

LYONSHALL COUNTRY DIARY

Issue 15: March 2018.



The horse-drawn tram road 'Wharf' [*Platform*] by the Church & ablaze with Daffodils.

It is official! "Spring" was late this year. However, during the odd burst of oh-so-welcome sunshine and warmer weather in this cold, wet March we were reminded of the resilience of our native plants and the speed at which they grow and bloom when they get the chance. Animals and birds, too, hunkered down in burrows & roosts but mostly appeared again as soon as it was dry enough to catch up on their delayed courtships and essential nest-building. Only we humans have been deterred from our normal nature-watching activities by mud and other slippery surfaces! In previous years I have not been so conscious of it, but this year I was intrigued to find a quotation about March that comments:

"Most of it is MUD, every Imaginable form of MUD, and what isn't MUD in March is ugly late-season SNOW".

(Vivian Swift – living American 'Painter and Author' born in Montana, USA).

The month in general

On a more positive note, March is also the month for Daffodils ("The Easter Lily") - hence the well-known quote from *"The Winter's Tale"*:

"..Daffodils, that come before the swallow dares, and take the winds of March with beauty.."
(William Shakespeare, Poet and Playwright [1564-1616]. "The West Midlands").

Despite the weather, there was a profusion of Daffodils this year, by the roadsides, in gardens, below The Church, around The Memorial Hall and pushing up through the tarmac by "Tellin's" gate as they have done every year despite the weed killer and without any cultivation. I think we should say "Thanks" to those who planted the bulbs many months and years ago for all of us to enjoy now. Strong winds and snowfalls had flattened the Daffodils throughout The Parish for a day or two but most of them have sprung back again, uplifting our spirits and confirming that 'Spring' **has** come - even if it is a little behind schedule.



Flora

Trees and Shrubs

I had hoped to pronounce on the “Oak-before-Ash” question this month but neither tree is currently showing “breaking buds”! Hopefully April may be more forthcoming. I have also looked back at March last year and found that we had the first green leaves and catkins on the Silver Birch trees and photographs of the first Blackthorn in flower – but there is no sign of either of these yet in Lyonshall Village and I have had no reports of them from the wider Parish. In fact the only new Tree/Shrub information I have is that members of the “Go Wild in the Curl” group have planted some Black Poplar ‘truncheons’ by the brook near Moorcourt. Some other “Country Diarist” in a few years’ time may be able to offer an up to date report...

Smaller Plants

Much to my own surprise I notice that in last March [2017] I made no comment on white “Dog Violets”, which have come out in great drifts towards the end of March this year. Delicate little things, yet they spread rapidly across rough waste ground and our track-bed!



The white 'Dog Violet'.

Curiously, their purple counterparts - which are more common in most of the County - are fewer, later and less vigorous here this year. I hope to see them again later on - in April perhaps?

Also coming into flower this March, despite the late snows, are the Primroses, the Grape Hyacinths – and the first of the “Kingcups” [a.k.a. *Marsh Marigolds*] in the ‘Upper Fishpool’.



The Kingcups in The Upper Fishpool

In flower last year but not yet reported for this year – Speedwell, Wood Anemones, Ladies’ Smock. In many of Lyonshall’s gardens, as well as myriad varieties of Daffodils, there were Crocuses, Pulmonaria, Primulas and Periwinkles (*Vincas*). “*Spring IS a cummin in*” And further to My comments of last month, the icy winds -- or perhaps just the volume of rain or the passage of time -- has got rid of the “Pondweed” in the Upper Fishpool where it has been replaced by slimy scummy mud, although there are signs of other water plants growing – (In the persistent puddles in the Fish Pool Orchard it has been replaced by perennial grasses). I have had no reports on the fate of the Lynhales’ Pond Duckweed as yet.

Fungi fanatics (like me) will be pleased to know that “they’re back”! Many more fungi sightings in March... The Judas’ Ear [“*J**’s Ear*” – a.k.a. “*Jelly Ear*”], which though unattractive to me is a **culinary delicacy** in China and Eastern Asia, has been seen in two or three places in The Parish. Usually in small groups on dead branches, with each fungus about 2 inches (5 cm) in diameter, the one shown below and seen near ‘Moorcourt’ was about 5 inches (12–13 cm) across! Perhaps Judas’ Ear Fungi could become the next Herefordshire cash crop if anyone has the confidence to name them and sell them for thickening clear soups! Also seen near ‘Moorcourt’ but **inedible** – the Blushing Bracket, which is common on Willow and Birch trees, and the Netted Crust (*byssomerulius corium*) which is common on fallen Ash trees and branches. {Please look out for our Ash Trees’ health. They are a matter of concern to ‘The Woodland Trust’ and to all “Herefordians”}.



‘Judas’ Ears’ or the “Jelly Ear”, the ‘Blushing Bracket’ and the ‘Netted Crust’ © Sarah C.

Last but not least, though the smallest, is the bright and pretty Scarlet Elf Cup – also seen in two or three parts of the Parish, also found on dead wood and also inedible (*in fact* it is **poisonous**). It is high on my list of “favourite fungi” because it is so attractive to look at.



Scarlet Elf Cup © Sarah C.



& © Shaun P.

Note: Growing with the Scarlet Elf Cup (*photo below*) is an attractive and common moss.



Scarlet Elf Cup & ‘Common Tamarisk’ Moss © Shaun P.

Our clean Herefordshire air and damp conditions have shown us yet more lichens, for example the ‘spotty’ white lichen on sycamores near the Titley Road junction by the ‘Broad Meadow’, facing away from the prevailing wind. These are the very common ‘Dust Lichens’.



Dust Lichen on the '*leeward side*' of the trees.

Fauna

Mammals

Rabbits! Rabbit tracks in the snow [*see below*], Rabbits nibbling or Rabbits chasing one another through the grass, a large Rabbit picking its way over the island bogs of the Upper Fishpool (possibly the same rabbit as seen in December) – 'Rabbits' have been the predominant mammal of March in Lyonshall. Otherwise, apart from farm stock, there have been only a few Grey Squirrels to be seen on the drier and brighter days and the occasional Brown Rat, Wood Mouse or Field Vole. Molehills, of course, give evidence of the inevitable Mole activity underground. Roll on April and warmer, sunnier weather when more mammals should put in an appearance and, probably, more of us will venture out to see them too!

Birds

The results of the RSPB "Big Garden Bird Watch" (done in late January this year) were published in March. These indicate that Lyonshall is broadly comparable with the rest of the UK in its bird population. The 'Bird Watch' results show there are still large numbers of Sparrows although there has been a general decrease in England; there have been more sightings of Goldfinches, Long-Tailed Tits and Coal Tits; and this is a good year for Greenfinches which are recovering from their significant population drop. These findings coincide with local reports, such as the Goldfinches near 'The Fishpools' houses, and my own observations. For example, for several years I rarely saw a Long-tailed Tit; now one or two (at least), are frequent visitors including the one which taps persistently at my 'Office' window, maybe thinking my shed would make a nice warm nesting place for them as well!



The Long-tailed 'Titmouse'.

In March the Magpies were no longer solitary wanderers but could be seen in twos or threes as the mating season began – "*One for sorrow, two for joy*" *etc, etc*. Wood Pigeons, Rooks and Crows abound and just beginning to pair up were our local Buzzards and Red Kites. The occasional "coal black" Raven has been sighted also. They are no longer so rare.

Most interesting is another 'National Report' published this March from the British Trust for Ornithology, showing that "*the overall British breeding population of Peregrine Falcons has risen to a record 1,769 pairs, up 22% since 2002.*" The increase has been particularly significant in lowland areas "*which previously were not natural habitat for Peregrines because of the lack of crags*", where they have taken to nesting on man-made structures instead, such as electrical pylons, radio/telephone masts, grain silos and tall buildings.

Could this be relevant to their occasional, although still rare, sightings in the Lyonshall area?



'a Peregrine falcon on the ground '.

Still no water fowl reported as yet but otherwise the population would seem to be healthy.

Insects and Invertebrates

On fine days in late March the first Buff-tailed Bumble Bees and a few smaller Bees could be found on Hyacinths and other garden flowers. An occasional House-fly could be found as the central heating kicked in, No butterflies or other insects reported as yet. The 'Red-tailed Bumble Bee' has woken from hibernation also and is looking for nesting holes underground.

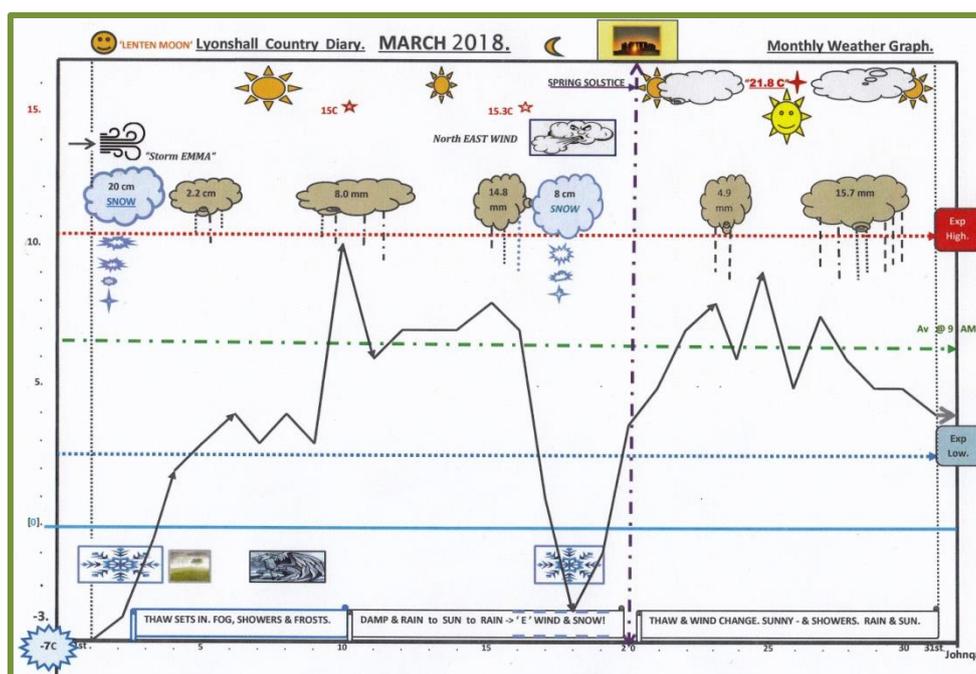


'Red tailed' & 'Buff tailed' Bumble Bees at Lyonshall.

Fish, reptiles and amphibians

Report from mid-March 2018:- "*Frogs have gone mad! Spawn everywhere. Toads on the move! -- and just one single Newt seen...*" That was just before the second dollop of snow and ice this month, so let's hope they survived. Maybe an amphibians expert could let us know the chances of a "reptilian revival" in North West Herefordshire [HR5] ?.

Lyonshall's Weather in March



March 2018 was a very “*Drear / Dreich*” month. It “*Came in Like a Lion*” at -7°C and “*Went out like a Lamb*” at $+4^{\circ}\text{C}$ {and it did reach $+21^{\circ}\text{C}$ very briefly} – but it was the wettest March in recent history. It rained at some time on 20 of the 31 days and the rainfall was over twice as much as last year (2017). Not a month to savour or to remember! Rainfall was over 80.7mm! We had two snowfalls worth recording (20cm+ & 10cm+) and neither of them were much fun (The ‘Wrong Sort’ of snow for “snowballing” and building “Snowmen”!).

Before the real Spring comes

The weather defined March 2018 and what could be observed during the month. Hopefully we shall have no such weather for the rest of the year. This seems like a good time, before I forget, to make a note of: “**Things You Can Only Know From Snow**”:

1. Rabbit tracks are very distinctive.
2. As lying snow begins to thaw all tracks seem to enlarge, so that “giant” footprints from innocent birds such as Blackbirds can seem momentarily quite threatening! This is aggravated by the fact that blackbirds’ footprints form a pattern very similar to that found on old convicts’ clothing.
3. Pheasants, on the other hand, place one foot precisely in front of the other as they walk, even in snow. No “*walk like a penguin*” for them! But they sometimes drag their tails in the snow or scrape it with the tips of their wing-feathers, making pretty fern-like patterns.
4. ‘Rabbits pee’ (OK– “*urine*” if you prefer the term) is **bright** orange in colour.

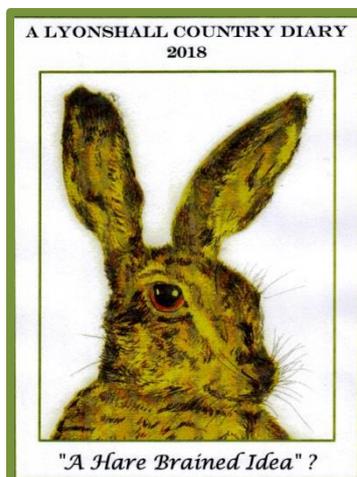
I’m sure that you needed to know all of that!

I think we are all looking forward to a “**burgeoning**” April – my chosen word for the coming month and I shall be very disappointed if it fails to “**burgeon**”. If it does, please inundate me with reports and photos so that I can put together a “bumper” issue for April 2018.

ALL CONTRIBUTIONS (verbal or photographic, amateur or expert) GRATEFULLY RECEIVED at jcvqa@btinternet.com



Blackbirds or Convicts?



'one legged convicts?'