

GARDEN WILDLIFE BLOG: Confined to the garden, Week 1

So the prime minister has declared “lockdown”, we are only allowed to leave our homes for brief, essential journeys for at least the next three weeks. However, the sun is shining so I’m making the most of having a garden. It may be small but it’s attracting more and more wildlife each year.

Primroses are a classic sign of spring, and a personal favourite of mine. They are often one of the first flowers to be seen, as they can bloom as early as late December and flower until May. Often found along hedgerows and roadsides, in damp grassland areas and ancient woodlands, they always cheer me up with their bright yellow blooms. The flowers provide a valuable nectar source for early pollinators like brimstone and small tortoiseshell butterflies. I have a cultivated form of this beautiful wildflower in my garden. They pop up in the lawn every spring, where there used to be a flower bed. I prefer the wild version but on my “shoe-string” budget buying new plants is a rare treat, so I will make do with these for now.



Wild Primrose

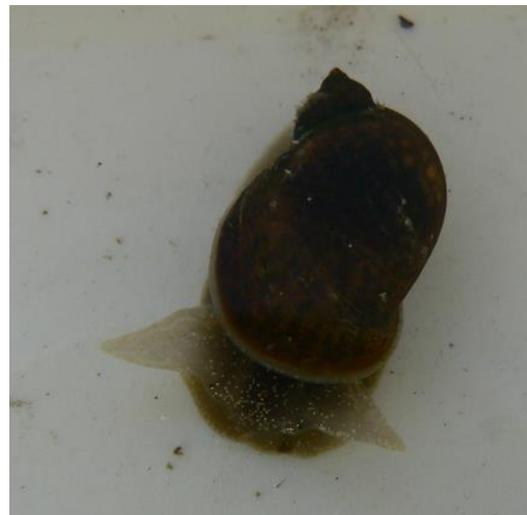


Cultivated form in my garden

This week I decided to do some pond dipping. I’ve not really had creatures in there to identify before, but at the moment the water is very clear, and I can see several species of invertebrate going about their business. There may not be any signs of occupation in the nest boxes yet, but breeding season has begun in the pond. One day, I would love to see some frog spawn in there but so far, frogs have just visited in the summer. For now, the pond snails are laying their jelly covered eggs wherever they can. I noticed there are two different types of snail, so I thought I’d brush up my species ID skills and find out what to call them. It turns out one of them is called the ‘wandering pond snail’ and he’s pretty cute!



Wandering pond snail in the pond



Wandering pond snail

Apparently, they enjoy debris and silt, and don't mind swapping water for mud, so thrive in very small bodies of water. This sounds right, my pond is tiny and you can see from the photo above how much debris is on the bottom! I also identified Dwarf Pond Snails.

There were a selection of other invertebrates in the pond, including a small Water Beetle. Upon attempting to identify it I discovered that there are around 350 different species of water beetle in Britain! I had no idea there were so many! I've narrowed it down to one of the smaller diving beetles, probably *Rhantus suturalis* or one of the many *Agabus* species. I would ask for help with this, but it's so fast I can't get a decent photo!

Along with some small leeches and assorted minute fly larvae, there were lots of Water Slaters - watery relatives of the familiar garden woodlouse. They behave similarly to their terrestrial cousins, rummaging through dead leaves and other detritus at the bottom of the pond, recycling organic material. While Woodlice are strictly vegetarian, Water Slaters will consume both plant and animal remains. Both are crustaceans, so related to crabs, lobsters, crayfish, shrimps, prawns, krill, and barnacles.



Water Slater

I hope the range of little creatures in the pond will continue to widen and eventually start to support some larger invertebrates like Dragonfly larvae or maybe even some amphibians.

For help identifying creatures in your own pond, click here:

<https://www.opalexplornature.org/sites/default/files/7/image/WATER%20pp%20chart.pdf>

Last weekend I put up some new insect hotels. There has been no interest in the new ones yet, but some others were well-used last summer.



Bee hotels

Some of the holes are plugged with mud. These are occupied by mason bee larvae. Others are plugged with small pieces of leaf. These contain the larvae of leafcutter bees. As the weather warms up, I expect to see males emerging from their tubes to buzz around the hotel waiting for the females to follow them.

I want to give pollinators and other invertebrates plenty of places to hide away, so I've drilled some extra holes in some of the logs in my deadwood feature.



Dead wood is an extremely valuable habitat. It feeds and houses a bewildering variety of minibeasts as well as hosting loads of beautiful fungi, mosses and lichens. I have a collection of logs from different types of tree, in various stages of decay, surrounding my compost bin and the open heap behind it. Last summer there was a spectacular slime mould on one of them (a silver birch log, if you're interested).



Slime Mould

For more information on dead wood and the species that rely on it, click here:

<https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/natureshomemagazine/posts/everything-you-need-to-know-about-dead-wood>

The Hedgehog feeding station has been busy as usual this week. Here's a close up shot of the feeding station, with a Hedgehog getting a free meal inside. A hedgehog can travel between two to three kilometres (one to two miles) per night looking for food. They can eat one third of their body weights in just one night. Their natural diet is varied. The most important elements in their diet are worms, beetles, slugs, caterpillars, earwigs and millipedes. As well as these, they also eat a wide range of other invertebrates. More infrequently, they will take advantage of carrion, frogs, baby rodents, baby birds, birds' eggs and fallen fruit. In the feeding station they get dry food for hedgehogs and tinned cat food.



I expect to see lots of courtship behaviour as spring progresses. Pictures and updates here each week.