

Confined to the Garden: Week 12

Lockdown is being gradually lifted. Shops will be starting to re-open next week. There is much discussion of how and when to get the rest of the children back to school. At North West Kent Countryside Partnership, we are even able to have some of our volunteers back to work outdoors with us, welcome back team!

It's been quite an eventful week in my garden. I found a gorgeous copper-coloured Slow Worm close to the compost heap, but I was once again too slow to grab my camera and get a picture. These legless lizards are often described as brown or grey, but this doesn't do them justice. They can range from copper to silver and the males sometimes have blue spots. I think they're really beautiful and I'm exceedingly pleased to have them in my garden. The Slow Worm is one of those creatures known as a 'gardener's friend' because they eat a lot of invertebrate pests including slugs and snails.

Click here to find out how to encourage reptiles and amphibians in your garden:

<https://www.arguk.org/info-advice/wildlife-gardening/245-dragons-in-your-garden-arc/file>

I was extremely excited to add another new species to the list of visitors this week. While reviewing video clips from my CCTV camera at high speed, I almost discounted this blur as just another moth. Upon closer inspection I realised it was an Owl! I'm pretty sure it's a Tawny Owl but please get in touch and correct me if I'm wrong.



Tawny Owl

Britain's most common owl species, the Tawny Owl is not unheard of in urban areas, and my garden does have a growing population of Wood Mice for them to prey on. There is a chance I may see this one again as Tawny Owls patrol permanent territories, although they tend not to roost in the same place each day, like Barn Owls do. I learned something new about urban owls this week. Apparently, urban owls' diet and method of hunting differs quite significantly to their rural counterparts. The Tawny Owl is traditionally a woodland bird, perching close to the ground and pouncing on small mammals, which make up most of their diet. In contrast, rodents make up only around 7% of an urban owl's diet. In towns and cities, owls prefer higher perches such as roofs and telegraph poles, snatching small birds from their roosts. Sparrows, Starlings, Blackbirds and Thrushes make up the main part of an urban owl's diet. So perhaps my Wood Mice are safer than I thought.

Click below for a guide to identifying UK owls:

<https://www.barnowltrust.org.uk/barn-owl-facts/uk-owl-species/>

It's been a dramatic week for the Hedgehogs too. If you read last week's blog, you will know about this female Hedgehog who was behaving strangely. She has been arriving earlier and earlier each evening, sitting in this food bowl for several hours at a time, sometimes all night. This is not normal behaviour for a Hedgehog. On Sunday night she turned up before dark and I was able to get a clear look at her.



To see a video of this hog arriving in daylight on Sunday evening, click the link:
https://youtu.be/pA7Hlu_nv5w

She was thin and sneezing or coughing occasionally. I contacted Medway Hedgehog Rescue, who were very helpful. They agreed that something was wrong and advised me to bring her to them. At first I had been worried about removing her, in case she had hoglets in a nest somewhere, but she was unlikely to have any as she was spending so much time in this bowl. The next night I was waiting for her. She arrived just after 10pm. After checking I definitely had the right hog, I popped her into a box and drove her to the home of a volunteer Hedgehog carer nearby. Once I picked her up, I could tell how emaciated she was. When rolled up, a healthy Hedgehog should be nice and round, with the distance from one side to the other pretty much equal to the distance from head end to tail end. This one was definitely not nice and round.



Very thin hog in a box

The Hedgehog carer thought she probably had a bad case of roundworm. She seems to be responding well to treatment so far and I hope to be able to release her back into my garden when she has recovered.

Upon arriving home from this rescue mission, I glanced at the live camera feed and spotted another hog I've been looking out for. This time the male with an injured back leg who was being pushed into the pond last week. His leg was badly swollen and dragging, much worse than last week. I nipped outside and picked him up, popped him into the box and off I went again. This time to a local 24-hr emergency veterinary hospital (on advice from Medway Hedgehog Rescue). He turned out to have an abscess, which has now been drained. He will be in rehab for at least a week but when he is recovered, I should be able to release him back into my garden.



Injured male, last week

The rest of the hogs seem to be settling into summer now. There is less interaction between individuals as courtship gives way to raising babies. Many of the females will be nursing hoglets in maternity nests, tucked away in bramble patches, under sheds, in a pile of leaves in a quiet corner, or maybe even my compost heap. Let's hope I get to see some of those cute hoglets soon! Males play no part in rearing the young and no longer have much to fight about, so they are free to concentrate on feeding and putting on weight for their winter hibernation. Males tend to start hibernating earlier, but females and juveniles will be active for longer into autumn in order to gain enough weight to survive hibernation. The males generally emerge from hibernation earlier, so they can feed up before going in search of a mate. Some females will mate again and have a second litter. In milder climates this is not a problem, but in Britain these autumn juveniles struggle to gain enough weight to survive the winter without human intervention. They need to reach at least 450g before hibernating in order to have a chance of survival, but ideal hibernation weight is more like 600g. Hibernation is triggered by dropping temperature, so it may come early in a cold autumn or not happen at all if the winter is very mild. If the temperature fluctuates, hogs will be in and out of hibernation all winter, waking up when it's warm and going back to their nests when it's cold. Mild winters are a huge problem for Hedgehogs as despite warmer weather, there is very little food available for them. Waking up and foraging uses precious energy reserves which can't be replenished. I keep feeding until the hogs stop visiting, but still leave a bowl of dry food in the feeding station after the last hog has disappeared, just in case they wake up on a mild night. Most of this food is usually stolen by mice.

To find out what Hedgehogs do at different times of the year, click the link:

<https://www.hedgehogstreet.org/the-year-for-a-hedgehog/>

I've had another visit from the Fox cub I am assuming belongs to 3Paws. The cub was alone again so I can't be absolutely sure whether it's hers. This time, the cub investigated the Hedgehog feeding station, and the Hedgehog within.



To see a video of the cub's visit, click the link:

<https://youtu.be/xovBnnYyDM8>

I think that's enough excitement for one week. I will keep you updated on the progress of all my garden visitors through the summer. Keep checking back here to see what 3Paws and her cub have been up to, how the Hedgehogs are getting on, whether I see the owl again and how my projects for pollinators are progressing.