

COUNTRY PIE

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THE YEAR HAS FINALLY TURNED and grim winter has made an early entrance to our part of the countryside this time, which suggests that we could all be in for a lengthy spell at Jack Frost's not so tender mercy. Truthfully we have been favoured with a sequence of milder winters for quite a few years now, so it is on the cards that a frigid one is due to balance the books as it were.

Gardening purists will tell you that we need the very cold spells to kill off the pests, like the aphids for instance; sadly the bitter weather uncompromisingly decimates the smaller birds like the blue tit, who is a voracious searcher and feeder of the aforesaid little green monster.

The blue tit is an easy little bird to identify and fortunately due to their gymnastics on the peanut holders are great favourites in the garden. As these little chaps only weigh a few ounces they need to fuel themselves constantly during this difficult period, that is why you will notice regular trips to and fro. However, because they are small, they are timid when it comes to competing with larger birds like the house sparrow, greenfinch and starling who also really enjoy peanuts. You can buy a peanut holder that admits only the smaller birds such as the titmice family but they are not particularly cheap.

Coconuts can now be found on sale in our supermarkets; when cut in half and hung up on a string in a tree they will be perfect food for our colourful little acrobats and they will give you hours of entertainment watching them from the comfort of your home. Don't forget to drain the milk out of the coconut before you hang it up, which is perfectly drinkable of course should you desire.

During this cold snap in our own garden I have recorded sightings of blue tit, coal tit, and the great tit and alarmingly none of these in any great numbers. At one time it was nothing to count up to 20 competing for the nuts. By the way, lest I forget, the empty coconut shells can still be used after the flesh has been picked clean. All surplus fat from a Sunday roast can be collected in a pot and when cooled can be smeared into the shells as further food to keep the cold out and thus preserve these pretty little birds.

Please also remember the ground feeders, by buying some wild bird seed to cater for the needs of other popular garden favourites such as robin, dunnock (hedge sparrow), chaffinch and wren. After snow I like to scatter the seed against our garden wall where the birds are more likely to find it on their search route for creepy crawlies, another source of food. Left over porridge, bread and toast scraps, apples that have seen better days, baked potato skins, all is valuable winter food to blackbirds, thrushes etc. But please soak the bread and toast beforehand.

As I have said earlier, there is always the chance you may attract rarer birds into your garden in search of food. On January 3rd I was particularly delighted to recognise a pair of reed buntings helping themselves to seed put down by the edge of the garden wall. This day we also had a single pied wagtail grant us a visit too. A flight of seven long tailed tits gave us a passing visit as they feasted on the peanuts and who knows what tomorrow may bring?

Well now, did you have a good Christmas holiday? Personally I thoroughly enjoyed Christmas Day spent at my sister in law's over at Ilmington, near Chipping Campden.

We enjoyed the traditional Christmas turkey meal with all the trimmings followed later by a scrumptious trifle which was rather rich! During the night I was aware that some kind soul had left a large paving stone on my stomach, at least that is what it felt like. I felt much better after I had been gloriously ill several times, but in place of the stone I still had a localised dull pain, which became persistent.

One of our truly wonderful local doctors kindly looked in on me, following Sue's concerned phone call and in next to no time I found myself speeding off to the John Radcliffe complete with two "green suited paramedics", fully monitored and wearing an oxygen mask, which was not how I'd planned Boxing Day at all! Now feeling much better, it was a gall stone incidentally, I nevertheless had to spend the ensuing four days in the very top ward at the magnificent J.R., whilst they pumped antibiotics into me. I shared the ward with the jockey like Irishman Sean and a large West Indian called Carlos. Although Sean could make painstaking progress with his zimmer frame, poor old Carlos couldn't walk at all. Looking after us during the daylight hours were two of the sunniest Australian girls you could wish to meet. Their names were Melinda (Mel) and Rebecca (Bec).

Now it came to pass on the Sunday that Sean who was a little hard of hearing, received a visit from his son and went into a close and earnest conversation by the bedside leaving the T.V., which was screeching the epic Ben Hur on at full blast. Meanwhile whilst I was browsing through an old newspaper I noticed some rather violent movements with the curtains from Carlos's bed. Jumping out of my chair I noticed Carlos on his hands and knees clasping his bedside cupboard as if his life depended on it.

Imploring him to stay where he was I managed to find Mel who tried in vain to haul the bulky West Indian back into his bed, I was then dispatched to find Bec to give assistance. During this period the decibels from the chariot racing in Ben Hur had reached almost deafening proportions and they had just started releasing the lions and tigers on the long suffering Christians which added variety to the pounding hooves and strident voices. The Irishmen however were still incommunicado.

Eventually Carlos was restored to his bed and Mel looking somewhat hot under the collar, strode over to the T.V. to diminish the appalling racket that was coming forth. "Oh that's alright Love, said Sean "You can switch that off!" When asked how he had managed to get himself into such a mess, Carlos, who had very large sad eyes, meekly replied that he was searching for a biscuit! "All that for a biscuit!" yelled the Aussie duo. Me, I was laughing my little woolly socks off. I thought the whole episode absolutely hilarious.

Also in one of the side wards was a lady of advanced years whose night attire would have done credit to Barbara Cartland, all flouncy and pink it was. She, I christened "Trottie Two Shoes" for the simple reason that she spent much of her waking hours patrolling up and down the corridor in a pair of what I believe are called court shoes. After having to endure this almost incessant clonking noise during my stay it never ceased to amaze me that no one in her family ever considered buying her a pair of slippers for Christmas!

Finally, be of good cheer; spring is not too far away now and the first snowdrops could be imminent once they manage to force themselves through the frozen ground.