



April 2015



JOHN BLAKE
22nd January 1928 – 9th January 2015



John Blake Obituary

John was taught hedge laying by his father 70 years ago. He left school at 14 to work on the family farm. He progressed to work as a farm manager and ran his own prepared vegetable business at Hurstpierpoint.

He held a number of posts & offices, including Sergeant in the Air Training Corps.

Pre Young Farmers Club, John started & ran the "Calf Club" at Hurstpierpoint, where participants reared a calf through to showing it at the County Show.

He was a great supporter & regular attendee of Young Farmers Clubs, including being Club leader at Hurstpierpoint Young Farmers Club; he worked through the ranks to become President.

He was also President of the Lindfield Young Farmers Club.

John became Vice President & President of West Sussex Young Farmers Club.

He was the Youth Club leader at the Hurstpierpoint Methodist Church and Leader of the Methodist Guild at Hurstpierpoint. John worked at Plumpton Agricultural College for 4 years as a Countryside Crafts Instructor.

He ran a care home with his wife Anne, who was an excellent nurse and carried out the administration side of the business.

John was instrumental in the start up and the long running success of the South of England Hedge Laying Society over the last 30 years, holding various offices including Secretary and President.

John was chairman of the National Hedge Laying Society for 9 years and regularly

attended committee meetings. He has supported the National Hedge Laying Society Competition Intermediate class with the John Blake cup.

In 2001, John trained a hedge layer from the Netherlands, Lex Rouleveld, as the craft & skill had been lost in the Netherlands. This has led to a large conservation movement in the Boxmeer region of the Netherlands which, at the recent competition in March 2015, in its 10th year, attracted 32 cutting teams of up to 6 hedge layers and 10,000 enthusiastic spectators. Strong links remain between Hedge Layers in the UK & the Netherlands. Lex has many memories with John, which included an enjoyable evening of Line Dancing in Lindfield village hall.

John always had an eye for detail and zest for getting things done. In June 2014 John

received the Award of Honour from the South of England Agricultural Society, presented by Her Royal Highness, The Princess Royal, for his contribution to promoting the traditional craft of hedge-laying. With over 20 hedge layers from up & down the country present in the United Reform Church at Lindfield, it was a great honor to help carry John at his service of thanks giving & remembrance, along with Peter Tunks, Alan Ashby, Gary Moore, Mike Parrott & Bob Hunt. As the sign on the miniature hedges outside the church said,

“John Blake, laid to rest, South of England Style”

John will be sadly missed but not forgotten.

Phil Hart



Message from the Chairman

Dear Members,
Thank you for electing me as chairman, I look forward to working with the committee members throughout the next year .

Thank you to Gary Moore for all his help over the last few years, his knowledge and experience has been extremely valuable & infectious: with comments like “it’s only a clearing up shower” as the rain lashed down and “it was a hedge that needed laying” or “it was a tough little hedge” All very true, the stuff that keeps us going..

Thank you to Jim & Rachel for all their committee work. Jim certainly knew how to organise a good competition. Rachel always did an excellent job with the meeting details and the newsletters. They will be hard acts to follow but I am sure the people stepping up to the plate will get their teeth into the work and sort out the new challenges that face us. Phill Piddell has got us off to a flying start with the successful 2015 competition.

Thank you also to the coppicing group who do a sterling job coppicing the local woodlands obtaining the necessary materials for the training days & competitions.

2014 was a sad year seeing the passing of Ron Mouland & John

Blake, they are and will both be sadly missed. It was a fitting tribute to have 6 members of the Society as pallbearers as John Blake's Funeral, as the sign said on the miniature South of England style hedges outside the Church. “Laid to rest - South of England Style”.

Books to Loan out. The Society has been very privileged to have been given a copy of the “Europe’s Field Boundaries” from the researcher & author George Muller from Germany.

George has researched the book over the last 30 years and travelled, photographed & documented the details of hedgerows fences, walls & boundaries throughout Europe. At present the books rest with our “new librarian - Bob Hunt”, an unlikely candidate but we can always be surprised. Seriously, I have dropped them off to Bob as he is letting Des Whittington check them out, as Des has not been well recently. Our best wishes go to Des for a speedy recovery.

The Committee has been tasked to sort out a loan & deposit scheme so they are looked after but most importantly are used. We cannot hide 30 years of research under a pile of brush.

Phil Hart

NOTES

Welcome to the first Newsletter with myself as editor. It's a bumper issue with 20 pages. No revolutionary changes are to be expected. Just keep the articles and letters rolling in.

Ian Runcie



MEMBERSHIP

As a very successful hedge laying season draws to a close.... Yes I'm after your money again! Membership remains at £15, but please do confirm if you are able to "gift aid" as we can claim an extra £3.75 from the government. This year I will be claiming back £288, which really makes it worth the effort. As long as you pay a bit of tax then it costs you nothing!

The eagle eyed amongst you will notice some additions to the membership form this year:

First Emergency contact – if you get sick / injured while at an event who should we inform?

Occupation – Maybe you have some special skills at work which would be useful to the society?

You can renew on-line via the website www.sehls.co.uk (we accept all major credit and debit cards, and paypal), via bank transfer, I also accept Cheques and Cash. The latest renewal form is included with this newsletter. If you have already paid you will already have your membership card, so please don't pay again! Overall we ended this year with slightly less members than last year, but you have been a lot more active

Thanks **Phill Piddell**



President vs Chairman comp and the fun day will both be followed by a Lamb BBQ (It's Ed Lovejoy's place - one of Phil Harts old students. Nice local organic Lamb, yummy)

Phil P.

WELL DONE EVERYONE

says Mike Parrot. The 20 cutters at the Charity day raised £876.00 for Chailey Heritage . There is more to come from the Angmering Estate and what ever the committee decide to donate from the society funds.



The SOEHS Website

Our free adverts section on the website is getting popular, why not place an advert for your products or services?
Send details to Phill Piddell

The current adverts are listed below, check out the website for details <http://sehls.weebly.com/ads.html>

KENT

Stakes & Binders Cut to Order. Ashford Kent
Willow binders "Pick your own" Near Benenden, Cranbrook, Kent
Free Hazel - "Pick your own". Pembury Kent =

Surrey

Stakes & Binders Cut to Order. Godalming Surrey

Hampshire

Hazel stakes and binders. Winchester Hampshire

WANTED

Hedgelaye wanted. Petworth

Phil P.



The Wakehurst Scythe and Cider Festival in conjunction with the Fantastic British Food Festival, July 18th & 19th Wakehurst Place

In 2014 9 hedge layers took part & enjoyed a successful weekend of scything & cider; the results were.

Saturday, Individual Open Class: 1st G Moore, 2nd T Standen.

Sunday, Team Open: 1st G Moore, M Moore, T Standen. 2nd Scything Association Team

Anyone wishing to take part in the scything please contact Iain Parkinson for further details & an application form. Iain Parkinson, Conservation and Woodlands Manager Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, Wakehurst Place, Selsfield Road, Ardingly, West Sussex, RH17 6TN 01444 894304 email: i.parkinson@kew.org

Hedge Laying Grants.

With DEFRA & Natural England getting the finer details out of the “New” Countryside Stewardship Scheme (not to be confused with the old Countryside Stewardship Scheme). There is money available for farmers who are in the scheme, to claim £ 9.40 for hedge laying: form BN5 and £3.40 for adding stakes & binding: form BN10. Other money is available for other hedge related work. Visit the Natural England Website for full details and conditions. Phil Hart



One day Chainsaw update course, £107 per person. Please contact Sarah Firrell, Bespoke Training Organiser at Plumpton College. 01273 892014



Thanks to Reg Lanaway.

We would very much like to thank Reg for giving such an interesting and informative talk following the AGM at the College.

Reg's intimate local knowledge of Brocks Wood and the wildlife it supports gave a unique insight into so many birds and plants thriving there, nurtured by careful management and conservation over many years.

The illustrations from his comprehensive library of photographs made a really worthwhile conclusion to the evening and we were privileged to have been treated to such a riveting presentation.

Thank you Reg!



Save the SOEHS Money

We would like to encourage members to receive this newsletter by e mail, please let Phil Piddell know if you would prefer this:

phil.piddell@bt.com

Old Pleachers Never Die

Conventional wisdom states that pleachers eventually die and the hedge grows up from the base as in a coppice. Well that may be true of most pleachers but not all of them. At this year's competition I won the veterans's prize for the best regrowth for my hedge in the '14 competition. Anyone who knows my hedgelaying will be aware that this would have very little to do with my abilities. Thinking back, in addition to the planted hedge my cant happened to contain a couple of ancient knarled hawthorns with ground level thick horizontal pleachers lying in swampy ground. They looked more dead than alive but I did a little minor coppicing and nicking of these and my best guess is that the rejuvenated shoots from this work has combined with the official hedge to form a doubly thick hedge a year later.

In the Lake District recently, I took a walk on the west edge of Loweswater. Drystone walling is the feature of Lakeland but hedge-laying has been carried out there in the past and is being revived in the National Trust land around Loweswater. At the Southern edge of the lake there is a newly layed stretch of hedge in the Midland style, layed, I think, by NT volunteers. Near the Northern end are some old hedges pleached many years ago probably by the local farm hands. A close look in the hedges here revealed many horizontal branches still thriving and sending up tangled branches.

At the end of my walk, at the SE end, I came across these two trees, which must once have been part of a hedge. Any guesses how old these pleachers might be?



Ian Runcie

FOR YOUR DIARY

Events and Shows

Date	Event	Address	Post Code
9 th May	*Plumpton Open Day	Plumpton College, Ditchling Road	BN7 3AE
23 rd May	*Heathfield Show	Broad Oak, Heathfield	TN21 8UE
23 rd , 24 th & 25 th May Sun & Mon only	*SEHLS Show van only attending on the 24 th Sunday & 25 th Monday. Wakehurst Place Wood Fair	Ardingly, Haywards Heath, West Sussex,	RH17 6TN
20 th & 21 st June	*Wood Show, Weald & Downland Museum	Town Lane, Singleton, West Sussex	PO18 0EU
Thu 18 th June	Laughton & District Agricultural Society Farm Walk. Book in with Shauna Fenner, Secretary, 07737 668077	HJ Hecks & Sons, Newhouse Farm, Firle, Nr Lewes	BN8 6ND
4 th & 5 th July	*Smallholders Show,	Ardingly, Haywards Heath, West Sussex	RH17 6TL
12 th July	Southern Shears UK, Sheep Shearing Competition	Holmbush Farm Faygate Horsham.	RH12 4SE
16 th July	*Connect with the Countryside (Schools countryside education day)	Ardingly, Haywards Heath, West Sussex	RH17 6TL
18 th & 19 th July	Scything & Cider Festival, Wakehurst Place	Ardingly, Haywards Heath, West Sussex,	RH17 6TN
	*Autumn Show & Game Fair	Ardingly, Haywards Heath, West Sussex	RH17 6TL
18 th , 19 th & 20 th . Sept	*Weald Wood Fair Bentley Wildfowl Trust	Bentley, Halland, East Sussex,	BN8 5AF
Saturday 5 th Sept	Laughton Ploughing Match Hedge Laying Competition. Saturday	Northeast Farm, Northeast, Nr Iford, Lewes, East Sussex	BN7 3EX
Wed. 16 th Sept	Laughton Ploughing Match Ploughing & Agricultural Competition. Wednesday	Mays Farm, Selmeston	BN26 6TS
19 th Sept	West Grinstead Ploughing Match Hedge Laying Competition & Agricultural Show.	Upper Chancton Farm London Road, Washington	RH20 3DH
3 rd Oct	Hurstpierpoint Ploughing Match Hedge Laying Competition & Agricultural Show.	Truslers Hill Farm, Blackstone Lane, Nr Henfield. West Sussex.	BN5 9TA
9 th Oct	Durham Hedge Laying Championship	Near Durham, North East England	
10 th Oct	Scottish Hedge Laying Championship	Near Jedburgh, Scotland	
11 th Oct	Hampshire hedgelaying Championship	Hattingley Valley Vinard	

FOR YOUR DIARY

Events and shows continued

11 th Oct	North East Hedge Laying Championship	Northumberland, North East England	
24 th Oct	National Hedge Laying Society Hedge Laying Competition, Bristol.	Woodford lodge, Stoke Hill, Chew Stoke, Bristol, Avon.	BS40 8XH
9 th Jan 2016	SEHLS Improvers Day Competition	To be confirmed (TBC)	TBC
21 st Feb 2016	SEHLS Annual Competition	Scotney Castle, Lamberhurst. TBC	TBC
23 rd Jan 2016	President vs Chairman competition	Wittersham, Kent	TN 30
26 th Feb 2016	SEHLS AGM	Business Centre, Plumpton College, Ditchling Road, Plumpton, Lewes	BN7 3AE

* The SOEHS caravan will be at these events
 Anyone interested in helping out at any of the shows for a free entry ticket (limited number available), please contact David Crouch. 01323 811557

Anyone know anything about ALBANIAN HEDGELAYING?



A friend of mine sent me this photo from their holiday in Albania. They thought the hedge was made up of a combination of live pleachers and weaved in cut branches.

FOR YOUR DIARY

Training in Hedge Laying

The following training days for Coppicing & Hedge Laying are planned as follows.

Training Fee for Hedge Laying the course fee is £150.

	Subject	Date	Location	Cost
	Tool Sharpening	29 August 2015	Plumpton College	£10.00
	Coppicing	26 September 2015	TBC	£150.00
Day 1	Hedge Laying	17 October 2015	Alton, Hampshire	
Day 2	Hedge Laying	14 November 2015	Alton, Hampshire	
	Coppicing	28 November 2015	TBC	
Day 3	Hedge Laying	12 December 2015	TBC	
	Coppicing	2 January 2016	TBC	
	Hedge Laying Improvers Day	9 January 2016	TBC possible Scotney Castle	

Note that Coppicing days are FREE to all Members

Experienced current members

A section of hedge will be allocated for experienced current members wishing to lay hedge, please contact The Training Co-ordinator Phill Piddell for more details. Please note to take part in any of these events you need to join the society so you are covered by the Society's insurance. Membership is £15 per annum. Please bring your membership cards to all events.

To get booking information for these events, send a completed membership application form to Phill Piddell.

The Membership Secretary, Phill Piddell.

1 Hope House Farm Cottage, Crouch Lane, Sandhurst, Cranbrook, TN18 5PD 01580 850768 phill.piddell@bt.com

Form on Next Page:

**South of England
Hedge-Laying Society
MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION (or RENEWAL)
April 2015 to March 2016**



PRESIDENT:

Peter Tunks
The Coach House
Waltersville Way
Horley
RH6 9EP

Tel: 01293 784826 / 07836 757570

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY:

Phill Piddell
1 Hope House Farm Cottage
Crouch Lane
Sandhurst
Cranbrook
Kent TN18 5PD
Tel: 01580 850768

Annual membership of the Society	£15 per person	
Lapel Badge	£5 per badge	
Total		
Please treat my membership as a Gift Aid donation (YES / NO)		

I confirm I have paid or will pay an amount of Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax for the current tax year (6 April to 5 April) that is at least equal to the amount of tax that all the charities and Community Amateur Sports Clubs (CASCs) that I donate to will reclaim on my gifts for the current tax year. I understand that other taxes such as VAT and Council Tax do not qualify. I understand the charity will reclaim 25p of tax on every £1 that I have given.

PLEASE USE CLEAR BLOCK CAPITALS

Name: _____

Address: _____

_____ Post Code: _____

Tel: _____ Mobile: _____

Emergency Contact (Name and Number) _____

Email: _____

Age (if under 18): _____ Occupation: _____

It is your responsibility to ensure that the Society is informed of any changes in your communication details.

Please return the completed form to Phill Piddell You will receive a Membership Card in the post.

Alternatively please email the above details to phill.piddell@bt.com and transfer the money directly to our bank account: SORT CODE **20-49-76** Account **90867381** (South of England Hedge Laying Soc)
Renew on online - www.sehls.co.uk

**31st Annual Hedge Laying Competition. Sunday 22nd February 2015.
Angmering Park Estate, Lee Farm BN13 3XJ**

After 2 date changes due to unforeseen clashes with HRH's annual competition I did wonder if anyone would turn up to our event but, in the end, we had a record turnout. A number of members made a weekend of it and attended both events.

What a glorious site! It is hard to imagine somewhere so quiet in the southeast of England, and with such an "easy" hedge we had no need of chainsaws. Unlike last year the weather was nice and sunny until the end of the event, then it came down by the bucket.

With 35 competitors cutting over 300 yards of hedge our three judges and chief steward were kept busy throughout the day. Due to the straightforward hedge and very high quality laying by everyone, they had their work cut out with the



marking. Happily everyone completed their section and we had no need to return after lunch (in the rain) to finish off.

The entries were pretty evenly split between classes, with 8 in both Novice and Champion, 9 in Senior, and 10 Veterans.

Some changes to the rules meant that the Champion class was limited to 8 entries, with the last placed entry swapping places with the winner of the Senior class the following year. So well done to Nigel on his promotion, and commiserations to Sarah who now has to battle her way back up to the champion class.



We had a few visitors, mainly from the estate itself, who were impressed by the workmanship, and very supportive of the craft. Hopefully next year at Scotney we can attract lots more visitors, and maybe pick up some new members. We will be looking for help from non-laying members to talk to the public (nothing tricky, just hand out some leaflets and answer questions about hedge-laying and the competition).

Thanks must of course go to: the Judges and chief steward,

31st Annual Competiion

Pat for scorekeeping, Paul for cutting 100's of binders and sharpened stakes, the Estate team for allowing us to use their venue to Lady Mary presenting the prizes, to the refreshment team (Luz- Marina, Pat and Mike) and to Fiona for taking some pictures of you all.

The score sheets and prizes are below, well done to everyone who won a prize.

Another change is coming next year – in order to speed up the start of the event the committee have agreed that we will not hold a “draw for a cant” – your cant will be allocated based on the order you apply to enter the competition (in your class). So the early birds catch the low numbers (which might be an advantage, or might not



**31st Annual Hedge Laying Competition. Sunday 22nd February 2015.
Angmering Park Estate, Lee Farm BN13 3XJ.
Results.**

Cant	Competitor	Member number	Class	Pleachers		Stockproof		Height		Stakes		Binders		General Appearance		Total	Position	Steward	Judge
				25	25	15	10	15	10	10	100								
1	Stephen Thorns	61	Novice	12	13	11	7	10	7	60								Mike Parrott	Bob Hunt
2	Phill Piddell	105	Novice	14	19	12	7	11	8	71									
3	David Droscher	76	Novice	14	20	13	8	12	8	75	3								
4	Joseph Moulard	4	Novice	16	21	15	7	11	7	77	1								
5	James Selby	25	Novice	12	22	14	6	12	6	72	4								
6	Chris Burchell Collins	15	Novice	13	15	12	5	14	6	65									
7	David Dunk	109	Novice	14	16	14	6	12	6	68									
8	Mike Mason	114	Novice	18	18	14	7	13	6	76	2								
										0									
										0									
9	Frank Wright	60	Veteran	16	14	14	6	12	5	67							Mike Parrott	Bob Hunt	
10	John French	89	Veteran	15	13	14	7	11	6	66									
11	David Crouch	24	Veteran	17	18	13	8	12	8	76	2								
12	Clive Gilligan	74	Veteran	20	19	15	9	14	9	86	1								
13	Roger Taylor	104	Veteran	18	13	15	9	12	7	74	4								
14	Bob Taylor	57	Veteran	10	11	14	7	11	6	59									
15	Dave Truran	52	Veteran	17	12	13	7	12	7	68									
16	Tim Hughes	2	Veteran	16	15	15	8	13	8	75	3								
17	Mick Friend	29	Veteran	15	15	14	8	12	9	73									
34	Chris Sparkes	165	Veteran	17	14	13	7	12	7	70									
18	Jef Gielen	49	Senior	20	20	14	8	13	8	83							Mike Parrott	Alex Leggat	
19	Tom Standen	65	Senior	21	19	12	7	12	7	78									
20	Nigel Adams	133	Senior	20	24	14	10	14	10	92	1								
21	Stephen Mockford	77	Senior	21	18	12	8	12	8	79									
22	Phil Hart	46	Senior	20	20	12	8	12	8	80									
23	Darren Hulbert	45	Senior	22	19	14	8	12	9	84									
24	Terry Standen	68	Senior	21	20	13	9	14	10	87	3								
25	Lex Roeleveld	166	Senior	21	20	13	9	14	9	86	4								
26	Hans E Taylor	94	Senior	22	22	12	9	14	10	89	2								
			Senior							0									
27	Mark Moore	122	Champion	18	16	12	8	11	7	72	7						Mike Parrott	Des Whittington	
28	Paul Matthews	8	Champion	18	18	13	8	13	7	77	2								
29	Sarah Hooper	117	Champion	17	14	12	7	11	7	68	8								
30	Tony Gallow	99	Champion	16	17	13	8	12	7	73	6								
31	Bob Whittaker	116	Champion	15	18	14	8	12	8	75	4								
32	Mike Bentley	91	Champion	18	20	12	9	12	8	79	1								
33	Geoffrey R Pitt	44	Champion	17	17	13	7	12	8	74	5								
35	Gary Moore	150	Champion	18	16	14	7	13	8	76	3								

Additional Prizes

Best Overall Re-growth	Bob Whittaker
Best Veteran Re-growth	Ian Runcie
Challenge Cup	Mike Bentley
Improvers Day Award	David Dunk
Best work on a poor Length	Not awarded this year as the hedge was very consistent.
Best Novice stakes & Binding	Not judged
Most Improved Novice	Joseph Moulard
Best overall stakes & Binders	Clive Gilligan
Points Trophy	Mike Bentley

Further Information

Entries	
Novice	8
Veteran	10
Senior	9
Champion	8
Total	35

Competition Director	Phill Piddell
Competition Secretary	Phill Piddell
Chief Steward	Mike Parrott

Weather Conditions
Sunny and warm

Nature Notes

Feb '15

It is not long after the shortest day that we see movement in the countryside. Before Christmas I saw Daffodils in full bloom under a garden hedge and along a local hedgerow Hazel catkins long and fluffy. It will be only the odd tree so forward as in Nature there is always a spread within the timing a species reproduces so that in adverse conditions all is not lost. Many of the herbaceous ground cover plants are emerging in the woods and under hedges.

I have started to list the different species of bird I see this year, not "Twitching" but finding and identifying our own. To this end, early in January an intrepid group of five of us ventured to the far eastern end of the county and to Dungeness, just past the border into Kent. Now if you haven't visited that area in winter you are probably wiser than we are. As it is so flat and like a moonscape with acres of pebbles and low vegetation, it is usually very cold but does support interesting wildlife.

There are many very large lakes, formed by the extraction of gravel over many years that are deep and are used annually in winter by waterfowl and wading birds from the far north. One such lake, right beside the road, is more than a mile in length and about half way along is the County boundary. It is important that when reporting sightings of birds for Sussex that they are in the correct end. Unless you go to such places it is difficult to imagine the sheer numbers of ducks and geese to be found. Literally hundreds of Widgeon, beautiful ducks that graze grass, were an amazing sight against the green fields in the bright sunshine. Similarly in the creeks and water meadows at Pett Level, well within Sussex, large numbers of Teal, Shovelers, Lapwings and Curlews were feeding within a few yards of the road undisturbed.



In total we saw twelve species of duck and four of geese during the day. Probably the most exceptional sightings were of all three white egrets, heron-like birds that are more frequently found in Britain recently. The Little Egret with its black legs and obvious yellow feet is often reported locally and now quite common. The elegant Great White Egret is about as tall as a Grey Heron but completely white and much more slender. Two Cattle Egrets, small white rather hunched up birds with yellow bills, were in a classic situation amongst some out-wintered in-calf beef cows with metal ring feeders with bales of fodder so when the animals plodded the ground worms and other food for these birds were exposed for them to find. These are the ones often seen amongst wild animals in African wildlife films. Their range across the globe is vast but are scarce in Britain but increasing.

Five birds of prey were also identified, Kestrel, Sparrowhawk, Peregrine and Buzzard. The most special being Marsh Harrier quartering the reedbed from only a few feet from the ground. This large raptor has increased from very rare half a century ago to one you can now be sure of seeing in these habitats.

Last month I suggested that it might be interesting to be an armchair bird watcher and record any seen on television. During the Coast programme the

other day when they visited Islands off North Scotland, a flock of what were probably Dunlin flew along the shore and three Black Guillemots were on the sea. There is so much of interest to be found in Nature wherever you are.

March

As March arrives we may be encouraged by the longer days that winter is behind us. This may well not be the case for this is a period of uncertain length and is known in the countryside as “the Hungry Gap”. Creatures that have survived the cold weather up to that point probably have low reserves of fat and bodyweight so a prolonged shortage of food is the last thing birds or small mammals need at this time. It is essential to maintain any regular feeding until well into spring. In addition to this, a safe roosting area is necessary. At dusk most birds just seem to melt away to spend the night in cavities or more likely in evergreen foliage. This where Ivy is so valuable in winter when little else has a covering of thick leaves for this protection.

It is perfectly natural that late cold spells add to the mortality of the population of birds and when this happens, those that do survive, are the strongest and hardiest and should pass these qualities on to their descendants. They will also command larger territories from which they will secure a food supply for their nestlings, rear larger broods and with less competition more will survive to maturity. With most species an optimum population is restored in a couple of years.

There was a report on the News this morning that there is an increase in Barn Owl numbers. Good, this is to be celebrated and always a treat to see, but surely hardly news when it was well known that last year was a bumper year for rodents on which they feed and many reared large and even second broods. Conversely in a few years when the rodent population reaches the low point, numbers of all birds of prey that rely on them for food will also dwindle. Then we will be expected to wring our hands and say what a wicked world we live in! This sort of undulation in population of a predator species responding to abundance or scarcity of the prey on which they rely is well known to most of us who have an interest in the world around us.

By the middle of the month Chiffchaffs will be in song in the woods around. Their numbers have increased over the past years to about double they were more than twenty years ago. Theirs is an easily recognised song as they rather monotonously repeat their mane. Many more now spend the winter here and could have bred in more northern regions and come here because it is warmer. Indeed a few of them show characteristics of the race found in Siberia which is much whiter.

At the end of the month there will be reports of the first Sand Martins and perhaps, Swallows arriving. These are usually to be found flying up river valleys or over lakes and reservoirs and I know one doesn't make a summer but it is a good sign of the progression of the year. One of my favourite signs that spring has arrived is when we see the first Orange-tip butterflies patrolling their territories along damp areas of woods or roadsides where the plant food, Lady's Smock, on which their eggs are laid and upon which the caterpillars feed.

The best time of year is approaching!!

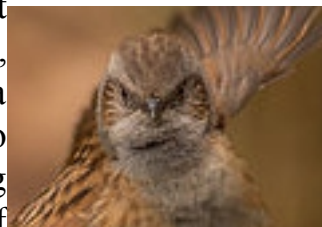
April

I am able to update some news of local Barn Owls. When we ringed the brood of five in June at Townings Farm, just past the Aerodrome, we caught up the parent birds each of which was ringed. Both had been ringed as nestlings in the Chailey area, the male was from a large brood of six nine years ago and the female from a brood of five two years later. By this we can see that they are experienced adults that must have successfully survived the peaks and troughs of the vole population as described last month. These records also show the year in which Barn Owls bred well with large numbers of young reared.

The other nest where we were able to read the number on the ring was a female caught at a box at the south end of Plumpton Lane near the footpath to East Chiltington. Though she had a large brood patch indicating active breeding, she was not using that nest site but probably one close by. This bird had been ringed as a single chick at Itford south of Lewes along the Ouse Valley three years ago. Obviously that had been a poorer year for prey species and we can only speculate how many of her siblings she, as “boss chick” consumed to ensure that the next generation of Barn Owls survived that year.

More locally, we ringed three well grown young at Court Gardens Farm but were unable to see if the adults were ringed. There we also had a brood of five Kestrels in a well-used site. These are interesting birds and I fancy, more to be seen in the area this year. Early in spring the female rests near the chosen nest site and awaits food to be brought to her by her mate. In this way she will not use energy and will increase in bodyweight and accordingly lay eggs in proportion to it. If it is a plentiful year for prey she will be given more food and lay more eggs. Conversely in a poor year she will lay fewer, or if the male is unskilful as a hunter or lazy, not so many of his genes will be passed on to the next generation.

A bird that is often overlooked is the inconspicuous Dunnock. Very wide spread in woods and in gardens this sombre coloured bird does its best to go un-noticed and feeds on the ground. At first glance it is the typical “Little Brown Job” but the grey of the head and the mottled brown of the mantle is in its own quiet way very beautiful. The song of the male is a thin but pleasant warble but the display where both birds and often a rival will flutter their wings above their backs is most distinctive. From this they get local name of “Shuffle wing”. They nest in hedgerows, bushes and Ivy covered stumps and for such a nondescript bird, lays the most beautiful blue eggs in two broods between March and July. It had been for a long time in folk lore that these birds were a prime example of domestic bliss so quiet and devoted they seemed. Close studies of the species revealed that this was very far from the truth with either of the pair likely to slope off for illicit liaisons at the first opportunity. So the saying that “it is a wise Dunnock that knows its own father” is often the case.



Reg Lanaway

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Items for next Newsletter to Ian by end of August please

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