

## Country Pie

Tony Boardman

**T**HE COUNTRYSIDE around the Wychwoods has now taken on softer brown tones and the fields gather eerie mists as night falls and dawn breaks. Russet leaves lie below the sparse woodland where rooks noisily congregate. Whether we like it or not it's that time of the year again. Nature is about to take its rest period.

Sue and I were driving through East End on our way to work the other morning when she pointed out a toad laboriously crossing the road. Fortunately I managed to avoid it and turned the car around in order to assist it to safety, at the same time agonising because another car had by this time passed in the same direction. Looking only somewhat shell shocked, however, the little creature was lifted up and placed safely onto the adjoining common land where it could find some place to hibernate. As it happened, four cars in succession came by immediately afterwards so you can imagine that we were relieved that we took the action that we did to avert a further animal casualty on our busy roads.

Toads do sterling work in our gardens keeping pests in check and, like a lot of our wild life these days, are not so plentiful as in the past. So, be like us and adopt the slogan "Help a toad across the road!" For the more squeamish, put an old glove, or even rag, in the car for removal purposes.

Touching on the subject of declining quantities, the once very common lapwing or peewit has diminished by 70% in Oxfordshire alone. This beautiful member of the plover family, handsomely marked predominantly black and white with

a greenish sheen on its back, also has an unmistakeable crest to ease identification. Springtime courting displays by the male birds were commonplace over the fields of this country a few decades ago. They could be seen tumbling about the sky performing aerial antics and heard calling out their own name – peewit.

The RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) are urging farmers to leave over winter stubble fields and have implemented what is known as the Arable Stewardship Scheme, which is already in operation in East Anglia and the West Midlands, in an effort to stabilise the slide. They seek Government funding to help them as well as consenting, sympathetic farmers, in their quest to boost the numbers of this exquisite bird and, indeed, an even more desperate species, the tree sparrow, from disappearing for good. I am happy to relate that I have been able to record seeing different flocks of lapwings in the Swinbrook Road fields, near Burford on the Lechlade Road, and another group near Evesham. Having been pleased to witness these flocks, we must take into account the fact that many visit our shores in winter, as do other birds like starlings, for instance. Plovers eggs were considered a delicacy amongst aristocrats from the turn of the last century to the 1930s. The practice would be frowned upon nowadays.

As winter bites, as I'm sure it will, please remember to help our birds by regularly feeding them and providing water for bathing as well as drinking purposes. There are loads of household scraps, such as bruised apples, which are ideal in addition to the mixed bird seed and peanuts p.t.o.

which we can obtain locally to sustain them through until the better weather returns.

I don't know what you think, but the Millennium seems to have been a bit of a damp squib, "damp" certainly being the operative word. There was all the euphoria surrounding the great occasion and then, when it eventually arrived, it really didn't seem any different to any other year. We would have been extremely foolhardy to have believed that our lives would be enhanced greatly with the coming of the year 2000, simply because mankind cannot share the same beliefs. Instead of considering what can be done about assisting an ailing planet there are too many confrontations about other matters. In fact there are times when you wonder what progress has been made, although it must be admitted there are improvements in some areas.

In effect, we look back once more on a year of disappointment and concern, particularly with the escalating violence between the Israelis and the Palestinians with all the dreadful implications that could bring about. Coming nearer to home there is the fuel crisis with a Government that says it will not be moved on its policy and the consumers who say enough is enough and, as I write we await another "scrum down" between both sides as they lock horns again to try to settle the issue.

Paramount for us country folk who have to use a vehicle for our livelihood and who do not look forward to more price increases, nor deprivation, is a rapid and reasonable compromise.

Our railways, once admired all over the world, have become a

shambles, trying to operate a system with ageing rolling stock and insufficient funds to put things right. Recent tragic rail accidents have suddenly stirred the system up to finally do something about the situation, but why should we have played Russian Roulette with our lives for so long?

What can we look at with British pride at the year's end? The Dome perhaps? YESsss!! We did do extremely well at the Sydney Olympics and surely Steven Redgrave will be Sir Steven come the New Year. The Aussies put on a wonderful show didn't they, culminating in the firework extravaganza, shooting all those colourful "dandelion clocks" into the night sky at the finale. Our cricketers, bless 'em, also beat "the Windies" for the first time in 33 years, don't forget.

From all of us in our neck of the Wychwoods, have a wonderful Christmas, and enjoy the atmosphere that Christmas evokes, especially if you are lucky enough to have family and friends around you.

And finally to those little spelling errors that can be amusing. I had to go to Badsey, near Evesham, when I worked as a Sales Agent. On one occasion, the General Stores in the High Street displayed a sign outside saying "Mined the step". The thought of little old ladies with shopping trolleys suddenly being hurled into the air doesn't bear thinking about!

And more recently, there is a flower stall in Witney that sells a variety of lily called "Star Gazer". Unfortunately, they describe it as "Star Gazzer".

That man Gascoigne has a lot to answer for!