

NATURE NOTES 88

Listening to BBC Radio 4's PM programme the other day, I pricked up my ears as the narrative turned to bluebells. Listeners were asked to air their thoughts via e-mail or whatever on this wonderful feature of the British spring time, and one after another the musings of – I think it was about ten – contributors were duly aired. All phrased their appreciation of the gorgeous spectacle of a springtime bluebell wood with warm words, yet there was something missing. Not a single commentator referred to the fragrance! Imagine describing a bluebell wood without mentioning the smell! Unbelievable. I think we were hearing from some strictly armchair naturalists. Last week, I found myself wading through a display of wholly white-flowered bluebells on Ware Cliffs at Lyme Regis.



Last year I described how one of a pair of mistle thrushes which had chosen to nest nearby was taken by a sparrowhawk, but how the tale had a happier ending when the surviving parent appeared a week or so later with a youngster. Now we have a sequel to that story, with another pair of mistle thrushes (not at all common as a garden bird) nesting in the hedge right next to my patio. From the way they are gathering beakfuls of food they plainly have a brood coming on, and I'm following their progress with interest. I wonder if this is the surviving parent from last year with a new mate, or whether it's last year's youngster who's paired up. Or maybe it's a completely new pair. Curiously I've heard not so much as a snatch of the male's strident song. Perhaps the two birds paired up early on and the male didn't feel the need to sing from his customary high perch.



It took its time but at last the wind has got out of the north and the weather has warmed up. Substantially so over this weekend of 7th/8th May, when almost straight away we have been threatened with thundery outbreaks. None so far here (the main activity is developing over the Midlands), but there have been some interesting high-level clouds about and now a bright and multi-coloured solar halo has developed – or rather part of one – like an upside-down rainbow between the sun and the horizon. The warmth has brought out many more flowers, including spectacular displays of dandelions like last year, and a host of butterflies, bumble bees, hoverflies and other insects to pay court to them. Bee-flies, with their darting flight and long, straight proboscis, were specifically targeting cowslips on the farm I monitor near Bridport, where my first orange tip butterfly of the season actually came and settled on the grass at my feet and posed for a photo! A curious sight early this morning was a wasp feeding at the blackcurrant bushes – methodically going from flower to flower and sticking its head into each in turn. I'm sure it wasn't hunting.

Just sorting out my order for native grass and wildflower seeds for some summer training workshops, and I see those dreaded taxonomists have been at work again, changing names, for reasons which they alone must know. Corn marigold, which I have always known by the straightforward name of *Chrysanthemum segetum*, now has to be called *Glebionis segetum*, and as if anything could be more simple than meadow fescue's name, familiar to generations of stock farmers as *Festuca pratensis*, this is now *Schedonorus pratensis*! It wouldn't be so bad if they weren't such ugly names.

It's been a long time since I offered up any quiz questions, so, gardeners and botanists among you, do you know what those second (species) names – *segetum* and *pratensis* – mean? Answer next time!