



February is not a month to fill most people with joyful high spirits. The winter, whether cold and miserable or mild...and miserable, has been going on for ever and you're just fed up. A few might like it: skiers perhaps, or those with enough money to escape to the sun, or the lovestruck anticipating the 14th. But for many, it's a winter month too far.

Unless of course, you're a member of the Wildlife Group (<https://plumptonwildlifegroup.weebly.com/join-us.html> to join) and can see what's happening beyond the surface gloom and anticipate the excitement to come. Because while we're huddling inside in front of the fire, the wildlife has to cope, concentrating on finding enough sustenance to survive as well as preparing for the full-on days of spring, and this means February can be a good time to see, monitor and survey wildlife.

With wild food becoming ever more scarce, birds take advantage of the feeders and berry plants our gardens provide, particularly during a cold snap. As well as seeing good numbers of the usual species, watch out for things like Fieldfares and Redwings, both types of thrush more likely to find their way into gardens when it's frosty. Taking the advice of Reg Lanaway, our great local bird expert (see 'Bird Watch' in this magazine), I'm nailing out halves of apples in an effort to attract in a flock of Waxwings - a beautiful sight, once seen never forgotten.

For the Wildlife Group, 2024 is the 'Year of the Bird' and as an opener we hosted a Big Garden Birdwatch event at the end of January. To see the local results of this count, going back a number of years, go to <https://plumptonwildlifegroup.weebly.com/rspb-big-garden-birdwatch.html>.

Regarding mammals, with both vegetation and animal activity at a low level, February is a good month to start our annual Harvest Mouse surveys, looking for last year's woven ball-shaped nests in the dead grass. Started originally in response to a request from the Mammal Society, since 2022 our surveys have found approximately fifty nests across a number of local sites, more than was anticipated for this charming Red-Listed rodent. We will also be continuing our Badger survey this month, counting the setts across the parishes. Details of these surveys will be made available to members if they wish to take part.

There is potentially plenty of amphibious activity in February. Check out ponds for the eggs of frogs (laid in clumps), toads (laid in a string) and newts (much trickier to find, laid individually on submerged leaves) all of which spawn this month. On mild, wet evenings look out for members of the 'Toad Patrol', bravely rescuing toads from being squished while crossing the road to get to their spawning grounds in the Novington sand pits. Over 200 toads were given safe passage last year. But as the month progresses, it's perhaps the plants that provide the surest sign that Spring is round the corner. Who isn't cheered up by seeing clumps of snow drops or early wild daffodils beginning to show? Wild violets, lesser celandine, primroses and crocuses all provide welcome winter colour and interest, as do some of the early flowering trees, such as alder and goat willow with their catkins (male & female on the same tree). As well as pleasing us, these flowers provide vital food for queen bumblebees and other early flying insects. On a sunny day these may include over-wintering butterflies such as peacocks and small tortoiseshells.

So even in miserable old February there's lots to look for and see both in our gardens and the lovely countryside that we're lucky enough to live in.