

Leisure

Wildlife Watching

Local news and views of the natural world

THE recent warm weather, which followed just enough rain to relieve the dry conditions, has allowed to spring to really get underway after another harsh winter. The evidence of this is all around us with burgeoning plant and insect life, and birds starting their courtship and breeding behaviour.

This is a great time of year to get out and watch wildlife and there are now a number of 'watch' schemes that you can get involved in particularly involving what is probably our most popular form of wildlife – birds.

The best known of these are the garden bird watch schemes run by the RSPB and the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) which not only generate mass participation but also data which are valuable for increasing the knowledge of the species, numbers and distribution of birds using gardens

One of the more interesting reporting schemes is the BTO's 'Big Garden Beak Watch' which has been initiated due to reports of increasing numbers of birds, including common garden birds, being spotted showing beak deformities such as elongation or twisting. There are a number of theories as to what is causing this, including exposure to pollution and nutrient deficiency, but none with much evidence to support them.

Another possibility is that these deformities are genetically inherited and it has been observed that birds showing them can breed, though less successfully than their 'normal' counterparts.

It may be, then, that these characteristics are due to an inheritable genetic mutation. This is a phrase that has horror movie connotations but it is in

fact what drives the evolution of all species - including humans. The fact that beaks are involved here brings to mind one of the most famous examples of this - Darwin's finches. He found that these birds in the Galapagos Islands had evolved a number of beak shapes and feeding patterns from a common ancestor, which originally colonised the islands. This apparent creation of species formed part of the evidence for Darwin's theory of evolution.

The big advantage that Darwin's finches had when evolving was that they were adapting to unused ecological 'niches'. No such luck for the garden 'bent beaks'! Almost all of the available 'niches' here are both used and often hotly contested and, while their beak 'deformity' might scare other birds in a direct confrontation over resources, it puts them at a disadvantage in other ways. They are unable to preen as well as birds with 'normal' beaks, leading to decreased resistance to hypothermia and a reduced ability to attract mates. If they do breed, they are less able to build and manage nests. Their beak design also limits their ability to feed without allowing access to any new food sources.

How, then, do they survive? A clue may be found in the title 'Garden Beak Watch'. It may be that most observations have been made by people watching birds in gardens but that might be due to gardens in which food is provided being the only place where the 'bent beaks' can survive. Birds with deformed beaks often show ingenuity in overcoming the limitations they impose but could this, and the availability of food in gardens, really be enough to sustain these birds through a

NOTTINGHAM Rugby's quest for a place in the Championship promotion play off semi-finals came to an end last weekend.

It was a disappointing defeat at Bristol on Sunday which ended any mathematical hopes, but by then they were in the impossible situation of having to overturn a points difference deficit in excess of 100, thanks to London Welsh gaining a bonus point in their narrow defeat against Worcester Warriors.

And so the Green and Whites will complete their season on Saturday when Welsh visit Meadow Lane,

and *Beeston Express* readers were offered a chance to win a pair of tickets for this finale.

The game will kick off at 3.15pm, following Notts County's crucial Division One game against Bournemouth, with supporters of both clubs being given the opportunity to watch the two games together at reduced cost.

Nottingham will be looking to go out in style, despite a mounting injury list. With Phil Egglestone and David Jackson both having suffered facial injuries against Worcester, last weekend also saw Jack Cobden and Tim Usasz forced out of the action.

That will see their resources

stretched, but will not compromise the attacking style which they have developed over the last couple of seasons.

And while some supporters will be disappointed to see them miss out on a promotion chance, this has still been a successful campaign for the club.

Given their financial resources, a fifth place finish in the regular season is a genuine achievement, one that should not be underestimated.

Hopefully the recent takeover should ease those financial worries and see them pushing to go at least one better next season.

Rugby Competition Winners

NOTTINGHAM Rugby kindly offered *Beeston Express* readers two pairs of tickets to see this weekend's Premiership finale against London Welsh.

All you had to do was answer the question: "Where do Nottingham Rugby play?"

The answer is, of course, at Meadow Lane, Nottingham.

Ticket winners were P Lawrence of Appleton Road, Beeston and P Glanfield of Mapperley Park.

Rugby

London Welsh finale for Green & Whites

Croquet

Open Afternoon at Highfields

LOOKING to increase the number of croquet players in Nottingham and make more use of the croquet lawns at Highfields Park, University Boulevard, Nottingham Croquet Club is holding an Open Afternoon in May.

A spokesman for the club, Roger Berkeley, said: "We play two forms of croquet at Nottingham, Golf Croquet and Association Croquet. Golf Croquet is a more interactive game with two or four players on the lawn, where hoops are contested one at a time. Association Croquet is a longer, more complex, game where one person plays at a time and several hoops can be scored in a turn. About three-quarters of the members at Nottingham play Association

Golf Croquet

"If you're sure Golf Croquet is the game for you, coaching sessions will be run every Wednesday morning from 10am to 12 noon, starting on April 20. There will be no charge for this, but if you wish to continue after the first two sessions, you will be asked to join the club," Mr Berkeley added. First year membership is £70, with reduced rates for juniors, students, and those living more than 20 miles away.

Open Afternoon

Mr Berkeley continued: "For those who are unsure which form of the game they want to play, we will be holding an Open Afternoon on Sunday, May 22. You will be welcome to come along, hold a mallet, hit some balls, run some

hoops and talk with members to find out why we find our game so fascinating."

A comprehensive Introductory Coaching Course will start on Thursday evening, May 26, from 7pm to 9pm. The fee for this course is £35, which includes temporary membership of the club, and is deductible from the first year's full membership.

This course will cover both forms of the game, whilst developing the skills and tactics of Association Croquet.

For more details, go to www.nottinghamcroquet.org.uk

If you go along to the Open Afternoon on May 22, you are asked to remember to take a flat-soled pair of shoes with you!

freezing winter which tested the survival abilities of the fittest individuals?

The results of the ongoing 'beak watch' will help to answer this, particularly records from this spring. Taking part requires not just watching the birds in your garden for a day but being sharp eyed at all times as well as lucky. Although the number of reported sightings has been increasing they are still rare, which is why each one is valuable.

If you do happen to spot a bird with an unusual beak, the more detail you can record the better - species, sex (easier with some species than others!) along with date and place spotted would all be useful. A photograph is ideal but could be difficult unless you have such a bird regularly visiting your garden. Details of how to participate can be found at the BTO's website www.bto.org.

The story of the bent beaks might just be a quirk of evolution but may well be more complex and could even be unrelated to it. It is a puzzle whose solution will be assisted by every report - this is one 'watch' where your contribution, if you get the chance to make it, will really count!

Jack Smith
Local ecologist

Thought for the Fortnight

If something goes without saying, let it.

