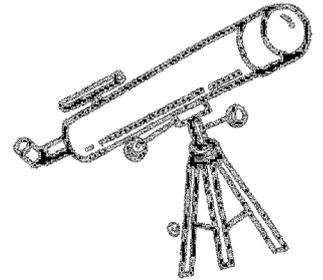


NATURE NOTES - 81

By the time you are reading this we'll have experienced our second near-total solar eclipse in 15½ years. I remember the event of August 11th 1999, when all went dim and strangely quiet after a morning of constant traffic of little planes heading for Cornwall, where the eclipse was total. They all trooped back again later. This time you'd have had to make for the Faeroes or other far-northern climes to get the full effect.

The night sky is as entertaining as ever just now, too. Orion and the other winter constellations are moving on but still a great spectacle when the Moon isn't too bright to mask them. They are preceded in the early evening by stunning Venus in the west (and you may just spot red Mars as it sets in the twilight below), with Jupiter, another brilliant beacon, riding high in the later night sky, and Saturn coming on duty last as it climbs up with its more subdued old-gold glow from the east in the early hours – though I have to confess that by then I've normally got my head down. Alas, clouds masked the chance of spotting remote Neptune a hair's breadth from Venus on February 1st, but I did catch Uranus again in a similar position a month later, on March 4th – an ultra-faint pinpoint alongside the blazing inner planet which looked like a miniature sun by comparison, all of 10 000 times brighter according to my guide-book.

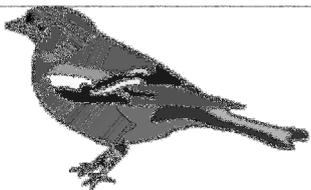


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These astronomical observations have all helped to divert my attention away from less pleasing terrestrial happenings on our very doorstep, where yet further substantial tracts of diverse permanent pasture have been, or are about to be, ploughed up. The fields concerned were for a time, along with their sprawling hedges, part of a Higher Level Stewardship agreement which, alas, Natural England saw fit not to renew when it expired. The land changed hands and the new owners evidently see this as an opportunity to “tidy up” the hedges and “get some decent grass established again” – a familiar goal in intensive commercial farming terms, but dealing a death blow to the native grasses, wildflowers, butterflies, bumblebees and other beneficial insects which had become so well established, not to mention the soaring skylarks nesting there, and the voles which in their turn brought in patrolling owls and other birds of prey. At one time, dormice found cover in those hedges, too.

Regrettably, with farm economics the way they are, this is still all too familiar a scenario, even in 2015, the year of the new Basic Payment support scheme, with its so-called “greening” measures to address this very issue of protecting habitats, turning the tide of declining farmland birds and beefing up pollen and nectar resources. I continue to spend much of my professional time working with the many farmers who, along with their families and employees, do indeed care about these things and manage their land – intensively as may be – accordingly, but their efforts can only really work when their neighbours follow suit, and in this regard I cannot, at the moment, feel anything but seriously pessimistic. Time to retire, perhaps?

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I've just had a walk in the strengthening March sunshine to Aisholt, via the streamside Rectory fields to Durborough Farm and on via Watery Lane to Middle Hill and back, accompanied by a very tame, ground-feeding chaffinch for part of the way along the latter stretch, and with a clutch of new-borne lambs with their proud ewe-mums greeting me on my way back.

Those are beautiful and restorative places to be sure, and mercifully in the safest of hands.

Maybe I won't pack it all in just yet...

Chris S.

