

Country Pie

A Viking Invasion

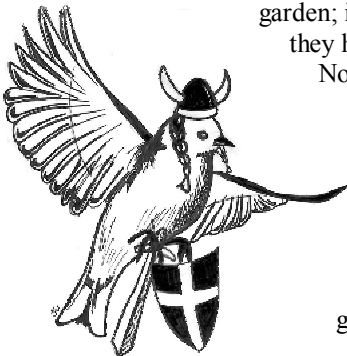
Those pillaging Vikings are invading in their hordes once more.

However before you lock up your daughters, let me reassure you that these visitors to our shores are purely of the avian variety.

The phenomenally early winter saw temperatures plummet alarmingly before Christmas, accompanied by weeks of unusually heavy snowfalls. Wildlife suffers when there is a blanket of snow, none more so than the phantom-like barn owl who hunts the hedgerows and tussocky ground in search of the favoured voles and mice in normal times.

Winter Visitors

Whilst regularly feeding our garden birds helps, life is not so easy for the more timid birds who rarely deviate from their preferred surroundings. Kingfishers, for instance, are in severe trouble when rivers and streams freeze over. Last year my wife Sue and I watched one fishing from a rock in the estuary of the River Axe at Seaton in Devon. The beautiful little bird would lift off and hover like a hummingbird over the flowing water, before diving in to catch his small, unwary prey. As the swallows and many of the small songbirds depart for warmer climes in late summer we become the host for winter visitors. Swans, geese and ducks come to our feeding grounds to avoid the harsh Arctic conditions and so do the Scandinavian thrushes, such as the redwings, fieldfares and finches too. You have probably remarked on the number of chaffinches looking for food in your



garden; it's more than likely that they have flown across the North Sea. Look carefully, for in amongst them there could be a brambling. They look similar in size to the chaffinch but they have an orange breast and a white tummy with a greyish head in winter.

An Irruption of Waxwings

This year has been a bumper year for waxwings coming over in their thousands with one intention, to raid the berries on our hedgerows. When they arrive in large groups it is called an irruption. Dumpy, starling-like birds with a pronounced crest, they are very active and amazingly tame. A handsome pink and grey body with a black eye-patch and throat; the wings are black - striped yellow and white. If you are lucky enough to see them you cannot mistake them.

Redwings in Profusion

As Christmas approached, we noticed that the yews beyond our garden were covered in fleshy pink berries which festooned the dark green foliage like tiny Christmas fairy lights. These berries are very poisonous to us mere mortals but to the great numbers of marauding Scandinavian thrushes, redwings and fieldfares they are manna from heaven. As soon as winter bites they search for berries. So it was for 'our' yew hedge as we watched them busily feeding, at the same time dislodging the built-up snow on the boughs; it was a winter scene to remember - redwings in profusion.

Tony Boardman