

It's snowing again as I write this, it has been strange having a 'real' winter again. However, I can also hear a robin singing outside, the birds are a lot noisier and more active, reminding us that the season is on the change.

The snow always creates extra work but we have not been as badly affected as dairy farms in other regions where milk was thrown away and it has been a great chance to take some winter pictures, such as the last of the lambs out on the ridge and furrow fields by the river.



Sheep meat prices have remained very high, bolstered by a weak euro, but we have additional legislation to cope with now with new electronic identification and recording requirements.

We took a very big decision late in 2009, due to a shortage of heifers coming into the herd, (partly due to calving difficulties) we bought some in-calf animals from Holland. Taking advice from our vet, we had them tested against a range of diseases which our cows do not have, and kept them isolated in a separate yard for as long as we could, only transferring them to mix with our own when they had calved. Bovine tuberculosis is not present in Holland so we knew there was minimal chance of bringing this problem onto the farm and they are also tested by the Defra for some other diseases within 48 hours of import. Our 'Dutchy Girls' have settled in well and we had one novelty - a red one, Kobe, who is bred from a very good bull (Poos Stadel Classic) and who gave



us a beautiful heifer by Huybens Red Tequila, so we now have the wonderfully named calf Brentingby Tequila Kobe Red. And no the Dutchy Girls don't moo with an accent.

Subsequent herd health tests so far have not picked up any new disease issues but we cannot be complacent and will keep looking for any problems developing and hopefully we can now 'close' our herd again without need to buy in.

Baron, the new Angus who replaced our previous bull Beefy Boy (due to the very large calves Beefy was siring) is now producing progeny of fantastic conformation (shape); some are kept for rearing and others are sold due to lack of housing and have been making very good prices.

Due to keeping the Dutchy girls isolated, we were very late bringing the older Angus fattening cattle up from grass into yards in the autumn so they are not ready as early as usual. However, over the next few months they will be ready to go to the butcher.

The wheat and new seeds (grass) is not looking very healthy after a difficult winter (and drilling into a droughty seedbed) and the permanent pastures are very yellow with snow mould taking its toll. Hopefully when (if) we get some spring sunshine then things will start to strengthen and green up. I have noticed a lot of vole burrows in the grass fields, which at least means that there should be plenty of food for the owls. We seem to have a mismatch of the sexes in our local tawny population, with an awful lot of frantic 'twoos' and no 'twits' from dusk most evenings, so I hope they manage to find a mate!



This mistle thrush appeared as soon as I discarded the Christmas holly outside the kitchen window and has been around ever since. So far he has refused to touch the mistletoe - a pity as I had rather hoped he would set some in the apple trees for us.

With the hard weather, the berries in our hedges were rapidly stripped by the winter thrushes in the cold spell and our ringer has been kept busy topping his feeders up as well as dodging the snow showers to keep ringng - he has now recorded well over 1,000 birds in the two years he has been working with us.

We brought in contractors to hedge-trim after the berries had all been eaten, as some hedges had fallen out of our trimming rotation but we are now reasonably up to date. The wettest areas have not been done as the tractors would make too much mess but there is more frost forecast, so we should be able to get this finished on firmer ground before March 1st.



I didn't run any midwinter walks but I have delivered quite a few talks to adult groups such as U3A and WI as well as participating in or organising events in schools raising awareness of countryside issues and career opportunities. There are plenty of groups booked in for summer walks and I will also be offering some public dates including some holiday children's sessions again.

It has been a difficult few months for us as Ian's father has not been well and much of the winter disappeared in a blur of snow and hospital visiting, but John is now back home and with longer daylight hours there is more chance to keep up with things.



Brentingby in the snow

**Julia Hawley
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