

## Confined to the Garden: October

The clocks have been put back and the nights are drawing in. Covid restrictions are now regional and based on a three-tier system. Where I live in Kent we are in tier 1, but many friends and family live in parts of London, which is currently in tier 2, which means we can't visit each other indoors. For most people, the season for socialising outdoors has now passed, so it's back to the video calls. Everyone wants to know what we will or won't be allowed to do at Christmas, but that's a long way off yet. Meanwhile, in the garden, it's been a wet month but life goes on...

On drier, sunnier days there is still the odd bee buzzing around the last of the flowering plants, but most are tucked away for winter now.



The last remaining flowers

To find out where bees go in winter, click the link:

<https://www.buzzaboutbees.net/Where-Do-Bees-Go-In-Winter.html>

As the days get shorter, garden birds enter a race to find enough food to get them through the night before it gets dark. Blackbirds and Robins are often the last to roost, foraging for worms until the light is completely gone.



A Blackbird foraging at dusk

Winter is a hard time for birds, but they have ways of keeping themselves warm enough to survive. Small birds, like Blue Tits, cannot put on a large reserve of fat - perhaps only enough to get them through one cold night. This means they have to spend most of a typical winter's day searching for food. Research has shown that Blue Tits and Great Tits are 5% lighter at dawn than when going to roost the previous night. House Sparrows' plumage weight increases by 70% following the autumn moult, to provide insulation for the winter.

To find out more about birds in winter, click the link:

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/natures-home-magazine/birds-and-wildlife-articles/features/what-do-birds-do-in-winter/>

The mice are extremely busy preparing for winter. They zip back and forth all night long. On just one night in October, there were over 50 visits to the Hedgehog feeding station, over a period of 8 hours. They are careful to avoid the cats and foxes but there have been a few close calls.



To see a video of this near miss, click the link:

<https://youtu.be/kFyybl6QQPO>

Learn more about the Wood Mouse:

<https://www.mammal.org.uk/species-hub/full-species-hub/discover-mammals/species-wood-mouse/>

Last month I wasn't sure how many were taking advantage of the free food. I now know that at least three individuals are visiting, as I've seen three on camera at the same time. That means at least three caches of Hedgehog food hidden away somewhere safe and dry. I hope they've chosen their locations wisely.

Wood Mice are well known for caching nuts and seeds in the autumn, but they are not the only ones stocking up. An occasional visitor to the garden has been back to see what's on offer. This Squirrel

stopped by several times in the space of about half an hour, each time climbing up to the bird feeder, running off then coming back. I presume it was taking peanuts to a cache.



Grey Squirrel

Grey squirrels are famous for caching nuts and acorns. Red Squirrels have been known to hang mushrooms in trees to dry them for winter storage. Foxes will cache surplus food all year round. Several other British species are known to store food, including Moles. They keep underground larders of live Earthworms. Follow the link below to learn more about food caching.

A handy guide to which species cache what – and where:

<https://www.discoverwildlife.com/how-to/identify-wildlife/how-to-identify-animal-food-stores/>

Although the feeding station is busy with mice, there have been only a couple of visits from Hedgehogs this month.



A visiting Hedgehog

Last year several hogs were still visiting regularly well into late autumn and even winter. This year there was a dramatic reduction in Hedgehog numbers after the breeding season was over, and I was

left with just one or two individuals. It's impossible to know exactly what is behind this lack of hogs, but several factors could be involved. Individual hogs will spend more or less time in a particular part of their range at different times of year. Young males move on to find their own range. Access routes can become suddenly blocked. Individuals are killed on roads or lost to illness and injury. The challenges facing Hedgehogs are endless.

Whatever else is going on with the local population, the time has come to hibernate. My one or two remaining visitors will be building nests and tucking themselves up for winter. The timing varies from year to year. Exactly what triggers hibernation in Hedgehogs isn't completely understood, but it is most likely a combination of cold temperatures, a change in daylength and lack of food. Males will often hibernate earlier than females, as they haven't had to raise the young. My most frequent visitor last month was a male, so he may well be hibernating already. I'll have to wait until spring to see how many hogs come back for the next breeding season.



Interesting facts about hibernation:

<https://www.discoverwildlife.com/animal-facts/what-is-hibernation/>

Hedgehog hibernation in depth:

<https://www.wildlifeonline.me.uk/animals/article/european-hedgehog-hibernation>

With fewer Hedgehogs, the supply of leftover food for the Foxes has dwindled. They still visit the garden often, to see if anything is available. They might get lucky and find occasional kitchen scraps or some of the birds' peanuts, but mostly they are finding natural food. As its been so wet, Earthworms have been readily available.



Click the link to see a short video of these foxes eating worms:

<https://youtu.be/eNd8P9i6fNk>

Foxes are famously curious creatures and will take an interest in any new objects they come across. I enjoy seeing them investigate the things they find around the garden. This wooden dragonfly ornament has been hanging there for years and recently lost a wing to a boisterous young Fox. For some reason, this month, it has been attracting attention and arousing suspicion.



To see video clips of this, click the link:

<https://youtu.be/pU2Fzs37CiY>

3Paws is putting on her winter coat and looking healthy...



3Paws this month

I have become so used to seeing 3Paws that it is easy to forget the average urban fox only lives for 1-3 years. In some areas the average may be as little as 15 months. Rural foxes live, on average, around 9 years, but they don't have as much traffic to dodge! I hope to see 3Paws around for a lot longer, she seems pretty capable of looking after herself despite her obvious disadvantage.

To learn more about urban foxes, click the link:

<https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/the-secret-life-of-urban-foxes.html>

To see videos of foxes interacting with each other in my garden this month, click the links below the pictures:



<https://youtu.be/Ka1eVZTMso>



<https://youtu.be/rHNdu4TdK8Y>

As we descend into the darkness of November, I expect to see less activity in the garden. The Wood Mice will continue to cache food as long as it is available. I will keep leaving some snacks out in case any late Hedgehogs pass by. The young Foxes will be dispersing and finding their own territories, the more mature adults will be defending their resources and attempting to establish dominance over others. They are quite solitary at this time of year, but in December they will start to pair up in preparation for the peak of the mating season in January. All the while, my cameras will be watching. Come back at the end of November for another update.