

## Magical Moments

by John Bland

In last year's Observations Sue Jones described some magical moments – those occasions when you see something because you happen to be in the right place at the right time simply by accident. A footnote requested all members but particularly those who don't normally contribute to consider writing a paragraph to share their excitement. The following are some of my more interesting moments of 2013.

A number of my magical moments have involved the rowan tree which grows in the garden of the flat below mine and is therefore outside my bedroom window. In January, as I was getting into my car to go to work I heard a call like a high pitched tinkling bell. When I looked up, two goldcrests were flitting round the twigs with their very fast wing-beats. During the worst of the snow I opened the curtains one morning and two long-tailed tits were only a few feet away outside the window. On 15<sup>th</sup> April as I woke up I could hear a familiar bird song cascading down the scale. I couldn't spot it then but later from ground level saw my first willow warbler of the year. On the morning of New Year's Eve I opened the curtains to find two redwings feeding on the few remaining dried discoloured berries.

On 8<sup>th</sup> June we visited the RSPB reserve at Lakenheath Fen. There were reports of rare species such as common crane, golden oriole, Savi's warbler and red footed falcon. However, as they were further away than we were happy to walk, we settled for scanning over the reeds from the fen view point. We were expecting to see birds - and we did - but there was one short spell, no more than ten minutes, when a lot of exciting species were seen. At times it was hard to know which special bird to concentrate on. The scope was focused on a reed warbler in its little cup shaped nest in the reeds nearby. A cuckoo was calling from the dead tree on the edge of the poplar wood and could be clearly seen. A kingfisher flashed over the water to perch on a tall reed. Behind him three marsh harriers glided around with their wings in a V. The bittern, which had been heard booming, rose and lumbered across the *Phragmites*. A hobby put on an amazing display of high speed aerobatics in pursuit of insects. And at that point another birder alerted us to two birds on a feeding platform by the side of the reeds - bearded tits.



Bittern – by Thorburn



Hobby (*Falco subbuteo*)  
– by Thorburn

That visit inspired this poem:

### Subbuteo

*Lakenheath! RSPB's  
Land of reeds and poplar trees  
Of bitterns, orioles and cranes,  
With languid river, passing trains.  
Woodside viewpoint, quite enthralling,  
Warblers singing, cuckoo calling.  
Raptor suddenly in sight,  
Small with agile dashing flight.  
In the blinking of an eye  
Left foot snatches dragonfly,  
Eaten as it keeps on going,  
Jinking, turning back and showing  
Rusty under-tail and thighs,  
A swift-like profile as he flies,  
Bold head markings, white and black,  
Well streaked breast and slate grey back.*

On 9<sup>th</sup> September we had watched the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance, performed at Blithfield Hall and were talking to an elderly gentleman who had written a book about the dance. I heard several *prunk* calls and looked up to see two ravens with their distinctive wedge shaped tails.

Around that time we also visited Renishaw Hall and went down to the lakes to look for dragonflies. At one point where there is a hedge either side of the path I noticed a rather large robin's pin cushion or rose bedeguar on a dog rose, which also had peapod gall. Near that there were bean galls on a crack willow and a small English oak held marble and artichoke galls. The undersides of some of its leaves were encrusted with common spangle gall and silk button gall, with the occasional smooth spangle squeezing in. It was very nice to have so many galls within touching distance but the magical bit was when I spotted a cherry gall, a red sphere on the underside of the oak leaf. I have seen more of them since but that was the first I had seen for about three years.

In October I was walking up the cycle path from Alvaston park to look at the Sanctuary, in view of the City Council's controversial proposals. When it started to rain, I took shelter under the railway bridge which crosses the Derwent. Soon a flurry of high pitched whistles alerted me to a bird flying upstream, fast and low over the water. Soon I could see the amazing blue of a kingfisher, which seemed to hesitate a few times as it passed under the bridge before perching on a waterside willow. While I was watching the kingfisher two goosanders swam upstream and dived underwater.



On 10<sup>th</sup> November we visited Draycote Water near Rugby. The bird hide offered good views of little grebe and over 100 great crested grebe concentrated in an arm of the reservoir. Tits and finches were visiting the feeder but the highlight was an albino squirrel, pure white with pink eyes.

On 14<sup>th</sup> November I was at the Breadsall Cutting Reserve looking at the time for galls of *Dasineura urticae* on stinging nettle. Adjacent to the path was a relic of the railway, a small concrete construction which had a dark empty space beneath it. Suddenly a wren landed in the space and appeared to be feeding. I know wrens are common but there seemed to be something special about this troglodyte in its little cave.

## Footnote

by Sue Jones

The 23<sup>rd</sup> November found us in Lancashire for the North West Bird Fair at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust site at Martin Mere. Taking the chance to explore the surrounding area we were lucky enough to see long tailed duck at the RSPB's Marshside reserve and great white egret on the nearby salt marsh. Hoping for more marsh type habitat we headed out on narrow roads to Hesketh Bank, but the land is now mostly used for market gardening. In the distance we could see a large flock of whooper swans, which somehow seemed more interesting than the ones being fed at Martin Mere. The farmer suggested we would get better views if we went down his farm track to the old barn. Encountering more mud than I like on my car I stopped just in time to see three birds come out from the barn - two magpies and a barn owl. The magpies soon flew away and the owl retreated. Soon re-emerging, it flew towards us along the grass-lined drainage ditch alongside the track and passed close by the car.

## CROSSWORD ANSWERS

### Across

- 1) Gilbert White
- 7) talc
- 8) legato
- 9) boxes
- 11) blue tit
- 14) butterflies
- 19) cacti
- 22) ground
- 23) hare
- 24) magic moments

### Down

- 1) gazebo
- 2) latex
- 4 & 17ac) wildlife safaris
- 5) tract
- 6 & 3dn) Costa Rica
- 10) extra
- 12) Erica
- 13) periodic
- 15) usage
- 16) hippos
- 18) flora
- 20) clean
- 21) Ohio

## A 'Magical' Moment?

by Margaret Hobby

In May 2013 I had a magical moment, albeit a very short lived one. Brian has two stealth cameras which he regularly puts out overnight to see what comes into our garden in the dark. At the beginning of spring we captured a hedgehog on camera but then came the snow and we seemed to lose him.

One day Brian brought in the cameras, downloaded the pictures on to the computer and to our 'delight' we had three pictures of a large badger. At first it was a truly magical moment, as I don't see badgers very often and now we had our 'own'. Then, suddenly, I thought about what he might get up to! I am not very bothered about our lawn, he is welcome to dig that up but what about my newly planted vegetable plot? I had just spent all day sowing peas, beetroot, carrots, etc. I can assure you that my magical moment suddenly evaporated rather rapidly.

Although Brian continues to put out his cameras we have not 'seen' him again, but I still venture out each morning to inspect my vegetable plot with a very anxious feeling. Perhaps a badger in the garden is not such a good idea!

## Magical Moments

by Ruth Johnson

When my friend Val and I visited the Durham Dales in May, 2002, we had a magical moment at Langdon Beck. We watched from the car for two hours, albeit through a telescope. We saw ten black grouse lekking and bubbling in the valley. If this were not enough, in these same two hours we heard snipes drumming, curlews calling, skylarks singing, oystercatchers piping and finally a short-eared owl hunting over the moors. Truly a magical moment. This account is not coloured by memory, but notes taken at the time.

### 'Nest boxes, not just for blue' tits:

This very interesting talk was given at the 13th October meeting by Chris du Feu. I had been given a used nest box in the summer, so I was prompted to investigate.

As I unscrewed the front of the box, the first thing I encountered was a snail. Next I removed a bird's nest of moss, partly built but never occupied and revealed a spider and a woodlouse - but the most interesting things inside were the egg cases of a bee moth hanging from the apex of the roof. These were extremely difficult to remove for a closer look.

The Bee Moth, *Aphomia sociella*, is a micro moth which lays its eggs in the nests of bumblebees and wasps. The larvae feed on old cells, debris and even the host larvae. When pupating, they produce a communal mass of extremely tough silk. (Ed.)



## Magical Otter Encounters

by Liz Lonsdale

I have been lucky in my life to have seen many otters. More often than not the views have been distant and fleeting but just once in a while the encounters have been special. Staying on the Isle of Arran about 15 years ago, Steve and I



Otter by Thorburn

spotted an otter fishing about 400m down the coast. We sat down against the bank at the top of the beach about 50m from the water's edge and watched the otter fishing along the shore. It came ever closer and eventually was searching for fish in the waves directly in front of us. To our surprise, it turned and headed up the beach to a patch of long grass beside us. We were holding our breath as we could hear it moving in the vegetation, perhaps drying its fur then, suddenly, it burst out of the grass and raced back to the sea. We let go of our breaths knowing that however quiet we had been we couldn't disguise our scent and we had been sussed.

More recently we had a trip to Shetland and saw quite a few otters. One evening we spotted a mother otter with a cub. Moving carefully when the otter was diving we got quite close and had good views of the mother fishing and the cub following. The light was fading and both the otters came ashore near to where we had stopped. The mother otter became aware of my presence, although I don't think she could see me very well. She stared in my direction for a few seconds then rebuked me with a couple of sharp 'huffs' and disappeared into the water with the cub.

## My Magical Moments with Brown Hares

by Christine Maughan

I have long held a fascination with these beautiful creatures, and a chance sighting always lifts my spirits. Usually the views would be of a distant hare running across a field or perhaps the outline of one crouched in a hollow when you are never really sure whether you are looking at a clod of earth or an animal! If you know the right places to go you can usually guarantee sightings and we have always seen them, for instance, at Gibraltar Point Nature Reserve in Lincolnshire where the numbers are quite high and occasionally they will be feeding in the fields closer to the hides. However, more often than not they are on the far side of the lagoon and a telescope is vital to enjoy watching their



Hares at Rutland Water and Stettisham

Photos by the author

antics. This is the only place I have actually witnessed hares boxing, although it was more like a brief stand-off than the full show!



Recently I have had a few memorable encounters. Our walking group disturbed a hare from its resting place whilst on a ramble in the Peak District, but if you



blinked you would have missed it - it suddenly leapt out from the long grass only a couple of yards from my feet, but it shot across the field and was gone in seconds.

The second experience was far more relaxed. In late summer Max and I visited the Egleton Nature Reserve at Rutland Water and were on our way back from the hides overlooking the south arm of the reservoir where the ospreys nest. Suddenly, a hare appeared from nowhere just a little way up the track, but it was not alarmed and did not appear to be disturbed by our presence. It sat for several minutes nibbling at the grasses, allowing me to approach fairly close to get within reasonable camera range. It ambled off towards the gate at the end of the track and paused for a while before disappearing from our view. We were quite excited to have had such a close encounter and continued to discuss it as we approached the gate, not realising that the hare was in fact still sitting just round the corner. Had we been quieter, we may have viewed it at even closer quarters, but it finally sprang up the bank and out of sight.

The third and perhaps most memorable event took place at Snettisham RSPB Reserve in Norfolk at the beginning of October. It was a dull, damp and rather dreary day, the waders were way out on the mud flats of the Wash and most of the birds on the lagoon seemed to be greylag geese. We walked to the hides at the far end of the reserve as we waited for the tide to come in and bring the birds closer. However, it was not an avian spectacle which brought elation to my day. As we rounded a corner just before the second hide I quickly signalled to Max to stop as I had spotted a hare crouching motionless in the grass. It was only a few feet away and eyed us nervously. I managed to grab a couple of photos before it scampered away. A little later we were in the third hide right at the end of the lagoon and Max called out 'Hare!' as another chased along the side of the lagoon to our right. Shortly afterwards we spotted a third, much closer, coming up the bank towards the hide. I lost sight of it behind a bramble bush below me, but quickly realised it was actually at the base of the bush, straining to reach the abundance of juicy fruits on offer. I could clearly see it through binoculars but getting a photograph between the stems of long grass was a different matter! It nibbled away for about five minutes, occasionally pausing and raising those incredible ears to listen out for danger. It then continued up the bank in front of the hide, pausing just before it got too close for my camera to focus, and then moved to browse on the bushes and grasses on the left of the hide. It was fantastic to have such intimate views of this animal going about its normal business, foraging for food, seemingly unaware of its observers behind the wooden boards of the hide. My slight frustration was that the light was fading fast making photography quite challenging! It was nonetheless a magical experience and my closest views ever of brown hare.

*Sadly, since the time of our visit, the hides and banks at Snettisham referred to in my article no longer exist or have been changed beyond recognition due to the recent storm surge and flooding experienced along the east coast in early December 2013.*

## Beccabunga!

by John Bland

On the evening walk at Dale Abbey Brian Gough pointed out brooklime, *Veronica beccabunga*. The comment was made that it is called beccabunga because it bungs up becks. As this is just a quip I said I would investigate the real origin, anticipating something in Latin or Greek. It can be traced from an old Norse name for brooklime, bekkabung, where bekkka meant brook and bung was an even older Norse name of the plant. It also links to a Flemish name bekkapunge which meant "mouth smart" as the plant is pungent.

Brooklime was eaten as a salad plant in the way that water cress still is. The young tops and leaves are not unpleasant and were long recommended against scurvy.

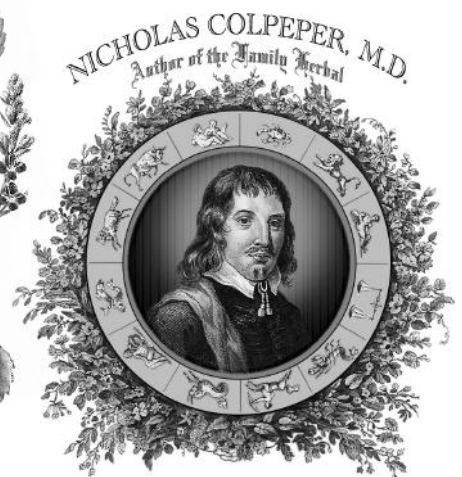
Diet drinks were made in the 17<sup>th</sup> century from brooklime, with other ingredients following a recipe like this:-

half a pint of brooklime juice  
 half a pint of water cress juice  
 half a pint of scurvy grass juice  
 4 ounces of Seville orange juice  
 2lbs of fine sugar

Make a syrup over a gentle fire.

Take one spoonful in your beer every time you drink.

Culpepper says this serves to purge the blood and body from all ill humours that would destroy health. It would provoke urine, break the stone and pass it away. Alternatively you could fry brooklime with butter and vinegar. Applied warm it helped all manner of tumours, swellings and inflammations.



Brooklime and Nicholas Culpepper