

VILLAGE DIARY

We are officially in spring and have passed the equinox and we shall increasingly notice the gradual lengthening of the daylight hours, particularly once the hour goes on at the end of March. The gardens are filling with colour; daffodils, camellias, magnolias and almond and cherry blossom are pleasing the eye from ground to tree level. The willows are coming into leaf, which is a little early this year, and the birds have been singing cheerfully whenever we have had some sunshine.

John Lea writes about a delightful surprise he had on a beautiful first day of March when, enjoying the sight of some 50 goldfinches clustered around his bird feeders, he heard the song of a remarkable bird. Described by the RSPCB handbook as a song that 'in the opinion of some people is as good as, if not better, than that of any other British bird'. Hardly the size of a robin it must be some bird to be better than a song thrush, but the blackcap has a fantastic range of notes that continue on and on. John had heard one sing occasionally many years ago when fishing on the Peover Eye but that was the first time he had heard one here in Gawsworth. The finches suddenly flew away and the blackcap abruptly stopped singing and flew to the bird feeder. A greyish, rather drab-looking bird with the smallest of black caps was enjoying the sunflower heads. They were always known as migrating birds and John wonders if they no longer migrate or perhaps birds from Northern Europe come here for the winter.

Another unexpected arrival was a group of over 90 curlews. John saw them silently probing the peaty soil around a blocked drain on low-lying pasture land along Shellow Lane. They were not singing, as they do later in spring, but they were fascinating to watch. It is 50 years since he saw curlews so early inland. They usually come inland from the coast to get away from bad weather. When they return to their breeding grounds in April, they will come in small numbers and their beautiful call floats over the landscape. Sadly they no longer breed in the fertile silage fields of Gawsworth. Contractors fast moving silage machinery spares neither ground nesting birds nor chicks and the intensity of stock numbers has destroyed many of their nesting sites, which are rough areas of grass either in a silage crop or a pasture. A cow's foot can do as much damage as a tractor wheel. Curlews are not doing well in Cheshire and John misses them.

I hear that loss of curlew numbers is a problem in the Lake District where they are the symbolic bird of the area. Like John I think it is sad that their haunting calls can be heard by fewer people.

Barbara Wilson