

Nature Watch

The clocks have gone back, the days are noticeably shorter, evenings are depressingly dark and winter is at hand; however, tawny owls are happy. They do not appreciate daylight as they can see their prey sufficiently in the dark but it is their hearing that allows them to swoop efficiently on mice and small birds. They also stay in one territory which they know in every detail which helps in their hunting. These owls are not hooting at the moment as they have now driven out competitors from their territory and are not ready for mating; they will resume their hooting around the turn of the year.



Coots are more common in wintertime as about a quarter of a million fly in from the continent to spend winter here. They are



aggressive birds and will rocket across the water

at another that they have taken a dislike to. These attacks, that rarely end in a fight, cause turmoil within the flock.

Flocks of various thrushes are also arriving on the east coast: redwings, fieldfares and blackbirds. They arrive in the morning to feed and then move inland across farmland. The fieldfares come mainly from Scandinavia and are even more

striking than our native thrushes. Their speckled breasts are orange coloured and their heads are a steely blue. They are easily identified by their loud chattering as they swoop down to feed on insects and earthworms; later they will dine on berries in the hedges. They will leave in late spring.



Pink-footed geese are winter visitors and are now flying in from Greenland and Iceland to spend their nights on east coast estuaries. During the day they will fly onto farmland to feed on stubble and on remnants from the surge beet harvest. Darbellied geese are also arriving from Siberia. These are rather small; about the size of a mallard. They will stay in the estuaries feeding on the vegetation.



Most trees are now looking brown or yellow but the weeping willows are still green. They are one of the last trees to shed their leaves and will be one of the first to open their buds in the spring. Hawthorns will lose their leaves over the month as will the blackthorns, leaving only the sloes on the twigs to give a blue tinge to the hedges. One oak tree that will keep its leaves is the holm oak. It loses its glossy dark green leaves in early summer and keeps the new ones throughout the winter.

Just over 100 years ago a great pandemic spread around the world and killed at least 50 million people. The Covid-19 pandemic is nowhere near that number (yet?). Unlike the current pandemic there is still no conclusion as to why the 1918 influenza virus was so virulent. One theory blames La Nina which turned the tropical Pacific colder and disturbed the weather patterns world wide which, in turn, affected bird migration. These wayward bird migrants come into contact with unfamiliar domestic animals and this may have led to mutations of the influenza virus which were deadly to humans. Curiously, unlike our current experience, young people appeared to have had little immunity to the 1918 virus.

Let us hope that when the spring again arrives it will also bring relief from Covid-19.

Jack Falcon