

COUNTRY FILE

It has been a strange summer so far with a cold, overcast June followed by a short hot spell in July. Soon we will see the hedgerow berries ripening and we will have the sages reminding us of country folk-lore which says that many berries is the harbinger of a harsh winter. We have long forgotten that it was a mild winter with few frosts, and that the May and Blackthorn bushes flowered early to set a bumper crop of berries. Blackberries in particular seem to be ripening earlier – my childhood recollection is that September and October were the time for blackberrying - but now it falls in late August.

There are some that believe that the early crop, leaves some species of birds and small mammals short of food as autumn and the cooler weather approaches.



The effects of the new environmental guidelines for farmers are now visible in many fields. Hedgerows should be left untrimmed for 2-3 years to provide cover and berries for birds, and a 6m uncultivated strip is left around the headlands of arable land. This has had a great impact on the flora and fauna. The grasses and plants now support a host of butterflies such as meadow browns and gatekeepers while the thistles which would have been sprayed out of existence, are now the food source for hundreds of bumble bees. I have counted at least 6 different species on a single plant.

Burdock plants are now coming into flower. Burdock is a large plant with rhubarb like leaves and “sticky-bud” seed heads which are almost impossible to remove from clothing. The flowers are very attractive to Painted Lady butterflies which are not native, but migrate in great numbers from the continent when the wind and weather conditions are right.

Bird recognition is not one of my skills, particularly with small birds, and this has prompted me to carry a pair of binoculars to help me with identification. Unfortunately as soon as I lift the glasses to my eyes, they fly off; most inconsiderate when you are trying to compile Country File. I am sure I have missed many rarities which would attract the twitchers. However, I was delighted to see and hear meadow pipits in a set-aside field on Woodcote lane and willow warblers, yellow hammers and many other small birds in the hedgerows.

The rooks in the local rookery have prospered and pairs of rooks, a fledgling accompanied by an adult, appear to be carrying out navigational exercises around the local area. They particularly enjoy soaring on the up currents on the Lincoln Edge. Soon they will be gathering in flocks as the corn ripens.

This week a deputation of farmers from Lincolnshire and Nottingham lobbied in Brussels against the 50% reduction in subsidy on sugar beet. Farming is very much at the crossroads as the changes in EEC subsidies and the introduction of the single farm payments are implemented. Lincolnshire is an important area for growing sugar beet and thousands of tons are refined each year at the British Sugar Corporation Newark plant.

The reduction in the subsidy means a loss of income of £80,000 to one local farmer, with little prospect of growing alternative crops to replace the loss. To the small arable farmer who relies on sugar beet as a secure source of income, it may be the last straw. The sugar beet subsidy is a complex issue which affects not only UK farmers, but also sugar cane farmers in Kenya and the West Indies whose exports are supported under the old Commonwealth Preference Scheme. The current mood of Government and the general public, is against agricultural subsidies (particularly if they are paid to the French) but we would like to see the continuance of the typical British farm and its way of life.

Perhaps we are moving down the right road with the single farm payment and the emphasis on environmental issues rather than crop subsidies; but it will be a tortuous course. Mindful of history, I reflect on the parallel with this and the abolition of the Corn Laws in 1846, which had since Napoleonic times, kept bread prices high by protecting British farmers from the import of cheap grain from the USA and Canada.

Doom and gloom said the farming lobby, ruination said the landowners, Peel was forced to resign as Prime Minister but the bill was passed. In fact it had little effect on agriculture but the resulting free trade made Britain the most prosperous nation on earth. Now there's a thought!



THE BURTON COOK BOOK

BY MARGARET SEXTON



FRUMENTY

One of the oldest known foods dating at least from Anglo-Saxon times and possibly a forerunner of the modern Christmas pudding, it was traditionally made from the gleanings after harvest. New wheat gives much the best results, but whole wheat from health food shops is acceptable.

Wash the wheat well, removing any husks. Soak in a large bowl for twenty-four hours. Place in a large pan, fill with fresh water and bring to the boil. Either simmer very gently for several hours, or place in a very low oven overnight, the time taken to cook depends on the moisture content.

The wheat will swell and form a jelly with the liquid. This is known as cree'ing the wheat. Strain off any surplus liquid if necessary.

The resulting mass can be served as a savoury, with salt and pepper and butter – in medieval times it was served with venison. Better still serve with cream, honey or brown sugar, spices and dried fruit.



Go easy on the
steak and kidney
Pie!