WILD JANUARY

BULLFINCH

FAITHFUL MATES

Research by ornithologist Tim Birkhead has shown that this portly finch is remarkably monogamous, perhaps more so than any other British songbird. It's unusual to encounter a lone bird – a pair is far more likely, in the depths of winter as well as during the breeding season. The male and female constantly whistle to each other to stay in touch in thick hedgerows or scrubby woodland – a soft 'pew, pew'. Your first glimpse is often of flashing white rumps.

TOP TIP Listen to bullfinch calls at www.xeno-canto.org

MISTLETOE

TREETOP WONDER

Bare leafless trees reveal shaggy clumps of this curious semi-parasitic plant, typically in apple trees, poplars or limes. Since mistletoe is evergreen, its untidy mass of oval leaves offers welcome shelter to overwintering invertebrates. The gooey white berries – poisonous to us, like the foliage – are eaten by mistle thrushes, redwings, fieldfares and blackcaps, thereby dispersing the seeds to new host trees.

FIND OUT MORE Learn more at www.mistletoe.org.uk

MUNTJAC

GARDEN VISITORS

First it was foxes, now deer are a growing urban phenomenon. Fallow visit Essex housing estates, reds venture into Sheffield and roe frequent many cemeteries, brownfield sites and railway embankments. But the deer most likely in urban gardens – at least in southern England, the Midlands and Wales – are tiny muntjac. No bigger than border collies, they come to food scattered for birds in winter, and lush garden plants also prove irresistible. Muntjac breed year-round; one survey found that numbers in the UK have doubled since 1996.

FIND OUT MORE British mammals: www.mammal.org.uk/discover-mammals

JACK SNIPE

HIDE AND SEEK

One of our daintiest waders, the starling-sized, pin-striped jack snipe has no trouble hiding among short tussocky grass and rushes. It is famous for crouching down and staying put until almost trodden on. Such exceptional shyness and camouflage help this dapper little winter visitor from Scandinavia to slip under our collective radar, though it's actually widespread in boggy grassland and marshes. But cold snaps can force birds into the open in search of ice-free areas.

TOP TIP Watch a BTO video on snipe ID: www.bto.org/about-birds/bird-id

HEN HARRIER

DUSK DRAMA

A big raptor flies low over a coastal saltmarsh at dusk. It moves with slow, lazy-looking flaps of its long wings, held up in a stiff 'V'. Then you see another, and another: hen harriers heading to a communal reedbed roost. Males have ghostly grey upperparts, while female and young birds are mostly brown but with a thin white rump. There are well-known winter harrier roosts at Hickling Broad, Wicken Fen and Strumpshaw Fen in East Anglia, the Isle of Sheppey and Lancashire's Dee Estuary. When you visit, look out for marsh harriers, too.

FIND OUT MORE Learn more about hen harrier populations: www.bto.org/hen-harrier

BBC RADIO 4 TWEET OF THE DAY www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/tweetoftheday

UK HIGHLIGHTS

The essential wildlife events to enjoy this month, compiled by **Ben Hoare**.

WHOOPER SWAN

SUPER WHOOPER

Birders talk about "wild swans" to distinguish whoopers and Bewick's from our more familiar resident mute swans. Whoopers, from Iceland, are the larger of these yellow-beaked winter migrants. They feed in floodplains and arable farmland, each afternoon shuttling to lake roosts, mostly at reserves. In full cry a trumpeting flock – like an out-of-tune brass band – is among the most spine-tingling sounds of winter. For close-up views, visit one of the daily swan feeds at WWT Caerlaverock, Martin Mere or Welney.

FIND OUT MORE WWT swan feeds: www.wwt.org.uk

ALSO LOOK OUT FOR...

SEASONAL DECORATION
London planes in cities are festooned with dangling seed clusters, looking for all the world as if our street trees have been dressed for Christmas. Not much eats the fat brown baubels, as these trees aren't native, though another alien species – the grey squirrel – might.

WAGTAIL WINS
Flocks of pied wagtails have taken to roosting in sheltered city-centre precincts and courtyards, where it is a few degrees warmer. Heathrow's Terminal 5 has become one of the best-known wagtail roosts – see Daniel Trim's winning photo in this issue's British Wildlife Photography Awards 2017 supplement.

SWEET SMELL
A sudden hit of vanilla while you're on a walk may indicate winter heliotrope. This plant, a garden escape, blooms in the bleak midwinter. Its scruffy pink flower-spikes are hardly showy: it is grown mainly for the intoxicating scent. Unfortunately, the species is also invasive, smothering hedge-banks and waysides.

HEAVY HITTERS
October saw record numbers of hawfinches turn up from central Europe, boosted by strong winds associated with Storm Ophelia. Normally these 'miniature parrots' are scarce in Britain, with under 1,000 breeding pairs, so this winter may offer your best chance of a sighting. Keep an eye on yew trees in churchyards across southern England and Wales!

Bullfinch: Paul Hobson; mistletoe: Calum Dickson/Alamy; jack snipe: David Tipling; spine: Arne Willcocks/Eyeline/Getty; hawfinch: Sven Gottschling/Getty; hen harrier & swan: Eric Meikard