

January Nature Notes 2012

January, named after the Roman God Janus who looks back towards the Old year and forward to the New. In Welsh: Ionawr, Gaelic: An Ceud Mhios na Bliadhna and in Anglo Saxon: Giuli!

This is the month of mid winter when the land is, or at least should be, enjoying its long sleep until its awakening in Spring. As I write this, Plough Sunday and Monday have passed and both the ploughman and witches are back to work after the Christmas, ready for St Hilary's Day, January 13th, by tradition, the coldest day of the year (and interestingly the weather guessers are forecasting a cold spell). Will we have snow this year; should we be cleaning down the sledge and ice skates? Not holding my breath on that one! All Saints is an innovative establishment: how about re-establishing a Plough Sunday service?

Walking around Croxley Green it is quite clear that Nature is not having a particularly restful sleep as crops are sprouting in fields, buds are a-budding in the hedges and on the trees, and naturalized bulbs are beginning to show their heads (my various varieties of early Cornish Daffodils, supposed to show around now have been sprouting away since early December). There is a good display of bird life and I have seen fieldfares in the Orchard. Walking along the footpath that leads from the Green to Loudwater Lane, I was kept amused and occupied by a flock of long tailed tits (*Aegithalos caudatus*) probably my favourite bird. Beautiful to watch for their colour and their antics they were very busy feeding and squabbling with a robin who clearly seemed to think that they were on its territory. The long tailed tit is a master craftsman when it comes to nest building, constructing an intricate, oval shaped nest from moss bound with cobwebs and hair and lined with up to 2000 feathers as this is a bird that needs to keep warm. Very cold winters can lead to an estimated mortality rate of around 80% of the population.

On the 2nd of January whilst out walking Keira I heard another one of my favourite bird calls and looking up caught site of a lone buzzard stoically ignoring the mobbing of a number of rooks. I am also delighted to see the occasional red kite over Croxley Green; surely, depending on your viewpoint, one of the successes of introduction in the Chiltern's area.

Although the sheep that I help to look after are not in Croxley Green (but as soon as I can find a suitable field I intend to bring some in) I am often asked about them. The Herdwick tup has, we hope, done his work and we are looking forward to lambs around March. Otherwise all is well, the pastures have held up but the flock is also enjoying the hay and haylage that it is given.

Foraging does not present the greatest opportunity at this time of year. However, turning to my "Foraging Bible", I find that dandelion roots are available and that common sorrel and chickweed are both in low season as indeed is wood sorrel whilst wintercress is actually at its best!

As something of a folklore fan I am wondering if I can persuade our wonderful Residents' Association that we should be wassailing the apple trees in Stone's Orchard (and indeed any other tree, why leave any out?). With a good resident folk music fraternity, I am sure we could make an interesting evening of it then perhaps back to our favourite pub for a mulled cider or three. Equally we could revive the old Hertfordshire custom of "wassailing the beehives" with the help of our resident bee expert! Perhaps too late for this year (Wassail Night is traditionally old 12th Night, i.e. the 17th of January).

Mind you, we may need some luck this coming year. Those of you that follow these things may have noticed a distinct lack of Morris Men and Women on The Green on Boxing Day.

I am reliably informed that there was no room at the Inn for them but they were made very welcome in Sarratt!

Without the luck of the Morris dancers will Croxley Green have as good a year as it deserves?

Only time will tell!