

Nature Notes from Italy Spring in a quiet valley



It has been wonderful to experience the progress of Spring, here in Le Marche in central Italy. We are close to the mountains that run the length of Italy, known in this area as the Monti Sibillini. They rise to about 1800m, but we are in one of many valleys at about 500m where farm land is flanked by low wooded hillsides and steep banked streams that turn into torrents after rain.

Since we've been here the beautiful weather has been interspersed with late snow on 24th March – 6 inches that lay for several days, as well as hail, thunderstorms and ferocious winds. On several occasions it rained without let up, day and night, for at least three days.



The flowers of early spring – the primroses and violets that covered the banks when we arrived have long gone. Everything is growing at an incredible rate – everyday there are new flowers to see, but they often don't last for long. Many are the flowers that we see at home: speedwell, vetches, bugles, clovers, lady's mantle, buttercups, marguerites and dog roses. Some are slightly different in colour.

The Star of Bethlehem (above) is growing along the top of the banks, and the Lady orchids (on right) growing in the garden and along the track remind us that by now the mountain pastures will be covered with orchids, wild narcissus, gentians and alpine flowers as far as the eye can see. Lockdown prevents the usual visits – but next year...

Many of the animals and birds around us are recognisable from Oxfordshire but they are much more timid. In Whitchurch we have badgers, foxes, deer, squirrels that not only regularly pass through the garden day and night, but they are happy to stop and nibble on the plants or dig up things of interest, whether they are welcome or not. Here everything, birds, beasts and insects, race from one bit of cover to another and you get used to listening out for a warning call and seeing just a flurry of wings, a pair of ears or the flash of a tail.





In recent weeks we have twice seen a young stag with impressive antlers running across to the wooded valley opposite after visiting the group of hinds that live in a local copse.

We've seen a slim young fox, a small badger and a couple of black squirrels (on left) that live in the oak trees. One night, when we were closing the shutters, we heard a noise and, shining a torch, watched 14 cinghiale (wild boar) - adults and young who had been snuffling up acorns and who then charged away up the bank and into the wheat field.

There are blue tits and great tits, robins (smaller, more orange and not at all friendly), blackbirds, blackcaps, nuthatches and tree creepers, a small type of woodpecker, flocks of hooded crows and buzzards. A pair of goldfinches (on right) are nesting in an apricot tree beside the house. The garden is full of wheatears that nest in a nearby barn and we were excited to see a pair of hoopoe – called hoopopa here because of the noise they make. They were doing an aerial dance over the track- a bit like the tumbling of plovers. And the swifts are back – just two or three at the moment but the rest must be on their way.



A few of the things that are different to Oxfordshire are the constant scurrying of little lizards (below), strange insects with many legs (on left), the odd scorpion, huge black bees and this morning a little yellowy green snake sliding through the ivy.



Not to mention the moths and butterflies, like this Brown Argus (on left), and next month in the evenings there will be the dancing lights of fireflies