



All Change

The recent discovery of a large, greyish caterpillar with black dots, near the TECT field in East Chiltington, is yet another indication of the changes to our local biodiversity being ushered in by the warming climate. The caterpillar was swiftly identified as belonging to the splendidly named Clifden Nonpareil – ‘Clifden’ after its discovery near what is now Cliveden House by the Thames near Maidenhead, and ‘Nonpareil’ meaning literally ‘without compare’. When observed, it’s easy to see why – it is a very big, grey moth with stunning blue flashes on its underwings, a highly unusual colour in moths. Until recently extinct in the UK, it has long been the holy grail for British moth enthusiasts. It remained a rare immigrant from Europe until around 2007 when it slowly been recolonizing southern England, so the confirmation that it is breeding on our doorstep makes for an exciting addition to our local resident Lepidoptera. Shortly after this goes to press, the Wildlife Group is planning to use a moth trap to try to see the adults in flight where the caterpillar was found.

The fact is that the make-up of no country’s wildlife is static. As well as the seasonal movements of migration, there are longer-term changes of personnel brought about by a host of factors. The ubiquitous cooing of the Collared Dove was not heard in Britain until 1955, when an extraordinary explosion in their population in Turkey and the Balkans brought them here for good. Such changes often take some years to play out, and what might seem alien at first slowly but surely becomes familiar. I remember my excitement the first time I saw a Little Egret here in the late 1990s. Now these elegant white herons from southern Europe are a commonplace sight on British rivers and estuaries. Then there are the species that we have chosen to bring back long after they went extinct, through expensive and carefully planned reintroduction schemes. In recent years this has been most successful with some of our larger birds of prey: Red Kites are flying far and wide once more and I often see them over Plumpton. After their reintroduction to the Isle of Wight, the majestic White-tailed Sea Eagle could also become a regular sight. White Storks are breeding in Britain for the first time since the Civil War, thanks to a reintroduction programme not far away at the Knepp Estate.

But it is climate change that really seems to be accelerating the arrival of new species. The Long-tailed Blue butterfly is now a regular feature of late summer and autumn in Sussex, notably at Whitehawk Hill in Brighton. How long before a patch of their favoured broad-leaved everlasting pea attracts them further inland to our parish? The large colony of the rare Early Colletes bees discovered in Plumpton is another species spreading here from the continent. More spectacular would be the arrival of perhaps the most tropical-looking bird on the British list, the Bee-eater. A pair bred successfully in Norfolk this summer, and it’s not impossible to imagine future generations taking up residence in the sand banks of Plumpton Sandpit.

For every winner that might be expanding its range, however, there seem likely to be many more losers from climate change. As temperatures rise, birds for which Britain represents the southern end of their range, such as the Purple Sandpiper, Dotterel, Snow Bunting and Slavonian Grebe, are fast retreating north, and may disappear as breeding species all together. The prolonged heatwaves of summer 2022 might have been enjoyed by this year’s butterflies, but they may well see a marked reduction in their numbers next year, after their caterpillars found little left to feed on when they emerged into our parched countryside. If there is one thing that this year’s extreme worldwide temperatures and the disastrous flooding in Pakistan and elsewhere has shown us, it’s that there is no up side to manmade climate change. So while we might enjoy getting to know some of the new moths, butterflies, bees and birds flocking to our shores over the coming years, we would be wise to remember why they’re here, and to do something about it before it’s too late.