

NATURE NOTES - 46

First of all, let it be clear, I am still here. It was my respected namesake, Dr Chris E.D. Smith of North Petherton who sadly died recently, and with his memorial service having been held at Broomfield, it was inevitable that some people thought it was me. There was always some confusion between us, especially during my earlier contracts with Somerset Wildlife Trust, with whom Dr Smith Snr had been closely associated long before I migrated here from Bucks. I'm sure his family won't be offended by my setting the record straight like this, and of course my sympathies are very much with them in their loss.

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This is the time of year when I have the responsibility of monitoring the breeding bird populations on farms on the Dorset and Wiltshire Chalk, as well as on the Mendip scarp in Somerset – always enjoyable, even though it means getting myself up and away as early as 4 am! The idea is to catch that initial burst of activity marked by the fabulous dawn chorus, although the walks so far, carried out between April 23rd and 29th, were relatively quiet on account of the decidedly bleak conditions prevailing at the time. Many birds lie low when it's cold, and although



the males do indeed sing, it's often just half a bar or so, and you have to be really quick off the mark. Fortunately both my father and uncle were very good at recognising bird songs, which were dinned into me at a very early age, so it was a real plus to pick up a snatch of nightingale in thick woodland understorey on the Dorset farm, and a lesser whitethroat in a hedge on the Wiltshire one – the latter much scarcer than its common counterpart, which has a coarser and more scratchy song. Another good record from the Wiltshire farm was a pair of tree sparrows, peering at me from a great veteran

hedgerow ash tree, though on this occasion completely silent. The system I follow is that of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), and the procedure is to repeat the exercise after an interval of a couple of weeks or so, to catch the later arrivals among the summer migrants. This I am due to do next week (the second week of May), so let's hope things have warmed up a bit by then.

One of the main purposes of these and similar assignments is to monitor the effects of wildlife-friendly management practices and projects on farms, and it is quite extraordinary how birds respond to even quite modest steps to improve farmland habitats, often, it has to be said, as a spin-off from managing a shoot. Thus, allowing a hedge to thicken up, especially at the base, complete with a good cover of grassy vegetation there, is very good for linnets and yellowhammers, while even quite young hedgerow trees provide high enough perches for chiff-chaffs to sing from. (Chiff-chaffs often insert an extra chiff, and sing "chiff-chiff-chaff", but on the Mendip farm one bird was managing up to five "chiffs" at a time!) The tree sparrows I mentioned were in a classic habitat for them – old hedgerow trees – but in favourable locations they will respond to the installation of customised nest boxes. One of the BTO's most experienced ornithologists, Rob Fuller, who I have known for many years, produced a book in 1982 called *Bird Habitats in Britain*, and this is full of many more such examples.



Back on home ground, which it has to be said is somewhat over-run this year by pheasants, the resident Goods Barn blackbird family has provided some amusing spectacles over the past few weeks. Firstly, in the process of gathering nesting material, Mrs Blackbird found the old runners of last year's wild strawberries, which I had never cleared from my gravel paths, to be just what she wanted, and was to be seen frantically gathering up the long, wiry structures, a bit like an angler struggling to land a good catch. Since then, they've had, seemingly, just one youngster, and having been feeding on the ivy berries by my patio, Mr Blackbird decided these would be good for the baby. Alternately flying up to pick off one berry at a time and stuffing it into the baby's open beak, it soon became clear that the latter didn't think much of this dry fare. It dumped the berries back on the grass, as Mrs B looked on in disdain a bit like a disapproving Grommit. Later I saw her feeding it worms – much more sensible.

Chris Smith



AISHOLT & MERRIDGE VILLAGE HALL

Next event: Tuesday June 30th. Barbecue and Bar with Taunton Dean Morris Men and Sweet Coppin Ladies' Clog Dancers. No bookings. Just turn up any time from 7.30 onwards.