

Nature note: where's Spring?

I used to listen devotedly every week to Alistair Cooke's weekly 'Letter from America'. He wrote 2,869 of them over 50 years and often used to complain that some big news item would break just after he'd done his radio recording. Pity then the humble nature diarist, who has to submit his magazine copy a whole month before it will appear. I'm writing this one on 1 April and am tempted to say that we're victims of a national weather hoax. Where is the Spring? The Beast from the East froze us rigid in the first week of March and since then it has remained mostly dull, raw, chilly and wet. The chiffchaff – usually our first summer migrant – did arrive in late March but it has fallen silent again (who could blame it?), and I have yet to hear my first blackcap of the year or see my first brimstone butterfly. Meanwhile, the early spring flowers keep raising their heads only to bow them down again like drooping bonnets after yet another overnight frost.

Spring will surely have arrived by the time you read this, but it may be a short and accelerated one with the usual phased sequences tightly compressed. And that could be disturbing in a quite different way. You can see in an article I posted on the Shingle Street website (www.shinglestreetsurvey.org.uk) a calendar of dates on which I would expect different species of birds to clock in here for the summer. For centuries people have looked for the first swallow or listened for the first cuckoo as the welcome signs of the new season. There is a Greek vase from the sixth century BC where two men and a boy are pointing excitedly upwards and their speech bubbles say: A 'Look, what's that?'; B: 'Good lord, it's a swallow'; C: 'So it is, it must be spring!'. These regularities are also a deep reassurance, as the poet Ted Hughes recognised when he said of the swift's appearance in early May (one of our last migrants to arrive):

*They've made it again,
Which means that the globe's still working,
the Creation's still waking refreshed,
our summer's still to come...*

But if everything arrives at once all the carefully calibrated interdependencies will be disturbed. Will the right flowers be in bloom for the pollinating butterflies and bees? Will the teeming caterpillars that birds depend on to feed their young emerge punctually? Will the clouds of flying insects be available in the upper air for those swifts to Hoover up? Meanwhile, I hear that a white stork landed on the Shingle St Martello Tower. Now, what could that be a sign of?

Jeremy Mynott Shingle St



A wonderful view from Alan McBurnie's bedroom window