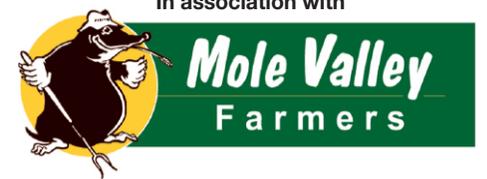


Morning News Country



Nature watch

with Trevor Beer



A pair of meadow pipits were exploring a field edge where the hedge-bank slopes into the field. The other side has a bit of a ditch, clearly showing how the farmer dug and built the soil up on that side. The vegetation on top is hawthorn, blackthorn, some hazel, spindle and holly, a good hedge which was obviously steeped a few years ago.

I felt it was somewhat early for the meadow pipits to nest but some site exploration never did any harm and as it is the female who constructs the nest an early decision on a good, sheltered home possibly sets her mind at rest.

Meadow pipit eggs may vary a great deal in colour and may be grey, brown or red in ground colour with mottled or spotted markings but I have seen them with no markings at all and quite uniform in appearance throughout the clutch. The usual number of eggs in a clutch is 4-5 and two clutches may be laid in a season.

Incubation is usually by the female alone but I have known the male occasionally changing over and helping out. Both adults feed the young which fledge at 12-13 days. Occasionally young leave the nest before they can fly and are tended by both parents for 4-12 days. I have known young leave the nest territory within 21 days but would see them about together into the autumn when they could join with others as winter flocks. This was especially so with second broods later in the season.

Tomorrow: Tis Rough Out There!

Country notebook

BY PHILIP BOWERN

How often do we see hares in the Westcountry? In my part of South Devon, not nearly often enough. In March, of course, they are supposed to go 'mad'. In fact hares that appear to be boxing, standing on their back legs and waving forelegs in the air, are actually male – or buck hares – indulging in pre-mating behaviour, for the benefit of the does.

In MacDonald Hastings' entries for March in Country Fair, his long out-of-print but still fascinating collection of anecdotes from the countryside, he describes the hares he has seen boxing. "These antics take the form of standing straight up on the hind legs, waving the forelegs after the fashion of a boxer sparring for an opening; or sometimes the buck takes crazy leaps forwards, sideways and backwards; or again he bucks like a broncho at a rodeo. A lucky observer may even see all variations during a short period of time."

That would, indeed, be lucky. I have seen hares in South Devon, but often not before they have seen me. Walking across a field of what looked like very short grass I was amazed, one early spring afternoon, to suddenly have a hare leap up, almost under my feet and run, in a zig-zag away from me at great speed. I bent down to examine the form where he had been hiding up and it was still warm, with little tufts of fur left behind after his quick exit. Such experiences stay in the mind for a very long time. The hare really is an amazing animal.

Time is running out to help brothers who want to make cheese on the farm

BY SARAH PITT

Time is ticking by to help two brothers establish an organic goats' milk dairy on their not-for-profit Dartmoor farm – in return for naming one of their baby goats.

Davon and Sylvan Friend are appealing to locals to support their Crowdfunder campaign – pledging money in return for naming a goat and other inducements.

So far the brothers, who began farming on rented land near Chagford a year ago, have raised £6,100 towards the £15,000 target.

The pressure is on, though, because under Crowdfunder rules they have to forfeit all the donations if they don't meet the target by March 28.

Crowdfunder invites individuals to pledge between £5 and £500 to get innovative business ideas off the ground or move to the next level.

The brothers, who have sunk £35,000 of their own money into the

'Goats are very charismatic creatures – more like dogs to look after than sheep'

Davon Friend

community farm, plan to use the donations to buy a cheese cave for maturing their cheese and a milking parlour for five female dairy goats, due to kid in July.

In return, supporters of the farm, which supplies produce to its members in the local area, are being offered rewards which include the chance to name a kid born this summer, to enjoy a rustic lunch cooked by the brothers.

"We've got a tough second year ahead of us and the £15,000, if reached, will certainly help us to expand and continue to demonstrate that fantastic local food for local people is both affordable and sustainable," said Davon.

"We believe that the way we pro-



Brothers Davon (left) and Sylvan Friend on their farm Chagfarm – they are appealing for donations to help them set up a goats milk dairy

duce and consume food needs to drastically change for the better and if we can reach out to other like-minded people via Crowdfunder then we're one step closer to self-sufficiency."

They have already bought a 200-litre cheese vat, heated by their wood-fired Rayburn, and Sylvan, who is chief cheesemaker, has been experimenting making different styles of cheese, including ricotta, feta and halloumi. The dairy will be up and running by May, with cheeses supplied to existing "members" of the farm, locals who commit to buy produce – eggs, milk, honey and pork – paying a year in advance. A small amount will also be available to buy from the Devonshire Dairy in Chagford.

The herd of Anglo Nubian-Saanen goats have five acres of mixed woodland and pasture to graze on, and eat hay from the farm next door during the winter. Muck from the goats is traded with the nearby community market garden Chagfood to fertilise the crops.

When the brothers swapped the conventional life for their small farm, they had no hesitation in choosing dairy goats over cows, said Sylvan. "We were brought up on a smallholding where our parents kept goats," says Sylvan. "They were hand milked, and I'll never forget the taste of the glorious cheese that the milk produced, as if by magic."

He said he wanted to specialise in producing cheese from the milk, using traditional techniques to

create both hard and soft goats cheeses. "We are also planning to make soft mould ripened goats cheese and having travelled throughout the UK and the rest of Europe have witnessed how diverse these cheeses can be," he said. "We are excited about using traditional techniques to incorporate some of this diversity into our own cheeses."

Davon said they hoped to expand their goat herd – currently consisting of five girls and six boys – to 30 in the fullness of time.

"They are very charismatic animals, they are amazing to work with – more like dogs to look after than sheep – and they are very friendly and inquisitive animals."

Visit www.crowdfunder.co.uk/chagfarm to find out more.

Honeybees rescued from flood water on the Somerset Levels

Somerset beekeepers have been braving the floodwater on the Somerset Levels to rescue their colonies.

Brian Maskell, from Westonzoyle and a committee member of the Quantock Beekeepers Division, had to launch his canoe in order to check his colonies.

He kept his bees on the site of the Battle of Sedgemoor, which has been transformed from a field to an inland sea this winter. Sadly one of his two

colonies has drowned but the other, with a special pedigree queen bee, is battling on.

Ken Edwards, secretary of Quantock Beekeepers, said he was particularly pleased this colony had survived: "Four years ago Westonzoyle Women's Institute decided to support local honeybees and donated a 'Buckfast' pedigree queen bee to Brian. The group called the bee Queenie and Brian gave them regular

updates about her welfare. Last year she was superseded by one of her daughters and the colony was well prepared for the winter."

The apiary has never been flooded before but Brian will not be able to thoroughly inspect the rescued colony until late March because of the natural overwintering behaviour of honeybees.

Quantock Beekeepers are preparing to help members who have lost

bees as a result of floods and will run a queen rearing programme to provide replacement bees in late spring.

Meanwhile, Chris Harries of Sedgemoor Honey Farm at Creech St Michael, near Taunton, had to put on waders to get to some of his bees kept at West Lyng.

He said: "We had to wade waist-deep through rising flood water to remove five colonies."



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