

## Mentmore wildlife report 2017.

Words and Photo's by Steve Thomas

It seems a familiar story, but it has been far too long since my last wildlife report. I started out about five years ago with the good intention of providing something every quarter, and the interval between reports seems gradually to have grown longer. Looking back over 2017 I see that I haven't accumulated much suitable material this year. I think that's probably a mixture of a very busy time at work, leading to a degree of exhaustion at the weekends, combined with other things taking priority later in the year. Whatever the truth, I offer with some apology a rather limited selection of images from the year.



Rat Holes in the old grain dump.





Rat Tracks

I'll start in January with an almost universally unpopular species – the brown rat. We have noticed evidence of a substantial population, almost certainly sustained by unwanted grain dumped as a by-product of local farming. The images show burrows and well-formed tracks from them down to a drainage ditch, an obvious source of water and cover for moving around. There was also plenty of evidence of droppings, though we only rarely actually saw the rats themselves.

On perhaps a similarly distasteful theme, I'll share one image from February of evidence of another local pest, the inveterate litter-dropper. A number of volunteers have helped clear this mess for the last several years, but as ever homo sapiens turns out to be the most unpleasant and destructive of all native species. You might feel this is a little out of place in a wildlife report, but in my defence I would say that litter – particularly glass and metal containers – is a well-known threat to smaller wildlife.



Litter



Blue Tit

Coming into spring, I offer a very simple “bird on a stick” shot from March of a blue tit – nothing special, but satisfying to nail something so clean and simple. The following month I was lent a monster lens, a 300mm-800mm zoom, and set out to try it out on the local Chinese water deer population. There have been plenty around this year though they are notoriously difficult to get close to. We have seen upwards of a dozen on occasions, in the fields between Mentmore and Ledburn, but with a sensitive sense of smell, good eyesight and excellent hearing it is very difficult to creep up on them undetected. On this occasion, faced with carrying a camera, lens, tripod and head combination weighing 25lb or more, I decided to settle down in a hedgerow and, paying attention to



the wind direction, simply wait. Patience paid off as I got a series of images of an obliging individual which walked across in front of me without initially seeming to be aware of me. As you'll see from the image, though, I was definitely spotted in the end!



Chinese Water Deer.



Brown Hare

On the same occasion I also snapped a brown hare, which turned out to be one of the few I've managed to photograph all year. After a positive glut of hares some 10 years ago, the local population seems to have dropped considerably – or maybe I'm looking in the wrong place.

In May I went out with friends from the [Bucks Owl and Raptor Group](http://www.giveahoot.org.uk/) (<http://www.giveahoot.org.uk/>) who were monitoring nesting boxes in the parish. My pictures are occasionally used in their promotional materials, and it's a great opportunity for me to get closer to some species I may otherwise miss. The aim is to provide nest boxes for barn owls, little owl, tawny owls and kestrels, though of course no-one tells the wildlife which boxes to use. It's commonplace to find grey squirrels, jackdaws and stock doves in residence, and not unknown to find a little owl in a barn owl box, or some other unintended combination.



Tawny Owl chick





Stock Dove



Female Kestrel





Male Kestrel



Adult Tawny Owl



The pictures you see here show a stock dove chick about to be ringed, tawny owls, both adult and chick, and finally a pair of kestrels in residence at a local box. Seeing the kestrels was a real pleasure as there have been very few nesting locally in the last few years.



Roe Deer

Also in May, it was with considerable pleasure that I was able to photograph a species locally for the first time – a roe deer. The quality of the picture isn't great, but it's unarguably a roe. For the most part the only deer we see in the parish are muntjac and Chinese water deer, though we've had a couple of previous sightings of roe deer which we haven't been able to confirm with a photograph. We saw this individual resting quite calmly, but weren't able to get any closer without risk of disturbing it as there wasn't adequate cover. Happily we retreated after taking a few snaps and left it undisturbed – it always feels like a win to be able to see an animal minding its own business and leaving it completely unaware of our presence.





Starlings



Pheasants



Mullein Moth



Mullein Moth

My offerings from June are a group of young starlings on power cables – as it happens quite close to the kestrel box – and a pair of male pheasant which faced up to one another in my back garden, keeping me entertained for an hour or so. Finally the last shots, also from my garden, are of a very striking caterpillar which we identified as belonging to the mullein moth (see, for example, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mullein\\_moth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mullein_moth)), chomping its way through a verbascum – or mullein – plant growing in what passes for my lawn.



The second half of the year has been dominated by a trip to the Cairngorms to photograph pine marten, red squirrels and osprey (great fun but not really grist to the mill of these pages), preparing for September's Mentmore history exhibition, and recording the village fete and barn dance, so the local wildlife has taken a bit of a back seat. I hope these images give a sense of 2017 even if it's a bit lopsided and abbreviated!