



THE STREET

SUPPLEMENT: DEC 2022 - JAN 2023



NATURE NOTES



Little Egret

When I first started birdwatching in Suffolk in the '60s, there were no Little Egrets here. Little Egret was not even given in my bird book as a British bird! Since then, they have spread up from the Mediterranean, through Europe, and they are now well established here as a breeding bird, especially common on our coastal marshes. Although not abundant in our valley, they are a regular feature. Look for a small heron, (long black bill, with long neck tucked up) and a brilliant white - I think the whitest bird there is. They are seen flying up the river or feeding on the floodplain meadows. Usually there is a thin, wispy crest, and if you are especially keen, you might see that the toes, at the end of black legs, are yellow, an esoteric point but useful in distinguishing other species of egrets which are also on their way to colonising.



Water Vole

Walking with my brother alongside the river in October there was a small splash, which he saw was a Water Vole diving in from the bank. I was thrilled about this. At Flatford in the '60s Water Voles were common and we could watch and study them easily. Since then, they have suffered a huge decline in numbers and range - there are 95% fewer in Britain than there were then! Reasons given include deterioration of their waterside habitat and predation by the introduced American Mink. I knew that they are hanging on in the Alde Valley; I have found a few of their skulls in local Barn Owl pellets but have not actually seen one here. Bigger than our other voles, with thick, chocolate covered fur, about the size of a rat but with a shorter tail and shorter, fur covered ears, they have often been called 'Water Rats'. Ratty, in *The Wind in the Willows*, is a Water Vole, as you can see from Shepherd's illustrations. More about them if they make a comeback here on the Alde.

Fieldfares have been here since mid-October, flying between woods and fields, and a few Redwings have already joined with the Blackbirds to completely strip the Holly berries in our garden. There are also a good number of Mistle Thrushes around, making their loud rattling call, but these seem to be in family sized groups rather than bigger flocks. They are as big as a Fieldfare, but much plainer grey. This year in Sweffling there are again fields of fodder beet for the sheep. Last year these fields were extremely attractive to all the thrushes at the end of the winter, so look out for them again in 2023. Also regarding berries, it struck me what a large crop of Blackberries there was this year. A few of these are eaten by Blackbirds, Wood Mice, Bank Voles and others, but most seem to go uneaten, and end up dry and shrivelled on the bushes. In fact some of these seeds do still get eaten during the winter, some by mice and voles which climb up to get them, and some by Bullfinches, which are adept at taking small seeds from the stalks.



Mistle thrush

During the late warm weather, we have been seeing a number of insects preparing for hibernation. Usually, we mention these in relation to the Autumn flowers of Ivy, which are so important for them. This year a late crop of apples (Ashmead's Kernel) has attracted feeding wasps, which will all die, except for a few large ones which are next year's queens. There were even a couple of butterflies on the windfalls - Red Admirals, which I have seen before feeding on old fruit, but which are thought to survive the winter only rarely, and Commas which hibernate successfully, to be one of the first butterflies to emerge next spring. There have also been quite a number of large queen bumblebees, and in the back porch the biggest queen Hornet I have ever seen.

Geoffrey Abbott