

A précis of the year of the laird.

Jan Feb March:

Cold wet and short days. Wild life at most vulnerable.

Snow. Get up early. This is the time to find out what really goes on.

You think that you are early but the ground is already well marked. Hares – three prints, two rears together two fronts one leading. Rabbit similar but smaller. Fox – same size as hare but in straight line. Badger – box like with short claw marks prominent. Deer – cloven footed - closer cloven than sheep. Pheasant - hen like.

Crow – feet turned in. Spuggies small and hop. Squirrel, rats, weasel and stoats small with prominent leading claws. March is the time to trap and kill grey squirrels. Too late all red squirrels have succumbed to their flue. I fear this is evolution.

The Buzzard has recently been introduced to this area and the Magpie is naturally moving in. The Buzzard is mainly carrion but the Magpie is predatory like the hooded crow – an intruder we could do without. Woodpeckers are clearly audible but hard to spot. Rooks start vying for nesting spaces Feb. Noisy but interesting. Song birds start their morning chorus. Sounds nice to us but like the rooks most of song is warning to get off my patch. The cuckoo is never heard here but go ten miles west and they are regular callers.

Sad losses to this area are the Lapwing – pewit – and the Curlew – whap. The grey partridge is also very much in decline but being replaced by the red leg released for sporting purposes.

Water: The salmon and sea trout have been up to spawn and returned to sea. The brown trout sadly have all but vanished. Some blame acid water from forestry some chemicals from farms. The ponds on the golf course are pooliverses of their own and frogs star to spawn late march much to the delight of the herons.

Plants: Snowdrops, aconites, crocquai and daffodils promise spring. Trees: Willow. Sycamore and poplar are generally first to brave the elements.

Animals: Foxes badgers mad march hares are courting. Red squirrels have all but been taken over by the grey. The occasional otter is making a brave but slow come back. The mole begins to show its presence. Jan. Feb and early March are the best times for dogs to roam unleashed. Shooting is over, birds have not started to lay or nest and lambs are not yet in the fields. Beware of cattle. They can be grazing peacefully half a mile away. Dog unwittingly comes too close to a new born calf left hidden in the grass. Mum knows exactly where she left it and thunders to the rescue. Dog rushes to you for safety. Mum attacks the larger target without concern that you are a vegetarian or vagen.

April May June:

Grow, grow and grow some more. Everything. Weeds, grass and trees – in that order, Oak and ash are the last to wake up. Farming is up and running. Crops sown and germinated. Lambs bouncing. Cattle out of hemmels and fertilising the ground in a natural way. Birds nesting and rearing young. Mallard duck tend to be prizewinners followed by the hooded crow. Most sensible ones wait until late April early May. There are few snakes in this area but just five miles to the west adders are common. The first of fox and badger cubs appear. Leverets are common on the golf course. Hares like the short grass and feel safe in the rough thinking that the fairways act as a strip of open ground which predators are uncomfortable to expose themselves. Linnets

are similar. May 1st. swallows and martins arrive. They and their off spring nest in the same place year after year. Their sat-nav must be incredible. May 14th. The young rooks appear. The world is alive again. On the farming front silage is underway and sprayers – enormous – battle for space on our little roads. The ponds become alive with beetles, skaters and tadpoles. In the burns the sea trout and salmon par can be observed. A late arrival to the insect life is the cleg or horse fly. Nasty quiet bloodsucker. Bats invade the evening skies in per suite of the mass of flying insects. I know little about bats they do me no harm I do them no harm. We have a bat box in the mill garden but I think it is hung upside down. I am sure they sleep that way . Prim roses grace our deans and glens in profusion from late March to mid May. Sheep and primroses do not get on. Bumblebees appear mostly solitary but some live in small groups. The roadsides take new look. Covered become the cola cans and crisp packets and up pop cow parsley, wild iris, orchids bog myrtle.

July Aug Sept:

Busy time on farms. Cut it all down and replant winter crops. Little roads now jammed with grain lorries combines and overloaded tractors. An other hazard appears Mid Aug onwards: the local hunt. They abandon horse boxes and trailers willy nilly. The car followers have lost all sense of Highway Code. We put app. 100 pheasant poults down every year in the hopes of shooting app 50. These arrive end of Sept. and are penned for the first month. We have to protect against fox badger and hawks. Fox and badger effectively controlled by an electric wire 10 inches above ground around pen. Hawks deterred by scarecrows, old cds and tapes. Dragon, damsel and hover flies dance above the ponds and near hedge rows. Wasps begin to wander, their job in the swarm being over. Midges are not a problem in this area but flutter about harmlessly unlike their smaller relatives in the north and west. Butterflies like the short grass of the golf course and enjoy the last of the summer. Black pennels swarm mainly under lime or sycamore trees – they look menacing but are peaceful. For the juice makers , elderberries and rosehips offer an ingredient.

Oct Nov Dec:

Sanity has returned to the farms. Harvest is over. Winter crops in bed. Time for the tups to have their turn. Most ‘ in bye ‘ lambing is in March and Hill lambing April. Which means tups away Oct and Nov. A coloured bum on a ewe shows tup activity. Cows and bulls vary, the gestation period being similar to yours and heats regular so the choice of calving up to farmer. Generally last full moon in Oct. brings our woodcock from Russia Scandinavia and Newfoundland. I love woodcock – to look at, to shoot and to eat. Their numbers are not great here and on an average days shoot we will see about ten and perhaps shoot three. Owls twoo at nights – mainly the tawny owl. Barn owls are regularly seen. Jays, related to magpie, screech their presence. Beautifully coloured and much fancied by fly tiers. They are classified as vermin. Starlings, once the plague of Glasgow and inside cattle feeders, became an endangered species but seem to be making a robust come back. Some birds flock at this time of year. Starlings, field fare, lapwing- those that are left – male magpies and hoodies. Geese arrive from their breeding grounds in the artic. They pass overhead going either south or west but seldom touch down between the A7 and A68. Why?

Swans also gather in groups again generally east of the A68. After the first heavy rains in Oct. the sea trout and salmon rush up our burns – spawn – and return to safer waters. Migratory ducks used to visit Moss End - one mile west - in their thousands, The last three years lucky to see twenty. Hang up stockings for Santa and retire to over feed and drink and expect great things from the New Year. Grasses, weeds and trees could take up the same space again – just accept them. Small birds I know little about. I just accept them.