

# Leisure

## Wildlife Watching

### Local news and views of the natural world

DESPITE a few cold days and frosty nights recently, this winter has yet to match the severity of the previous two and, rather than them heralding a return to 'proper' winters, we seem to be back to the trend of unusually warm ones that we have been seeing in recent years. This has led to some unseasonable events in the natural world, including the recording by botanists of sixty-three plants in flower in the Cardiff area when the expected number would be less than 10.

Locally, there is plenty of evidence that nature is beginning to think that it is already spring. As well as the usual early flowerers such as snowdrop and crocus, which are still appearing earlier than usual, plants such as daffodils and bluebells are already showing strong growth. Plants that develop early in the spring often have a degree of frost resistance and can tolerate short periods of sub-zero weather, although an extended period of weather can damage their growth or kill them off. Any over-wintering insects which have emerged from hibernation prematurely, for example the peacock butterfly seen on the wing last week, would have little chance of surviving these conditions.

However confusing the weather may be for other wildlife, birds are likely to benefit from a winter with a minimum of harsh conditions after successive years when these were extensive. In relation to the great 'where are our garden birds?' debate that has been conducted in these pages, personal observations would suggest that almost

all the usual garden species can be seen although, apart from the blue, great and the seemingly ever-more successful coal tit, there seem to be fewer in than in previous years and they appear less regularly. Winter visitors such as fieldfares and redwings are around in good numbers and waxwings have been spotted locally. However, there are some species, such as the starling and the house sparrow, that were formerly common in gardens but are now seldom seen at all in any number.

The humble sparrow has been staging a little bit of a comeback in recent years after a steep fall in their numbers and the raucous sound of a sparrow breeding colony, often in dense ivy clinging to walls of trees, is a joyful one to most urban birders and a nostalgic one for those of a certain age. Given that there seems to be some increase in their breeding success it might be expected that more might be seen over the winter but one individual observation is not especially meaningful. (See Attenborough Nature Notes on page 14. Ed).

Hundreds of thousands, however, are and there is a chance next weekend (January 28 – 29) to make one of them by participating in the RSPB's annual 'Big Garden Birdwatch'.

The results generated by this give a good indicator of how the birds which use gardens are faring. The changes in the numbers of some familiar species over the last 30 years will be borne out by the experience of anyone who has observed garden birds over this period.

House sparrows and particularly starlings have declined dramatically but tits of all species have expanded their populations. It will come as no surprise to anyone who feeds birds that the biggest winner over this period is the wood pigeon, whose numbers have increased by 850 percent! The increase in numbers of collared dove of more than 300 percent is remarkable for a bird that was, not so long ago, very rare in this country. The pigeon family certainly know how to make the most of it when the conditions are right!

The diversity and number of gardens in this country make them impossible to survey by conventional methods and they possess many variable factors and features that make like-for-like comparison difficult if not impossible. The sheer amount of data that are generated from mass surveys like the RSPB's Garden Birdwatch – an intensive head (or beak!) count over a very restricted period – overcomes many of these problems.

Taking part in next week's Big Garden Birdwatch is a great excuse (if any were needed) to look closely at the birds in your garden – even seasoned birdwatchers may learn something new – and passing on your observations will help fill in the gaps that still exist in the understanding of even our most familiar species.

If you have access to the internet, details of how to participate can be found at [www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch](http://www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch)

*Jack Smith  
Local ecologist*

## Rugby

### A frosty reception for green and white runaround

AFTER the disappointment of last week's late postponement, Nottingham Rugby make their second trip to Penzance to take on Cornish Pirates in the space of three weeks as they bid for a place in the semi-finals of the British and Irish Cup.

Their game against Doncaster Knights at Meadow Lane fell victim to weather last week, but not until 15 minutes before it was due to kick off.

The match referee and Nottingham skipper Craig Hammond both agreed the pitch was playable, but the Doncaster captain was not

happy with it, which meant that all concerned had a wasted journey.

And so the Green and Whites turn their attention to the cup, having qualified for the knock out stages with a 100 percent record.

Just two weeks ago they suffered an agonising 26-24 defeat at the Mennaye Field. But having been ahead for most of the game they paid dearly for two yellow cards in quick succession meaning they had to play with 13 men for a decisive spell as Pirates took their chance clinically.

"We have had two very

good matches against the Pirates already this season," said Nottingham's Director of Rugby Glenn Delaney.

"In both matches we were ahead for long periods but have succumbed to late points which have cost us victory.

"Now we're in the knockout stages anything can happen and we're hoping to go as far as possible.

"We know this will be another tough match, but we're excited by the challenge and we'll go into it backing ourselves to do what's required to win."

## The Cast returns! *by Alex Tavener*

ANYONE in the East Midlands interested in live theatre should be aware that there is a treat in store for February... The Cast are back to perform the 'Hot Mikado' in Long Eaton's Duchess Theatre at the Chatsworth Centre.

This show is a version of the Gilbert and Sullivan classic, The Mikado – the same enjoyable plot but with songs updated to a swing-time jazz era that gets the toes tapping from the start and dance routines that set the pulse racing to the finish. It's a great show, much under performed (last performed in the north-east under the direction of TV's Craig Revell-Hall, no less) because it demands so much from a small numbers of players. And that is what makes it ideal for 'The Cast' to put on.

So who are The Cast?

They are a group of performers from different theatrical and musical groups across the region who are brought together to perform a particular show. Some of you may remember their well-received productions of 'A Chorus Line' and 'Company' nine years ago. It's the same idea again, a select group who

want to put on the sort of show seldom attempted by the established theatrical groups. The aim is to create the sort of dynamic and entertaining live experience that normally only professional shows provide.

Heather Weaver, one of the founders of 'The Cast', explains: "It's brilliant. We get to pick some of the best talents in the region to match the parts they're playing. It's so good to see these people working together as one group."

Ashur, who has just been invited to join The Cast, continues: "The enthusiasm at each rehearsal is infectious. If we can get just half of that across to our audience, it'll be the best thing in ages."

However, just because these players are new to each other does not mean they are new to theatre. The group this time includes some well-known local faces – Alex Tavener (from Erewash Musical Society, recent lead in the NODA-award winning show 'Gypsy'), Matt Fry, Ben Alvey and Kevin Chatten (of Beeston Operatic, recently showing their credentials in 'The Full Monty') Rachael Brown

(Nottingham, recently playing the leads in 'Guys and Dolls' and the 'Little Shop of Horrors').

From further afield, the group are joined by Craig Arme from Derby Players, Emily Harris and Chris Collington from Ripley and Heanor Operatic Society as well as Lucy Bramley from Birmingham.

The show will be directed by Rob Corner, whose work includes 'Seven Brides for Seven Brothers' as well as the original 'Mikado' and, as musical maestro, the versatile James Rayner of Centrestage, Derby.

Rehearsals are well under way and there's a buzz in the air... this might be a good time to make a note in your diary for 7.30pm, February 15 – 18 at the Duchess Theatre, Long Eaton. See you there!



### Thought for the Fortnight

#### *Precious little*

We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean, but the ocean would be less because of that missing drop.

*Mother Teresa (1910 – 1997)*

