



# SPRING to life this MARCH

by Mick Austin

**R**ural France provides a fantastic opportunity for watching wildlife, with the diversity of the countryside producing a variety of animal life not normally encountered in the UK outside of nature reserves. In Spring the place is alive with butterflies, bees and other insects. And as the sap starts to rise, mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians also find that love is in the air – sometimes with dangerous consequences!

Some of the wildlife is fairly common, some fairly elusive and some downright rare. Here are just a few of nature's wonders for you to search out. It's nowhere near a complete list, but hopefully there's enough to get you out enjoying what is a fabulous time of the year. Spring is in the air!

## TREES AND PLANTS

**Hazel** (3) (*Corylus*, *Noisetier commun*). Catkins are one of the obvious first signs of spring and will attract plenty of flying insects in search of food. Others include the **Goat willow** (*Salix caprea*, *Saule des chèvres*) sometimes called pussy willow, **Blackthorn** (*Prunus spinosa*, *Epine noire*) and **wild plums** (*prunes sauvage*). Wild orchids are also a joy to see. Some of the early flowering ones include: **Early purple orchid** (12) (*Orchis mascula*, *Orchis male*). Flowers April-July. **Fly orchid** (*Ophrys insectifera*, *Ophrys mouche*). Flowers April-July. **Lesser butterfly orchid** (*Platanthera bifolia*, *Orchis-à-deux feuilles*). Flowers May-August. **Lizard orchid** (*Himantoglossum hircinum*, *Orchis bouc*). Flowers May-June.

## INSECTS

**Buff-tailed bumblebee** (4) (*Bombus terrestris*, *Le bourdon terrestre*). Most common of the bumblebees in this region. Queens will be appearing from their winter sleep, usually underground, looking for pollen and nectar to build up their strength to raise the first workers. Another to look out for is the **Red-tailed bumblebee**

(*Bombus lapidaries*, *Le bourdon des pierres*) which, as its French name indicates, is often found nesting in stone walls. **Yellow-legged mining bee** (1) (*Andrena flavipes*) is one of the earliest solitary bees to emerge, usually in early February. They don't actually have yellow legs; the legs of both sexes are covered in yellow hairs.

Another is the **Red Mason Bee** (*Osmia rufa*, *L'Osmie rousse*). On the wing from late March and feeds solely on pollen and nectar. It's covered in dense, gingery hair. **Drone fly** (5) (*Eristalis tenax*, *L'éristale gluant*). Looks a bit like a honey bee but has two wings whereas the honey bee has four. Quite common from February on. See them on sunny days close to yellow flowers. Its larva (the rat-tailed maggot) lives in stagnant water or on animal faeces and rotting carcasses and is unusual in that it breathes through its tail, using it like a snorkel.

**Butterflies**. The first few warmer days brings them out of hibernation. Watch out for **Red Admiral** (*Le Vulcain*), **Peacock** (*La Paon du jour*), **Brimstone** (2) (*Le Citron*), **Comma** (6) (*Le robert*) and a couple of rarer ones in the **Small Tortoiseshell** (*La petite tortue*) and **Large Tortoiseshell** (17) (*La grande tortue*).

You'll really know Spring has arrived if you spot the **Orange Tip** (7) (*L'Aurore*) First of the migrating butterflies, all the way from Africa, include the **Painted Lady** (18) (*La Belle-Dame*).

## BIRDS

**Marsh harrier** (18) (*Circus aeruginosus*, *Busard des roseaux*). Can be seen any time of the year – especially along the Charente-Maritime coast and the Marais. They love waterfowl eggs and chicks, frogs, lizards and the occasional rabbit. March is the best time to see their mating displays, comprising high climbs and rapid falls with wings folded.



8



9



11



10



12

**Common buzzard (14)** (*Buteo buteo*, Buse variable). The most common bird of prey in France. An amazing variation in colours, from almost total white through browns to almost total black. Keep an eye out for their mating ritual, high in the sky with plenty of turning and diving.

**Short-toed eagle (10)** (*Circaetus gallicus*, Circaète Jean-le-Blanc). Quite rare in this part of France, but you might get lucky. They arrive from West Africa from March until May hunting for snakes, although they will take slow worms, voles, mice and the occasional hedgehog. Best chance of seeing one is on a hot, sunny day.

**Goshawk** (*Accipiter gentilis*, Autour des palombes). Historically one of the most persecuted birds of prey in Europe, it can now be found in most regions of France, although you can consider yourself lucky if you see one. Often described as a large sparrow hawk, it's about the size of a buzzard and prefers large woodlands with clearings. Courtship begins in February when the male performs spectacular 'roller-coaster' displays high above the trees.

## MAMMALS

**European beaver (15)** (*Castor fiber*, Castor d'Europe). A protected species found in many of the region's rivers including the Thouet, Vienne and Creuse. It's the largest rodent in Europe, with a body length of more than a metre plus a tail of up to 40cms. Their main threat comes from being accidentally shot in mistake for a coypu (ragondin), which can be found throughout France. Mating takes place in the water between January and March.

**Southwestern or Southern water vole** (*Arvicola sapidus*, Campagnol Amphibie). Quite rare in most of France but quite common in the Charente-Maritime. Found mostly near water. Doesn't hibernate but Spring (from March) sees the start of reproduction.

## REPTILES

**European pond turtle (16)** (*Emys orbicularis*, Cistude d'Europe). One of two native freshwater turtles present in France. Another, which has been introduced and can now be found in almost every region, is the **Florida turtle** (*Trachemys scripta elegans*, La Tortue à tempes rouges). The European pond turtle is around 20cms long with a smooth, brownish-grey domed shell with yellow streaks and can be found in lakes, rivers and canals where there is plenty of submerged vegetation and reeds. Hibernation usually ends in March and reproduction takes place in April/May.

**Viperine snake** (*Natrix Maura*, Couleuvre vipérine). Smallest of the couleuvres found in France, rarely exceeding 70cms in length. Its head is distinct from its body, with a flat top and sides, a pointed nose and eyes with round pupils. An excellent swimmer, it likes fast-flowing rivers and streams and feeds on frogs, newts, fish etc. It ends its hibernation (in a hole or under rocks) in March or April and lays up to 20 eggs in soil or a hole in the ground. It's quite shy but if threatened it will hiss loudly and even strike, but with its mouth closed. Non-venomous.

**Aesculapian snake (13)** (*Zamenis longissima*, Couleuvre d'Esculape). One of the largest snakes in Europe, growing to over two metres long. Has a thin body, a small pointed head and prominent eyes. The uniform back colouring can be yellow/brown, grey/brown, grey/black or olive green, while the underside is lighter. Hibernates from October to April in old tree stumps etc. Mating starts in May with some pretend fighting and up to 20 eggs are laid in compost heaps or stone walls. A non-venomous constrictor, it feeds on small mammals and birds, lizards and young snakes.

**Smooth snake (19)** (*Coronella austriaca*, Coronelle Lisse). Found in most parts of France, its back has two rows of darker markings