

Wildlife notes 45, 6th April 2024.

I've been prompted to write these notes to let you all know about the fascinating wildlife "walk" we had this morning! Not much of a walk, we barely ventured more than 200m from the Hall, so we could keep an eye on the weather and retreat for a cup of tea if the rain came on! We have our priorities worked out in this community!

However, we carried out a mini "Bio-blitz" and found no less than 35 species of beasties, birds and plants, just in an area of rough ground near the top of the putting path. I've got to say, I wasn't expecting it to be so successful but with 7 pairs of eyes, and people grubbing about under stones, bricks, logs and wood, we uncovered an amazing variety of things. I think we often think of bug hunts as being something children should do, but you should have seen us adults!! We were all enthusiastically getting our hands dirty.

I'd like to tell you about just 3 of the beasties we found, common creatures which we would normally overlook, but which have really interesting life stories.

Early on, under a brick we found a big black ant. This would have been a young queen, one of the flying ants which we so often see on hot sunny days at the end of summer. The flying ants are the young queens and males from several colonies, who fly up high and mate. The males then die, and the queens drop to the ground where they shed their wings and find a nice sheltered place to hibernate over the winter, and where they hope to establish their own colony the following year. As Spring warms up, the hardest part of the Black ant life cycle is the job of the young queen in raising the first generation of workers as she cannot leave her nest to forage for food. The queen shuts herself in a cell underground and when her first eggs hatch, she feeds the larvae with a fluid created from the breakdown of her own muscles. By the time the first workers emerge from their pupae the Queen will be terribly weak, having lost about half her body weight. The first role of the workers is to forage for food and nurse the queen back into good health. If successful, the colony can continue for many years, with the same queen laying thousands of eggs. So, I suppose we should all just wish her luck in surviving and establishing her own colony. These black ants are the commonest UK garden species.

The next creepy crawly which took my attention was an earwig (or clipshear, forkie tailie, or even hornie golloch, depending on where you come from!). Earwigs are incredibly good mothers and this one was under an old slab of wood, guarding her nest of eggs. They will stay with the eggs until they hatch, keeping them clean and ensuring their safety. Then they will look after their young ones until they are old enough to fend for themselves. This is very unusual in the insect world, where eggs and young are usually left to fend for themselves. So, we were very careful to restore the roof over the head of this mother beastie!

Finally, with the aid of a photograph and some id books, we identified a small black beast, about 1.5cm long, as a Devil's coach horse beetle. These aggressive, carnivorous predators are commonly found across the UK and Europe in a variety of habitats. The Devil's Coach Horse can sometimes be mistaken for an earwig but when threatened its scorpion-like posture will give the game away! It curves its tail upwards and looks threatening. They don't generally harm humans, but I have seen a large devil's coach horse beetle tackling an earthworm, probably about 20 times larger than it, repeatedly biting it while the worm writhed about, until eventually they disappeared into some long grass. But I can only imagine that the outcome wasn't going to be good for the worm, poor thing.

In case you are not as enthusiastic about beasties as I am, then I should also give a quick update on birdie news. I heard the first Chiffchaff of the year on 12th March, at least 10 days earlier than I have

ever heard them before. Margaret Ronaldson has provided a super photo of a Chiffchaff (below), which are usually very difficult to see.



Chiffchaff courtesy of Margaret Ronaldson

However, all the other summer arrivals from Africa have not shown up here yet, as the strong easterly winds will have been putting them off. Storm Kathleen, blowing outside at the moment, and turning the wind direction to the south, should bring a flood of summer visitors in the next few days and weeks, so look out for our swallows and martins, willow warblers (which to all intents and purposes look identical to the chiffchaff), blackcaps, and a whole variety of other arrivals. I'll be very pleased to hear from you when you see any of these!

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