

Confined to the Garden: November

Autumn is gradually giving way to winter as the solstice draws nearer. Since my last update, we have been put into a second national lockdown, which is now almost over. After much speculation and debate, the localised tier system of restrictions is set to return this week. Kent will be a 'tier 3' area. Whether all this is having the desired effect remains to be seen, but there are now several new vaccines on their way, providing a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. We have been promised 5 days of relaxed restrictions to see our family and friends at Christmas; and warned to expect a rise in Covid cases afterwards.

This lockdown has had very little impact in the garden. Although there has been an eruption of fungal fruiting bodies, thanks to rain and mild temperatures. I've collected logs and pieces of dead wood from various species of tree, in an effort to increase fungal diversity, and it seems to be paying off. I find the world of mushrooms and other fungi fascinating and bewildering in equal measure. In Britain, there are more species of fungi than native plants. There are thousands of different kinds, with some wonderful common names. This is one of my favourites, not least because it can be easily recognised!



Candlesnuff fungus

For more information on this species, click the link:

<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/fungi-and-lichens/candlesnuff-fungus/>

I can confidently recognise Candlesnuff and few others, but I'm no expert. I tend to stick to the more distinctive ones and stay away from the myriad of 'little brown jobs'. When the orange mushroom below popped in the garden, I had no idea what to call it. I'm not 100% certain, but after doing a bit

of research and consulting with a knowledgeable friend, I think this is one of the Rustgills. It could be Common Rustgill, or Spectacular Rustgill.



Probably a Rustgill

Being able to recognise different species can be extremely important with mushrooms, as foragers can easily poison themselves. I'm not a big fan of mushrooms as a food, so it's not something I worry about much, but if you do want to eat wild mushrooms there are some you should be familiar with in order to avoid them. If you fancy foraging a wild mushroom meal, the links below may be useful.

7 of the most dangerous mushrooms in the UK:

<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/blog/2018/11/poisonous-mushrooms/>

How to avoid mushroom poisoning:

<https://www.hedgerow-harvest.com/2019/07/15/avoiding-mushroom-poisoning/>

For a general introduction to the fascinating world of fungi, click the link below:

<http://www.countrysideinfo.co.uk/fungi/intro.htm>

The Grey Squirrel from last month has been back again, but only for two very brief visits in November.



Grey Squirrel

Squirrels don't hibernate over winter, but they do become less active as the days get shorter and colder. They rely on their caches of food stored in the autumn and spend most of their time tucked up in a cosy nest called a 'drey'. This is usually about the size and shape of a football and made from leaves and twigs.

To learn more about dreys and how squirrels get through winter, click the link:

<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/blog/2020/06/squirrel-nests/>

Another new face joined the cast of characters at the start of this month. I thought I had seen some tell-tale signs in the compost bin, then my suspicions were confirmed when a Brown Rat showed up in the Hedgehog feeding station. It can't have been very impressed though, as it hasn't been back since. It was pretty quick, so this blurry image is the best I could get.



A Brown Rat exploring the feeding station

This is not the first time I've seen a rat in the garden, but they are very infrequent visitors. In three years of feeding and filming the Hedgehogs, this is only the second time one has been caught on camera. They are not the most popular of wild creatures, but I have a bit of a soft spot for them. Most of the animals that earn the label vermin, do so because they are intelligent and adaptable enough to live alongside humans, taking advantage of our wasteful ways. Rats are no exception. They have excellent memories and complex social lives. They laugh when they play together and become depressed without companionship. I believe this much misunderstood rodent deserves a little more respect than it gets.

For more interesting facts about rats, click the link:

<https://onekindplanet.org/animal/rat/>

More numerous and more conspicuous than the rats, the mice are caught on all three cameras every night. They dash about furtively, avoiding predators while trying to secure enough food to fuel their fast-paced life. Even if they manage to avoid the Foxes and cats, Wood Mice are short-lived. Most don't make it through their first winter and those that do are unlikely to survive a second. They breed prolifically from March to October, then the population dwindles dramatically over the winter and recovers very quickly in the following spring. It can seem like there are more of them in the

winter because they become more densely concentrated around available food sources and nest sites.



Wood Mice

Wood Mice are willing to abandon their usual solitary ways and nest communally in the winter, to improve their chances of survival. Although they can still be decidedly grumpy when they encounter another mouse in the dark. One busy night in November, two mice bumped into each other in the feeding station, resulting in an aggressive chase.

To see this mouse fight, click the link below:

[https://youtu.be/m\\_c7iuT3Kmc](https://youtu.be/m_c7iuT3Kmc)

Foxes are still coming and going most nights, although I don't really know how many I'm seeing any more. I'm working on trying to recognise some individuals but some of the distinguishing marks I was relying on turned out to be just smudges of dirt and washed off in the rain! The only one I can reliably identify is 3Paws, but she has only visited a few times this month. There has been very little supplementary food for the foxes, so they are having to work for their meals. One determined Fox spent over an hour pursuing a mouse amongst the Ivy by the pond.



Fox hunting mice

To see a sped-up version of this hunt, click the link:

<https://youtu.be/3DYNMvZFMpg>

Most fox visits have been solitary affairs this month. The two foxes below arrived as a pair but weren't willing to share when a dish of leftover Hedgehog food was discovered. I should start to see more pairs next month as the mating season begins in December.



To see a short video of this visit, click the link:

[https://youtu.be/4Yq19\\_jf1pc](https://youtu.be/4Yq19_jf1pc)

October was a very quiet month for the Hedgehogs, but it turns out they haven't quite finished their year just yet. One male has been visiting twice a night almost every night this month. He has the food all to himself though. He has a distinctive mark on his left side which shows up nicely as he leaves the feeding station, so I know its always the same one.



Distinctive markings

He's an itchy little fella. All Hedgehogs love a good scratch and this one is no different. They do seem to be particularly itchy animals, but the bizarre myths about them being unable to survive without their fleas are simply not true, and they won't give your pet fleas. While it is not uncommon for a wild Hedgehog to harbour a few fleas, those found on hedgehogs are host specific. They will not survive for long on any other species as they need a Hedgehog host to complete their lifecycle. Many Hedgehogs also have a tick or two attached to them. Parasites are just a part of life for a wild animal

and they usually don't suffer any serious ill effects, but high numbers of fleas or ticks is a sign that the Hedgehog is unwell.

For in-depth information about Hedgehog parasites, click the link (WARNING- unpleasant images):  
<https://www.wildlifeonline.me.uk/animals/article/european-hedgehog-mortality-parasites-diseases>



Itchy Hedgehog

After all that talk of parasites, my final video this month is gratuitously cute. A compilation of November's most enthusiastic scratching.

To see the video, click the link:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nJ-ma5cYic>

My next update will be just before Christmas. Come back then to find out what December brings. How will the weather affect the wildlife in the garden as winter begins? Will the itchy Hedgehog go into hibernation? Will 3Paws find a mate? Rest assured, if there's something happening out there, my cameras will be watching.