

Nature Notes

Rupert Evershed's monthly diary of the natural world

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Born and bred in St Albans, Rupert has enjoyed observing and recording local wildlife for over 30 years. Drawing inspiration and insight from the sights and sounds that accompany the seasons throughout the year, he invites you to tune in to the often overlooked natural world all around us.

Unexpected natural wonder

There's a tree that has recently fallen across the River Ver in Verulamium Park, just downstream from the lake, and it has turned an otherwise quiet stretch of the river into a bubbly cascade that immediately draws attention to itself, as the water pours noisily and energetically over the fallen branches and down into a new plunge pool.

It is exactly the kind of unexpected natural event that sparks the imagination and causes people to pause and wonder, maybe at the tree's demise, maybe at the new water feature or maybe, more practically, at whether the council will take steps to undo nature's work.

The waterfall's magnetism is etched in the grass with a new beeline path as walkers, including me, have gone off the beaten track to explore this miniature wonder.

The new feature holds intrigue not just for the human passers-by but also for the many birds that flit along the river bank.

New feeding possibilities are thrown up as the

formerly inaccessible river filters under myriad rivulets thereby requiring the former residents of the fallen timber to surface and search elsewhere for their livelihoods.

Even as I stand and watch, a wintering chiffchaff, whose song we have yet to hear this year, picks its way just above the water finding any hapless grubs and bedraggled morsels.

On a previous walk, a few weeks earlier, I counted at least four of these birds along the same stretch of river - no longer only a summer visitor but now another small sign perhaps of a warming climate. I myself, however, fail to pick up any feeling of global warming today and am more inclined to empathise with Mr Tumnus' assessment of Narnia: "Forever winter and [no longer] Christmas!"

I look around expectantly for the grey wagtails that favour the tumbling waterfalls descending from the old mill by the Fighting Cocks, but do not see them.

Their food is found wherever the water thins and breaks over rocks or obstacles and this would seem like a fantastic new larder.

They are always a delight to see and on first impression you may immediately wonder why they were not named 'yellow wagtails' with their vivid yellow breast set against a slate grey back.

However, you have the answer to that question when the genuine yellow wagtails arrive in spring as they are entirely yellow, landing like large yellow buttercups to breed in the fields around St Albans.

Staring at the fallen tree I am reminded that there was a time when trees were felled not just by winds and rain, or by humans, but by teeth!

Beavers used to be indigenous to our land but have long been extinct. However, just recently, a family of escaped beavers was discovered to have successfully bred on the River Otter in Devon, much to both the delight and consternation of local residents.

It seems beavers are vying to make a comeback...but, I wonder, could we cope? What if tree felling was not decided solely by Tree Preservation Orders but by a sharp-toothed, dam-building quadruped? What if we came across a freshly felled tree



■ Fallen tree waterfall and (left) grey wagtail

Bird picture: STEVEN ROUND - STEVENROUND-BIRDPHOTOGRAPHY.COM

across the Ver and found a family of beavers hard at work building a dam?

Would we be happy for them or would we mourn the loss of a tree and condemn the dam?

The jury is out but recently the Devon beavers have been given a five year reprieve during which they must prove themselves responsible citizens!

I pause a little longer at the fallen tree waterfall, enjoying the hive of natural activity created by the river but intensified by the new feature.

While I'm not sure beavers would necessarily select the humble Ver as their home I like the idea that they may soon not be too far away. They and the fallen tree, with its resulting waterfall, at one level create a natural attraction for anyone passing by to wonder at, but at another level provide a reminder of how quickly nature can change of its own accord, demanding a response from the local inhabitants, be they wild or be they human.

