

COUNTRY FILE

I must confess to having a soft spot for the rooks that reside in the rookery close to the house. The trees, now in full leaf, provide the birds with some privacy, but during the spring, our new annex provided an unrivalled window on the nest building activities of these highly social and intelligent birds.



Throughout the winter months, the residents of the colony were joined by birds from other local rookeries to form a flock of over 1000 birds. At daybreak, the flock would hold a conference to decide which fields held the best food, and then wheel into the air amid much noise to fly to their chosen destination. The same ritual was performed each evening at sunset, before flying off to a roosting site. The collective noun for a gathering is "a parliament of rooks" and listening to the exchanges high in the trees, it does often seem like Prime Minister's question time.

As spring approached, the visiting rooks dispersed, leaving the residents 50-100 strong, to start the nest building ritual. The walnut tree in the garden proved a popular source for nest building material. Rooks would perch precariously on a branch and then reach out to try and break-off a suitably sized twig. They seemed to prefer the green branches rather than the more easily collected dry twigs at the base of the tree.

Snapping a green twig the thickness of a finger is no mean feat for a rook but once achieved, the birds would fly back to the trees with a heavy payload, often having to complete an extra circuit to gain height. The colony has steadily expanded over recent years and I counted 25 nests before the tree leaves drew a curtain over their activities. Rooks, I read, lay 3-5 eggs, but with the nests precariously sited some 75ft above ground, it is not a fact I intend to challenge!

Now the young rooks are fledged, but there seems to be a continuing learning process for the offspring. Often two rooks, a young bird accompanied by an elder, will fly out together in close formation, on a recce of the area. Sometimes they will carry out evasive manoeuvres, as if they are under attack, wheeling diving as if to throw off a pursuer. Rooks appear to have no natural enemies, but instinct seems to tell them that some types of bird are a threat. The sight of a heron in lumbering flight will bring out the whole colony to protect the nesting area and a buzzard will alert the heavy squad to hound the intruder for a mile or more until it leaves their territory.

This season has been one of extremes for the weather with a bitterly cold March, an exceptionally wet May, and very hot weather in June. The wet spring may well have had an effect on the butterfly population as tortoiseshell, red admiral and peacock butterflies are a very rare sight. The buddleia is yet to flower, so this will be the test of the effect of weather on the population. However, there have been one or two surprise visitors. I spotted a clouded yellow during the hot spell in June, very unusual as this would be an immigrant from the continent and normally only seen in southern England. Also I saw a painted lady butterfly seeking nectar from a thistle head. The burdock is a particularly favourite plant and dozens can sometimes be found feeding on the flowers.



In summer, when the wind is in the south east, many thousands fly across from the continent and North Africa on the prevailing wind. The painted lady is a powerful flier flying at 8-10mph when migrating.



I have not seen a painted lady for 3 years so perhaps its appearance may herald a good summer.



Stay on your feet Daisy or the stockman will think you've got Mad Footballers Disease.