

Bealeswood Common, December 2021

Overwintering

Bealeswood Wildlife Recording Group (BWRG)

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Previous monthly records and notes are posted at www.dockenfieldpc.org.uk/wildlife

Birds

Contrary to widely held ancient beliefs, birds do not hibernate. Instead, some migrate south, some residents adapt to the prevailing weather and limited food supplies, and others seek harbour here from harsher climates such as the Siberian/Scandinavian thrushes – Fieldfare and Redwing. Having mostly harvested the Common's Holly berries, Redwings are now seeking invertebrates - mostly worms - alongside Fieldfares in surrounding fields; later they will tackle Ivy berries.



In bleaker times they will resort to gardens, particularly if falls of apples remain on the ground. Resident Blackbirds, Song and Mistle Thrushes will mix in with their cousins; the latter even commencing its hesitantly-phrased song as a prelude to Spring.

With a good view, Redwing (photographed here by Alan

Cox) are unmistakable; red-brown flanks and creamy eye-stripe. They are more challenging to identify in flight – note the subdued “tack” single-note call, noticeably short tail compared to other thrushes and more social groups.

Mammals

Bats will be in their winter roosts by now, choosing cool, humid and undisturbed places to hibernate. They can emerge to feed in the right conditions but unplanned arousal can be disastrous for winter survival.

Hedgehogs and dormice also truly hibernate, but other mammal species simply become less active, entering periods of torpor in cold spells.

Our resident Roe and Muntjac deer are still active but move into woodland habitats in the winter feeding off bark, fungi, berries and nuts.

Butterflies

Although you may not see any butterflies in the winter, they are still around in one form or another. Brimstone butterflies hibernate as adults, usually among leaves, while others, such as Tortoiseshell, Red Admiral and Peacock, often hibernate in sheds or outhouses. Some butterflies (Small and Large White for example) survive the winter as chrysalises, hidden among leaf litter, hanging from a branch or even on buildings.

Most of our grassland butterflies (Meadow Brown, Marbled White, Gatekeeper etc) over winter as caterpillars and these will lie dormant when it's very cold, but feed when it's milder.



Yet others like the Purple Hairstreak (photo opposite by Alex Potts) and Brown Hairstreak, survive as small eggs, hidden in crevices of trees or at the base of a bud on a tree and do not hatch till Spring.

While most butterflies consistently survive the winter in one particular form, the Speckled Wood is unusual in that it may do so as a caterpillar or as a chrysalis, depending on whether the egg was laid in the spring or the autumn.

Wildflowers

Many of the plants on Bealeswood are perennial, and so die down in winter and re-emerge in spring, flowering at different times from spring through till early autumn. These will also grow from seed, dispersed by wind, birds, and perhaps the feet of animals and humans, but some also spread from their roots, forming large clumps (good examples on the Common being Harebells, and Nettles). The root growth is particularly active in autumn, so not visible until the following year's new plants.

Some are annual, dying off, having dispersed their seed during the year, and are replaced by new plants the following year; but of these, some seeds germinate before the end of the year and lie low as seedlings over winter, springing into growth when the weather warms: of these Goose Grass or Cleavers is very noticeable over the winter as masses of fresh green young plants.

Many others, such as the Umbellifer family (Cow Parsley, Hogweed etc) are biennial, so may take two years to reach flowering, and then die and re-seed.