

Winter wildlife

Jim Stevenson explains how our wildlife copes when the river fills the meadows

'Isn't it lovely and peaceful watching the ducks?' said the lady next to me as I scanned the birds massed before us. It looked like mayhem but it became apparent that there is a pattern to their behaviour. Coots pull up weeds in about a metre of water. The ducks that can't dive gather to snatch anything that floats out, while the diving ducks go after their favourite snacks. The Great Ouse valley holds many thousands of birds in winter, so what brings them here to this muddy corner of Cambridgeshire, and where do they come from?

From the end of July onwards the first wading birds from the high Arctic drop into the boggy bits to probe with their long bills. For them, the-wetter-the-better. Icelandic Wigeon start to arrive in September and up to 22,630 of them have been counted on the Ouse Washes. Like the waders, they like wet fields and marshes to feed, but they also want deeper water nearby to escape to when danger threatens. Teal and Shoveler form the night shift. They sift the surface film and then loaf around the shore by day.

Diving ducks pile in from as far away as Finland and Russia. Smart black-and-white Tufted Ducks dive for invertebrates; grey, barrel-shaped Pochards dive for plant tubers and seeds. Finally, the top predator ducks (yes, really!) arrive after a big freeze in Holland and Denmark. Goldeneyes dive vigorously for shrimps and small fish, while salmon-coloured Goosanders, with their saw-like bills, are proper fish-grabbers.

The big white guys are my favourites. Thousands of noisy Icelandic Whooper Swans, and some endangered Siberian Bewicks, join our Mute Swans. They love nothing more than a flooded carrot or potato field.

Small birds come here too. They forage at the water's edge where there is a strand-line of spiders, snails and all the seeds from the flooded meadow. Herons and egrets, march in the shallows using their feet to 'guddle' for fish. Harriers, owls, buzzards, Sparrowhawks, Merlins and Peregrine Falcons are attracted by this huge congregation of prey.

Perhaps surprisingly, Kingfishers don't have such a good time of it. They can only hunt by sight and so move a short distance to find a pond where the water is clearer. Voles, Moles and mice have to swim for it when their runs and burrows are flooded, making them vulnerable to owls, Foxes, Stoats, and Weasels. Badgers, and gulls too, feast on worms that are washed to the surface.

In spring as the waters subside, waders will nest in the rushy pastures of the washes, but floods in April or May could wash out the entire nesting season. New shallow wetlands

have been created away from the river to remedy the problem, so that our valley will continue to be filled with the sounds and sights of winter we treasure.

The Great Ouse Valley Trust promotes for public benefit the conservation, restoration and enjoyment of the landscape, wildlife and heritage of the Great Ouse Valley and environs in the county of Cambridgeshire.

For more information about the Trust please visit
www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk



The wintry flooded meadow of Berry (Bury) Fen at Earith, captured by Jim Stevenson