

Country Pie

Tony Boardman

MARCH HAS COME in the normal leonine fashion but will it keep its side of the bargain and depart like a lamb? February failed to provide us with any hint of the spring-like weather that we would like to think is just around the corner. This time last year we had already enjoyed one or two really sunny days which had lured some of the over-wintering butterflies and adventurous bees to seek out the available flowers and blossom. So far it has either been too cold or too wet to entice anything outside, including ourselves, and our garden stands testament to this fact! The spring spruce-up will be a little late this year I think.

Surprisingly, we are told that Britain has just had its tenth warmest winter in 12 years whilst arctic winds have buried parts of Europe under huge falls of snow. Apparently spring is at least six days ahead of itself, we haven't had any semblance of normal spring-like weather but we cannot deny that the daffodils and many of the blossoming trees and shrubs have been early this year. Is it the dreaded global warming?

When I was quite young, buzzards were rarely seen other than in remote parts of England and Wales and were more likely to be seen in Scotland. However since the banning of pesticides and the return of the rabbit following the pernicious but still existing myxomatosis, these birds of prey, which are the size of a tomcat, are now seen quite regularly in our area. The other morning when I was walking Jessie and Rastus, our border terriers, I stopped to watch a

lone buzzard languidly making his way across the open fields towards Ascott with a few flaps of his strong wings followed by long glides. He didn't seem to have a care in the world and had all day to do it in. A day or so later driving back from work I briefly watched another three birds wheeling around together near the village of East End. Apart from the favoured rabbit their diet usually includes small mammals such as mice and voles although beetles and the earthworms are also taken.

In colour they are a chocolate brown and white and some birds vary as to how dark or light their plumage may be. So when you are next outside taking the air, look about you, that 'crow' might just be a buzzard, particularly if it has a broad wedged tail. Remember their flight is leisurely and often gliding and they delight in soaring on the thermals similar to the way our gliders do. Their call is a frequent high-pitched "kee-yurr", or so it seems to me.

You never know once you have identified your first you may get 'hooked' on the hobby and become an inveterate ornithologist.

My elder brother Scott often teases me because he has seen a hoopoe, a bizarre pink, black and white crested bird equipped with a long probing bill, and I haven't! The bird does occur over here between spring and autumn but not in large numbers because it prefers warm climates and that's why he saw this amazing specimen in Majorca. There is no other bird like a hoopoe and I reckon he asked what it was just to be able to torment me!

When he was younger, cars were probably his main fascination which still dominated his interest, even through his wartime RAF career, although what seemed to be a rapid procession of nubile young ladies vied for his prime affection. I seem to remember that no sooner had the family got used to learning the Christian name of the incumbent girlfriend a new face would then pop up with alarming regularity. Very disconcerting it was.

Floundering some eight years his junior, my main interest, when not chasing a football or cricket ball, was I regret to say, collecting birds eggs. Quite correctly nowadays of course it is illegal but in the forties it is what young boys did along with train spotting and other such hobbies. There was always a golden rule, you only took one egg out of the nest and if you found another similar nest you left it intact. My father bought me a fine partitioned cabinet to keep my egg collection in – a wooden rarity that might only now be seen on the Antiques Road Show.

To augment my limited collection a friend and I would sometimes catch a bus into the hub of Birmingham to visit a dusty little shop in Suffolk Street. Behind a glass counter were displayed rows and rows of birds eggs of various hues, shapes and sizes, and all bearing a printed label of the variety of bird that had produced the egg. The owner of the shop was a Mr. Spicer. Dressed in a brown overall he was rather reminiscent of the late Wilfred Bramble who played Albert in the fine TV series Steptoe and Son. His hair was normally dishevelled and a colour you would describe possibly as of mouldy hay. Perched on his nose was a pair of rimless glasses, but what intrigued us most about him was his capacity

of being able to secure his portion of cigarette to his bottom lip whilst ensuring us through a haze of blue smoke that the particular eggs we had set our hearts on were excellent specimens.

Peering myopically through his specs he would pander enthusiastically to our needs, "Temninck's stint did you say young sir? Wait a minute I'm sure I have a few somewhere" and off he would rush again. "I have some bard tailed godwits, just come in if you're interested". Needless to say we always went out with some extra purchases, he was a good salesman.

Some birds have of course started to nest and it won't be long before we shall see parent blackbirds rushing about the garden feeding their squawking demanding offspring, at the same time keeping a wary eye out for marauding cats and if just two survive to adulthood to carry on the species it's really the average, nature is strange that way.

I'm afraid that I haven't any humorous tailpieces on this occasion as nobody phoned in with any gems to impart so please if you hear anything, particularly from children, that makes you chuckle let's all share it in "The Wychwood" (01993 831332).

Last Saturday Sue and I followed a new car in Witney with the extraordinary registration number OOPS. Admittedly the first O was fragmented and could possibly have been L7 but really it was so vague. If we found it problematical how would a police car crew look upon it? Is it legal? It's certainly amusing but would the owner be amused if someone ran into the back of his brand new pride and joy through distraction?. OOPS!