January 2026: Joy illimited

Some animals migrate to hotter climes for the winter; we shall not see swallows, martins and swifts for several months. Others hibernate. There are butterflies hibernating in the vestry, moths in the vault under the church, and ladybirds at the top of the tower by the bells. Our bats, who have their spring and summer maternity roost in the church porch, will be hibernating somewhere else – maybe underground in a cellar or cave. Their body temperatures drop to near ambient and their heart rates drop from hundreds to tens of beats per minute, although on rare, very warm evenings, pipistrelles might emerge from their hibernation and risk burning precious brown fat stores in the hope of finding a moth.



Bats, hedgehogs and dormice are the only British mammals to truly hibernate. Many mammals, rather than hibernating, simply spend a lot of the winter asleep. Our badgers, for example, will have fattened up in the autumn so as to be able to spend much of the winter snug underground, occasionally emerging and visiting the churchyard to snack on worms. Although only, of course, if the ground isn't frozen, as that drives the worms down and out of reach. Beneath the grass, on the other hand, our moles are active all year round. If the surface freezes, they just dig deeper, looking for the worms who simply fall into the moles' tunnels. Just to be sure, though, as they are unable to put on much body fat, from the autumn, moles store up worms in underground pantries. The worms are alive (and so fresh) but can't escape as they are paralysed by a well-placed bite behind the head, although some think that, like shrews, moles may have a worm-specific neurotoxin in their saliva.

Meanwhile, above ground, this is a time of year when the lack of leaves makes it easy to see those birds that are out and about. Most obvious are the blue tits and great tits coming to Phil's feeders, and the blackbirds energetically throwing about leaf litter like overexcited dogs with Christmas wrapping paper. If you stand still and wait, every few minutes flocks of long tailed tits loop chattily from tree to tree. Tiny goldcrests, some resident birds and others winter visitors from Scandinavia, hide at the top of churchyard trees, but can be recognised by their high pitched 'yup-yup' call. Noisiest, of course, are the rooks in the rookery beyond the old vicarage, constantly arguing, their racket punctuated by the 'clattering' of shouty jackdaws. On the north side of the church, you might see a brown flash between bushes and hear the urgent alarm call of a wren. Wrens, and robins, are among the few birds that sing throughout the year;

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blackbirds will give their 'chink chink chink' alarm call if you disturb them but won't start singing properly until around February, as Gilbert White observed when wrote out his list of birds that sing by month in a letter written in November 1769.

Although he reported that song thrushes also don't start singing routinely until around February, they do sometimes sing in the winter, and there was one doing so gloriously in the churchyard the other day. Rev CA Johns, in his wonderfully personal 'British Birds in their Haunts' of 1862 (these illustrations – 'presentments' – by William Foster are from a 1915 edition), wrote of the song thrush; 'However near it may be, its song is never harsh, and at a distance its only defect is, that it is not nearer.'

The song of a thrush often symbolises hope in literature. It's not at all clear (to me at least) whether Thomas Hardy's darkling thrush was a song thrush or a mistle thrush; does 'darkling' refer to the thrush, and, if so, does it mean darker (song thrush) or greyer (mistle thrush), or does it simply signify its singing at dusk? His poem was written for New Year's Day, 1900, and his thrush, through the gloom and cold, sang joyously (mistle thrushes are often a bit hesitant and melancholic), bringing Hardy hope for the new year and century.

I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was spectre-gray[1]*,*
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day…
…And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I.

At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy illimited;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

If, during cold and gloomy January, you feel a bit in need of some joy illimited and blessed hope, you could do worse than to listen out for a song thrush.

[1] Hardy spelt grey with an 'a' so we'll go with that. Apparently the American and British spellings only diverged later in the 20th century, long after his poem was written.