New Year card.

The stigma, however, is there. What that really implies is that you were too late to wish her A Merry Christmas! How many of us will be receiving cards this year from people we least expected one from ? "Heavens to Murgatroyd" (or something similar) we will exclaim "we have had a card from the Blenkinsopp-Smythe's and it is now too late to reciprocate". "Oh dear how sad, never mind" as Sgt. Major Williams in "It ain't 'alf 'ot Mum" would have said.

Your "Wychwood" should be with you before the celebration of Christmas begins. On behalf of my wife and myself, plus our three lovely dogs (and five bantams) we would like to wish you all a 'Very Happy and Peaceful Holiday', and see you, all being well again, in the New Year.

Incidentally are you aware that in 1797 a chap called James Hetherington wore a top hat in London for the first time. Unfortunately he attracted a large disorderly crowd and he was arrested and charged with causing a breach of the peace because he appeared on the public highway wearing "A tall structure of shining lustre and calculated to disturb timid people".

Can you imagine ladies collapsing in doorways having the vapours at the sight of this monster who obviously had no shame as he walked abroad. Had he have concealed burning coals in the top you could have imagined their concern a little more. So much for fashion old lad.

I wonder what they would have made of the headgear to-day - the baseball cap, reversed of course. Now there IS something for ladies to have the vapours about!!

Happy Christmas all.