

View from the platform – May 2008

Well – did they? Are they? Has our doughty observer lost it on the platform? Or could he be right after all?

What's this all about? Birds and trains – in case you don't follow, this is the latest instalment in the saga of the nest boxes that our eager station helpers have put up for us alongside the platform at Chelford Station.

I think I have managed to convince most people that, for an observer marooned on the station platform between trains, there are places less nature friendly than Chelford platform. Even without birds, the entertainment of watching the ongoing battle between the weeds and the gardeners is quite fun. Until the gardeners opened up all those nice patches of carefully tended soil, the weeds always had it tough to get established. However, at least they are now in full view, at the mercy of every passing hoe! And the flowers are really looking nice, instead. I'm sure the butterflies will agree later in the summer, too.

But back to birds. All through April there was a Song Thrush singing his heart out every morning, when I got off the train, yodelling from the highest of the small trees by the steps. I also hear the local Dunnock singing (that's a "hedge sparrow" to those of us over a certain age), though not often in sight; perhaps he and his mate will nest in the roadside hedge again, like they did last year. I have not yet heard the Whitethroat that sang last summer beyond the down end of the up platform, or the Little Owl across the fields, but there's still time.

What does he mean, down and up, by the way? Well – on the railway, all lines lead *up* to London – work it out from that!

Last year there was a larger nest built in a much more obvious spot, in the tree near the bike shelter. It was probably a Collared Dove that built it, although whether the nest was used I know not – I didn't even see it appear, for it was built after the leaves grew.

But back to the big question. One of the nest boxes (better not say which one) was in full view when I stepped off the 8.19 train right opposite it one day a couple of weeks ago. Perched at the entrance was a Blue Tit, with something in its beak. Ah, said our nature expert with overweening confidence, let's watch and see if it comes back. If it was feeding young, 4 or 5 minutes would be about right. And lo! As reliably as a Biblical prophecy, it came true – the bird was back in five minutes on the dot. Rejoice, we have nestlings, I declared. But then . . .

"They must be nesting if *he* says so." "Well, I haven't seen them!" "Nor me." Doubt, sadness and gloom descended, most notably on yours truly. For two weeks there was not a peep, let alone a tit. Then, on Tuesday, I disembarked from my morning train to find the smiling face of David Stannard, your present Level One Station Adopter, on the platform. He was already cheerful (isn't he always?) but his face beamed even more when I grinned and pointed. At the nest box, the Blue Tit was back! Great news. But *why* does that pesky bird only visit the nest just as I get off the 8.19?

My guess – and you will now all realise that I am only likely to be right *slightly* more often on nature questions than most of the rest of you! - is that it is a matter of time. Blue Tits lay lots of eggs – I know of one nest as I write this that has 13 eggs in it, and even 16 is not rare. And Blue Tits are small birds, so they will only lay one a day, normally in the morning. If the male bird visits at this time, he may well be bringing an offering of what is known as courtship feeding, not food for chicks. The female will not in fact start sitting on the eggs properly until the clutch is complete. Until first warmed, the eggs will stay undeveloped. Then her body warmth will start all the eggs developing together, so they all hatch around the same time.

According to that theory, there *might* be cheeps in a week or so – the incubation period is 14 days. Of course, it could be the nest is empty – some male birds, particularly wrens, will build several nests for the female to choose one. But here's hoping! I'm just not making another definitive statement for now, that all!

George Hill