



Penallta Yafflings

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A seasonal newsletter about the wildlife at Parc Penallta

As I write this, in early January, the ground outside is hard with frost, a chill wind blows in through an open window and in the distance I can make out the faintest sign of snow on the hill tops. I am reminded of the carol 'in the bleak midwinter' and its description of ground like iron, moaning winds and endless snow but I can't help feeling that winter gets a bit of a bad press.



Wild carrot seed head

Looking out the window, the sun is just breaking through the cloud, its brightness exaggerated in contrast to the muted wintery tones of the landscape. The warmth of its rays chases away the frost as the sun climbs slowly higher in the sky. Surrounding ourselves with nature can be an uplifting experience and no matter what the season, or weather, there is always something in the natural world to act as a little ray of sunshine to melt the blues away.

With their leaves now gone, the trees stand like skeletons showing their bare bones to the world, silhouettes against the sky. It is striking how each type creates a different shape and it is possible to recognise different species even from a distance. Ash, tall upright trees with regularly spaced branches, the ends of which bend upwards toward the sky. Alder, slender medium sized trees, their purple tinged branches already laden with catkins. Oak, broad and mighty with strong branches, gnarled and twisting, desperately clinging on to the last withered leaves of autumn like strands of velvet on stag's antler. Silver Birch, tall and thin, with braches ending in a mass of cascading twigs and trunks glistening with white, papery



Silver birch

bark. No other tree seems to mirror the season so well. But the birch is more than just a pretty face! It is a pioneer species being one of the first trees to colonise new areas and is capable of growing at greater altitudes and colder temperatures than many other species. Its timber is light and strong and is used in furniture making and to make plywood. It burns well and thin shavings of bark will serve as tinder for fire lighting. For centuries it has been used by craftsmen from around the world to make all kinds of things from besom brooms to birch bark canoes and in spring, the sap can even be tapped to provide a sweet refreshing drink.

Sometimes it is the small things in life that bring the greatest joy and that is certainly true of the wren. Not quite Britain's smallest bird (that honour belongs to the goldcrest) the wren is one of our commonest species. It is found in virtually every habitat across the country but favours woods and gardens, spending much of its time hidden away from view in dense undergrowth, scampering around, mouse like as it



Wren

hunts for small insects. During winter it is easier to spot when there are fewer leaves to conceal it. Its small size and brown colouration mean it doesn't really stand out at all until it opens its beak to sing. What the wren lacks in stature it makes up for in volume and relative to its size it is louder than a cockerel! Its easily recognisable song, made of consistent short phrases and a machine gun like rattle near the end,

can be heard all year but more so in spring when the males will readily belt out their song to defend their territory attract a mate.

According to folklore all the birds took part in a contest to see who should be king. It was decided that the bird that flew higher than the rest would be given the honour, so they all took to the sky flying up and up until one by one they grew tired and had to glide back down to earth. Finally, the eagle was the only bird left in the air and just as he tired the little wren, who had hitched a ride un-noticed on the eagles back, leapt up and flew upwards higher than the eagle singing its song as it went. Since then, the wren has been known as the king of the birds, proof that strength of mind can be mightier than strength of body.

Even in the bleak midwinter, nature is showing us the signs that spring is on its way. We just need to open our eyes and ears to see them.