

Confined to the garden- week 13

Non-essential shops are allowed to re-open this week. There are plans to get the hospitality industry back to work next month, and even suggestions that the 2m social distancing rule could be reduced to as little as 1m. As lockdown restrictions are slowly eased, I am finding myself working outside of my home more and more. I can now invite human visitors into my garden for socially distanced conversation, but almost all my visitors have been of the non-human variety.

Crowds of noisy young starlings have been descending on the feeders, the lawn and the pond. I watch them feeding, drinking, bathing and squabbling through the kitchen window, but as soon as I try to get out there to take some photos, they scatter. I managed to get this by standing in the bath and pointing my camera out of the window.



Juvenile Starlings and House Sparrows

Juvenile Starlings are a rather drab brown but come Autumn, they will moult into their spectacular adult plumage. As they mature, they will learn to mimic sounds they hear around them and add them to their repertoire. In winter they will flock together to form murmurations, one of nature's finest spectacles.

To find out more about Starlings, click the link below:
<https://www.bto.org/understanding-birds/species-focus/starling>

I added another new species to my list of visitors this week. Early one morning, this squirrel turned up to explore my garden. There is no woodland nearby, just a few mature trees in other gardens, so the squirrel is out of its usual habitat, but they are incredibly adaptable creatures.



Grey Squirrel

As a non-native species, they can be serious pest in woodland and they carry the squirrel pox virus which is lethal to native Red Squirrels. However, they've been here since the 1800's and breed twice a year, so getting rid of them would be quite a task. Personally, I believe the best hope for a restoration of the natural balance is the Pine Marten. Where Pine Martens are making a comeback, they are causing the Grey Squirrel to decline and disappear.

To read about the effect of returning Pine Martens on squirrels, click the link below:

<https://www.britishredsquirrel.org/grey-squirrels/pine-martin/>

I had a busy weekend making more improvements for wildlife. I put up three new bee hotels for leafcutter bees, as Mason bees have occupied every tube in the hotels I put up earlier in the spring. Leafcutter bees emerge later than the mason bees and use pieces of leaf to seal their egg chambers, rather than mud.





To find out more about leafcutter bees, click the link below:

<https://www.buzzaboutbees.net/leafcutter-bee.html>

As well as the pollinators, I've been thinking about other invertebrates this week. One I haven't seen for a while is the Stag Beetle. Once known as the bringer of lightning, they are Britain's largest land beetle and can reach up to 8cm long as an adult. Living in the South of England, I am fortunate to be within the range of this impressive insect. Their distribution is affected by climate and soil type, and they are absent from much of the rest of Britain. They are present in Kent, except for areas with chalky soils, as these are too hard for them to burrow into or dig their way out of. Like so many species, tidy gardens do not benefit Stag Beetles, and improvements made with them in mind will benefit numerous other beetles. Beetles being one of the preferred foods of the Hedgehog, I am more than happy to encourage more of them in my garden.

To find out more about Stag Beetles and how to help them, click the link:

<https://ptes.org/campaigns/stag-beetles-2/stag-beetle-facts/>

I have adapted my existing dead wood feature to make it more suitable for the magnificent Stag Beetle. They spend up to seven years as larvae inside dead wood, preferably partially buried in the ground as a rotting tree stump would be. I've artificially created stumps and rotting root systems by burying large pieces of untreated wood. First, I removed one of my logs that was just sitting on the ground and dug a hole.



Then I put some old posts into the hole and filled it in with bark chippings to imitate a rotting stump.





Mini 'stumpery'

Not content with just one feature for Stag Beetles, next I filled an old tyre with large pieces of wood and bark chippings and topped it off with compost. Then I cut the bottom out of a large pot and placed it on top.



New beetle habitat features

I planted my new Buddleia into the pot and scattered some wildflower seeds (Foxglove and Ox-Eye Daisy) around the edge. This two-tier arrangement imitates the root system of a much older shrub where Stag Beetle larvae could munch away on the dead wood underground.



A home for beetle larvae and nectar for butterflies, all in one place.

I finished it all off by adding a bird bath. I've been meaning to make a bird bath for ages. The pond is used for bathing, but only when the water is high and the edges are shallow. When the water gets low, the birds can still get a drink, but they can't get in to clean their feathers. I hope this will provide a useful resource for small birds such as Starlings and Sparrows.



Mini beetle stumpery with bird bath

So, the beetles get dead wood for their larvae, the birds can have a bath, the butterflies will get nectar from the Buddleia flowers and I will (eventually) get a nice big bush to screen the inadequate fence on that side of the garden. Maybe one day it will even get big enough for birds to nest in. Everybody wins!



Male and female Stag Beetles (photo from PTES)

If you've seen a Stag Beetle, please record it at:

<https://ptes.org/get-involved/surveys/garden/great-stag-hunt/stag-hunt-survey/>

We've finally had some rain, so I've had less watering to do. The effort has paid off though, the new plants in my flowering lawn are thriving and I've even had the first flowers from some of the daises.



Common Daisy

After nurturing these tiny plants gently for over a month, it felt a bit wrong to mow them for the first time this weekend. Mowing every few weeks should prevent them being swamped by grasses while encouraging them to put on sideways growth and flower repeatedly, so I took a deep breath and did it. I'm looking forward to seeing more species begin to bloom here.

The Mint cuttings I have been cultivating on the kitchen windowsill put out some good roots, so I planted them out into my mini kitchen garden. It now contains four pollinator-friendly edible plants:

Rosemary, Chives, Mint and Strawberries. The Strawberries strayed under the fence from next-door, and I transplanted them from there.



Mini kitchen garden

Last week I stayed up late playing Hedgehog ambulance. One hog was extremely underweight and behaving unusually. She is apparently settling down a bit and gradually putting on weight. She's not out of the woods but I'm hopeful for a positive outcome. The second hog had a large abscess at the top of his leg. The abscess was drained but it was a very large wound and he was returned to the vet for further treatment this week, where he was unfortunately euthanised. The numbers of hogs visiting the garden seems to have reduced by more than just those two and it's been pretty quiet. I'm putting this down to the time of year and the weather. Nursing mothers won't be going far from their nests until their hoglets are a bit bigger. Also, there has been some long-awaited rain. This will have made natural food a bit easier to find so they don't need to rely on my feeding station as much. I'm hoping this quiet spell won't last long and that one of those mothers will bring her hoglets to show them where to find the food. As I don't have much interesting Hedgehog footage from this week, I'm sharing this picture of a cheerful hog from 2018. I think he looks like he's smiling.



Cheerful Hedgehog

If you're desperate to see more Hedgehog videos, you could visit the Hedgehog Street YouTube channel at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/HedgehogStreet/featured>

The Foxes have not been shy this week, I've had lots of visits from them. The Fox cub who visited last week has been back. This time it was determined to reach the food that it could so clearly smell inside the Hedgehog feeding station. I was impressed to see it wriggle its way inside, through the same entrance as the hogs. Although the feeding station is supposed to be fox-proof, cubs are small and very flexible. I probably won't bother making any adjustments to the design. Some of the larger Hedgehogs already have quite a tight squeeze to get through the entrance, and the cub will soon grow too big to fit.



To see a video of the cub getting in, click the link:

<https://youtu.be/qz6u5jWMdp0>

I have been enjoying watching the antics of this cub. Although it turns out I was mistaken in thinking there was only one. This week some siblings accompanied the crafty cub and they have also learned how to get inside the feeding station.



To see a video of the siblings, click here:

<https://youtu.be/edMLhVIt-ME>

I haven't seen an adult with any of the cubs, but I'm still working on the assumption they belong to 3Paws. She turned up on Tuesday night and took two boiled eggs away with her. I didn't see the cubs that night though. She was back on Wednesday night, alone again. Over an hour before that, a cub had visited but failed to get into the feeding station. Either it had grown a bit overnight, or this was a different cub who hasn't worked out how to get in yet. It's very hard to tell them apart at this stage. I'll keep watching and see what I can find out.



3Paws taking an egg

Come back next time to get all the latest news on my garden visitors and residents. I'll be keeping an eye on all the comings and goings, and I'll be getting on with more projects to make my garden a better place for pollinators and other wildlife.