

The Journal

Nature Notes

As we approach spring, much of our wildlife will be turning their attention to the next generation. Many of our birds will have already selected their nesting sites - not always in the most expected places. A well known example of this is the Peregrine Falcon nest located on the spire of Leicester Cathedral. Two young birds successfully fledged from this nest site last year and the parent birds are now seen here on a daily basis so it is expected that this season's eggs will be laid soon. The Leicester Peregrine Project is run by the Leicestershire and Rutland Ornithological Society with the help of Leicester City Council and Leicester Cathedral, and they have a live webcam trained on the nest site



(<http://leicesterperegrines.org.uk/camera-two/>). Peregrines are our most exciting and fastest bird of prey, reaching speeds of more than 200 mph when stooping (diving at high speed onto their prey - mainly pigeons for this pair).

Much closer to home, House Sparrows routinely nest around our homes, either in holes or crevices in the buildings or in nest boxes nearby (and often in hedges and behind climbers). Some will be nesting this month and up to four clutches will be laid between April and August. As they are such prolific breeders it is not surprising that they were the commonest garden bird recorded in last year's Big Garden Birdwatch. However,

they are under threat as their population has undergone a severe decline of more than 70% since the 1970s.

A real treat in the garden at this time of year is the emergence of Comma butterflies from hibernation. They, and a number of related species, will have been hibernating as adults in



garages, sheds and similar buildings during the winter and are now emerging to breed. The jagged edges to the wings provide admirable camouflage, resembling a dead leaf. In contrast to most of our butterflies, the Comma has increased dramatically over the last 50 years, mainly through using nettles as a larval food plant.

The return of jewel-like butterflies to the garden, the chattering of sparrows and

other garden birds competing for nest sites, and the sight (albeit via the webcam) of Peregrines laying eggs all remind us that the cold days of winter will soon be behind us and that spring is coming. The recovery of the Peregrine population from near extinction locally, due to pesticide poisoning, to the healthy numbers we see today is heart warming. By continuing to provide nesting sites for our garden birds and overwintering shelters for the butterflies, and planting plenty of pollen-rich flowers (free from pesticides) throughout the year, we can all make a real difference to the declining fortunes of our other local wildlife.