

Nature Watch

Mallards are familiar to most folk in the village. The males are resplendent in their luxuriant bottle-green and their cute tail feathers. Many of them already have a mate with whom they swim and stay close. The drakes that are still looking for a partner will be displaying their plumage and trying to impress unpaired females. Displays will include dipping their beaks in the water and throwing a spray of droplets in the air while wagging their tails; all to attract the dowdy female. If attracted, she will begin to follow the male around and by the beginning of February most pairs will have formed. Depending on the weather the pairs will nest in hedges some way from the pond or river and when the ducklings hatch they will be guided by their mother to the relative safety of the pond.



Magpies are now conspicuous at the tops of trees in their splendid blue, black and white plumage. They have an undeserved reputation for causing a decline in the number of small birds but this is more to do with modern farming methods which reduce the level of seeds and insects available during the winter months. Domestic cats are also a major cause of reduced numbers of small birds. So, do not disparage the magpie; instead, in line with an old custom, greet them so as to ward off bad luck.

My bird feeder is very popular at the moment with lots of visitors. Most are content just to eat but the blackbirds seem more concerned to fight each other and to drive away other birds. Both males and females are involved in this aggression and it appears to be wasting a lot of time which would be better spent eating. The wood pigeons lord it over all the other birds and will eat most of the food unless I hammer on



the window to shoo them away. The tits, dunnocks and hedge sparrows dominate the fat-ball basket.



Donna Nook is closed as I write (in mid-December) due to Covid-19 Tier 3 restrictions. The grey seals come to this shoreline sanctuary at the end of the year to give birth to their pups near to the sand dunes. The pups at first have white fur that quickly turns blotchy and they put on a lot of weight due to the richness of their mother's milk. They don't waste time getting used to the water and will try their hand at fishing after only a few weeks.

They are also safer in the sea than in the crowded colonies and they can see and hear better under water.

Squirrels, the grey ones that is, can be a pleasant sight even in the dead of winter as they do not hibernate. If the weather gets too cold they will stay in their nests but on fine days they will be out and about jumping from branch to branch. They will survive on their buried treasure of nuts and acorns and will strip bark from trees in the early spring to eat the rising sap, so much so that they may kill a tree. Elsewhere in the UK our native red squirrels are making a comeback against the imported greys, mainly down to the introduction of pine martens in the greys' territories. The pine martens will hunt and kill the greys which allows the reds to re-establish themselves.



When I was a regular air traveller on jumbos across the Atlantic one of the infuriating things was to be woken up when we arrived an hour or so early at Heathrow before the gates had opened and the passengers had to be bused to the terminal. The crew, however, was driven off for a swift transfer to their hotel or home. The reason for such early arrivals was mainly down to the jet stream that can sweep eastwards across the Atlantic so pilots can surf their aircraft along the stream almost at the speed of sound. The jet stream is caused when freezing cold fronts come off North America and meet up with warm air from the south. This clash of air masses results in the jet stream shooting across towards northern Europe bringing cold blasts and stormy weather as well as frustrated air passengers.

Jack Falcon