

April Nature Notes – The Spring Cuckoo’s Month

The Roman *Aperilis*: the month when the Earth opens. In Welsh: *Ebrill*, in Gaelic: *Ceitein na h-oinsich*, the cuckoo’s May or the fool’s May and in Anglo-Saxon: *Eostramonath*, the month of the dawn goddess *Eostra*. April, the month when swallows begin to appear and hedgehogs are active after winter hibernation. Trees and hedgerows are bursting with new growth and the following rhyme helps us decide the summer’s weather:

Oak before Ash, we’ll have only a splash but Ash before Oak and we’re in for a soak! Also let us not forget: March winds and April showers bring forth May flowers; thunder in April mean floods in May, a cold April and a full barn and when April blows his horn (thunder) ‘tis good for hay and corn!

Cowslips can be seen on the verge along with primrose and violets and of course the ubiquitous daffodil (the early Cornish varieties I planted in the garden this year are splendid with exceptional perfume). In Stone’s Orchard the trees are putting on blossom.

April is the month that the forager can start to look forward to finding more to eat with black mustard, borage, reedmace, dandelion, pignut, fennel and sheep’s sorrel all coming in or already in high season although we start to see the end of wintercress. The cuckoo pint, *arum maculatum*, (*aka*, lords and ladies, cows and calves, jack in the green) should now be coming into bloom. Country lore has it that if a young man, on his way to a dance or similar, places a piece of cuckoo pint in his shoe with the words “I place you in my shoe, let all the girls be drawn to you” he will have his pick of all the young ladies. Any reports of the efficacy of this will be heard with great interest!

Birds are very active at the moment courting and nest building. Stone’s orchard still has its thrushes and I spent a good few minutes watching a pair of jays cavorting. The various members of the tit family are also busy and there was a good flock of long tail tits working the hedgerow on the Green just the other day. Our usual reed buntings have shown up in the garden and there was a heron perched rather precariously on a roof in Dickinson Avenue a day or so back. Down on the Chess the heron is also much in view as is the ever popular egret.

Lambs are fast following on calves and there are already a good number of lambs having “lamby races” in the fields. I am delighted to say that the two flocks that I work with have escaped (at least so far) signs of Schmallerberg virus, the latest catastrophe to hit our shores. My

younger collie amused herself (and me) for a good few minutes trying to herd three butterflies that looked, from the distance I was standing, like small tortoiseshell. Eventually the butterflies got bored with the game and flew off!

Worldidge's, *Systema Agriculturae (circa 1697)* tells us "In April open the doors of beehives, for now they hatch, that they may reap the benefit of flowery spring: and be careful with your bees"

On Easter Sunday morning the rising sun is said to dance for joy at the Resurrection and is best seen from the top of a hill. If, however, the Devil has put clouds in the way this can be overcome by looking at the Sun's reflection in a bowl of water. Care will be needed in carrying the bowl up the hill and modern day caution suggests a full risk assessment! Do not forget to beware of dragons on the 23rd and perhaps you may like to try the church-porch watch on the 24th. Stand in the church porch for two hours on St Mark's Eve to find out who will pass-over in the year. The spirits of those that are to make the final journey will pass through the porch and into the church.

The 26th of April is, by tradition, the day that the waters of the Flood began to recede and the Ark came to rest. Rainbow to windward, foul falls the day, rainbow to leeward, rain runs away.

The end of April brings us the Eve of Beltane, the Celtic festival of Summer's beginning when fires were lit, preferably by rubbing oak twigs together, to welcome in Summer. However it may not be a safe time as *The Anatomy of Abuses (1586)* tells us "I have heard it credibly reported by men of great gravity, credit and reputation, that of forty, threescore or a hundred maids going into the woods overnight, there have scarcely the third of them returned home again undefiled" Clearly a proper risk assessment was not carried out: or was it?! Perhaps the CGRA can organise a Beltane Fire next year but I am not sure that the Chairman will be allowed into Croxley Woods!