

Lord preserve us



RECENTLY, THE REV Tom Comber kindly allowed me to survey the church grounds to assess their wildlife value to the neighbourhood and to offer my opinion as to what effects the overall tidying-up operation has had on the animal life.

From the point of view of a naturalist, I was somewhat dismayed at the rate at which the trees and shrubs were being cleared. I fully realise that a number of the trees were dead elms and therefore needed to be felled. Furthermore I agree that some of the shrubs required trimming back to facilitate easier access to all parts of the grounds and to permit a reasonable amount of sunlight to penetrate the former dense canopy of foliage.

SERIOUS THREAT TO WILDLIFE

However, I strongly suspect that these developments have gone far enough, if not too far already, and that to continue along the same lines would seriously diminish the wildlife in the grounds of both church and vicarage.

For example, the past few summers have seen a pair of attractive blackcaps nesting here annually, but this year they have not returned. With a species so faithful to its summer haunts as the blackcap I can only deduce that with the clearance of so much of the shrub layer - so suitable for the provision of necessary nesting sites - the grounds no longer hold any attraction for this bird.

However, another summer visitor - in the Spotted Flycatcher - has managed to survive these changes, and currently they are nesting

satisfactorily enough. This species like the blackcap, frequents woodland edge, parks, and large mature gardens with plenty of trees and undergrowth, the loss of which would result in its immediate departure from the site. Fortunately it will tolerate considerable disturbance to the habitat as long as enough trees and bushes remain.

It is advisable that bush trimming should be done in October or November when the sap has ceased to rise, and late broods of nestlings have had plenty of time to fledge.

KEEP THE WEEDS OUT!

Another point I feel is worth mentioning concerns the open area of grass in front of the church itself. For the present it looks neat and tidy enough, but it is very exposed and herein lies a real danger of it being choked in time with quick growing weeds. Tenacious and very abundant species such as ragwort, sow thistle, dandelion, hawkbit and cleavers are so firmly established in uncared-for corners around the allotments and various industrial sites in the area that the seeds carried by the vortex of air from passing traffic could quickly find a congenial home in which to germinate on this open grassy plot. And once established they are almost impossible to eradicate without continued vigilance and much expenditure of effort. This danger can be lessened by the careful planting of a few shrubs about this exposed area and especially between the horse chestnuts fronting the Botley Road. Once these have attained the desired height - say 5 to 8 feet - they could easily be trimmed each autumn and encouraged to thicken into an effective screen. Moreover there would be the added bonus that they would act as a buffer between the noise and activity of the main road and the comparative tranquillity of the church gardens.

A day with the birds



Bronze of the Valkyries

OUR DAY OUT this month takes us to two centres of birdlife, the Wellplace Bird Farm at Ipsden and the Child Beale Trust near Pangbourne.

WELLPLACE FARM

Ipsden is idyllically placed in a nook of the Chilterns just beyond Crowmarsh Gifford. Take the Henley road, and after the traffic lights at Crowmarsh take the second turning right (a narrow lane) and follow it until Wellplace is signed to the left in a couple of miles.

What spoils Wellplace Farm for me was that the owners had found it necessary to include badgers, otters and a fox, all confined in small spaces and deprived of all their natural dignity. I

NEW ELMS ON THE WAY

I was pleased to see that where the elms have been felled the suckering shoots have been left to flourish. In time these will reach mature trees and compensate for those that have succumbed to Dutch elm disease.

To sum up, I feel that to clear away any more shrubs would result in a serious depletion of the animal life and eradicate perhaps Osney's best wildlife preserve. If anything, a modest shrub replanting scheme is needed, especially along the Botley Road frontage, for reasons outlined above.

Finally, I would like to emphasise that these points are purely those of a naturalist (who are known not to possess tidy minds). But nonetheless I consider that much of the charm of the grounds owes its origin to the fact that its overgrown and bushy prospect, so beloved by the Victorians, is in keeping with the design of the church and a definite boon to Osney as a whole.

Mike Bayliss
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don't object on principle to animals being kept captive, but I objected here.

CHILD BEALE TRUST

At Child Beale, on the other hand, there are no such animals, and the birds are all accommodated very spaciouly indeed. The extensive riverside park is beautiful to walk around. There are plenty of wild flowers: too, and the somewhat eerie statues that adorn the place (complete with a monkey orchestra) are memorable in their way too. There is a beautiful flamingo pool, and a great many species of waterfowl can be seen in natural riverside habitats and ponds - with a minimum of fencing.

There is a notable childrens' play area and paddling pool; and for longer walks there is access straight on to the Thames at one of the most attractive stretches in the Goring Gap, where the wooded slopes of the Chilterns plunge to the river.

Child Beale is between Goring and Pangbourne on the left of the Wallingford to Reading road. Pedestrians are free, and cars are 50p no matter how many passengers: but on Saturdays even cars are free but the paddling pool is closed! It is closed all day on Mondays (except Bank Holidays), Tuesdays and Fridays.

Playground

THANKS TO THE work put in by the Community Education worker, Diana Parkin, an adventure playground may well be taking shape by August. As previously reported in WON, the probable site is in one of the fields off Ferry Hinksey Road.

R.D. ORME mps

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