

Confined to the Garden: February 2021

England has been in national lockdown for two months, but here in Kent we've effectively been under high-level restrictions since before Christmas and for many, it feels like much longer. Over 18million people have now been vaccinated across the UK. Death rates are slowly falling, although the critical care wards are still full. The prime minister gave a keenly awaited review on the 22nd of February, setting out his 'road map' to get us out of lockdown. Despite promising to focus on "*data, not dates*", he has laid out a series of stages with specific dates attached to them, all the way to June 21st when all restrictions will be lifted if the right conditions are met. People are understandably excited about this and many are making plans for the summer. Personally, I remain sceptical about the likelihood of target dates being met. The past year has taught me to expect plans to change. Schools will reopen on the 8th of March; care home residents will be allowed one regular visitor; and you will no longer be obliged to exercise if you want to meet one person from another household outdoors. If all goes according to plan, by the end of March we should be allowed to take part in outdoor sports and outdoor gatherings (including in private gardens) of up to six people or two households. For now, I'm not paying much attention to any of the predicted dates past that point, we'll have to wait and see. We should be used to that by now.

Last month I was already writing about signs of spring, but winter wasn't quite finished with us yet. On the 5th of February, I saw my first singing skylark of the year. It was framed in a cloudless sky and I could feel the warmth of the sun on my face as I squinted up at it. Then on the 7th, the temperature plummeted, and we had a whole week of snow and ice. I saw hundreds of Redwings and some Fieldfares, in the orchards that I pass through on my local walks. Known as the winter thrushes, these seasonal visitors breed in Continental Europe and Scandinavia in the summer months. They come here to escape the arctic conditions there in winter. They are social birds, often seen in large flocks. They usually forage for worms and berries in hedgerows and fields. When the weather is especially cold, they move into gardens in search of food and become more noticeable, especially if you have a *Pyracantha* bush, or something else with a good crop of berries, like a Rowan tree. Apples and other fruit are also popular with thrushes, which explains why I see them in the orchards, where they feast on the windfalls.

For help identifying the thrush family, click the link below:

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/thrush-family/>

In the garden, everything looked much prettier with a covering of snow. The pond was the last thing to thaw when the sun came out.



Snowy garden



Frozen pond

This cold snap proved to be a very quiet week in my garden, with very few visitors. I was hoping for a nice shot of a fox in the snow, but all I got was a couple of cats, and not even as many birds as usual. Perhaps the Foxes have chosen their mates for this breeding season. I hardly hear them calling at night any more, and I'm no longer seeing lots of different individuals scent marking in the garden every night.



Collared Dove

Even the rodents were hunkered down somewhere, probably surviving on food they had cached earlier in the season. I did get a few opportunities to practice my tracking skills though. I love finding the delicate marks left in snow by a bird's wingtips as it takes flight.



Cat tracks



wing marks

For help identifying animal tracks, click the link, scroll to the bottom and download the guide:
<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/natures-home-magazine/birds-and-wildlife-articles/features/animal-tracks/>

Another set of footprints were suspiciously absent during the snowy week. The Rats seemed to disappear very suddenly, and were absent for almost a week. I don't know where they were hiding

but they reappeared, briefly, when the thaw began. They haven't been very visible in the garden since then, only triggering the cameras a few times. I hope they're not living it up in my shed.



Rat emerging from shelter



Later the same night

As most of the action in the garden at the moment seems to be rodent related, I treated myself to a new toy, so I can get better views of what's going on. I bought some close-focus lenses which can be attached to the front of a trail camera. Trail cameras are designed to capture larger animals at a distance from the camera. Anything small is too far away to see in detail and anything too close is blurry. With the new lenses, I can focus on things right in front of the camera and get detailed close-up shots of small mammals like mice. The parcel tape on the front is to dim the infra-red LEDs as they are a bit too powerful for close-ups and make the images over-exposed.



New close-up camera trap

I set this new camera up inside the Hedgehog feeding station and got some good shots of mice on the first try. Previously, the best images of mice I could get were like this...



Wood Mice

Now, I can get pictures like this...



Close-up Wood Mouse

I hadn't realised quite how frequently the mice visit when there is food on offer. They don't trigger the external camera every time, but the internal camera picked up far more activity. I am now able to see what happens inside in much more detail. This resourceful little character managed to carry three pieces of food away: one in the mouth and one in each paw!



Greedy Mouse

If you're into small mammals, you might enjoy some of the close-up videos below.

See how busy the mice are in just 1minute – <https://youtu.be/8pGbZHK-zfU>

See how busy the mice are over a whole night – <https://youtu.be/ILdgGOM7iU0>

Watch mice fighting in slow motion - <https://youtu.be/nQXJNrR-YUo>

<https://youtu.be/kqB5fDEnneU>

The night before I set up my new view inside the feeding station, the first Hedgehog of the year had visited.



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First Hedgehog of 2021

I put some food out for the next few nights, but the new camera only captured mice, until the night before the snow started. I was treated to a close up view of a hog eating some food, then having a poo and wiping its bum on the floor before leaving. Hedgehogs are known for their appalling table manners, so I wasn't at all surprised. Then it started snowing and I didn't see another Hedgehog for the rest of the month.



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To see a video of this hog's charming table manners, click the link:

<https://youtu.be/zPKQjIMQvrM>

The close-up camera trap isn't my only new toy. For a little while now, I've had a couple of wireless bird box cameras waiting to be tried out. I was very kindly given a Sparrow terrace for Christmas and this was the perfect opportunity to try out the cameras. The box is on the front of the house because the back is south facing and gets too hot in the summer. It has three chambers as House Sparrows like to nest communally.



Sparrow terrace



Camera inside box



Inside view

Unfortunately, the wireless cameras have been a big disappointment. There are so many other wireless devices interfering with the signal that it's very difficult to maintain a clear picture. I can only watch/record one of the cameras at a time and the clearest signal seems to alternate between the two boxes. Even then, the picture can be lost when someone nearby uses a remote control, a cordless phone, bluetooth headphones, a wireless mouse, or any other wireless device. Wireless devices are everywhere! Even cars driving past affect the signal! After fiddling and tweaking for a week, the picture was pretty good. However, the Wi-Fi connection in the office upstairs where my wife works was terrible all week, and she kept dropping out of zoom calls. After lengthy phonecalls to IT support and virgin media, we slowly realised the new cameras may be the cause of the problem. I tried switching them off and the problem was resolved. So now I can only have the cameras on outside of office hours, which isn't much good. I'm on the lookout for a solution and hoping the sparrow terrace cameras will be fully operational before anybody moves in.

The weather has now shifted from arctic to very mild and spring-like. I don't think it will be long before the new season is fully underway. At least that's one thing that can't be cancelled by Covid! With more than ten and a half hours of daylight, daytime temperatures are soaring into double figures and I'm sure the Hedgehogs will start to emerge from hibernation soon. I've already seen birds carrying nesting material and I've heard reports of amphibians on the move. Spring flowers are erupting in sunny spots here and there and there are even a few bees and butterflies appearing. My friend Tad took these spring photos on his local walks this month.



Snowdrops in early February



Lesser Celandine



Hoverfly on a Crocus

If you'd like to see more of Tad's beautiful photos, you can find him on Instagram:

<https://www.instagram.com/thewildbeard/>

My next update will be at the end of March. Will the progress of spring continue uninterrupted, or will we be hit with a late cold snap? Will the Hedgehogs wake up? Will the sun shine or the rain fall? Will we be allowed out to enjoy it properly? Who can say? These are uncertain times. I can't promise any answers but if you come back next month, I'll tell you what's been happening in my garden.