

Blackcaps

The bird-of-the-month for June this year must be the Blackcap – after all, it was actually featured on the Archers! And it is true that Blackcaps around here have been singing well this month – on a regular walk I counted 15 Blackcaps all in full song in early June. Why were they all singing so vigorously this late in the season? I don't know – maybe some had lost broods and were starting again, though others were certainly feeding young. It is just possible that a few late migrants had arrived and the locals were all proclaiming their patch – this could also explain the high numbers.

The Blackcap song is something which everyone must have heard even though they may not have realised it. A “standard” Blackcap song has about 20 notes. It starts with a few scratchy ones then gets louder and more musical as it progresses, and finishes with a fluty flourish something like “rooty-tooty-too”. Such a “standard” song is pretty easy to recognise. However Blackcaps like to confuse us by including imitations and often singing a song which sounds more like their close cousin the Garden Warbler. So to safely identify a singing Blackcap you really need to see it, which luckily is not usually too difficult as they sing from between 6 and 20 ft from the ground and often on an open branch. However some individuals persistently sing from deep in the centre of a bush and just will not emerge!

Blackcaps are common around these parts, usually to be found in open woodlands with some shrubs and undergrowth, but also in little copses, gardens and even sallow scrub. The male is a handsome bird – Chaffinch-sized and greyish with a black forehead and crown – it is not really a cap as it doesn't come down far enough over his ears! The female is browner and has a chestnut “cap”, and is not often seen except just after the birds arrive in late-April and early May. The young birds look very like the female.

Rosemary Royle