

## VILLAGE DIARY

We do seem to be having a chilly February. There was ice on the pond on Friday as we waved Judy Sanders off to her final resting place but today the air feels lighter and perhaps there is a hint of better days to come. The daffodils under the large yew tree in churchyard are well up and the snowdrops in our garden have finally come to their full beauty.

John Lea has sent us an interesting article about his observations of sparrow hawks and I reproduce it here:

‘For several years a male sparrow hawk has plagued our garden birds in winter. I shouldn’t grumble because he has considerably reduced the food consumption at our feeders. This year he is not about simply because there is a much larger female. Unlike our pair of carrion crows, who are always in calling distance of each other, once their young have learned their trade sparrow hawks go completely separate ways. Their feeding territories do not seem to overlap. Though they are both partial to songbirds, the small male hunts the smaller birds such as blue tits or chaffinches whereas the large female doesn’t bother my garden feeders too much because she looks for larger prey such as wood pigeons. She must get frustrated in summer when she’s brooding young and her mate keeps bringing in those small birds but he does usually catch about nine or ten a day.

‘In winter when the leaves are off the trees they both hunt closer to the ground. Many rowan and holly trees grow in the wood behind my garden and, of course, the berries fall, rowan in early autumn and holly later as redwings and other birds knock many berries to the ground whilst feeding. After a skittering of snow, it is easy to see just how much disturbance there is to the leaf litter beneath the trees where birds forage. The female sparrow hawk hunts these birds by hugging the ground and sweeping between dense trees with incredible agility. I was sitting behind a holly bush when, at incredible speed and with just a flick of her wings, one dodged between the trees to pass within a few feet of me. The magic of the moment was spoiled by the feeble protests of a greater spotted wood pecker on his way to a cruel death on the plucking post. It is not just wood pigeons that are on her menu.’

John does not wish to give details of the way sparrow hawks prepare their prey for consumption but thinks that people should not be entirely shielded from the fact that nature is cruel. I vividly recall watching a sparrow hawk dealing with a smaller prey and hesitating to interfere as I realised that the little bird was too damaged to survive but its flailing legs and pitiful cries haunt the memory. John feels that too sentimental a perception of wild life can lead to bad decisions being made about animal protection. Those we chose to conserve, such as badgers, foxes and magpies are carnivores and feed on other wild life. John has sent us details of how badgers predate on ground nesting birds and bumblebee grubs, creatures which we would not like to see even more reduced in numbers. We are the top of the food chain and need to take responsibility for keeping the balance between the species.

Barbara Wilson