

After the storm

It is good to be able to slip from the house at dawn and to enter a world that is finally still. The biting and bracing wind has passed and the air holds the carrying notes of song thrush and woodpigeon, both of which hint at the approaching spring. February is a dark month; part of winter's realm, she carries not the new year hope of January but instead sits belligerent and brooding. A troublesome month of storms, of rain and rising waters, of a wind that never drops. Will spring ever come?

These final days of the month, however, give hope, and the calm that greets this dawn suggests a season soon to change. While I have seen these false hopes before, the hints of spring snuffed out by a weather system bringing chill winds from the north or squally rain from the west, the blooms of snowdrop, aconite and winter heliotrope offer a glimpse of the season to come.

And there, among the brash that needs clearing from around the pond, I find a female brimstone. Her yellow-green sulphur colour proclaims life amid the blacks and dirty browns of rotting wood and leaf. Tenderly, I take her folded wings between thumb and forefinger and place her within the green ivy that coats the ancient wall. She will be safe and sheltered here, ready to stir with the first run of truly warm days.

FROM FIELD AND FEN

The small tortoiseshells wintering in our unheated upstairs toilet have already shown their restlessness. On warmer mornings, when the sun's rays push in through the small window, these wintering house guests can be found fluttering around the upstairs of the house. Come evening, when they are perched on curtain or net, I return them to 'their' room.

Droppings in the side passage, both on the flagstones and stuck to the wall, reveal that the brown long-eared bat has also been active. There are few moths coming to the lighted windows at night, so he may be better off remaining in whichever cavity he has chosen for the winter. Perhaps, as it is with me, these stirrings are a response to the changing weather, the lengthening of the days and the turning of the season.

New tenants

The spoil heaps outside the old fox earth have grown in size over recent weeks, a sure sign that new tenants are in place. The loose sandy-coloured soil spills from these heaps down the steep leaf-strewn slope and into the dark waters that sit silently below. It is an odd location, positioned as it is at the top of a crumbling slope that eats its way into a small block of woodland. Well-worn paths lead away from the five different entrances, along the very top of the slope and into the wood itself. Not wanting to approach too closely, I can only scan the compacted soil of the entrances with my binoculars, but this fails to reveal a clear footprint that would identify what creature has taken ownership.

The entrances themselves have been enlarged quite considerably and the weak winter sunlight shining directly into one of these is sufficiently strong to reveal that the tunnel remains wide even as it disappears underground. Could it be that badgers have taken ownership? There have been occasional sightings from nearby over recent years, so perhaps this is a sign of a resurgent badger population, expanding into new areas. Norfolk does not hold the number of badgers seen in more southerly or westerly counties.

Badgers prefer loose, free-draining soils and need to be near arable land or grassland where they can forage for food. Many areas within the county are too low-lying but some parts are both suitable and well used. This particular spot is relatively free from disturbance so may have proved attractive to the badgers. Our understanding of Norfolk's badgers is improving, mainly due to the efforts of interested volunteers who have championed these wonderful animals, spending many hours searching for and documenting active setts.

A quick search through the wood, following the obvious paths that radiate out from the potential sett, reveals evidence that bedding has been dragged towards the entrances, but there is no sign of the shallow pits containing badger faeces, known as badger latrines, that I would expect to see. Since these have a social and territorial function it may be the wrong time of year to come across them. Although badgers do not undertake a true hibernation, they do reduce the levels of activity during the winter months. This suggests that I will need to return in spring in order to find out if it really is badgers who have taken up residence.

Songsters

There have been a few warmer days of late, premature hints of a spring that is still a number of weeks away. Such teasing glimpses make February burdensome – winter can't still be upon us? I want to get out and watch nature springing into life. I am not the only one eager to get going, for outside in the early morning darkness a song thrush is singing, its strident notes striking out above the plaintive winter song of a robin.

The impression ones gets when listening to a song thrush is of a singer that enjoys the act of performance, something that is reflected in the bold clarity of the delivered phrases and the deceptive simplicity of structure. Each song thrush will have a repertoire of a hundred or more different phrases and appears to select from these almost at random, putting several together and often repeating a sequence a number of times over.

This fondness for a rhythmic repetition of repeated phrases may be one of the reasons why the song thrush features so prominently in poetry. One of the best examples of this comes in Tennyson's *'The Thrustle'* but others, including Thomas Hardy, Robert Browning and Edward Thomas, all draw on this English songster. Edward Thomas, undoubtedly the least well known of these poets, featured our various thrushes in 15 or so of

his 142 poems and his use of colloquial speech rhythms is well suited to the repetitive nature of the bird's song.

The presence of repeated phrases, so characteristic of the song thrush, proves very useful for separating this species from another late winter songster, the mistle thrush. The latter species has a song that is more reminiscent of a blackbird, though harsher in tone and with a faster tempo. This is delivered from the upper branches of a tree and is loud and far-carrying.

Many authors have commented upon the feeling of sadness that derives from the mistle thrush's song. Perhaps this is added to by its habit of singing on bleak, overcast days or during periods of wind and rain, a behaviour that has earned it the local name of 'stormcock'. Although I admire the mistle thrush for singing, indifferent to the harsh backdrop of a late winter storm, I prefer the optimism offered by the song thrush: '*Spring is coming, spring is coming, spring is coming.*'

A wet walk

I have been marking time. Brooding over the weather, the wind and rain confining me to the house, I have been studying maps and planning which parts of the county to explore in the warmer, more welcoming days of spring and summer. Deciding that this won't do, that the weather will not restrain my wanderings, I dig out a thick woollen hat and my waterproof and head out.

With so much water in the air and seemingly oozing from the sodden ground I am drawn towards the river. The waters are brown with silt washed from the fields; in places they push their way up towards the lip of the bank, as if straining to reclaim the vast puddles that cover the bank-side path. The thin, elongated, fallen leaves of willow carpet the ground. Sodden with the rain, their grey undersides resemble small, lifeless fish, disgorged by the angry waters.

For a brief distance the path leads me away from the river, skirting a field and a small piece of alder carr, and here I encounter a muntjac. This one is a female; squat in shape and hunched against the elements it is uncertain at my approach, moving off slightly before turning to stare at me intently. Its thick coat must provide a good degree of protection from the rain. Finally, a decision is made and the small deer turns and is soon lost from view

FROM FIELD AND FEN

amongst the dripping vegetation. There is a real sense of decay in this wood; the fallen leaves and timber, last year's growth that has died back, are all brown and sodden. Only the leaves of the bramble stand out, green and vibrant and screaming of life.

By now the rain has eased somewhat, enough to bring out smaller birds intent on feeding before the light fades. Amid the many blackbirds is a song thrush, its warm tones welcome and lifting my spirits further. Then, as if seeing the song thrush was a good omen, I catch sight of a finch in flight. It is heavy and rounded in shape, and I follow its course, bringing my binoculars up to catch it land in one of the tall alders that flank the fen. It is a hawfinch, the first I have seen on my local patch and I feel unadulterated joy. I've seen these birds before, most winters in fact, at well-known local sites but this one is mine, on my patch and unexpected. Is this reward offered to me as an enticement – look at what you may see if you venture out – or is it pure chance that I stumbled across it? Either way, it is a wonderful bird to see at any time of year, no matter what the weather.