

Leisure

Wildlife Watching

Local news and views of the natural world

THE (precious little) rain that we have recently had has helped 'the darling buds of May' to bloom and this is the time of year when much of our wildlife, especially plant life, is at its best. We are now at the optimum growing time for many plants. In less than a month's time, the days will once again grow shorter.

Another sure sign that summer is really under way is the fledging of the first brood of many of our common resident birds. This is happening right now and it is easy to spot groups of the young of species such as blackbird, starling, house sparrow and tits taking their first steps (and flights) in the world.

Some of the young birds will still be being fed by their parents and the noise this generates is an aid to picking them out. Hopefully these young birds will also be learning what is an increasingly important lesson for urban birds – how to avoid being eaten by a sparrowhawk! The sparrowhawks may well have their own young offspring to feed and this sets the scene for an exciting, if potentially grisly, spectacle that you might be able to witness if you're alert – sparrowhawks hunting young birds!

Sand martins

For most migrant bird species that breed in this country, the fledging of their first, and perhaps only, brood is still a few weeks away. For our visiting sand martins nesting by the canal at Turnover Bridge, conditions are better than they have been for several years. After a little persuasion, British Waterways have now installed sturdy and clear signage prohibiting mooring along the section of towpath

which contains their nests. This, along with a little vigilance from local nature lovers, should ensure that there is no repeat of incidents in previous years where chicks have died because moored boats blocked their nest entrances.

British Waterways should be congratulated for the work they have done here – it is a measure of their concern for wildlife on their estate that they are prepared to inconvenience boaters in the course of wildlife protection.

House martins

Things are not so bright this year for the relatives of sand martins, the house martins. Because of the recent lack of rain and windy, drying, conditions, they have found supplies of the essential material for their nest – mud – difficult or impossible to obtain. Advice has even been issued to help any house martins nesting nearby by providing a source of mud! This would certainly help the birds that are able to take advantage of it and could also offer a rare opportunity to watch them at close quarters but it can only have a limited impact. It may be that the breeding success of house martins will be one of the casualties of this year's dry weather.

Flora and fauna

Other parts of the canal area around the Turnover Bridge are now starting to recover from the effects of the floodwall works. Trees and shrubs that were cut down in the course of the works are rapidly regenerating from the stumps that remained and the space and availability of light that was created by the clearance has resulted in, if anything, a more diverse community of plants than existed beforehand.

Hopefully this will not come to include the dreaded Himalayan balsam!

The areas of bare ground created during this work are also developing an interesting, if fairly sparse, flora. As everywhere, a little more rain would help this to develop – if it is allowed to.

Rather than reseeding with grass and keeping the flood banks manicured, they could simply be left to nature. The result would certainly be more beneficial to wildlife and would help compensate for the loss of wildlife value in the adjoining fields. These were quite recently uncultivated land under set-aside but are now used for intensive cereal production and are probably as much a danger to wildlife, predominantly insects which could suffer due to pesticide applications, as they are a benefit.

However well this recovery is progressing, regular visitors to the area might reflect that there has been a great deal of damage and disruption for the sake of a very small wall!

Jack Smith
Local ecologist

'Touch Rugby' for minis

YOUNGSTERS in Broxtowe borough have the opportunity to try their hand at rugby for free.

Broxtowe Borough Council has teamed up with Nottingham Casuals RFC and launched the club's first-ever junior side to offer five to eight year-olds the chance to try their hand at the non-contact version of the sport.

The introductory sessions stated on Saturday, May 21 at the home of Nottingham Casuals RFC in Canalside, off Meadow Road, Beeston and will continue on Sunday mornings, from 10am.

Qualified coaches arrange games where youngsters 'tag' one another, rather than tackling, by pulling specialised Velcro strips on a belt.

For more information, contact Broxtowe Borough Council on (0115) 917 3572.

Cycling

Rural Rides cycling programme is taken over by RideWise

CYCLISTS who had been enjoying free guided rides across the county as part of the 'Rural Rides' scheme will be pleased to know that they can carry on.

Nottinghamshire County Council (NCC), which produced the project, had withdrawn funding as a result of the financial cuts and the scheme looked doomed.

However, the council has decided to pass the project over to RideWise, a community enterprise that promotes cycling in Nottinghamshire, and the Big Lottery has confirmed an award which will help RideWise save the long-established programme.

Rural Rides will now continue until December under the management of RideWise.

From NCC, Stephen Jones, who previously oversaw the project, said: "It's fantastic that we have been able to hand over to one of our partners, RideWise, who are well-placed to take the programme of Rural Rides forward. We are confident that Rural Rides will continue to flourish."

The rides are free, open to all, and run from locations throughout the city and surrounding areas – many start from The Square in Beeston. You can join the rides alone or with friends.

Suzanne Slade, who discovered Rural Rides

recently, enthused: "I couldn't believe how friendly the other riders were and I was genuinely astounded at how easy it is to 'get away from it all' from right outside my own front door!"

Rural Rides follow quiet lanes and off-road tracks at a leisurely pace, with frequent stops along the way to take in points of interest. There is a variety of routes, from short and medium rides designed for the casual cyclist to longer routes better suited to the fitter, more experienced cyclist.

Family rides following off-road routes are run regularly, as are sociable 'pub' runs. All are led by experienced ride leaders who will take care of the route, café stops and be able to help with any questions.

Gary Smerdon-White, Chair of RideWise believes: "Cycling is important on so many levels. It's healthy, green and sociable. We are delighted to be taking on the challenge of moving Rural Rides forward and making it accessible to all. And if you have signed up for the Great Nottinghamshire Bike Ride, why not take advantage of the Rural Rides programme to get some training in?"

Helen McCullen, a local instructor who will be running the scheme locally, said: "Cycling is the fastest growing UK sport. It's a free, fun and a great way

to get fit. Enjoy the spring sunshine, lighter evenings and companionship of other cyclists."

For anyone interested in becoming a ride leader, RideWise provides free cycle training to National Standards Level 2 and a free one-day leader's training course.

E-mail ruralridesforall@ridewise.org.uk for details.

On your bike!

The next six guided rides have already been organised:

Sunday, May 29

Meet at 10.30am at Wilford Toll Bridge. To Attenborough.

Wednesday, June 1

Meet at 7pm at the Lenton Centre, Willoughby Street, Nottingham. To Beeston.

Sunday, June 5

Meet at Beeston Square near Argos at 10.30am. To Dale Abbey. A hilly road ride.

Wednesday, June 8

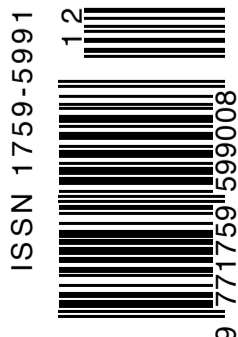
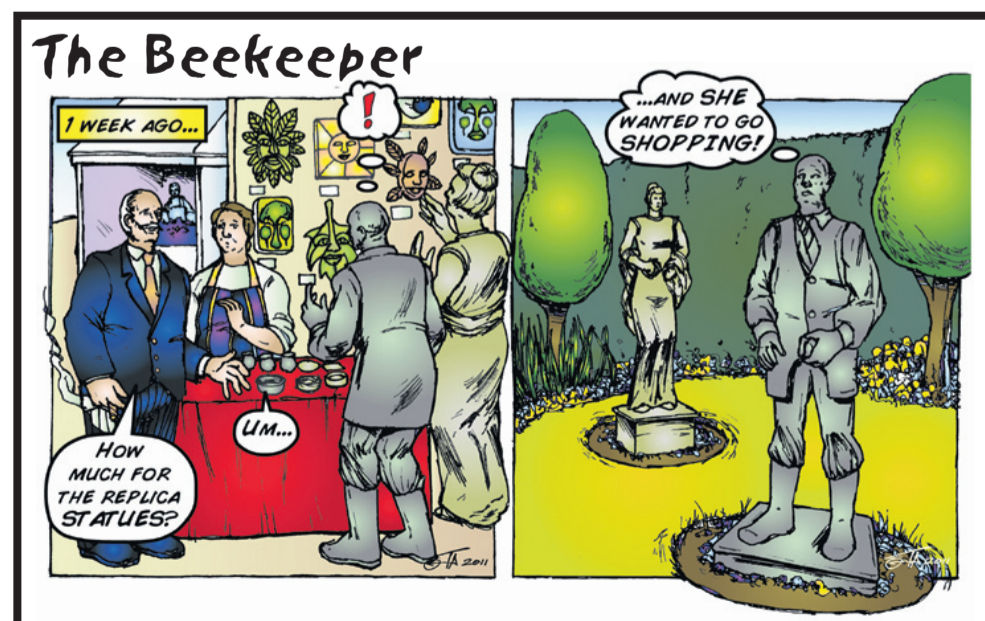
Meet at 11.50am at Christchurch, Chilwell. To wherever the group decides!

Saturday, June 11

Meet in Beeston Square at 10am. To Elvaston Castle (quiet roads).

Saturday, June 11

Meet at 4.15pm in Bramcote Park car park. Cossall (off-road tracks).



Thought for the Fortnight

As you slide down the banister of life, may the splinters never point the wrong way.