

## COUNTRY PIE

WELL, that was the Millennium that was! How many of us are asked, when celebrating a birthday, do you feel any older? The normal answer is usually the truthful one, "No, not really". The same can be said about the passage of time between one year to the next, nothing changes, therefore it would be naive of us to believe that because we are now in the infancy of the 21st Century, life's struggles would be any different. Wouldn't it be nice if we could wipe the slate clean and start afresh? No such luck, for within hours of the New Year the Russians were continuing the pounding of Grozny in Chechnya.

Analyse the situation and you will find a fiercely proud new State in the fragmented vastness of the former USSR who are dedicated to the Islamic faith. On the other hand, you have a great power determined to inflict retribution on troublesome neighbours within their own community. In short, the tick on the donkey's back syndrome. The result of all this of course is the loss of many innocent lives all round, for they are caught up in the horrific situation. The terrified children and elderly Chechnyans on the one side and the acutely nervous young Russian soldiers who find themselves in this unfamiliar situation on the other. All are governed by the commands of others. The format for the misery of War does not alter, unhappily.

Let us hastily get back to the tranquillity of our own environment.

The New Year, whilst it may seem tedious with the inclement weather, does at least give us hope of the awakening of growth in our own gardens and the surrounding countryside. I have yet to find anyone who is not joyously affected by the

sight of the first pure white snowdrops, traditionally our earliest arrival. Botanically they are known as *galanthus*, which means the milk flower, and certainly the shy drooping flower can be likened to a drop of milk. Although we have enjoyed their company for a length of time they are not originally a native of Western Europe and could have been introduced by the Romans.

They are generally offered for sale in garden centres in bulb form from August onwards and whilst you may have some success, because of dehydration and the fact that they resent being lifted separately, the best results are to scrounge a few well established clumps from a consenting friend after the flowering season is over. Alternatively, you will find them offered for sale in this form in the gardening magazines.

Our own garden looks very drab at present with much dead flowering spikes and foliage. Particularly unsightly are the stems of the evening primrose which arrived uninvited and has the annoying habit of establishing itself anywhere, such as the front of the border. However, they do have certain merits. They attract goldfinches to the garden in winter seeking their seeds, and in summer their pale lemon flowers which open one by one at dusk attract moths.

We frequently sit in our conservatory on an August or September evening watching the living natural theatre as first one bud and then another pops and opens into full flower as you watch. At the same time you are aware of neighbouring plants doing the same thing. You could be watching an intricate ballet sequence. Simple they may be, but nature provides us with these little wonders at no cost if we are curious

enough to go in search of them. A sage once said "There are those that look and see nothing whilst others look and perceive everything". How right he, or she, was.

An excursion up the Swinbrook Road a few weeks ago confronted us with undisguised and blatant hare coursing. Happily, the quarry got away. Sadly, so did the perpetrators of this illegal pursuit, minutes before a police van came on the scene. A much more beautiful sight presented itself on our return journey. An almost mournful piping call alerted me to a distant band of some 150 or more birds, which seemed nervously intent on settling on one of the large fields to my right. As they turned in unison, a flash of their colourful plumage became apparent as they sought their chosen feeding area. They were Golden Plovers who most likely come to us from Scandinavia.

Like many birds they tend to form flocks in the winter months so that when a likely feeding ground avails itself they may all benefit. I recently saw a smaller group in the same field but in a different position.

Again in the last day or so our neighbour, Edna, from across the road phoned me to witness a bird of prey demolishing the remains of what could have been an unfortunate blackbird or collared dove. Through the window we could identify a large female sparrowhawk finishing its meal before, briefly obliging for the camera, she took off for more familiar terrain. Distasteful as the scene may have been on the lawn, it nevertheless gave us a wonderful opportunity to study this powerful accipiter or bird hawk which is now on the increase following its decimation due to now illegal poisoning over a period of years. With her dark brown upper-parts and white eye stripes and paler under-parts barred brown, plus the cruel

beak, she looked formidable. The male sparrowhawk is smaller than his mate and is a slate grey and reddish brown in colour.

The favoured form of hunting is to fly low over hedgerows or through woodland to flush their prey into the open. Goshawks, which look very much like a larger female sparrowhawk, are also said to be coming back in numbers in our forests – which is good news for ornithologists, if not for birds like the pigeon!

Spring should be well on its way the next time we are in touch. Keep away from those winter illnesses. Should you have any amusing stories, particularly from youngsters, you would like to share with our readers, I would be pleased to hear from you.

Ring me (evenings preferably) on 01993-831332.

Tony Boardman

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