

South Wirral Watch

March

Letting you know what to look out for this month at Dibbinsdale LNR and Eastham Country Park

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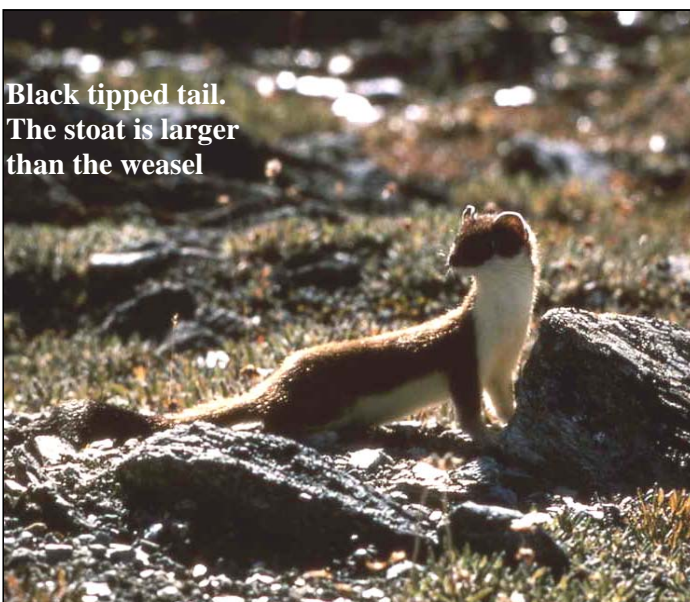


Welcome to our third *Whats On Listing* for wildlife in the South Wirral area. This is compiled by the combined forces of The Friends of Dibbinsdale and Eastham Country Park, in conjunction with the rangers service at both sites.

It is meant to be a seasonal **what could be seen** rather than what has been seen listing. However we would welcome anyone who visits the sites to keep us informed about things of interest you have seen. In order to do this, you could email us as above, or just call and tell the rangers at both sites. We are aiming to keep a monthly listing of some of the wildlife moments to look out for during the coming year. We will also 'post' them on our websites (See above)

Watch for Weasels

This is a time of great activity for male weasels (and for male stoats later in spring) as they set out in search of mates. The territorial system tends to break down as the dominant males begin to range more widely. At Eastham look for them particularly at the top of the woods bordering the golf course, or on Girlings Meadow near Riverwood Road. At Dibbinsdale look on Bodens Hey Meadow. They come out in the day time, though they still have quite short activity periods – about 45 minutes. They are likely to be more visible as the vegetation is quite short. The two species often 'dash' across the path, but can reappear because they are very curious about us humans! (Not dogs however) They love rabbits, so are found close to grassland.



Black tipped tail.
The stoat is larger than the weasel

Unearthed fox holes

Now is also the time to begin your preparations for Fox watching, for pregnant vixens will be sorting out suitable earths for rearing their cubs. Not only will they select one in which to give birth, but also others to which they can move their cubs if disturbed by people and dogs. This means that vixens will either dig new earths, or clean out existing disused earths or badger setts, or enlarge rabbit burrows to create safe havens. With badgers this is quite a dangerous time because they will want to roam more widely in search of earthworms. This brings them under threat from motorists. *Unfortunately the whereabouts of such increase activity is rather sensitive at both our sites but we are happy to let others know if we are sure it will be kept secret. Please let us know if you spot foxes or badgers near where you live.*



Breaking hibernation.

A warm spell in March may rouse some hibernating butterflies such as brimstones, small tortoiseshells and peacocks. The most common hibernator is now the comma butterfly. At Dibbinsdale we are planting alder buckthorn, the brimstone butterfly's favourite caterpillar food plant in order to encourage them to colonise the area known as Spital Field.

Of all the early flowering plants for insect pollinators, the common blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) is the true signal of spring. Its masses of small white blooms are usually produced before any sign of leaves. The peacock butterflies are fond of these. At Dibbinsdale look at the bottom of Bodens Hey meadow. At Eastham, look on the 'mound' at the rear of the blubell woods near Jobs Ferry.

Spawn Time

This month is the time to see frogspawn. The 'jellyballs' of frog spawn can be seen in many small pools, or bodies of water. The occurrence of toad spawn is slightly different. Their eggs are laid in large 'lines' rather than balls. The toads are creatures of habit and like to go back to larger bodies of water to spawn. The wetland close to Bodens Hey Meadow is a favourite.

March is also a dangerous time for the survival of the spawn because late frosts can kill off newly laid eggs. Ponds within the slightly warmer and sheltered woodland at Eastham may be more successful if temperatures dip severely.

Territory is all

For most of our resident species of birds this is the month when urges to defend and create territory reach their peak. A pair of breeding birds needs a secure area in which to nest, and big enough to find the food they will need while nesting.

For the robin this is when they go into 'overdrive'. Their behaviour become very aggressive. Both members of a mated pair will defend their area, though in most cases it is the cock bird that will do the fighting. A robin's song tells other of its ownership of the area, and the individual will know the songs of its immediate neighbours. Three robins together will almost always mean there will be a fight. These can be fatal. Eye damage is common. The bird garden at Eastham, seen from the visitors centre, can be a battlefield.



The robin likes to nest in an open (no hole) bird box. They are opportunist nesters and will nest quite close to the ground-in garden pots for example

The woods come alive

It is during March that the woodland flowers really begin their 'march' to set seed. This is race against time for flowers within the woods to complete their life cycle and produce seed before the canopy of trees above them calls time and the woodland world is enveloped in shade.

There is a rough order to the flowering of some of the better known woodland flowers. They don't all flower at the same time. They take turns. So the celandines (yellow buttercup looking) come first,

the anemones (pure white daisy looking) overlap with them and the bluebells often come last.

Carpets of celandines will appear this month and their often variegated heart shaped leaves are as attractive as their flowers. The more sunny the spot is, the earlier the flowering. At Eastham and Dibbinsdale the celandines are widely distributed. They do tend to form clumps.



The first leaves

The competition between the trees in the woodland can be seen as early as March. Those trees that gain most sunlight will usually do better than the others. The first leafers will 'gain a march' on the other species. Sycamores are the easy winners in this department. Not only do they burst bud early, but their leaves are large and even more impressively, later set multitudes of wind born seed (helicopters) Sycamores (a type of maple) are often known as the 'weeds' of the woodland. It must be said in their defence however, that they produce a large amount of food for other forms of wildlife. The sugary sap that covers their leaves in summer is food for clouds of aphids that in turn provide food for birds and aphid eaters like hoverflies and ladybirds.



The young leaves have a pinkish bloom and come from green buds

The rangers summer programme of events and activities will be sent out separately when produced