

### Spring

The contrast between this year's spring and the previous could not have been greater. Last year, we basked in warm sun and a drought threatened. This year has been one of gloom, cold and wet. Our stocks of straw and hay are running low but the silage should see us through. It is still an hour before dawn, a chill hangs in the air, but as I open the back door, a flood of birdsong pours into the house. Mistle Thrushes with their scratchy fluting, Blackbirds warbling and Song Thrushes with their melodic repetition of a few notes and then passing on to a new theme. A myriad of Woodpigeons form a chorus in the background. The staccato tapping of the Greater Spotted Woodpecker imposes itself on the harmonious song cycle.

Spring may be late but the music of these birds reminds us that it really will come.

As I stand quietly absorbing this bucolic awakening in the gloaming; a cock Sparrowhawk sped past, at head height, so close that I could nearly have reached out to touch it. He flew with a side slipping, skimming glide with occasional flips. A good time to hunt, as unwary Fieldfares or Redwing swoop out of their night accommodation to look for breakfast.

The Rye grass is just beginning to show. In contrast, a field dominated by Red Fescue was growing a host of fine shoots three weeks ago; enough to keep a flock of 120 ewes and their lambs content. The sheep are given a few bags of whole oats, trailed out of the back of the Landrover. Some ewes rush behind the vehicle, others form an orderly line to Hoover up the oats. When the sheep have finished, the Yellowhammers flip out of the neighbouring hedgerows, forming a golden chain as they peck up the waste.

By the middle of March, the pond became a melé of spawning toads, with around 15 per square meter around its shallow sloping edge. A week later, they had mostly gone, having returned to their hiding places in the hedgerows and small copses that crowd the landscape.

The first rays of the rising sun cut through steaming mist revealing a woodland edge, ruddy with the frost burnt catkins of Hazel. They form a flush of smouldering embers on the bare russet branches. Chiff Chaffs call from the top of the bare trees. These tiny warblers, no more than a pinch of grey and yellow feathers, have already crossed the water to return here. Their lives are one of perpetual catastrophic risk, yet somehow despite the multiple hazards of sea, storm, predators and an increasingly impoverished environment, they keep coming back to remind us of their tiny presence with their loud eponymous calls.

A warm afternoon, the Ivy leaves glow in the sun. A flash of bright yellow passes between the gnarled Hawthorns; Brimstone butterflies are tumbling across the fields and along the hedgerows like errant Buttercups. Just a glimpse of one lifts the spirit.

Now, the woodland edges all have their compliment of these racing, sulphurous and beautiful insects. The Brimstones have secreted themselves away in thick Ivy over the winter. The males will quarter the hedgerows in search of the larger greeney-yellow females, which will in due course, lay their eggs on Purging Buckthorn. This shrub is an essential addition to any new hedgerow planting or for incorporation in a woodland edge. The requirements of this harbinger of spring are small and are easily provided.

The Blackthorn flowers are swelling. The buds are a hint of cream and garnet. Soon the tiny flowers will festoon the hedges with silver glitter as they line the sombre twigs and transform the hedges into intermittent white clouds of blossom. Spring is here.

HAE