

Yellow Neck Mice

Every winter, the larder in our house becomes a refuge for Yellow Necked Mice. These are Britain's largest mouse, a woodland species normally sheltering amongst coppiced stools and tree roots. They are beautiful creatures, with large eyes and ears, inordinately long tails and a distinctive yellow collar around their necks. This contrasts with the pure white fur of their bellies and the shimmering golden fawn of their backs. They enjoy nuts, fruit and everything that a woodland has to offer. Hence the interest in our larder with its copious store of last season's apples and walnuts. When the subtle scrabbling of escaping mice develops into a stampede as the light is switched on; action becomes necessary. Two live traps, baited with a Cretan mountain cheese, captured 2 or 3 for several consecutive days until the score exceeded 20. All were released into the ancient copse of Oak and Hazel that backs onto the house. The Yellow Necks seemingly melting into the tangle of leaves and protruding roots as they vanish in just a few seconds.

The headlights shine on hore frost that has transformed a bare hedgerow into a glistening crystal crown that encircles the frozen fields. In the south, the thin curve of a crescent moon hangs as a bank of fog swirls around it. On either side of this regressing moon, are the glowing beacons of Jupiter and Venus casting the last light of a fading night. A splash of scarlet shows to the south, soon lifting the dark sky into the palest duck egg blue. As the dawn progresses, the scarlet transforms into a flush of pink clouds that spread from the south to the west as another day begins.

Robins appear to be in every nook and corner. Their cheery song brightens the mundane tasks of the early morning. Sheep and horses to be checked and fed. The Land Rover crunching through the brittle snow as it moves from field to field. Many of these robins are possibly migrants from the far north. They appear to be undaunted by the rigours and risks of a sea crossing. I have seen them during October, way out in the Bay of Biscay. They have a dipping flight, skimming the tops of the waves, which appears to risk death in every wing beat. These were probably our Robins heading for a Spanish winter whilst Arctic Robins are content to stay with us.

The Yellowhammers are flocking in the hedgerows where they are feeding on oats and other waste grain put out for them. Most fly down the hedgerow, away from me, in a blizzard of tawny wings but some males remain perched bright as Daffodils in the bare Hawthorns. Corn Buntings are beginning to show; yesterday I counted 12 as they settled on the very highest tips of the untrimmed hedge. If the weather continues to get colder, their numbers should increase. Last year, one flock of over 70 roamed over a herbal lay, grazing like sheep on the tiny over wintering leaflets of the dormant Sainfoin. Others found seeds amongst the hay put out for our horses.

Linnets with their pale breasts, streaked with cinnamon and sharply forked tails are working the tops of the Mustard and Fat Hen, planted in the late summer.

The plants still stand straight, over 3 feet high, but are blackened by the frost. These tiny birds fly in a dense flock, often rising from their feeding area but then soon returning. One flock this year exceeds 300. This particular group forage amongst the remains of the Turnip crop and often settle in a long line on the overhead electric cable. They are very sociable and all huddle up to each other making it easy to count them.

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