

It's a battle for survival

The robin's close association with Christmas dates from Victorian times when festive cards began to feature our red-breasted hero in salutation of the postmen who delivered them.

They wore red uniforms and were nicknamed "robins".

Robins can be seen on the Heath now, as they fiercely defend winter territories against rivals.

But your best chance of seeing a woodcock on Hampstead Heath might be when you nearly stand on one. It is a skulking, thick-set bird that lurks in damp woods.

It is mostly nocturnal, spending daylight hours inert, unmoving on woodland floors, where its brilliant camouflage looks more like leaf litter than leaf litter.

You can be a couple of feet away from a woodcock and never know it, unless it breaks cover in a noisy and hefty explosion of brown feathers, followed closely by a rusty rear end.

The woodcock is sometimes called the "snipe of the woods" but apart from the heavy and long beak, you would be more likely to place them in the game bird envelope.

We welcome continental woodcocks to the Heath at this time of year as they take advantage of our relatively mild winters.



■ A robin in the snow Picture: PA

As assaults of hard winter weather bite, spare a festive thought for the animals muddling through on Hampstead Heath.

They will employ a variety of survival techniques.

Some will have fat reserves, having gorged themselves earlier in the year; some will have migrated, other species continue to move around to seek optimum, milder locations; some will have stockpiled food stores in sneaky hidey-holes and yet more will change their feeding habits as the available choice diminishes. Just a few will hibernate.

You may be surprised to learn that there are only three true hibernators in the UK – hedgehogs, bats (of which there are quite a few

species) and dormice.

During hibernation body temperature and heart rate drop and metabolism is reduced by around 99%.

Fat deposits provide the energy required to survive the long period without food. Energy is still needed to get rid of waste products (through urination and defecation) and, believe it or not, to take periods of sleep – hibernation is not sleeping.

Warmer weather will be the cue to emerge from hibernation. But if climate change should push late winter temperatures towards those expected in April, the result could be disastrous.

Hibernating bats may be tricked into ending their winter hole-up early, only to find a lack of food and starvation a real possibility.

Similarly, if hedgehogs breed later in the warmer summers, there may not be time for that second brood to put on enough fat to survive the winter, so they might die during hibernation.

Please raise a merry glass in celebration of our Hampstead Heath wildlife, but perhaps also consider turning the central heating down a degree or two for its benefit.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year from the City of London Corporation at Hampstead Heath.

■ Follow the team on Twitter at www.twitter.com/CityCorpHeath.

Wet weather driving worms onto fateful journeys

The mass suicide of lemmings is a myth – and the famous documentary which featured it, and which so disturbed my childhood, turns out to have been staged. It was an over-dramatisation of the natural migration of lemmings, occurring when population levels outgrew resources.

I was forced to wonder recently, about the possible mass suicide of worms. I was walking to school with my youngest son when he pointed out that the pavement was littered with squashed or shrivelled bodies of earthworms.

He got to 32 of them before he got fed up counting.

We were passing the local park at the time and the next day, at the same spot, there were a further 20.

The phenomenon occurred again a week later and the common factor each time seemed to be that it followed a night of very heavy rain.

Drowning is one of the greatest threats to the wellbeing of the earthworm and my hypothesis is that the complete water logging of the soil had forced them to the surface in an unsuccessful search for higher or drier ground.

It is known that earthworms are found nearer the surface in wet weather or even after a heavy dew – a fact utilised by anglers who would gather them in the late evening or early morning for bait and who once knew them by the

name dew worms.

Conversely, worms will go deeper into the soil in dry conditions and in the hottest parts of the year will dig down before twisting themselves into a knot, to minimise moisture loss, and succumbing to aestivation – the summer form of hibernation.

Foxes

Apart from anglers there are other creatures which exploit this relationship between wet and worms.

Seagulls are regulars in my local park as they are of most flat and featureless grassland and in wet weather you can sometimes see them paddling rhythmically, raising their feet up and down on the grass. For some unknown reason, earthworms also respond to vibrations – which is why "worm charmers" use tuning forks to attract them. In this case, with the worms already nearer the surface because of the wet conditions it is a fatal kind of charming. The gulls are drawing them up to eat them.

Foxes also have an interesting relationship with earthworms.

Studies show that they comprise just over 12pc of the diet of a London fox. An individual worm provides little in the way of nutrition for a fully grown animal so it will need to balance the amount of energy derived from eating worms against the expenditure in energy from seeking them out.

For this reason foxes search for worms on warm wet nights when they can pick them up from the surface of a lawn – several hundred on a good night – without digging for them.

Another reason earthworms will come to the surface is to mate.

They mate lying head to tail on the surface of the soil on warm humid nights. According to some accounts they will also migrate in search of a suitable mate.

Peter Marren's *Bugs Britannica* cites an account, from a farmer, of worms migrating across fields in their hundreds in late winter and even negotiating cattle grids.

I'm rather puzzled by this. Since earthworms are hermaphroditic – having both male and female reproductive organs – you would think they would only have to travel as far as the worm next door to find a mate. And even if genetic diversity is an issue, earthworm populations are so dense, with an estimated 250,000 per acre on even the poorest soils and figures far in excess of that on fertile land, you wouldn't think they'd have to travel far to refresh the gene pool.

Given the recent weather and there is rain forecast as I write, I'm confident that it is the complete saturation of our soils that is driving local earthworms onto their fatal journeys.

It is, to paraphrase poet Stevie Smith, a case of "not dating but drowning".

Bob Gilbert

Oh là là, this is London's greatest bargain

And so this is Christmas. Do your home and family now look just like the welter of recent advertisements? A golden wreath on your red front door? Your beautiful children wearing plum coloured velvet? Your equally beautiful and silky partners near obliterated by must-have



bags and sleekly bejewelled 'timepieces'? No ...? Well at least you don't have to stand the articles any more: Books of the Year ('Christmas that is bound to please!'), stocking fillers ('Christmas all wrapped up!') and of course the acres of screed on the 'perfect turkey' ('Christmas on a plate with all the trimmings!').

It's me-time, now: you've done your bit – so give yourself a treat. Eat out. Somewhere French. Because you know it makes sense: when it's proper, French cuisine is still the best in the world. And I'm just about up to here, quite frankly, with gastropubs, 'concept' eateries, pop-ups, fusion, British 'with a twist' and anywhere at all that is 'happening', or doesn't take bookings. So last week I visited two very different sorts of French restaurant – one brand new, the other forty-five years old. Both are off our patch – but it's Christmas, right? So you'll be striking farther afield in quest of something different. And even if you won't be ... well: I was.

Colbert is on the corner site of the old Oriel in Sloane Square – bang opposite St Peter of Jones, and hard by the Royal Court Theatre. Here is the latest in Jeremy King and Chris Corbin's stable – much less grand in scale and ambition than the recent Delaunay or Brasserie Zedel, but in its intimate way, more beguiling than either of them. The décor is just perfect – art nouveau curves, pendants and banquettes, differing sorts of tessellated floors linking the disparate rooms, fin de siècle posters ... and a brilliant menu: a crossover between bistro and brasserie offering such rare delights as Steak Diane, but also an all day breakfast (not just the inevitable Rosbif sop of 'full

English', but all sorts of omelettes and croques). My chum and I both had escargots in a very garlicky garlic sauce, and then for me a very lean and yielding minute (sirloin) steak frites, and a duck cassoulet for him: really, really good. The bustle here is very uplifting – a stream of youngish and good-looking locals, catered to by a staff that knows what it's doing. This sort of place was largely responsible for France's reputation in general – and that of Paris in particular – for cheapish and reliable food at any time of day, amid a popping atmosphere. But still and all – then as now – it is really about fine dining: the best ingredients, chef, décor and waiting staff, allied to the weight of tradition.

Wow factor

Which brings us reasonably neatly to Le Gavroche. Albert and Michel Roux founded the place in 1967, and London had never seen the like. Up till then, there were Italian trattoria, steakhouses and the stuffy and overpriced hotels: here was French cuisine never before experienced outside of France, quickly garnering three Michelin stars. There are many fine restaurants in London now, but Le Gavroche, well ... the cachet lingers on (Michel Roux Jnr's television fame doing the very reverse of harm). I hadn't been for many years, and my wife and I were greatly looking forward to it. ... and at this point I would say something along the lines of "so did it live up to all the hype, under the mastery of Albert's son Michel, the man in charge for the past twenty years?" ... but you've already peeked at my scoring at the foot of this piece, and so are well aware that, wow ...! It did indeed.

The décor in the ground floor bar is cosy and traditional, and there is a little shrine to all things Roux: five signed books for £90, news of an App, studied photographs of the genius at work. The greeting is warm, and from the moment you are escorted downstairs to the restaurant, service, politeness and attention to detail are absolute ... and yet it is easy, welcoming and so utterly enjoyable: no hint of starch or unease. Thick carpeting, softly textured red walls, magnificent spotlit floral displays in black glass urns and a scattering of Picasso pastels. The lighting, c'est tres intime, the napery crisply perfect, and every piece of silverware bears an effigy of 'le gavroche' (the ragged-trousered urchin, le miserable).



Support both camps and enjoy sherry and fortified wines

One advantage of the festive season is that you can indulge in opening fortified wines knowing that there will be moments to drink them after the decorations have come down and turkey is a memory. With a few exceptions they can be just as good a couple of weeks on – provided you do keep them stoppered and cool when you're not pouring.

There's talk at the moment of port sales rising at the expense of sherry. That would be a shame, as both have their attractions.

Why not support both camps?

There are less familiar gems, too. Think of Madeira, covering the taste spectrum from dry to treacly sweet, or new world takes on tradition in the form of rich muscats from Australia, or southern France's vins doux naturels which can be pale and floral or dark and chocolate-friendly.

Most fortifieds (except those where very cheap prices should advise caution) are made with care and the results are reliable.

Even own-brands can be good, as often the small print reveals a classic name. M&S has one of the stars of my 2012 port experience, its 20-year-old tawny, made by one of the top names in the business, David Guimaraens.

It looks great and is even lovelier to drink – rich in nut, dried fruit and spice yet fresh. At £33 it's extravagant, but special.

The longer tawnies age, the more mellow and appealing they become, but a decade is enough to give something very good.

Quinta do Noval 10-year-old has an orange-spice edge (£15.20 at Waitrose and Ocado – which will take next-day delivery orders up to Sunday). Tawnies are matured in wood, hence the colour and flavour, and last well once opened.

Vintage port, from the finest grapes, develops more complexity



■ Noval vineyards in the Douro Valley, Portugal home of port

with time in bottle, while late-bottled vintage (LBV), with easy appeal, is ready immediately. Both styles are best finished soon once uncorked.

Ocado has three treats from Noval, the unfiltered LBV 2004, which has a savoury character (£14.90), colheita 1997 (a fine single-vintage tawny, £38) and vintage 2003 (£66), from an excellent year.

Softer and sweeter than Noval's, Graham's 2007 LBV (£10.20) there, too. Other pleasures in the Waitrose/Ocado fortified range include Sandeman 2007 LBV (£15), complex, delicious and superb value; fine Madeiras – start happily with Henriques & Henriques Full Rich (£10, 50cl); and the ever-excellent Solera Jerezana sherries (£9) – the dry oloroso is a star. At Tesco, the Finest* LBV 2006 (£10) is attractive, too, and Finest* amontillado sherry (£5.90, 50cl) is properly nutty and dry.

M&S has toffee-and-nuts Malmsey Madeira 2001 from Henriques & Henriques (£18, 50cl), as well as some good sherries – try the Rare Pedro Ximenez (£7.50) for sweet, rich decadence.

Majestic ticks lots of boxes, from drier to indulgently sticky: Apostoles 20-year-old palo cortado (£17, half-bottle) with everlasting length; Fonseca Bin 27 (£9), the standard all rubies should reach; Taylor's 10-year-old tawny (£19), rich, serious and fresh on the finish; and another fine ending to any festive day, De Bortoli Show Liqueur Muscat (£12.80).

Happy Christmas!



■ Colbert in Sloane Square

Your restaurant critic was in his heaven, for this is what I love (and why in blazes would I not?)

Little complimentary crispy sausage rolls and cheesy tartlets (tasting not unlike Boursin, may Michel strike me dead) and then an amuse bouche of sublime smoked eel. My wife had an amazingly concentrated and superbly creamy veloute that looked like cappuccino and delivered up chunks of scallop, and maybe failed (and therefore gutted) MasterChef contestants. My breast of pigeon with Puy lentil salad was meltingly tender and flavourful. Water (I had ordered fizzy, and was surprised by Italian Pellegrino: where Perrier? Where Badoit?) is poured into gold-rimmed glasses, a light and fruity Cote de Nuits Villages into splendid and generous Riedel stemware. A chunk of unsalted butter is on the table, as are balls of salted.

Mains involve synchronised removal of silver domes, and there, glistening before her, was

my wife's fillet of gurnard (rather like halibut) – moist and plump, with a beignet of escargots and a wonderfully buttery parsley sauce. And I had rolled cylinder of turkey breast, carefully stuffed and piquant with just enough apricot: a fine gravy from a dinky little boat, and much ooh-ing and ah-ing to follow. The chef actually in the kitchen that day was Monica Galetti (Scary Spice) – but Michel then came over to say hello. He looks far more bright-eyed, fit and whippet lean than any chef has the right to, and is as charming and engaging as ever. Already he is in training for the next London Marathon ... unaccompanied, I imagine, by Albert, his better upholstered papa.

Dessert? Bien sur. Buche de Noel – very unctuous chocolate and caramel log (this being Noel, after all) with roasted banana ...! I had cheese from a trolley of more than forty that makes you groan with greedy lust (and is there, I ask you, any other kind?). It is

all French and English, and I had Stilton, Lincolnshire Poacher and (a current favourite) Liverot. And then a glass gondola of very pretty petits fours, including miniature toffee apples as well as raisins on the vine ... and so to coffee and cushions of mince pie. Look: this place is just fantastic. And you have to take out a mortgage, right? Wrong. Well – not at lunchtime, anyway: three courses, the frequent freebies, half a bottle of water, half a bottle of wine, coffee and petits fours: £52 a head. I know: it's London's greatest bargain. Trouble is ... it's the very devil to get a table ... but then you have to take out a mortgage.

Alors, mes petits enfants, there vous have it: France, sur une assiette. Parce que, these days, London does Paris better than Paris. Joyeux Noel ... et un boozy New Year!

■ Joseph Connolly's latest novel, *England's Lane*, is published by Quercus in hardback and ebook. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

■ COLBERT

52 Sloane Square, SW1
Tel: 020 7730 2804.

■ Open Mon-Thurs 8am-11pm
Fri-Sat 8am-11.30pm
Sun 8am-10.30pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ Cost: It could be a tenner a head, it could be £60.

■ LE GAVROCHE

43 Upper Brook Street, W1
Tel: 020 7408 0881

■ Open Mon-Fri noon-2pm,
6.30pm-11pm. Sat 6.30-11pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ Cost: Set lunch £52: Three courses, including half bottle of wine, coffee and petits fours. À la carte expensive: Mains up to £60.

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