

COUNTRY PIE

Tony Boardman

SPRINGTIME IS STILL a few weeks off as once again I gather my thoughts and experiences to share with you. Perhaps I am tempting fate, but as yet there has been little or none of the cold white stuff that used to descend upon us regularly at this time of year. Come to think of it, we really haven't seen much snow for some time. With daffodils and forsythia in flower, amongst others a good few weeks before normal, it does give credence to the global warming theory.

We were having our lunch in the office on January 9th, when Anita peered outside at something white fluttering over the old red brick nurseries wall. Much to our amazement it proved to be a single female brimstone butterfly which had presumably ventured out from the ivy-clad wall where it was spending the winter months, to take advantage of a little sunshine. I have seen brimstones on the wing in February but cannot remember ever seeing them so early in January before.

My birthday, February 14th, a date I share with my gardening colleague A.V. Mitchell incidentally, was a glorious spring-like day that again saw brimstones, tortoiseshells and the good odd peacock butterfly making hay while the sun shone, as indeed did the bees. Nobody complains about a foreshortened winter, but with quite a few birds already nesting and the less hardy shrubs and plants making growth, a reversion to a spell of arctic conditions can end in disaster and sorrow. On Shrove Tuesday (February 24th) Sue and I decided to take the dogs a later walk up the Swinbrook Road and as we turned to return homewards in the twilight I put my hand on her shoulder and pointed. Like a large white moth searching and occasionally swooping along the opposite hedgerow flew a

lone barn owl hunting for some unaware rodent. We watched enthralled before the subject of our attention crossed the road and made his way ghosting over the furrows of the ploughed field.

Unfortunately this magnificent bird of the night with its heart-shaped face is not nearly as common nowadays because its previous habitat has changed. Old barns have been converted by builders into des. res. and hedgerows have been grubbed out to provide huge prairie-like fields. Because of this the barn owl has less nesting sites and its natural prey have also been moved on in consequence. Obviously not all barns have been converted into stylish homes, but farming methods over recent years have not been favourable to the bird that was always known as the farmer's friend. The "Silent death" accounted for many rats and mice caught raiding the farmer's grain store at night. Sadly the corpses of barn owls are sometimes noticed at the roadside on motorways, having been hit in flight by high-sided vehicles as they were searching for prey.

To compensate for the loss of suitable places for the birds to breed, special owl boxes are put up in some areas to encourage the owls' future prosperity, so there is concern in some quarters for this majestic creature's well-being. The blood-curdling screech of the barn owl can send a shiver down your spine but I sincerely hope that the sound may never be lost to us, as to my mind there is no finer sight than witnessing the soundless, effortless flight of one hunting at dusk or in the early morning. I was delighted to see another bird perched on a post between Leafield and Finstock on March 4th. The soft white and buff plumage easily identifies the barn owl from our other native species.