

This week end has brought the first sharp drop in temperature of the month and barometric pressure it is estimated might possibly reach a height that has not been seen since 1902. My mum, who was a keen gardener, used to welcome cold spells in the winter because she said that they killed the slugs. I have a feeling that slugs just dig a bit deeper when the temperature drops and happily survive unless the cold spell lasts for a long time.

John Lea writes that the south-easterly breeze in early January caused him to pile on many layers of clothes before taking the bridleway towards Great Tidnock Farm. At a high point in the drive he noticed that the sloping pastures had been trodden by the cattle. There was no permanent damage but just enough to expose a bit of turf and, when this happens, the many insects living in it are revealed. Sheltered from the breeze, a mixed flock of birds were enjoying the feast: redwings, fieldfares and starlings were spread over three or four small fields, all migrants, even the starlings. Although disturbed by his passing nearby, they just flew a short distance to land, hidden by the slope. It was impossible to count how many but John estimated into the hundreds. A couple of years ago he saw a similar situation on his own farm.

The wet conditions had not suited a crop of rape on a small area and, where the ground was too wet to harvest, weeds had grown. Then it was finches that arrived and, disturbed by his passing by, just about every species of finch took to the wing in a series of small flocks. Many of these would also have been immigrants. A rough count took John to well over 200. He says that we are lucky in this country to see so many immigrant birds in the winter months.

Peter Hulme recent wrote to tell me that he had had a chat with a group of keen wildlife photographers who commented that they were seeing far fewer rabbits of late. John Lea says this is also his observation. Their numbers have dropped dramatically. There seems to be a virus circulating which is causing this. It is difficult to investigate the reason as a sickly rabbit will soon fall prey to a buzzard and without a body it is impossible to investigate the reason.

Barbara Wilson