



Whitchurch Nature Notes (10) Gardening with wildlife in mind



It is over a year since my first Nature Notes – and what a year it's been. Our established ways of living have been questioned as never before and the environment has become a regular mainstream topic in the news. One positive aspect is that many of us have spent more time enjoying our gardens; we are also making time to look more closely at the flora and fauna around us.

Weeds v. Wild Flowers I shall start this Nature Notes with a little anecdote. One fine morning recently, I decided to do a bit of tidying and clearing in one of the beds in our garden, to make room for some summer annuals. Some Jack-by-the-Hedge, or Garlic Mustard, had self-seeded amongst the cultivated garden plants and I decided to weed it out. However, I was stopped in my tracks by the sight of a beautiful female Orange Tip butterfly which landed on the flowers (pictured on right). Garlic Mustard is one of the food plants for the Orange Tip caterpillars – if I dug out these 'weeds', I would reduce the available habitat for the female to lay her eggs, which are laid singly and only one generation per year.



You could argue that this butterfly is common and not on the endangered species list, so why bother? Surely the 'tidiness' of our flower beds should take priority over the needs of a common butterfly? After much dithering, I compromised and dug up some of the Garlic Mustard plants (possibly destroying some eggs in the process) but I left others for nature to take its course. If the butterfly hadn't appeared at that moment, I probably would have removed it all. It was a salutary reminder to think twice before digging out anything that was not in your planting plan!

Remember that the species we choose to grow have a huge impact on the insects which will come to live on them, and this in turn influences the food that will be available for birds, bats, shrews and predatory insects such as dragonflies. Everything starts with the plants.



Slugs and snails v. Dahlias I have discovered a great website called 'Slughelp' which makes very informative reading for those of you who despair about the damage done to your vegetable and flower plants by molluscs.

I know it is really tempting to drop in at the garden centre to buy a tub of slug pellets after discovering a precious plant, such as a dahlia (on left), munched to the ground overnight - but think before you buy. Slughelp recommends making our gardens more friendly for the natural predators of slugs and snails, such as ground beetles, hedgehogs, centipedes, toads, frogs, newts, lizards, songbirds and shrews.

Many of these predators are now in decline, especially the much-loved hedgehog, and the complex food chains have been disrupted by our modern intensive and chemical-based practices. I was

pleased to discover that the outdoor use of metaldehyde, a pesticide used to control slugs on farms and in gardens, is set to be banned in Great Britain from the end of March 2022 in order to better protect wildlife and the environment. We should welcome this move by the government and turn to greener ways to keep those slimy creatures off our cultivated flowers and vegetables.

Nesting birds and their young Of course, the springtime is when our native birds are nest building, egg-laying and then rearing their broods of hungry chicks. If you sit outside quietly for a while, you might be rewarded by the sight of some tireless parents hard at work. You may notice a nest site that you hadn't observed before – they obviously do their utmost to hide their youngsters from predators. We can help them by providing suitable regular food supplies and nesting sites, such as thick hedges and outbuildings accessible for small birds like robins. The photo on the right is of a nest of robin chicks which our daughter discovered on the floor of a greenhouse where she works, underneath the Mypex sheeting. They have successfully fledged, you will be pleased to know!



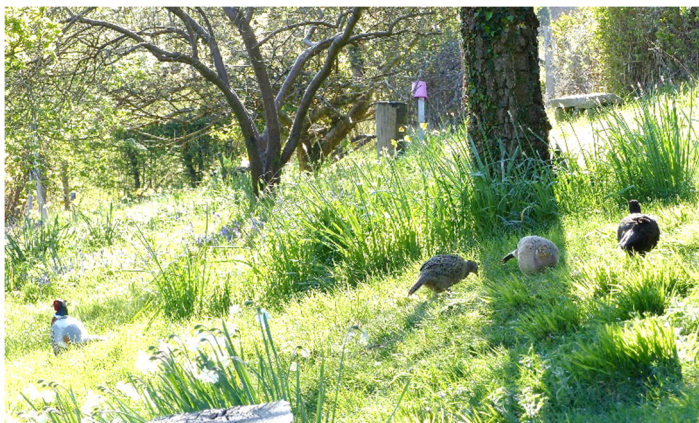
However, you may also be heartbroken when you see evidence of the harsh reality of nature – an abandoned nest, a pile of feathers on the ground, or a headless chick. The natural predators of small garden birds, such as magpies, jays, woodpeckers and sparrowhawks, are themselves providing for their young. The traditional countryside practices which controlled their numbers without compunction have declined, and the balance has now been tipped in favour of the predators.

There are endless arguments amongst environmentalists, gamekeepers and bird lovers about how to re-establish the so-called balance. Our English countryside and wildlife have been evolving over the centuries, due to changes in land ownership, management and the rural economy. The heated letters in the Henley Standard recently about the red kite population are a good case in point. Some argue that they are magnificent birds which grace our Chiltern landscape and their re-introduction has put them back in our skies where they belong; others argue the opposite – their numbers are excessive and they have now adapted their food source from carrion to taking live chicks directly from nests or on the river. There are certainly no easy answers in this debate.



Badgers, pheasants and lizards Here at The Old Farmhouse, we are very fortunate to have a large rural garden, with very sensitively managed grassland and woodland on our northern boundary. This means that we get a lot of interesting residents and visitors but sometimes there is conflict!

Badgers have always been regular night-time visitors (a trail camera image on left) and even if you wanted to, they are virtually impossible to keep out of the garden. When we fenced the boundaries, back in 1978, we dug in wire to keep out the rabbits but installed badger gates on their favourite trails. Badger gates are like big cat flaps but weighted with



stones to stop the rabbits using them too. The badgers do randomly dig up the lawn and eat the gooseberries when they are just ready for picking; however, on the whole, they are not a big problem for us and we happily share our garden with them.

There are always a few pheasants around too but recently we have had a resident pheasant harem, of one cock pheasant and three devoted hens (two pale and one unusually dark - see photo on left). They are like having free range chickens around, scratching in dusty seedbeds

and poking under the grasses for possible nest sites. Pete loves them – we have no other pets now so these are his substitutes. They follow him round when he is topping up the bird feeders. Not surprisingly, he was delighted when I found a nest with 5 eggs under a big grass clump, obviously laid by one of the hens. However, he was very sad when the next morning we discovered all the eggs had gone, most likely taken by an opportunistic badger.

The conflict I mentioned earlier is this – I have been more concerned about the fate of our resident common lizards, than the pheasants which Pete has befriended. The lizards would make a tasty supper for a hungry pheasant! In the past two years, we have seen the lizards throughout the spring and summer months, sunning themselves on our hot terrace walls (on right). We had not seen any so far this year (and I was getting increasingly worried) but I am now really pleased to say that we have spotted one – perhaps pheasants and lizards can co-exist after all.



The Wildlife Trusts calculate that the gardens in the UK are larger than all of our National Nature Reserves combined, making them as important for wildlife as they are for our own wellbeing. I urge you to think very carefully and sensitively about what you do in your own green space. Remember the excitement of young children when they find a ladybird or snail – we should never lose that simple joy. There is so much to be enjoyed in our natural world, starting in our own gardens, and it is in our hands to enhance the biodiversity wherever we can.

There are obviously no hard and fast rules for making your garden more biodiverse but here are a few **guidelines** that are worth considering: -

- plant as many *different* plant species as possible, including trees and shrubs – these will result in a richer insect diversity
- leave undisturbed corners for small creatures to nest, breed and hole up for the winter and don't be too tidy – leave leaf litter, make deadwood piles and cairns
- dig a pond or at very least, provide some permanent source of water
- leave an area of your lawn to grow longer, allowing flowers to bloom for the bees
- above all, please stop using pesticides and herbicides – their long-term effects are lethal

I hope I have provided a few interesting personal thoughts which will encourage you to take some simple steps towards making your garden even more wildlife-friendly.

Finally, for some inspiring and entertaining reading, I thoroughly recommend Dave Goulson's book 'The Garden Jungle or Gardening to Save the Planet' – put it on your book list!