

## COUNTRY PIE

Tony Boardman

**T**HE FIRST FROSTS of autumn have sent the precariously attached leaves spinning to the ground beneath the spreading branches of the deciduous trees and there are mounds of colour everywhere. For all the world it is as if the tree has divested itself of its summer dress and is now ready for a winter-time sleep. Whilst they may look rather unsightly in the garden, leaves swept into a corner where they can rot down will make fine compost eventually. Also they provide valuable winter quarters for the hedgehog and other hibernating creatures.

Bird song at this time of year is usually restricted to the thin mournful trill of the robin, the alarm calls of blackbirds as they identify a feline presence and possibly the wren might add his scolding rattle of annoyance. Put some soaked bread out on the feeding table and it's not long before the noisy squabbling starlings make their entrance. They always make me chuckle, they are greedy but they are such clowns and do a lot of good searching for leatherjackets in the lawn.

As dusk falls and the edges of the woodland becomes cloaked in ghostly mists you may hear the muffled caw of rooks as they return from feeding in the fields, the staccato sound of a cock pheasant as he prepares to fly up to the safe branches of a tree punctuate the evening air. Then all is still save possibly the hoot of the night owl.

Once more it is time to start feeding the birds so that their chances of surviving the winter are stronger. Nowadays your local pet store can sell you fresh peanuts and mixtures of wild bird seed which will cater for the tastes of the titmice

families and many of the ground feeders such as the retiring little dunnoek. The latter is better known as the hedge sparrow although they are ancestors and not related to the thicker billed sparrow which are members of the finch family.

Water is most important for birds to have access to, both for drinking and bathing so if you haven't a bird bath or a garden pond any receptacle such as a dog bowl will do. Prior permission from the rightful owner will have to be obtained of course! I know it's a bore when the water continually freezes over but think of it as a possible life saving chore when you wander out to crack the ice and top up once more.

I have known bird lovers make a brick platform and place a night light under the bowl to prevent freezing. The thrush family will be most grateful to receive any of those apples that have started to rot in your store, or fruit bowl and as winter really gets a grip you may entice into your garden those Scandinavian visitors the redwing or fieldfare. They are already here and you have possibly heard fieldfares calling with their familiar chack-shack-shack as they fly overhead. They tend to be shy birds and prefer to forage in rough fields taking berries from the hedgerows whilst available. Necessity drives them to follow the regular garden feeders when snow and ice makes life difficult in their natural environment.

The fieldfare is larger than our known song thrush or blackbird and is unmistakable with its grey head and rump, chestnut back and "plum pudding" throat and chest. The quieter redwing has a rusty red patch under the wings and a stripe over the eye which makes it easy to identify.

The tranquillity enjoyed in our neck of the woods has been disrupted somewhat in the last couple of months with men digging holes all over the place either renovating the piping of our water supply or putting up fresh electricity poles, presumably to improve our electricity services, not to forget the chap in his lorry who dumped several tons of clayey soil in large mole hills along the allotments field at the back of Fiddlers Hill.

We should of course be delighted that all this work has been done on our behalf and it would be churlish of me to be anything but grateful, for several days however it was quite a task to weave your way home around barriers. On one occasion, I kid you not, a brawny young electricity man lifted a pole slumped across the junction of Fiddlers Hill and the Swinbrook Road for me to drive under! Our beautiful view over the allotment field has altered somewhat. The horizon now boasts a larger line of poles which serve as hosts for flocks of roosting starlings as soon as it becomes dark. Dotted about on the wires they are reminiscent of bars of music.

The mole hills which I understand was the residue from the new Village Hall, have this day been cleared and smoothed by a bulldozer and hopefully it won't be too long before the blades of grass poke through the harsh ochre-coloured aspect as it is at present.

Does this ever happen to you? You sit down at the table contemplating the welcome meal set before you after returning from work when the telephone rings. With a sigh you pick up the receiver as your meal is whisked off the table and back into the oven to keep it warm and on answering a flat uninteresting voice queries "Mr Boardman." On identifying yourself you are then treated to a lengthy monologue by

this annoying twit who eventually inquires if you require any new windows fitting. When I reply that we don't get through too many windows as I had remarked to the previous caller from his firm only a month ago, he then changes his tack to asking if we need quoting for a new sun lounge.

With the prospect of my lovely dinner congealing away in the oven I halt his inane waffling in mid flow and terminate the conversation. Is there any way you can stop these people who always seem to attack at night when your resistance is lowest? Perhaps I should take a leaf out of the good lady wife's book, who really gives them short shrift when she intercepts one of their calls. Even I feel sorry for them!

Seriously though this almost aggressive attitude by organisations intent on relieving you of your money is getting a bit much. There is hardly a day goes by without some begging letter in the post in amongst the junk mail. It's not that I'm averse to contributing to what are I'm sure very worthy charitable causes but some of the methods of getting your attention I find nowadays unpalatable. I imagine I'm not alone in this assumption.

A smile for you to end with. We were discussing at work the other day the pros and cons of diet coupled with the surge of vegetarian interest since the beef scare. "I have no intention of not eating meat" said Anita "After all God provided for us because we are coniferous!" Not being deciduous we also keep our clothes on in winter too! Bless her, she did realise her slip of tongue but not before I howled with laughter. Come on now, surely you can remember similar howlers. Phone me 831332.

Seasonal greetings to you all from "The Memsahib" (Sue), "The Girls" (Jessica and Primrose) "The Old Gentleman" (Rastus) and yours truly.