

A walk on the wild side

Cholderton Estate

Meadow Pippits

A few sunny days combined with the welcome relief of a harvest safely in, have certainly helped to raise the spirit.

Our grain yields were satisfactory and the spring barley an excellent sample. Silage stocks are good, an extra clamp compared to last year but the quality is down. This was only to be expected with the lack of sunshine in the earlier part of the season. We managed to combine some vetches and are now incorporating them into the dairy ration. This will help with our protein requirements, but I am concerned about availability later in the season.

Meanwhile nearly all the young stock are outside and are flourishing on our Red Clover, Timothy and Meadow Fescue leys. The Sainfoin has put on some excellent growth and formed a really thick even sward which both sheep and calves are enjoying. How their coats shine after a couple of weeks on this remarkable legume! The cows have also been grazing on Sainfoin and both protein and butter fat are up. It is extraordinary to see normally sedate cows trotting to get back onto the Sainfoin and then, with heads down and grazing immediately.

Our flocks of Yellow Wagtails have sadly moved on, but now Meadow Pipits have taken their place. They are largely brownish with a pair of white feathers on the leading edge of the tail. They have a rather ungainly hesitant flight. When flushed, they utter a distinctive 'sweet, sweet' alarm call. Yesterday, there was a gathering of over 120, together with an attendant Sparrow hawk who put them up as I watched. On seeing me, the Hawk retreated into an Ash tree on the edge of the field and the Pipits returned to the ground. They are charming birds that are always about regardless of the weather. They appear rather vulnerable but in reality, are remarkably resilient.

Many of our birds are resident, moving from the uplands in the autumn. Some may fly far to the south, even to North Africa. So, we have a mix of wintering birds here which could be reared locally, from Northern Europe, Iceland or even Greenland. Meadow Pipits nest on the ground in rough tussocks of grass. Several pairs breed here on areas of chalk down land restoration.

In the autumn and winter the Pipits seem to favour our leguminous leys, particularly where grazed quite tightly. Here the Pipits are very active, running around picking up insects and possibly seeds. It is well worth while considering where these birds have originated; whether home or away; and how best we can help them over the winter and into the New Year. Sadly, as appears so often today, numbers of Meadow Pipits have declined in recent years. They may appear to be common here but that does not apply over the wider countryside. Organic farms can provide exactly the right conditions for them. Areas of intensive arable crops do not.

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