



Whitchurch Nature Notes (8) Winter Wonders



Our natural world around us is not so actively visible during our cold winter months, when compared to the bright sunny summer months - although of course there is plenty to enjoy if we know where to look.



For example, seed-eating birds are constantly searching for their next meal in hedgerows and field margins, hoping to find any remaining seeds.

We allow a few teasels to grow in our garden each year and are rewarded by the entertaining sight of agile **goldfinches** doing their acrobatics to extract the seeds with their long fine beaks. This colourful little fellow (on the left) was busy for a long time, one morning in November, hanging on to the very prickly teasel with his tiny claws.

One charming fact that I read about goldfinches in my Observer's book of Birds is that they sometimes deliberately decorate their nests and the author said he had seen one draped with fresh forget-me-nots!

The previous issue of these Nature Notes was written last August, and before our summer visitors such as swallows and swifts had departed on their amazing migrations to warmer climes. Now we are in the depths of winter, the winter visitor species such as fieldfares and redwings are here to brighten the countryside in their hunt for the autumn bounty of berries, particularly hawthorn.

It has struck me as rather humbling that the natural cycle of bird migration is obviously carrying on regardless of international travel restrictions, currently imposed on us 'technically superior' humans.

To conclude the topic of birds, I was really very interested when I received the news and this photo (on the right) of a very unusual visitor to the garden of Keith and Denyse Williams in Eastfield Lane – a **Great White Egret** (*Ardea alba*).

This rare visitor to the UK is a large, white heron and can look similar to little egrets (*Egretta garzetta*), but is much larger - the same size as the familiar grey heron. It feeds on fish, insects and frogs. According to the RSPB, expanding populations in Europe mean that this species is now seen more frequently in the UK - it can turn up in almost any part of the country, with most in the South East of England and East Anglia. Great white egrets favour all kinds of wetland habitats - even farmland ditches can attract them.

Keith told me that it was quite unconcernedly looking around in the flowerbeds for at least 10 minutes, probably hunting for frogs. The garden pond had overflowed because of heavy rain and high river levels at the time. It gave Keith a chance to get some good photos (on right) to confirm this rare sighting.



The recent winter weather has been a typical British mix of cold temperatures and high rainfall, fortunately not often at the same time.



Just after Christmas, the floods in the Thames river meadows were dramatic. The photo on the left was taken from high ground at Chalkhills looking south across the railway line towards Purley and Sulham. It is very hard to make out where the river stops and the fields start – a dangerous environment for the unwary.

The rain has also turned many of our well-used footpaths into slippery mud baths but even so, we are fortunate to have this lovely countryside on our doorsteps for our daily exercise (and nature spotting and puddle-jumping too!).

The very rainy spell was followed by a 'cold snap' with some hard frosts at night. We didn't get the snow that had been forecast in early January - probably a disappointment to many of you! Certainly, the landscape is transformed to a beautiful winter wonderland after a fresh snowfall.*

However, I did see an amazing hoar frost one morning up at Woodcote and Checkendon (see right). The freezing fog conditions had formed 'rime' on all the trees and hedgerows, weighing the branches down in some places, and looking just like snow.

It was a good example of how different the climatic conditions can be 'up' and 'down' the hill. There was no fog or frost on the trees down in Whitchurch-on-Thames but as soon as you travelled up Whitchurch Hill it was like fairyland!



On a recent visit to the Maze, I was struck by two small wonders of nature – very early blossom and incredible lichens.

The blossom was on the **blackthorn** bushes in the sheltered SE corner of the area and was particularly early, despite the cold weather we have had recently. Most of the blackthorn will be flowering in a month or so, but these delicate white flowers (see left) are little harbingers of spring to lift our hearts. On a more prosaic note, they will provide valuable nectar and pollen for the early insects on the wing, such as the impressive queen bumblebees.

As for the **lichens** – there is a small old hawthorn bush (on right), near the blackthorn, which was thickly covered in beautiful lichen and moss. They were particularly striking because the twiggy branches were bare of leaves and the effect was very similar to the hoar frost (described above). On closer examination, I could see (apparently) 3 distinct types of lichen and at least 1 type of moss. They were all miniature works of art! (see below).



Many people think that lichens are simple organisms rather like mosses. In fact, they are mini-ecosystems, consisting of at least two organisms: a fungus (mycobiont) and a photosynthetic partner (photobiont). The photobiont, which contains chlorophyll, may be either a green alga or a cyanobacterium. The lichenologists have divided opinions about the relationship between the two organisms; some describe it as a symbiotic partnership, in which both benefit, and others think the photobiont cells are prisoners of the fungus.

When I looked into this topic for these notes, I quickly realised what a fascinating but complicated subject lichenology is. However, even if the science is difficult to understand, I think lichens are simply beautiful – look out for some next time you are out walking and see if you agree.

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And now for something completely different – they are big and furry but *very* hard to see – **otters!** There has been so much interest in these beautiful creatures and numerous reported sightings by our Whitchurch community, that I asked Kay Lacey if I could reproduce the following piece for these Nature Notes. Kay is Chair of the Pang Valley Flood Forum, and she wrote the following piece which appeared in the Pangbourne Magazine recently: -

Graham Scholey (Biodiversity Specialist at the Environment Agency and Chair of the UK Otter Biodiversity Action Plan Steering Group) and I found otter spraint on the Pang upstream of

Pangbourne in July 2020 while on a site visit, and we thought it would be interesting to know whether any of you have any recent records of otters on the river, are able to recognise otter spraint and are able to look for signs in the future.



PHOTO BY DEBBIE COUSINS

The otter has made a steady recovery across much of England over the last four decades, following the phasing out of the toxic chemicals which were mainly responsible for their decline. In the first national otter survey (1977-79) there were no signs of otters at all on the Thames catchment, and it was only in the mid-1990s that some evidence of otters started to be

found. Since then, otters have slowly spread and are now present on much of the upper and middle Thames catchment, with evidence on the Thames as far downstream as Windsor and beyond.



Despite the extent of activity on the main freshwater Thames, some of the tributaries such as the Pang (see left, at Moor Copse Nature reserve) have not had many records of otters, which may in part be due to the low level of monitoring being undertaken, with very occasional signs in the last ten years. This is where our local community can help.

Otters live at low density and have large, defended home ranges, and the Pang is unlikely to provide territories for more than a few animals at most. They feed primarily on fish but take a range of other prey as well. It is likely that any animal on the lower Pang is also using the Thames as foraging habitat. They are expert at avoiding detection and they and their places of refuge (holts) are fully protected by law. Predominantly nocturnal and crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk), the best evidence of otters is usually by finding their droppings, known as spraint. These are often deposited at prominent locations such as on bridge ledges, on concrete bagwork, on the 'saddle' of trees overhanging the water and fallen branches across the water, and where a tributary meets the main watercourse. These are places where other otters will look for the sign of competitors.

Otter spraint (see right) is not unpleasant to smell, often described as either 'fishy' or even like 'jasmine tea', and it consists primarily of fish bones and scales. It can be confused with mink scats, but these are quite narrow, twisted, and smelly when fresh whereas otter spraint is a much looser gelatinous blob or 'spiky' streak of obviously bony material. When fresh, otter spraint is green to dark in colour, and when old it often looks faded and grey like cigarette ash, and can last a long time (months) if not swept away by floods or knocked off by people's feet.



If anyone thinks they have found otter spraint they may wish to send their record (with photo if you are able to take one) to Graham for verification (graham.scholey@environment-agency.gov.uk). There is no obligation to either handle or sniff the spraint! All confirmed records will be sent to the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre. It would be useful to get more evidence of how regularly the otter may be using the River Pang, and indeed the Sulham Brook where evidence of spraint has also been found near its confluence with the Thames.

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* Post script 24th Jan: We *did* get a transforming fall of snow after all, but just before publication of these Notes so too late to change the text and photos!

Main Text by Sally Woolhouse; **Article about otters** by Kay Lacey
Photos by Sally Woolhouse, Keith Williams, Debbie Cousins, Victoria Benstead-Hume