

Leisure

Wildlife Watching

Local news and views of the natural world

THE birds that we see in and around our gardens – in particular their apparently reduced numbers this year – has been attracting correspondence to *The Beeston Express*, with one reader pointing out this situation and another laying the majority of the blame for this at the feet (or more accurately the beak) of the magpie.

Linking reductions in the number of garden birds with what seems to be increase in magpie numbers, and suggesting that these numbers are increasing as a direct result of magpies feasting on eggs and nestlings is the ecological equivalent of putting two and two together to make five. Whilst it is quite true that magpies, as well as other corvids such as crows and jays, will raid nests if they get the opportunity, current research suggests that this represents a minor proportion of their diet and a smaller one than that of the jay, a handsome bird which many would be thrilled to have visiting their garden. These are not the only avian nest predators. Greater spotted woodpeckers will also raid nests and can break in to nest boxes that are not sturdy enough to resist their attentions.

When nestlings are fledged and out of the nest they may be facing another predator – the sparrow hawk. These birds are increasingly finding urban areas, including Beeston, a good place to hunt and raise a brood, with gardens where food for other birds is provided offering particularly rich pickings. As well as reducing the number of birds which are seen by actually taking them, their presence in any area is likely to make it

less attractive to the garden birds that are their prey species.

The crucial thing to remember is that all of these are species native to this country and have an interrelationship which has developed over hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Part of this relationship is between predator and prey. Birds which can avoid nest predation by the design and placement of their nests will have offspring that have a chance of going on to breed and themselves avoid predation. Those which cannot may become a meal for something else. This is not 'cruel' but one of the major factors driving evolution.

Squirrel villains

One predator which has circumvented this process, and which can add nest robbing to a 'nature crime charge sheet' that already includes disease introduction and tree damage, is the grey squirrel. Since the introduction of just a few individuals, their population levels have exploded, covering much of country and including urban areas such as Beeston where they seem to be present in ever increasing numbers. They have the agility to access nests that bird predators cannot reach and are more deserving of the status of 'villain' which some would seek to place on the magpie.

Cats out

Another alien predator is, of course, the domestic cat. The cat is, overall, possibly the most serious threat to garden birds accounting for casualties, which, nationwide, run into hundreds of thousands each year.

Owners can help to reduce this by fitting collars with bells and allowing their pets constant access to the house via a cat door – cats which are locked out for long periods are more likely to engage in hunting behaviour.

Predation may be one factor if numbers of garden birds are in fact falling, but there are many others. There have been two consecutive harsh winters, which will have had an effect on the number of birds surviving them, and a very dry spring and summer followed the last of these. This resulted in a bad year for flying insects and their larvae, which form a large part of the diet of many breeding birds and a reduction in the availability of water itself.

Disease

On top of this, there is a disease (trichomonosis) which is spreading in greenfinch and chaffinch and which may affect other birds, emphasising the need to clean bird feeders regularly.

There could be many reasons why our concerned reader is seeing fewer birds in his garden but no simple explanation as to why this may be happening, if it is part of a wider trend and what, if anything, can be done about it.

The best place to seek further information would be the web site of the British Trust for Ornithology (www.bto.org), although you will be unlikely to find, amongst its wealth of data and analysis, the recommendation that the solution to the decline of garden birds is to start taking pot shots at magpies!

Jack Smith
Local ecologist

Rugby

Nottingham Casuals Minis

Report by Bryn Lewis

Nottingham Casuals RFC Under 7s: 2 Mellish RFC Under 7s: 8
Nottingham Casuals RFC Under 8s: 12 Mellish RFC Under 8s: 18

ON a surprisingly sunny October morning, the Nottingham Casuals Under 7s and Under 8s Minis played against their counterparts from Mapperley based Mellish RFC.

This was the first game the newly formed Minis had ever played in, but both sides showed the kind of enthusiasm the England team in New Zealand could not, and they played some exciting and attractive rugby.

For both Casuals teams the results were not as hoped, the extra experience in defence of the Mellish players showing. The Under 7s scored two tries

in their first game; the Under 8s scored a whopping 12 tries (including 5 for Will and 4 for Rhys).

All the kids had a fantastic morning.

In the clubhouse afterwards, as the kids tucked into their well-earned post match lunch, the Mellish and Casuals coaches handed out the match awards and spoke of two great games, but they were also impressed with the impeccable behaviour and respect shown by the young people.

The game was played and watched in the right spirit and, most importantly, the kids

had obviously enjoyed every minute, judging by the smiles afterwards. The children were a credit to their clubs and to the game.

Luke won Casuals 'Player of the Match' for the Under 7s and Max for the Under 8s.

We hope to push on now and continue to develop the players and add to our numbers. We currently have approximately 30 players signed on and hope to get numbers up to 40 by Christmas.

Green and Whites need to reverse trend

NOTTINGHAM Rugby head to Castle Park in Doncaster this weekend to take on their fierce local rivals, hoping to reverse a trend that has seen them miss out on the points in too many games that were theirs for the taking.

Their last two home games – against Cornish Pirates and Rotherham Titans – both ended in draws. In both cases the Green and Whites had built up what should have been a winning lead only to ship costly points late on.

And there were similar stories at Bristol and London

Welsh games. Nottingham ended up losing in the closing stages.

With only two Championship wins so far, the Green and Whites lie in seventh place, eight points behind Rotherham.

The good news is that their World Cup stars are back, and both played their part in last week's draw against Pirates at Meadow Lane.

Outside half James Arledge scored all of Japan's points when they gave finalists France a hard time before finally losing 47-21.

Nottingham could certainly do with his goal-kicking accuracy at the moment, whilst they have also missed Tongan back row man Sione Kalamafoni's physical presence.

Sadly they look like having to do without David Jackson for what could be a long spell. Local hero Jackson, consistently one of Nottingham's best backs in recent seasons, suffered a serious shoulder injury in the Pirates game and now faces a lengthy layoff.

The Bee Keeper



Thought for the Fortnight

THE right honourable gentleman is indebted to his memory for his jests, and to his imagination for his facts.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan

