

Winter

I was surprised to learn, the other day, that the 21st December was the official start of winter. I look more towards the beginning of November for this, surely then the leaves have been stripped and the hard frosts are upon us. Nature goes into a kind of stasis with the shorter days. Is this not the end of autumn?

I see pairs of bullfinches crossing from one hedgerow to another with their conspicuous white rumps. Goldfinch in groups of 30 or more are congregating on the teasels, these now brown and stiff but shining silver in the early frost. The Goldfinches' cheerful tinkling calls are a foil to the depressing grey of an ever-present cloud cover so possessive of the land, that it never allows the sun to even peep through. The fields are sodden, my Landover tyres cut across them, leaving a muddy depression where the water hangs. So different from last year, when the dryness was so acute that much of the winter sown crop failed to germinate. This winter, the combination of damp and warmth has really helped to push the oats on, they look better than ever before, with such a proliferation of tillering that the drills are hard to make out.

Small groups of graceful Roe deer embellish the resting pastures. Now that the cattle are cosy in their sheds, they have the fields to themselves. The Roe watch as I drive slowly past, just a few yards away, with their deep brown limpid eyes. They feel secure as they recognise my vehicle. Odd groups of Fallow emerge from the woods at dusk, these are more wary and quickly seek shelter when disturbed. Some are very dark, nearly black, whilst others are a beautiful pale beige with white spots. Late born fawns trot at their heels. Where once their crouching forms mimicked the sullen mole hills, scattered across the pastures, now the hares are gathering in small cavorting groups amongst the pale green greying winter grasses.

A great flurry of Rooks and Jackdaws circle in an ever-tightening coil that seems to drill into the ground like a tornado from the American mid-west. A Goshawk is harassing them, circling and weaving ever closer, to select one of the multitude. As he makes away with his kill, the coil collapses and the corvids disperse.

With the shortest day passed, a glimmer of sunshine lights the garden. The grass glows and the twigs and buds of the Beech trees shine in a dark reflective light. A Mistle Thrush sings with that distinctive fluting call from a high perch, in the very apex of a huge oak that must have seen 400 seasons. Great Tits are calling from the Birch trees, silver in a silver sun. It may be the official start of winter but for birds, this is with the shortest day passed, the first day of a new season. Territories to be demarcated and defended against all comers. Around the house, even this season has its surprises. Golden Mahonia flowers contrast with the shining dark green leaves. The shrubby winter flowering honeysuckle offers small delicate white flowers with a sweet honey rich scent. Saracocca, with its dense clumps of narrow green leaves that disguise tiny white flowers, spread a fragrance throughout the garden as that rare sun warms them. Winter Sweet has pale yellow flowers like sea anemones, clustering on bare twigs and offers a sublime fragrance that is the envy of every parfumer.

The first Snowdrops flowered with the turning year and Cyclamen cluster in purple groups under the master Beech.
This is not winter, but the promise or at least an intimation of the beauty of spring.

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