

VILLAGE DIARY

This lovely warm spell has brought out the spring leaves in their many shades of green and bronze. As the camellias and magnolias blossoms fade, the lilacs and later cherries are taking over. We gardeners are kept busy with the bedding out planting. In the days before the royal wedding I began to feel that the press were getting a bit overwrought but the perfect weather the young couple had for their great day and their evident joy in each other did make the occasion very special. The crowds who turned out to cheer them certainly thought so too. Let us hope that our own Rose Queen celebration will be equally blessed by the weather.

John Lea tells us of an incident which brought home to him that even naturalists can underestimate the intelligence of animals. He had been told that stoats were opportunist hunters but one day he was watching a mother duck and her young brood catching flies on the pond which is now the top lake on Clover Bank Farm. Suddenly a male stoat appeared on the far bank near the ducks flashing the white of his chest and repeatedly throwing his head back to maximise his size. Panicking, the mother duck ushered her brood further up the lake towards the bank where John was standing. To his surprise he noticed a smaller, female stoat creeping into an ambush position. He moved to get a better view and both stoats vanished. None of John's country friends believe that stoats would hunt together, let alone to such a thought out plan, but John is keeping an open mind.

Recently John received a 'phone call from his neighbour Peter for advice on what to do with a baby tawny owl that had fallen out of its nest. The nest hole was high in a tree with very few side branches to help a climber. Assured that the chick was big and fat and not a runt, pushed out by a stronger sibling, John explained that it could be hand-reared. The problem then being the need to catch three mice every day for its food, Peter decided to fetch a long ladder. His son William bravely climbed up but when he reached the nest the mother owl hit him solidly on the shoulder, almost knocking him off. John felt guilty as he had not warned them that tawny owls can get very aggressive if you go near their nests and William should have worn a thick, wide-brimmed hat to protect his head. Tawny owls can do a lot of damage to the face if they attack from above.

As it turned out, the rescued baby owl had been the only one to survive. In a wet spring, such as we have had this year, wood mice, the owls' main diet, are in short supply. The mice rely on stores of acorns and nuts which are destroyed when the wet weather lifts the water table, drowning the nests of the mice and their food supplies. Another neighbour climbed to a nest to see what was happening to the young owls and also found that only one had survived. To his surprise, in the nest were many feathers of blackbirds. The mother owl had tried to make up for the shortage of mice but John could only guess how she had managed to catch them.

Some years ago John observed a pair of tawny owls rear four young in the wood behind his house. When they had left the nest, they would come within a few feet of him when he mimicked their call and sit in on a row on a low branch of an oak tree.

Barbara Wilson