

Chiffchaff Alley

Chiffchaff. Photo by Matt Thomas.

The Wirral Way on a bright and still mid-March morning. The air, stubbornly cold, chills my ears which poke out from under my hat as I pedal along. The sound of the bicycle tyres crunching through the gravel path is interrupted first by a Robin, then a Song Thrush both singing to mark their prospective territories. In the distance I think I hear it. I stop and listen again. Yes, there it is, the sound of Spring: “schllit-schlatt, schllit-schlatt”.

One of the most overlooked sights and sounds of spring has to be the Chiffchaff. Perched proud on top of a tree along the Wirral Way giving the metronomic, yet charming call for which it gets its name, the Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*) is a sure sign that winter is gradually releasing us from the stasis brought on by shorter days and lower temperatures.

We all have our favourite signal of the oncoming spring. Ask people for theirs and many will say it is the arrival of the first Swallow, for others it may be a first glimpse of frogspawn or an Orange Tip butterfly, but very few will say the arrival of the plain, unassuming Chiffchaff from its African wintering quarters.

Arriving around the middle of March they soon settle in and become part of the fixtures and fittings of the Wirral Way, so much so, that it can be renamed Chiffchaff Alley for a few weeks. They are less colourful and can be more easily observed than some other migrants so often they can be ignored, even taken for granted. However, if you study these little birds closely you will find they are anything but dull.

For example let's deconstruct the scientific name: *Phylloscopus collybita*.

The *Phylloscopus* part means “leaf watcher”, and if you spend any time observing them you'll see why. They flit rapidly from twig to twig searching for food. Hopping and dropping from branch to branch, they peer sharp-eyed into folds of bark and rummage amongst the unfurling leaves, constantly on the lookout for small insect prey. Its scientific species name “*collybita*” comes from an ancient Greek term used in money lending and refers to the song sounding like coins being rubbed together. This seems a little tenuous, but listen hard and it *sort of* sounds similar to two coins being moved back and forth across each other!

The hedgerows of the Wirral Way are a fantastic place to find and appreciate them. The dense Hawthorns provide safe nesting sites with an abundance of food to grow a hungry brood of chicks and the odd taller tree provides a perfect perch from which to sing and defend a territory.

To find out exactly how many Chiffchaffs take up residence along the Wirral Way read the full version of this article on our website.

Matt Thomas, Ranger, Wirral Council

Read more from Matt on his blog at www.deebirder.blogspot.com



Red-legged partridge. See article on back page.
Photo by David Higginbottom.

Living With A Mole

In June 2011 a mole arrived in my garden. The first molehills appeared in the flower bed, spilling soil onto the paths and elevating some plants a good three inches. From there the mole tunnelled under a narrow stone path into the herb bed and spent some time happily throwing up more soil and alarming the herbs. Then it hit the jackpot. The soil in my garden is a sandy, acid loam, very free-draining and generally poor in earthworms. Except, that is, for the much richer and well-manured soil in the vegetable plot, which is earthworm – and now mole – heaven. This area forms the largest part of my front garden, and to reach it the mole once again dug beneath a very solid stone path some three feet wide, throwing up sand from the foundations in the process. Each day I would find a molehill in a different part of the plot, but in time the mole also progressed up the side of the house, along a shady fern border, and then into the rear garden where it completed a neat circuit of the pond. Surprisingly, it has not yet branched out into the lawn, but each morning I look out of the window expecting to see that distinctive mound of soil amid the grass.

Of course, I considered my options. Any lethal solution was unthinkable. How would I ever be able to read 'The Wind In The Willows' to my grandchildren if I exterminated Mole? I did send off for some bulbs which are supposed to deter moles if planted at intervals around the garden. They were expensive, and I realised that they might not be the solution when I found one back on the surface next to a new molehill. It was while I was wondering what to do next that I read the following description of a mole in Katherine Swift's wonderful book, 'The Morville Hours':

"... the mole has one sense of almost unimaginable sensitivity: touch. It is through touch that the mole experiences its underground world. Using its naked snout, the bristles on its face and tail, the fine hairs all over its body which brush against the tunnel walls as it moves, it gathers information not only from contact with solid objects but from such insubstantial sources as changes in temperature and vibrations in the soil and air. The snout in particular is exquisitely sensitive to changes in air pressure, to the slightest draught in the tunnels, the merest movement of air – occasioned perhaps by the distant presence of another creature, by worms dropping into the feeding runs, by the soft fall of soil".

Suddenly, I stopped wanting to get rid of my mole. Who could fail to admire such perfect adaptation of creature to habitat, such mastery by the mole of its subterranean world? And all that labour going on beneath my feet: the digging, the endless patrolling of the runs in search of worms, the making of underground larders in which to store food, the dragging down from the surface of dried grass and leaves to furnish nests for sleeping and breeding, and

the continual maintenance of the ever-expanding network of tunnels. The mole is solitary by nature and will not share its territory with another mole, except during the breeding season, so it must also spend time chasing off intruders. What energy!

But apart from my admiration for this unseen creature, there is another reason why I have to accept its presence. Having spent so much time and energy in trying to attract wildlife into my garden I can hardly complain about the minor inconvenience of my new arrival. He is, after all, part of the wild. So I have learned to live with my mole and now follow his progress with a mixture of interest and trepidation. Perhaps I may one day see him above ground, but in the meantime I think of him working away beneath my feet and wonder exactly where he is. And I have also found a use for the molehills. Katherine Swift describes the mounds of dry and sifted soil as "the best potting compost in the world", so if you should happen to attend Open Day at New Ferry Butterfly Park on May 6th and buy a plant in aid of Wirral Wildlife, you may notice how fine the soil is in the pot and recall exactly where it came from!

Mike Maher

Who's chopping those trees down?

The Rangers and volunteers are often spotted at this time of year cutting and removing young trees and other unwanted scrub from the heathlands on Wirral. Why?

Heaths are wide open landscapes, dominated by plants such as Heathers, Gorse and heathland grasses and punctuated by scattered trees such as Silver Birch. They are historic landscapes and are essentially a man-made habitat. Their history goes back to when mankind used domesticated animals such as sheep and cattle to graze these sites. Heathlands occur on barren, infertile land. The geology of the Wirral, Triassic sandstones laid down about 225 million years ago, is ideal for heath-loving plants. The soils are usually sandy (and therefore free-draining), acidic and very low in plant nutrients. Because heathlands are man-made we need to constantly manage these sites. Although grazing now takes place again within the National Trust's ownership of Thurstaston Common, much of the rest of this site needs us to cut and remove the young birch and oak trees and other unwanted scrub; the trees otherwise invade again and this habitat would be gone.

In the winter months we are busy carrying out this work to keep this unique habitat which is home to approximately 5,000 species of invertebrates and a selection of rare plants, birds and reptile that only occur on heathlands.

Paul Greenslade, Senior Ranger, Wirral Council

Quiz Results

Congratulations to all those who entered the Wirral Wildlife Prize Quiz 2011 and especially to those who sent in completely correct entries of which there were 11. As indicated in the instructions for the quiz, the winner was chosen by a random draw. The prize of a gift voucher to the value of £10 goes to Mrs Enid Bradshaw of Gayton. The names of the other people who had all the answers correct are shown on the website, www.wirralwildlife.co.uk

The correct answers to the questions were:

1. Goshawk, 2. Oriole, 3. Swift, 4. Bittern, 5. Tree Pipit, 6. Mute Swan, 7. Nuthatch, 8. Cattle Egret, 9. Fulmar, 10. Sandpiper, 11. Angelica, 12. Alexanders, 13. Scabious, 14. Dandelion, 15. Clover, 16. Butterbur, 17. Poppy, 18. Fox and Cubs, 19. Restharrow, 20. Pansy, 21. Red Deer, 22. Yorkshire Fog, 23. Barnacle, 24. Cowrie, 25. Harvest Mouse, 26. Douglas Fir, 27. Slow Worm, 28. Death Cap, 29. Flea, 30. Leech, 31. Neston, 32. Noctorum, 33. Clatterbridge, 34. Hooton, 35. Leasowe, 36. Parkgate, 37. Seacombe, 38. Ledsham, 39. Caldý, 40. Great Sutton.

Squirrel Surprise

I have been walking in Stapledon Woods, Caldý for over 60 years, but had never until the other day, seen a squirrel carrying a youngster. I had stopped to admire, a few yards away, a large grey squirrel with a splendid tail in perfect condition, when from somewhere near my feet a smaller squirrel took off – straight up the nearest tree - carrying in its mouth a white-bodied, bare-tailed creature, hanging vertically, not struggling at all. From ground level to a height of at least 50 feet it went, with no hint of effort, pausing only twice to glare down at me. My first thought was that it had caught a large mouse or a small rat. It didn't appear to carry by the scruff of the neck, but by the whole neck. Trying to look for information I could find only a sketch in Romany's 'Out with Romany Again' (1938) p.87 where Romany's drawing shows (p.87) a red squirrel carrying young - but making no reference to it in the text. Perhaps he didn't quite believe it either! Other examples can be found on the internet.

Jim Gilmour

Online Newsletter

If you have internet access you can opt to read your newsletters online complete with extra photographs. This will save paper and ensure that more of the money we raise goes directly into our conservation work instead of on printing costs. We will send you an email to let you know when a new newsletter is published. To opt out of a paper newsletter simply email us at members@wirralwildlife.co.uk giving your name and address.

Events Programme - March to July

Friday 9th March

Room B, Heswall Hall, 7.30 p.m.

"A Flora for North Lancashire", a talk by Eric Greenwood. Admission £2.

Friday 13th April

Room B, Heswall Hall, 7.30 p.m.

A talk by Alan Creaser (past president of the Lancashire & Cheshire Entomological Society) on **Moths**. Admission £3.

Sunday 6th May

New Ferry Butterfly Park Open Day

11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

An ideal event for all the family with pond dipping, nature quizzes, art exhibition and crafts, face painting, woodland crafts, a sculpture trail, plant sale and a BBQ. Admission entirely free. Further details from Paul: telephone 0151 645 8937.

Monday 7th May

Dawn Chorus Walk. 4.30 a.m. Heswall

Join members of Wirral Wildlife to hear birdsong at its very best as returning migrants join our resident birds to claim their territories. This is a very early morning walk through heathland and woodland. Booking essential - telephone 0151 342 4249.

Tuesday 15th May

History of Fort Perch and Rockpooling

4 p.m.

Ideal for families. Meet in front of Fort Perch Rock SJ310944.

Wednesday June 13th

Red Rocks to West Kirby. 10 a.m.

Local history of this coast including Hilbre Island. Meet at the Stanley Road slipway SJ204883.

Saturday 21st and Sunday 22nd July

Fundraising event at Royden Park Coach House. 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Wirral Wildlife members will be serving refreshments and manning a sales table.

Price Rise

I hope you have managed to attend one of our recent talks and enjoyed listening to one of our enthusiastic and well informed speakers.

As from April we will have to make the admission charge to these talks £3 as the cost of hiring the room in Heswall Hall is increasing. Admission has been £2 since the beginning of 2005. We need to cover the cost of room hire and charges or expenses of the speaker so we hope you will understand the need for us to, reluctantly, raise the price.

Red-legged Partridge

The red-legged partridge is not one of the species we usually think of when we talk about garden birds. In the 2011 Big Garden Birdwatch organised by RSPB it achieved 56th position nationally. You would have been more likely to see a lesser spotted woodpecker or a red kite in your garden than one of these game birds! So I was delighted when a red-legged partridge decided to become a regular visitor to my garden. It made its first appearance in early October 2011 and stuck around until late November, visiting often on a daily basis. It soon discovered that there were easy pickings to be found on the ground underneath my bird feeders where finches, sparrows and tits had dropped seeds. Here it competed with other birds like wood pigeons, collared doves and blackbirds, but there was always enough for a visit to be worth its while.

Red-legged partridges are handsome birds. They have white cheeks with a black eye-stripe and a white throat bordered by a black band, which merges into a kind of gorget of black streaks. Their flanks are barred with black, white and chestnut, and they have a red bill and legs. Not originally a native of the British Isles, the red-legged partridge was first successfully introduced into England in 1770. Since then there have been many further introductions probably for their use as game birds. It is now widespread and common in the south and east of England with Cheshire being near the limit of its distribution north-westwards. According to *Birds in Cheshire and Wirral* (David Norman, 2008) it is established widely in Wirral as a breeding bird. This is mainly because some are regularly raised and released here for shooting purposes. Red-legged partridges are acclaimed for their meat, though not as highly prized as grey partridges. Their continental origin is reflected in their alternative name of French Partridge.

My red-legged partridge disappeared during December and January but it returned to the garden at the beginning of February. Let us hope it stays around for a while longer.

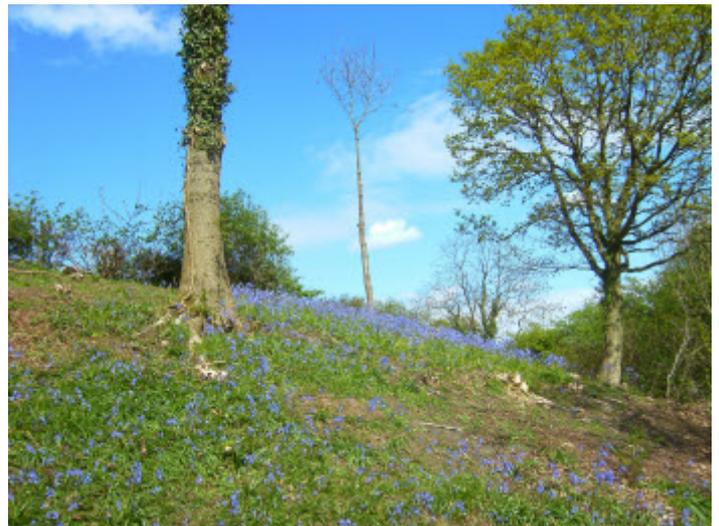
John R Gill

Woodland Regeneration

“Tree planting is not synonymous with conservation; it is an admission that conservation has failed” stated Oliver Rackham in his book 'The History of the Countryside' published in 1986. I have long believed in letting natural regeneration produce and select the next generation of woodland trees. It is certainly a good ecological principal. However Natural England considers Thornton Wood, a Cheshire Wildlife Trust reserve, to be in an “unfavourable no change condition” despite Cheshire Wildlife Trust’s positive input since 1985.

One reason is that Thornton Wood has many mature oaks but few young oaks. Perhaps some of the cause is oak mildew from America, first recognised in 1908. This has weakened oak seedlings, making them more light demanding so, in shade, decreasing the oak saplings’ survival rate. This mildew gives oak leaves that familiar white washed look.

One area of Thornton Wood where some oak regenerates is on a side valley. It may be an edge effect; more light along this narrow tongue of woodland, but for me the most noticeable difference is the lack of Himalayan balsam. Introduced to the UK in 1838 it easily grows a metre and a half tall from a seed in one season in dense stands which will shade out oak saplings.



Thornton Wood in spring. Photo by Paul Loughnane.

During the winter season Wirral Countryside Volunteers and mid-week parties from Cheshire Wildlife Trust have been striving to address this problem. In parts beech and sycamore have been removed, creating gaps in the woodland canopy. Planting of one metre tall oak saplings originating from acorns collected from Thornton Wood and nurtured for three to four years in the volunteers’ tree nursery has been undertaken. It is a long term and ongoing project with approximately twenty oaks planted per annum. We will monitor the planted oaks for rates of survival. This will be supplemented by pulling up the competing Himalayan balsam, with evening work parties every Thursday in June (see website for details - www.wirralwildlife.co.uk).

If you would like to see the progress of this work, there is a field trip on April 21st. In Thornton Wood the delightful spring flowers; bluebells, primroses and wood anemone should hopefully be in flower depending on the progress of the spring season. There is a new bridge across Clatter Brook, courtesy of Rob Roberts (Cheshire Wildlife Trust), making it less of a scramble so good for visitors and working volunteers. Booking is essential - phone 0151 327 5923.

Paul Loughnane