

LYONSHALL COUNTRY DIARY

Issue 14: February 2018.

The Parish of Lyonshall. The Bredwardine Hills. Kington Town & Kington 'Rural'. Eardisley.



The view from 'Bradnor Hill' looking south over 'Kington Town' towards The City of Hereford.

This will be a short Monthly Diary entry, not just because February is a short month but because it started off very cold and ended up even colder! Most of us needed no televised exhortations to persuade us to stay indoors! I am therefore especially grateful to those contributors who managed to get out and about and send in photos or reports from the better days, including the summary of the 'Big Farm Bird Count' which ran from the 8th to the 18th of February in this area. The Woodland Trust sent out an enquiry to its members about "first sightings" for specified flora and fauna but in Lyonshall we were able to report on only half the list being seen in January (e.g. Snowdrops, Ivy & Celandines), the other half not at all (e.g. evidence of various nesting birds). Apart from this there has been little new from "official" sources – unless I've simply failed to notice them. In March I am anticipating a simultaneous surge of activity among 'Countryside & Environmentalist' bodies, and the flora and fauna they were created and exist to monitor and protect. Watch this space! 😊

The month in general

"The bitter winds in February were sometimes called "The First East Winds", but the longing for spring somehow made them seem more piercing."

(Eiji Yoshikawa, Japanese historical novelist and reporter. 1892–1962)

If this Diary seems dominated by references to the weather, it is because this February the weather played an even more crucial part in wildlife activity and plant sightings than in most months or, indeed, in most Februaries. See the weather report for exact dates and details. The month was not, however, entirely given over to snow and ice. In the middle of the month there were a few early signs of spring awakening – courtship among the Blackbirds, Squirrels chasing one another through the catkins, the first Daffodils in flower. *Gertrude Jekyll*, the famous Victorian/Edwardian gardener, claimed that *"There is always in February some one day, at least, when one smells the yet distant, but surely coming, summer."* So, at the end of the month, I cling to the straw of optimism generated earlier and try to foster an unemotional intellectual curiosity about what may survive the frost or snow and what has perished.

Fauna

Mammals

What luck! A dog Fox, 'limping' but alert, stopped to watch me as I walked quietly into the cider orchard mid-morning on February 6th. He stayed long enough for me to take his photo, only running towards his earth in the old railway cutting when I moved. A fortnight later, perhaps 50 or 100 yards further away and a few yards from the path, the body of a Fox could be seen. The same Fox as I had met previously? Quite probably. Dead from disease following his injury (they are very sickly beasts), or shot to protect our local livestock? Either chance is possible. `Head' must rule the 'Heart' in these circumstances – but I have to admit to a pang of sorrow. They are such beautiful creatures to watch!



Dog Fox in 'The Upper Fishpool' Orchard.

If only Foxes could be trained to eat nothing but Rabbits! There are plenty of them around at the moment, bounding through the fields and undergrowth. The Grey Squirrels, too, are frisky when it's dry and sunny but disappear during ice and snow – not true hibernators but able to selectively "shut down" when the weather is bad. But a true hibernator was found among the brambles near the Curl Brook – a tightly curled-up sleeping Dormouse which was "carefully wrapped up, returned and hidden in a safe place, hopefully for it to wake up to a nice warm Spring". It would be great if Lyonshall and its environs could become home to more of these rare and elusive little creatures.



A hibernating Dormouse.



A Bank Vole.

The only other mammal seen this month was a Bank Vole, dug out of its burrow but seemingly unharmed by my Irish terrier. After I hauled the dog away from her digging, the vole disappeared. Possibly with a little "*phew*" for her escape from "The Jaws of Death"!

Birds

As mentioned earlier, 21 farms around Lyonshall and Pembridge were surveyed as part of the Big Farm Bird Count. A great variety of raptors is reported – a Red Kite, a Peregrine Falcon and a Hen Harrier as well as several Sparrow Hawks, Buzzards and Tawny Owls. The Buzzards have certainly been circling over the Lyonshall orchards recently and the Tawny Owls can be heard by both day and by night. There have been large flocks of Woodpigeons, Rooks and Starlings, as well as Redwings, Fieldfares and, more unusually, Lapwings, these

latter sometimes following the cows when it was possible to put them out to grass for a few hours. Smaller flocks of Linnets, Siskins, Bramblings and Goldfinches were reported. Of course, on drier and sunnier days the “usual suspects” of the small bird world could be seen on bird feeders and in gardens – Great Tits, Blue Tits and Coal Tits; Robins, Wrens and Blackbirds; Sparrows, Dunnocks and cheery Chaffinches (one of whom, bright and spruce in his courtship plumage, pecked at his reflection in my office window). However, there have also been some rarer visitors to the feeders – Snipe, Woodcock, a Tree Creeper, Goldcrests and Pied Wagtails, presumably an indication of more difficult feeding conditions elsewhere. A Greater Spotted Woodpecker has been seen in the distance, identified by its distinctive flight, and has been heard drumming many times. This well-chiselled branch of an old Rowan tree may be woodpecker-work too:



Chips of dead wood chipped away by a hunting Woodpecker

There have also been a couple of solitary sightings of birds more usually seen in groups – a lonely Long-tailed Tit on a rose bush early in the month and a lonesome male Mallard on a sheltered stretch of the Upper Fishpool on the 27th, perhaps resting there because the more exposed stretches of water were frozen over. Sadly this is the only water bird seen on the Fishpool, to my knowledge, so far this year – no sign of the habitual Moorhens and the occasional Dabchicks – but maybe March will be more encouraging.

Insects and Invertebrates:

Not an insect in sight! And the only invertebrates seen have been earthworms, slugs and woodlice exposed when stones were overturned.

Fish, reptiles and amphibians:

No reports in this category for February but we are assured of more work being done regarding Elvers and our native Crayfish in the near future.

Flora

Trees and Shrubs

I'm told I am becoming obsessed with catkins! Certainly I've always loved them and the Hazel catkins have been exceptionally abundant and beautiful this year. However, attached, is a photo of **Alder catkins** (*see below*) – shorter and redder than their Hazel counterparts. This photograph was taken on February 3rd which is early in the season for them locally.



And now I'll shut up about catkins (possibly) for another year! Unless of course you count in the "Pussy Willow", which is just beginning to show on the higher and younger branches of some of the many Willow varieties around here...

About 100 'native' Black Poplar "truncheons" (similar to plant "cuttings") have been planted in various wet locations on farms locally and a small number of 'disease-resistant' Elms will be planted shortly. Otherwise there has, at least to the naked eye, been very little change among the Lyonshall trees and shrubs this month – unless you include some excellent and well-timed hedge cutting (not 'flailing') early in the month. This will ensure thicker and healthier hedges for the birds and the smaller mammals during the coming breeding season.



Trimming the Hedges to encourage health and sustainability.

Smaller Plants

Like everything else, the smaller plants have been subject to the changing weather conditions this February and it is difficult to know which will re-emerge following the severe frost and snow at the end of the month. Dog's Mercury, Goose-grass, Chickweed and other common "weeds" which were all beginning to show in the early part of the month will probably survive but this has yet to be demonstrated. The most obvious "victims" are the early daffodils. Our first daffodil was fully open on February 19th; by the month's end it was bent under the weight of hard-frozen snow.



Dog's Mercury.



Daffodils 19th February & two weeks later on!



I am also curious to see what happens to water plants which become embedded in ice. Two photos taken during the second week of February, when it was relatively mild, show Duckweed at the Lynhales Pool and Pondweed at the Upper Fishpool (whence it had also spread to some of the long-standing puddles nearby). Will these plants be as green and abundant after the thaw in March?



'Duckweed' Isobel H.



'Pondweed' on the Upper Fishpool.

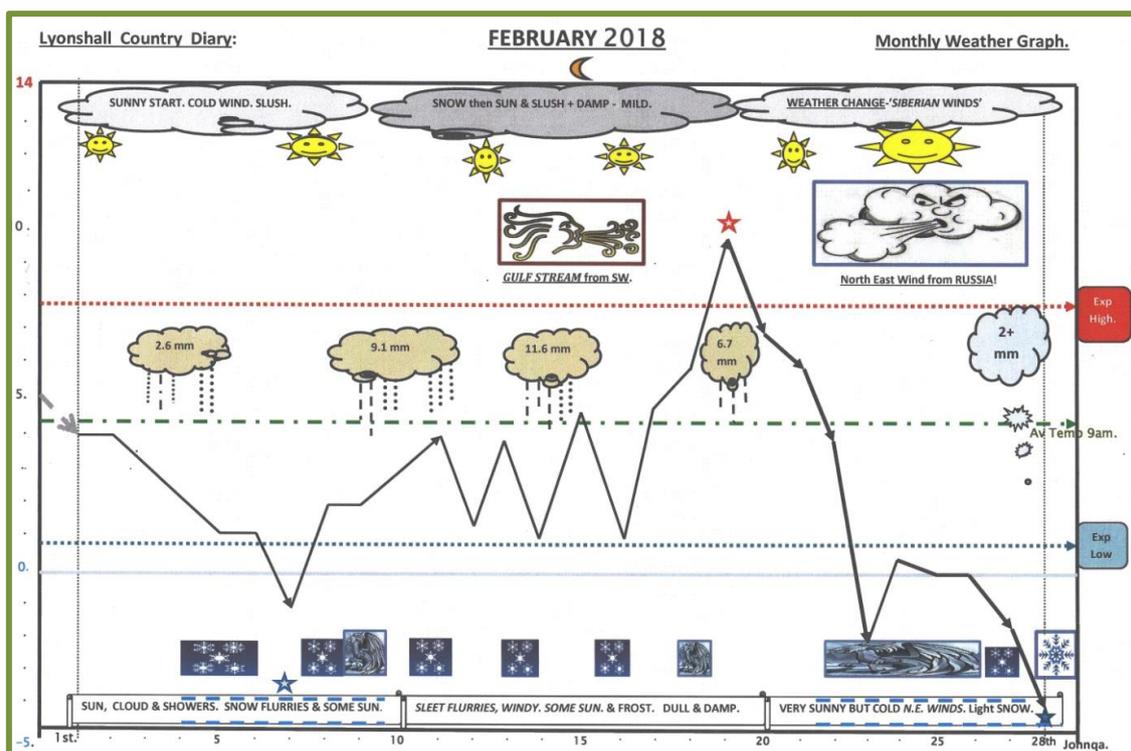
Fungi, Moss and Lichens

There have been no 'new' observations in these categories, other than some tiny white cap fungi, found on a dead Ivy twig and so small and fragile that they couldn't be photographed and had slumped and died before identification. If you see me creeping round the bushes with a magnifying glass like a 'thespian' Sherlock Holmes these may be what I'm looking for! The 'Dust Lichens' continue to proliferate on all sorts of different trees.



Blue Lichen on a 'Himalayan Cedar'.

Lyonshall Weather in February



This February has been an unusual month from a weather view point. It started off cold and then plummeted to -3°C within a few days. It stayed cold for the first half of the month with a cycle of wet (and sometimes 'snowy') days interspersed with sunshine – peaking at an early morning temperature of $+10^{\circ}\text{C}$ whilst the Gulf Stream prevailed then **WHAM!** The cold **Siberian East Wind** hit us with a vengeance. The 'glass' fell, the temperature plummeted and regular frosts greeted us every morning. The month ended at -7°C with falling snow and **Storm "Emma"** on her way. The average morning temperature at 2.5C was 3 degrees below what might have been expected although it was not as wet as February last year.

Diary Plans for Spring

Spring has always been my favourite season, probably because it is full of hope, with Summer still in the offing if Spring doesn't live up to expectations. And it's a busy season wildlife-wise so there should be plenty to see and report; I plan to get out and about in Lyonshall as much as possible and trust that Diary contributors will do the same. (My domestic "spring cleaning" may once again be perfunctory – surely one should get the major housework done **before** Spring in order to maximise the time outdoors when the sun is shining, the flowers are opening, the birds are singing etc.) However, if we have a few bad days I shall refresh my mind on what we saw or heard around the Parish this time last year and, as far as possible, what was seen and noted in 2011 and maybe provide some notes as an addendum to the March issue. These notes could help us to know what to look out for and will ultimately serve to show whether Lyonshall is gaining or losing environmentally.

Roll on, Spring! And "Happy Easter" to all readers and contributors, as the March issue won't be out until after the Bank Holiday.

ALL CONTRIBUTIONS (verbal or photographic, amateur or expert) GRATEFULLY RECEIVED at :

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