



## Whitchurch Nature Notes (II) Creatures of the Night



Have you ever wondered about the creatures that are out and about in our gardens during the hours of darkness? It is not surprising that we are unfamiliar with them and their habits - we are usually fast asleep when our local nocturnal wildlife is actively feeding and foraging around our village.

### Hedgehogs



Since I started editing these Nature Notes, several Whitchurch residents have mentioned to me that they often see hedgehogs in their gardens, some even visiting regularly for food. This is really encouraging because these much-loved animals are declining in number nationally and their conservation status is 'vulnerable'. In fact, gardens can be a safer habitat for hedgehogs than intensively managed farmland, as long as garden pesticides are not used. The photo on the left was taken by Laura Lucas – it shows an adult hedgehog on her patio.

I have always been rather envious when people have told me about their spiny nocturnal visitors but a few weeks ago, I saw one in our garden – the first time in 44 years!! Like elsewhere in Whitchurch, badgers (pictured on right) are regular visitors to our garden, and I think that they frighten off or even kill any unfortunate hedgehogs crossing their path. It is very significant that the number of badgers in the UK has more than doubled since the 1980s, but at the same time hedgehogs are in serious decline. There is considerable recent anecdotal evidence on the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) website which argues that in areas where badgers are being culled to control bovine TB, the numbers of hedgehogs and ground-nesting birds have increased. However, a 'What the Science Says' Briefing Sheet (Dec 2021) entitled 'Badgers and Hedgehogs' examined the relationship between these two species, and concluded that "predation and competition from badgers is unlikely to be the main explanation of hedgehog declines nationally." There are very strong views on both sides of this debate. You will find the GWCT and the Briefing Sheet links below.



If you haven't already seen hedgehogs in your garden, then perhaps you would like to think about a few easy ways to encourage them. They really are the gardener's friend - their diet includes slugs and snails as well as beetles, caterpillars and earthworms. Make sure that they have lots of thick dense undergrowth and a variety of lengths of grass in which to hide in and nest. You can also provide them with supplementary food (such as meat-based dog or cat food) and water. This is particularly useful during periods of drought when natural insect foods may be harder to come by.



They like to move from garden to garden and so it is useful to give them openings between boundaries. If your garden is contained by a fence or wall, try to make them a small opening, so that they can easily wander through. Finally, even if you have not actually seen a hedgehog, a sure sign of their presence is their droppings (pictured on left). You might spot them on a pathway – they are usually single, black, crinkly, about 40mm long and studded with the remnants of chewed beetles.

## Bats

Another nocturnal family of mammals are **bats**; there are 18 different species in the UK and some of these are found in our village. Unfortunately for bats, they are not very cute or easily observed by us humans. Consequently, I think it is true to say that most of us know very little about their lifecycles.

Denise Huxtable has written the following contribution for these Nature Notes which I found fascinating and I'm sure you will too.

"At this time of year (May/June), you may see some local residents performing feats of flying on your evening stroll around the village. Not, of course, daring young women standing on the wing of a bi-plane, these agile aerial acrobats are about 4cm in length, dark golden-brown in colour and furry. Whitchurch provides an ideal habitat for bats: close to water and an ancient woodland, quiet, and with lots of good spots for establishing a roost.



Our house, like many others in Swanston Field, has hanging tiles on the back wall (see photo on left). These tiles have good thermal stability, they don't get too hot in the summer and retain some heat in the colder months. They are perfect for bats to squeeze under so we should not have been surprised to discover that our house is a regular maternal roost. Around May, females move in to have babies and raise their young. Males roost in other locations, on their own or with others. Bats have one baby per year and live up to 30 years, so they usually return to the same location once they've found one that works.

Every year we can sit in the garden at twilight and watch them emerging from behind the tiles, to fly off and feed. We have counted over 60 coming out, then got bored so there are probably more than that. Do they cause any problems? The short answer is: no. Unlike other mammals such as mice, they do not damage the house. They are not noisy, sometimes making a faint chittering noise at dusk, and their droppings crumble to dust (although I prefer not to think too much about that). Although they do not spread diseases, they should not be handled as they may carry rabies. Luckily, we knew this before we found a bat flying around the bedroom. We managed to coax it into a jam jar and send it outside. We were told it was probably a 'lazy' young bat who spotted an open window and just went for it.

Bats play an important role in our ecosystem. They pollinate and spread seeds; they eat pests such as mosquitoes. They are also indicators of biodiversity, which is maybe another reason why we see so many around Whitchurch. Sadly, they are endangered. They are fully protected by law - it is a criminal offence to take, injure or kill a wild bat or to disturb a bat in (or near) its roost (including by taking photographs, which you should not do without a licence), damage or obstruct a roost.

Some people think that they cannot have work done to their house if they have a bat roost. This isn't true, it just means that a survey should be conducted so that appropriate materials are used and the bats are not disturbed. This was how we discovered that 'our' bats are soprano pipistrelles (*Pipistrellus pygmaeus*) – pictured on right. There are actually 3 types of pipistrelle – common, soprano and Natusius's. There was also evidence of a brown long-eared bat but that may have been a single brief visitor. There is loads more information about bats at <https://www.bats.org.uk/>, including the fascinating fact that bats are more closely related to humans than to mice and a single pipistrelle can eat up to 3,000 insects in a night. I like a good buffet too - definitely related! "



## Moths

For the final subject on this nocturnal theme, I have chosen to write briefly on the fascinating world of moths. We can usually recognise most butterflies, but their close relatives, the night-flying moths, are much less familiar insects. However, they are an important part of the wildlife ecosystem (and of course are an important food source for bats!)

Our daughter, Lorna, is a keen 'moth-er' and regularly sets up a moth trap in her own garden and at other locations, including our garden here in Whitchurch. She sends her results to the Oxfordshire County Moth Recorder, and then these statistics are fed into the National Moth Recording Scheme. In case you were wondering, the word 'trap' might sound bad, but moth trapping isn't deadly or cruel. It simply involves attracting moths to a light source or food source so you can take a closer look at them. They are released unharmed after being identified the following morning.



Lorna recently set up her trap in our garden one night at the end of June and she recorded 58 different macro-moth species and counted 183 individual moths. I find it amazing that all these different moths, with beautiful and weird names such as 'Small Emerald', 'Setaceous Hebrew Character' and 'Uncertain', were flying around in our garden while we slept, quite oblivious to their night-time activity. One of the most beautiful species she caught was the Elephant Hawkmoth – the photo on the left shows 3 of them resting on my hand.

Gardens are important places for moths, especially as intensive agriculture is limiting the number of suitable habitats in the countryside. There are likely to be over a hundred species in just an ordinary urban back garden! So, the way you manage your garden can really help moth conservation.

Butterfly Conservation (BC) is the leading charity dedicated to conserving butterflies and moths in the UK. Quoting their excellent website,

"Moths and butterflies are insects which together form the order called Lepidoptera, meaning 'scaly-winged'. The patterns and colours of their wings are formed by thousands of tiny scales, overlapping like tiles on a roof. Lepidoptera found in Britain includes over 2,500 species of moth but fewer than 70 butterflies."

Moths vary greatly in appearance as well as size. For example, the big Hawk-moths have narrow swept-back wings for fast, powerful flight, while the Plume moths have delicate feathery wings. Other shapes are characteristic of different moth families. Colours and patterns also vary, some very bright and bold while others have wonderful camouflage.

Moths are very diverse in their ecology too, and live in some surprising places; not just gardens, farmland and woodlands, but also marshlands, sand dunes and even mountain tops! You can also see moths at any time of the year, with different species active in different months, including mid-winter."

On the subject of camouflage, the Peppered Moth (pictured on right) is a very good example of a moth that blends in well with a background of tree bark or stone. Interestingly, the pale, speckled peppered moth turned black in many parts of Britain following the Industrial Revolution over the space of a few decades, enabling it to blend in against soot-covered trees and avoid predators. It became known as Darwin's moth, a symbol both of our changing landscape and of our understanding of its effect on the natural world.





One of my favourite moths, and another wonderful master of disguise, is the Buff Tip Moth. It blends in perfectly with its surroundings when it is resting on a birch tree – it looks exactly like a small twig (see the photo on left). When at rest, the wings are held almost vertically against the body, with two buff areas at the front of the thorax and at the tips of the forewings which look very like the pale wood of the birch. The rest of the wings are the same mottled grey colour of the birch bark.

The box tree moth caterpillar has certainly hit the headlines this summer, both nationally and locally. Their caterpillars have caused some very serious damage to some of the box hedges in the High Street. This species of moth is a recent alien arrival from Asia and our UK eco-systems have not yet evolved to find a natural predator. Interestingly, we did see a slow worm inside a box bush in our garden recently and we are hoping that it was on the hunt for the pesky caterpillars. Please don't despair or get too carried away with using powerful insecticides – nature will find a solution, I'm sure.



However, most of our native moths and their caterpillars have very specific lifecycles and habitats, and do very little damage to commercial crops or garden plants. If you follow some of the advice on the BC website (link below) about gardening for moths, you will be helping stop the decline of these beautiful and delicate little insects.

### Stop press!



Just as I was finishing off these notes, I was very pleased to receive a report from Sarah and Adrian Dixon about an unusual nocturnal sighting. They were walking along Hardwick Road one night, at the end of one of the swelteringly hot days recently, when they spotted a glow-worm in the grass on the verge opposite Shepherds Close. The photo on the left shows the glowing insect just to the right of Adrian's lower finger!

The glow-worm is actually a medium-sized, narrow beetle. The males look like typical beetles, but the females have no wings and look similar to the larvae. The females are famous for emitting a greeny-orange light from their bottoms at night. They climb up plant stems and glow in order to attract males, who have large, photosensitive eyes - perfect for scanning vegetation at night. The larvae can also emit light, and so can the eggs. Adults are only around for a short period in June and July.

I hope that these miscellaneous notes have inspired you to spend a little time on your own research into our local nocturnal wildlife. May I suggest that you stay up late one night, find a quiet spot in your garden or nearest green space, and just see what nocturnal creatures are out and about?

[GWCT Badger cull report & comments](#)

[What the Science says - Badgers and Hedgehogs](#)

[Butterfly Conservation - Gardening for moths](#)

**Text:** Sally Woolhouse, Denise Huxtable    **Photos:** Denise Huxtable, Lorna Woolhouse, Adrian Dixon, Public Domain

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