

WILD LIFE



The Flora and Fauna of Wales & the Borders

In this garden

Spring in their step

With the first signs of spring starting to emerge, *Jenny Steel* is eager to leave the cold snap behind and embrace 2009's returning wildlife

FEBRUARY IS MY LEAST FAVOURITE MONTH in the garden. There's so much gloom and mist. But even now, there are still signs of spring, with blossom on wild plum in my hedges, snowdrops in flower and catkins lengthening daily on the hazel.

Despite this, I'm glad the month is a short one and look forward with great anticipation to sowing seeds as soon as the soil is dry enough next month.

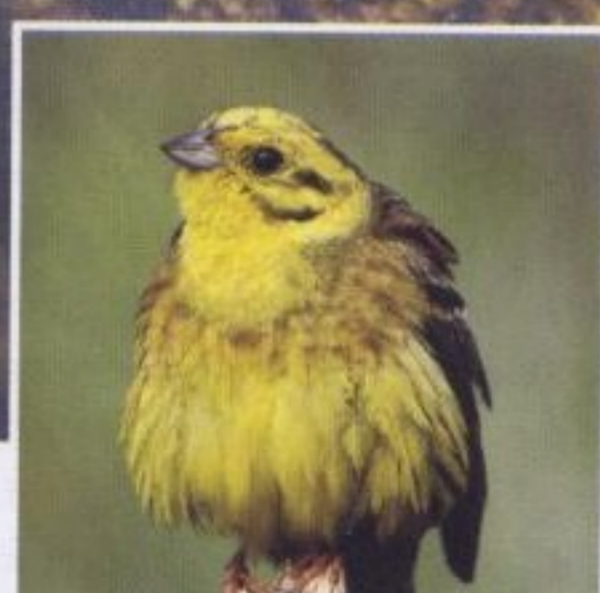
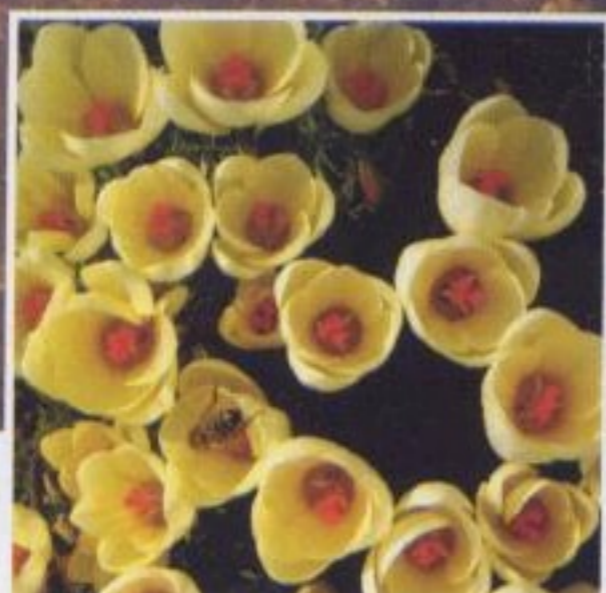
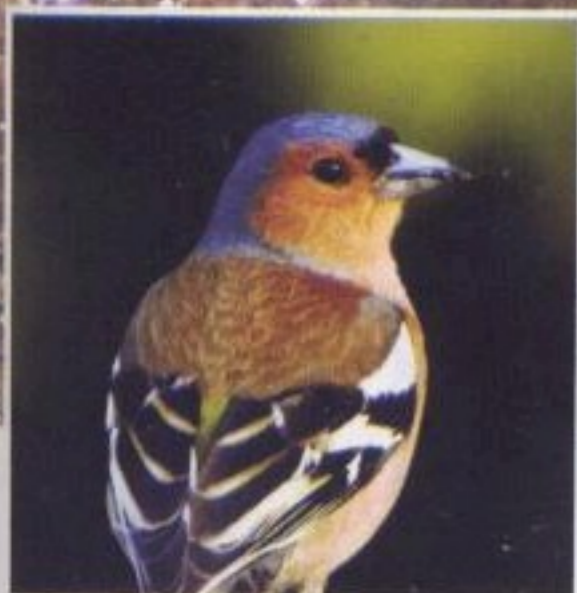
For now, though, I have to be content with pruning the fruit trees and preparing vegetable beds while eagerly watching for the return of our local yellowhammers on the hedge tops. Through the winter months they feed elsewhere, but once natural sustenance in the countryside is depleted they find the courage to approach my low bird table. As yellow as a canary, the male stands out like a sore thumb,

a prime target for the local sparrow hawk. On bright days the yellowhammers, together with the local great tits, thrushes and chaffinches, begin their territorial songs.

It's easy to remain oblivious to how quickly the days lengthen at this time of year. By February it's light until 6pm and this rapid change in day length doesn't just stimulate song birds. Many plants are growing now and buds appear on daffodils and crocuses. Frogs, too, are starting to feel amorous, and appear around the garden and the natural pond in the field next door as they prepare for the frantic orgy of activity ahead.

However, I do love the month of March,

when so much changes in the garden and there's everything to look forward to. In the meantime I'm happy to watch, listen and wait.



Jenny Steel lives in the south Shropshire Hills, where she is busy establishing a natural garden with wildflower meadows, an orchard, ponds and nectar borders, all to encourage and support wildlife. For further advice and tips, visit her website at www.wildlife-gardening.co.uk

Project for the month

Box clever

February heralds the yearly campaign known as National Nest Box Week which runs from February 14th (Valentines Day) to the 21st.

Many people may well think it's too early to be installing nest boxes, but some species will already be nesting and robins and tits will be actively seeking nest sites this month.

Many types of nest box are available, but if you're hoping to increase the success of breeding birds in your garden, choose one from the RSPB, British Trust for Ornithology or from a specialist bird care company. There are still a great many unsuitable boxes around, with the wrong size hole, a small perch at the front (ideal for



a predator to sit on!) or the depth of the box is often incorrect.

If you don't already have a nest box, choose one for a blue or great tit as these are the most likely to try out a new box. Boxes should be attached to walls, fences or trees at above head height, but make sure the entrance hole isn't obscured by vegetation. If you have grey squirrels, you may want to fix a metal plate over the hole to prevent them from chewing their way in. Woodpeckers, magpies and cats may also see an easy meal, so be aware of the box position. Tits eat a huge number of small insects so with any luck you will soon have your own family of natural pest controllers.

And other jobs...

- If you planted new native hedging last winter, this is a good month to cut the shrub back or plant new ones as long as the ground is not frozen. New bare-rooted trees can also be planted now.
- Buddleia is one of the mainstays of a wildlife friendly garden, attracting a wide range of larger butterfly species. This shrub flowers best on new wood. Prune Buddleias hard at end of month to encourage new flowering shoots for the spring.
- Pruning of fruit trees should be completed this month, where possible. Stack your prunings on a twig pile to create a wildlife habitat unless any are diseased – these are best burnt quickly on a very hot bonfire.
- In mild areas you can start sowing. Broad beans, parsnips, shallots, garlic and Jerusalem artichokes can be sown outside, but most of us will need to wait until next month. Salads, perennial flowers and annuals such as sweet peas can be sown under cover.

Book worm

Wild France – the Animals, Plants and Landscapes by Bob Gibbons. New Holland Publishers UK Ltd 2008. £29.99. ISBN 978 1 84773 340 5

France is just a stone's throw away from our shores, yet much of its wildlife is very different from our own. More than 12 million British people visit this popular holiday destination every year and many are no doubt perplexed by the wonderful range of mammals, birds and insects they see on their travels.

This fabulous coffee table sized book, written and illustrated by Bob Gibbons, one of the UK's most renowned wildlife photographers, should be the first stop for anyone with an interest in wildlife who is planning to visit France. The superb photos are all taken with an artist's eye and make a good identification tool, whilst the landscape photos are dazzling. Even if you don't have plans to visit France in the near future this wonderful book could change your mind!



Out & about Coltsfoot

A sure sign of the imminent arrival of spring is the yellow flower of the coltsfoot – standing erect on its scaly stem above bare ground on desolate roadsides and banks. Little else is in flower now but this dandelion relative is guaranteed to brighten a dark February day.

Known in many country areas as Poor Man's Baccy, the leaves of coltsfoot, which appear a few weeks later than the flowers, were once used as a substitute for tobacco. It was also used as a cough remedy. Smoking the leaves as a herbal tobacco, or more usually taking an infusion of them sweetened with honey, was said to cure coughs and even bronchitis.



The commonly adopted name of coltsfoot comes from the shape of the pale green leaf as it emerges from the wintry ground – a hoof shape with a soft mealy covering on the upper surface. They grow rapidly and the whole plant spreads quickly, covering large areas of poorly

drained soil. The yellow flowers offer both nectar and pollen for smaller insects, and even bumblebees out of hibernation on mild February days relish this early food source.

A bright and cheerful flower, it can be easily distinguished from the dandelion, which also starts to show its flowers this month – coltsfoot flowers are a paler yellow than the brighter yellow of its garish relative.