

Wildlife notes 40, 20th June 2023

I was sitting in the Hall garden today, at a meeting with the architect, which was very useful and interesting, but I was being constantly distracted by the insect life all around. Not the biting and annoying kind of insects, but all the beautiful bees, hoverflies, butterflies and moths which were making use of the garden and all its flowers. It's a pity the garden is still closed to us all because the building works are on-going, but any garden or patch of wild flowers can have the same procession of insects if you make time to sit still for 30 minutes or so.

I didn't manage to identify any of the hoverfly species. These little insects are often yellow and black striped to mimic wasps, which gives them some protection from predators. But in fact they are not dangerous at all, and feed on nectar and pollen. Hoverflies are a vital and colourful part of a healthy garden. They are brilliant pollinators that are often overlooked. The larvae of many species feed on aphids while others are efficient nutrient recyclers, making a valuable contribution to a natural balance in gardens. They can seem quite alarming if you are walking in the woods as they patrol a territory, usually in a patch of sunlight, and as you walk through, they will fly up to your head with an extremely high pitched buzzing, just to check what you are and what you're doing in their patch. But as I said before, they are completely harmless.

There were several species of bumble bees, also feeding on nectar and pollen. Bumble bees nest in colonies, and at this time of year the queen bees have raised their first brood of workers, so the queens stay at home laying more eggs and the workers are out gathering food. Some of the workers, such as the red-tailed bumble bees, are really quite small. I've also seen several tree bumble bees, a larger species. They were not found in Britain until 2001, when they arrived in the south of England. Since then, they have spread through almost the whole of the British Isles, and are an extremely successful species. They are an easy species to identify as they are the only one with a fairly bright reddish-brown head, black body and white tail. They can nest in tree holes, bird nest boxes and even in sheds and houses if they find a suitable hole.

But my most exciting creature in the garden today was a Humming Bird Hawkmoth. I have spoken about them before in these wildlife notes [Wildlife notes 9, July 18th 2020].

They are a migratory species from the continent, so all this hot settled weather will have been suiting them. They are unmistakable as they hover in front of flowers, just like a tiny humming bird, and use their long proboscis to probe deep into flowers to get nectar.

Moving away from insects, I got really good news from Downfield farm last week – they have got young peewits, or Lapwings, on the farm, for the first time since the Prentices moved in nearly 20 years ago. The farm has recently become organic and this is obviously having great benefits for the wildlife. Lapwings are one of the species which have a rapidly declining population in Britain, so it is nice to report a success story in our area.

I've also got more pairs of swallows this year than usual, all just about to complete raising their first brood of youngsters. Usually swallows have 4 or 5 young in each brood, but one nest nearby has just successfully fledged 6 babies, who flew from the nest yesterday. They will hang around this area for about a week, still being fed by their parents and returning to the nest regularly for a rest and to sleep. Then they will fly off to join big flocks of other young birds while their parents start again with another brood.



As usual I really welcome your notes on our wildlife and I'm happy to try to answer any questions you might have.

Alison