

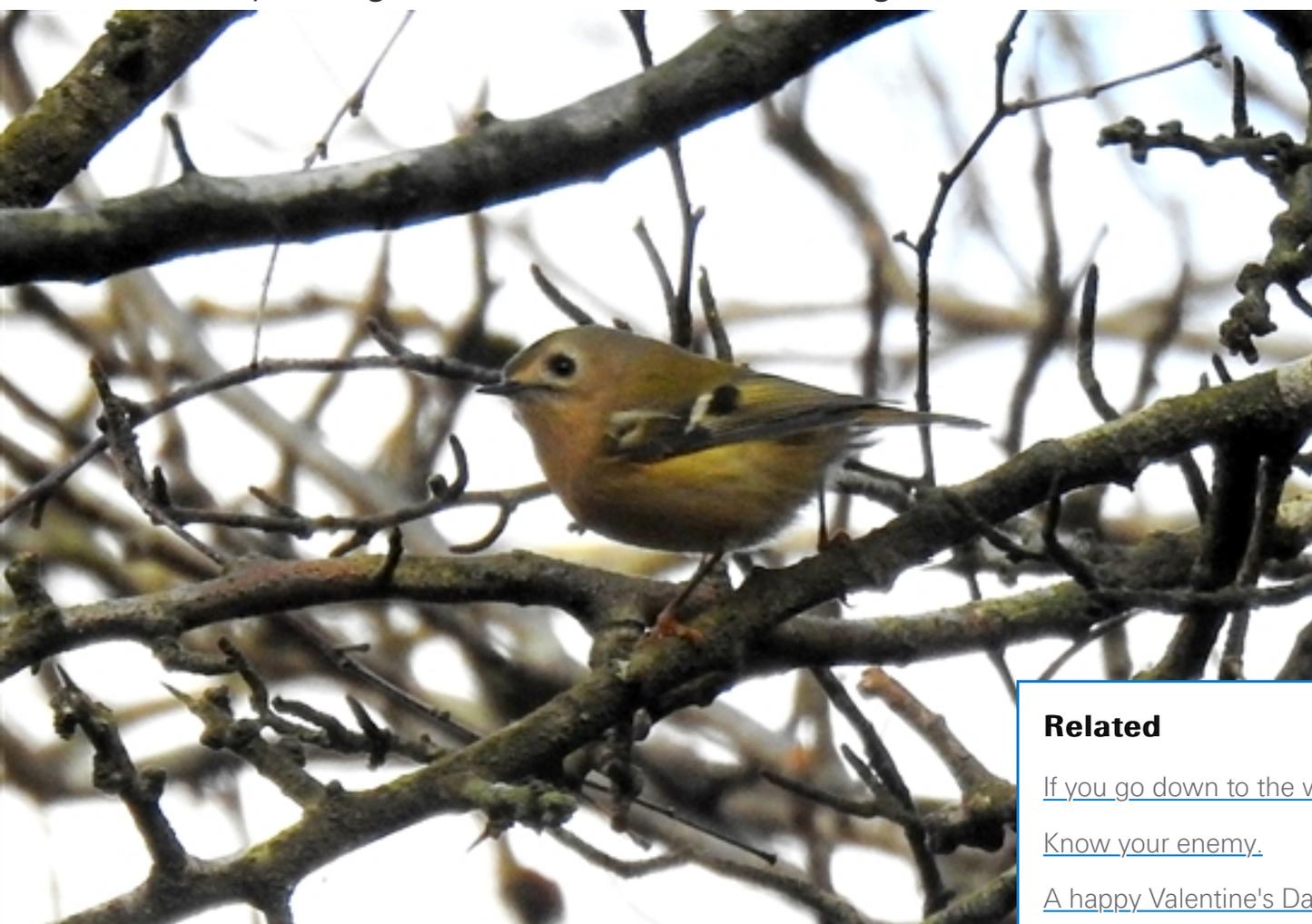


An area of farmland lies north west of Saltholme, between the reserve and Cowpen Bewley, which you can see as you drive along the A1185. Although It is always a good idea to look out of the front window on that road as some of those tankers are a tad large. This farm habitat comprised pasture grassland with gappy hedgerows and was heavily overgrazed. However, RSPB have now managed the reserve for a couple of years and the new tenant farmer is managing the land in a more wildlife friendly way.

To see how the changes in management affect bird life, I undertake breeding bird and monthly winter bird counts there. I like to pick a sunny day to do a winter bird count so that half of the birds are dark silhouettes against a bright sky, and I have to be careful not to look into the sun as I try to follow flying birds with my binoculars – bird surveys are easier with functioning eyes.

In this period of habitat change I never know quite what I will find. Initial surveys, when the land was overgrazed, produced little bird life other than 200 starlings, some winter thrushes, two tree sparrows, 5 yellowhammer and a goldcrest. The yellowhammer were nice to see as we don't get them on the main reserve and they really brighten up a winter day. The goldcrest was a surprise as it seemed completely out of place.

This morning things were very different, with 200 wood pigeon joining the hundreds of starlings, 12 curlew, 3 redshank, 64 lapwing, 25 reed bunting, 22 tree sparrow, 20 yellowhammer (13 in one hawthorn bush), 5 long-tailed tits and one goldcrest.



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Goldcrest in winter by John Bindeman

Could it be the same bird ? and if it is, who is this little fella ? The plantations around Cowpen Bewley contain plenty of conifers for breeding goldcrests, and they are known to move to other habitats in winter to feed on insects which are hard to find in winter. So hard to find that in a severe winter, this tiny bird can suffer 90% mortality. But Britain is inundated with goldcrests from Northern Europe in winter, so birds we see now could be either locally bred or continental. For now this little bird is a mystery.

When I teach bird song, I always ask participants what the various sounds remind them of. It is now firmly accepted, without any uncertainty what so ever, that a singing goldcrest sounds like a mouse revving up a very tiny motorbike.



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