



Whitchurch Nature Notes (12) Sights & Sounds of Summer



A year has passed since my last Nature Notes, 'Creatures of the Night', and what a year it has been. The weather has been unpredictable, with two intense and persistent cold spells in the winter followed by a very wet spring. It certainly has given us plenty to talk about (the Brits' favourite topic of course) but we should be aware that these changes to our climate patterns are disrupting the natural world around us.

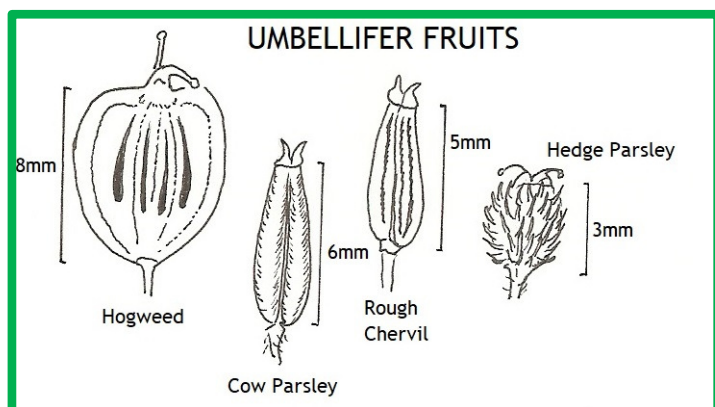
Every day, something catches my interest when I am in the garden or around the village, so I try to make a note or take a photo as a reminder. We are constantly told in the news about the threats to our environment which can be very depressing. However, just keeping aware of what is here around us, and trying to understand better, is a good first step towards protecting our local flora and fauna. Here is a miscellany of seasonal topics that I hope you will find interesting and enlightening.

Hogweed and its relatives

The start of the summer sees a rapid growth of beautiful vegetation along our country roadside verges (as seen on the right). It never fails to surprise me because the transformation is virtually overnight. The tall, airy, white flowers which predominate in April and May are mostly Cow Parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris*) but these are followed later by other similar umbellifers such as Rough Chervil, Hedge Parsley and the ubiquitous and misunderstood Hogweed (*Heracleum sphondylium*). To quote my Collins Wild Flower Guide, Hogweed is a 'very variable, tall stout biennial/perennial, to 3m, hairless or roughly hairy'. This is the dominant tall plant in the rough grassy area at the Maze, and all along our verges. It persists upright through the summer because the stems are thick, unlike the more delicate Cow Parsley plants.



I use the word 'misunderstood' because it is a common mistake to confuse a tall Hogweed specimen with its close relative, the Giant Hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*) which should be avoided at all costs! It can cause severe blistering on the skin if touched – every summer there will be a scary news item about someone being hospitalised. The Giant Hogweed can be recognised easily because it is much stouter and taller, up to 5m, and it grows only in damp ground.



On the left is a diagram taken from the Hardwick Road Verge Flora (WNN9), by Sandra Parkinson, which shows the differences between the fruits (seeds) of the four umbellifers mentioned above, which are all to be found on the verges of Hardwick Road. If you find a seedhead, this diagram should help you work out which plant it comes from. A hand lens (or loupe) would be an aid, to see the fine details.

A few weeks ago, I was asked to look at a plant growing along Muddy Lane because someone had reported that it might be a Giant Hogweed and if so, parents with children should take great care. On inspection, the plant was a tall Hogweed, not a Giant, so I was able to report back and allay the concerns.

This little episode had an interesting epilogue. When I took some general photos of the hogweeds in the Maze, I discovered a large beetle feeding on an umbel (the composite flowerhead). All umbellifers are great food sources for a wide range of insects, from large to miniscule – stop and look for yourself sometime.



I was not able to identify the beetle (apart from being in the Longhorn family because of its very long antennae), so I sent this photo on the left off to iSpot. This is a Citizen Science website, funded and hosted by the Open University. It is a brilliant resource which brings together a great community of experts who seem to be ready day or night to help identify anything in the flora and fauna world for us. It is completely free, so give it a try!

This beetle was identified within the hour as a Variable Longhorn (*Stenocorus meridianus*). Longhorn beetles are herbivores and feed on plant tissue such as stems, trunks, or roots of both herbaceous and woody plants. So, neither the beetle nor the plant can cause humans any danger!

Birds

On the subject of birds, you may have already discovered the Merlin Bird ID App which helps you identify birds. The most impressive option to me is the Sound ID which listens to the birds around you and shows real-time suggestions for who's singing – incredible! The ability to identify bird songs and calls was always a minority skill which required years of practice, a good memory and hearing – a skill to be admired but hard to master. Now, the Merlin App has opened up this fascinating world to anyone with a smartphone and the interest to use it. Of course, it does sometimes get things wrong (like humans!) but I think it is impressive and worth trying out.

The start of summer in the bird world for us is the sound of rooks and the sighting of bullfinches. There is a row of cherry trees opposite our house on Hardwick Road which were planted in the 1980s and for many years, we were able to harvest a good crop of ripe cherries. But now, unfortunately, the local rooks have discovered them and so they raid the trees in the early hours, stripping the branches of the unripe fruits and littering the road with debris. I guess that the nearby rookeries have increased their populations in recent years, so the parents, followed by their very noisy young, desperately try and satisfy their incessant demands.

However, another early fruiting tree that we have in our garden is the Amelanchier (probably *canadensis* variety) and this is beloved of the bullfinches. In my limited experience (and without Merlin for help) I do not often see or hear these beautiful finches, except when they visit us to harvest the dark red berries on the Amelanchier in June (male bullfinch shown on the right). From our kitchen window, we can watch the male and female working their way acrobatically round the tree. The pigeons try their best to copy them, but don't stand a chance on the thin branches.



Moths

I make no apology for including the fascinating subject of moths again – after all, there are over 2,500 species of moth in the UK, so a huge topic!

In May, a number of people spoke to me about the mysterious Halloween-type webbing on the hedges along Hardwick Road. In some places it completely covered the whole hedge plant (as the photo on the right shows). On close inspection, you could see that the whole plant had been completely defoliated.



The culprits were the caterpillars (pictured on left) of the Spindle Ermine moth

(*Yponomeuta cagnagella*); they feed gregariously in a web on Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*) and Evergreen Spindle (*Euonymus japonicus*). The webbing successfully protects them from predators. This moth is a common resident species in the UK but rarer further north and into Scotland. The forewing

is uniformly white with black dots – a pretty little moth which belies its earlier damaging eating habits! It is very similar in appearance to other closely related Ermines, such as the Apple Ermine and the Bird Cherry Ermine. As their names imply, the food plants of their caterpillars are very specific.

Last September, Gill Goodwin sent me two photos (below left and right) of a Pale Tussock Moth caterpillar that she spotted on her recycling bin. She also sent the following interesting notes: -



“The Pale Tussock Moth (*Calliteara pudibunda*) caterpillar grows to about 45mm and is fairly common in the southern half of the British Isles. The fully grown caterpillar can be various shades of green and yellow, with some caterpillars lacking the distinctive red hair tail spur. Those with are usually males. Most often recorded in September and October, it may be found walking on the ground looking for somewhere to pupate.

I thought at first that the seeding daisy head, which I found nearby, might be its foodplant, but that doesn't appear to be the case. Good camouflage though! Its larval foodplants include a wide variety of broadleaved trees and shrubs including hawthorn, blackthorn, crab apple, cultivated fruit trees, oaks, birches, hazel, limes and elms. It used to be common in hop fields where it was known as a 'hop-dog'.



The tail-spurs on some British caterpillars such as Hawk-moths may appear threatening to predators but in reality, they are harmless. However, the hairs of some caterpillars, such as the Pale Tussock Moth, can be irritating”.

The chrysalis forms inside a silk cocoon among leaf litter, where it spends the winter – a good reason to not be too tidy in your garden this autumn. Gill saw this unusual caterpillar last September, so why not look out for it yourself in the coming months?

Honey Bees

Finally, returning to the subject of our changing climate, and the particularly hard winter in 2022/23, here is a short report which Alan Boarder sent in, who keeps bees in his garden in Manor Road: -

“Notes of a bee keeper in Whitchurch –

Before Christmas, I had two hives of healthy bees. In March of this year, I found only dead bees in them - zapped - frozen in time. I looked into my second hive and found a queen bee laying an egg - dead. A worker bee feeding brood - dead. A juvenile bee about to take its first flight - dead. A bee playing football with a grain of pollen - dead. Two bees looking lovingly at each other - first love - dead. Another eating honey - dead. Another cleaning a cell - dead. And so on. Why this happened I do not know. (Editor's note: most likely cause was the very cold winter?). They reminded me of those stone figures that I saw in Pompeii – dead, frozen in time.



Since then, I have bought a small nuc (nucleus colony) of bees which I have placed into a beehive. This nuc has grown into a large colony which should produce a lot of honey. I was inspecting this hive yesterday and found the beautiful voluptuous queen. She has a large pointed abdomen which lays all the eggs in the hive. She does not control the colony. The other bees control her. They wash, feed her, guiding her movements. Each bee in a colony has a tiny brain. The intelligence of a hive does not reside in one of these brains. It resides in the collective effect of all of these brains. Perhaps it is possible to measure the IQ of a colony in a Hive. Did you know that bee hives can talk to each other? “

Following on from Alan's experiences as a bee-keeper, I have recently been fascinated by the honey bees (from Alan's colony perhaps?) visiting our asparagus patch. At this time of year, after Midsummer's Day which is when we stop cutting the asparagus, the uncut spears grow up very rapidly making a beautiful airy clump of feathery foliage. The stems are soon covered in tiny bell-shaped pale-yellow flowers, quite insignificant, but the local honey bees love them and visit in their hundreds. When I stand still beside the foliage, on a sunny day, the sound of the bees humming is a very typical 'sound of summer'.

Looking closely at the foraging bees, they all have bright orange balls on their back legs. The photo on the right shows a worker bee hanging upside down on a tiny dangling flower and you can clearly see the orange balls. These are in fact their pollen baskets or *corbiculae* into which the pollen is stuffed – they are hairy receptacles on their hind legs. The bees are very particular and only collect pollen from one type of flower on each foraging trip, and can carry up to 30% of their own body weight!



You are probably familiar with the sight of a bee with bright yellow balls on their hind legs, but in fact pollens come in a wide range of colours, even blues, greys and black. The pollen is stored in special cells in the brood chamber of the hive, providing valuable fats and protein for the colony and is fed to the growing grubs. Amazingly, you can now buy Bee Pollen as a food supplement - to quote a website review "This wondrous multi-talented little gem is a must for your supplement cupboard" but I think we should leave it for the bees!!

Text & Photos: Sally Woolhouse, Alan Boarder, Gill Goodwin, Sarah Dixon, Public Domain