

## COUNTRY PIE

Tony Boardman

THE SUMMER SOLSTICE, or longest day, has come and gone. Will summer be far behind? For years now we have been told that due to holes in the atmosphere the British Isles could be experiencing climatic conditions comparable to Southern France or Spain. The possibility of orange groves in Oxfordshire, grapes grown in Grantham and mangroves in the Mersey seem at present to be just a teensy bit far fetched.

I am sure that pollution and mankind's unwise jiggering about with nature, such as vast desecration of South American forest lands, is not conducive to making our future any brighter, but to return to basics and present frankly very disappointing late June weather, is it really that it is just one of those years that will go down as a wet summer? It has happened before and no doubt it will happen again.

The cuckoo has given us his famous call and it did seem a little more frequent during the brighter weather in late April and May and now he prepares to wend his way back to Africa leaving his various progeny to find their own way south in the Autumn months.

If the cuckoo ever went into big business he would soon prosper. He arrives, makes a few calls, has others working like mad to look after his kids whilst he feeds off the fat of the land and then beetles back off to the sunny south for his holidays.

He's a lazy old devil but I can't help but like the old rogue and every year I am always delighted to hear his first familiar call.

You may have noticed in the local press that a flight of nearly 20 bee-eaters had chosen to stay for a while in Burford moving onto a field of oilseed rape in nearby Fulbrook.

This happened in late May and caused a certain amount of consternation to local residents particularly when the area was besieged by a small army of bird watchers. The brightly coloured birds, which are really at home in their Mediterranean or North African haunts do migrate in spring and autumn and the explanation for the visit so far away was possibly due to storms blowing this particular party completely off course.

Occasional sightings of bee eaters on the south coast are recorded from time to time but never in quantity.

You can just imagine the picture of a couple of Fulbrook senior citizens, on being acquainted with the fact that the men in the woolly hats and binoculars were looking for bee eaters, would remark something like "What are they doing in a field of rape and shouldn't they be looking for the Tower of London?" You cannot fault the bird watchers for their dedication to what is an absorbing hobby and further than that, they do show concern for the preservation of endangered species.

Now news of another endangered species, I refer to Percy the cockerel who has become a father of six chicks who are now fully fledged and spend their day following the clucking Mum, Matilda in pursuit of any edible objects that are in their path, usually young accessible flowers or vegetables. Percy, possibly in a protective mode has taken a fancy to attacking the back of Sue's ankles. I have mentioned before his aggression to the dogs, now he is taking things a little too far. In football parlance he has had the yellow card and has already had an early bath on an occasion after another ankle pecking, my wife retaliated by hurling the contents of a partly filled watering can at him.

An irate Sue has made it clear that further problems with Percy and it will be the red card and he will be returned to her Uncle Henry's farm from where he came. He doesn't seem to be able to cope with trousered legs but he did have a go at me one Sunday morning when I came down to let them out in my dressing gown.

Our regular perambulations up the Swinbrook Road with the dogs always seem to provide us with revelations of interest. For instance, Sue, with her floral knowledge always notices unusual flowers and plants growing at the roadside and recently she came across one of the parasitic variety which was new to us.

The mauve blue flowers of the meadow cranesbill, which is the true

geranium, are particularly at their best along our country roads at present and contrast spectacularly with a haze of distant brick red mass of field poppies. At the top of the road we were surprised to discover the blue cornflowers growing at the edge of the field, probably seed scattered by goldfinches who revel on feeding on cornflower seed when gone over in the garden.

On the fauna side we discovered with sadness recently what appeared to be a young lizard or even possibly with the wet weather a newt that had fallen foul of a passing car.

Coming back towards the Fiddlers Hill turn we have seen and heard the tiny whitethroat, a delicate but beautiful little summer visitor which generally frequents the hedgerows or wild scrubland. To many country folk it is known as Peggy Whitethroat.

Another pleasant sight recently has been a family of young bluetits working the tall hogweed, possibly for aphids.

The poor old butterflies have had a rotten summer so far but there is still some time for them to grace our gardens and byways. The painted lady butterfly which was so common to these parts last year doesn't seem to have put in an appearance as yet.

There is a strange brightness in the sky and the rain has stopped – warmth and folk showing their knees again – am I mistaken or could this be the start of summer?