

Confined to the Garden – Week 6

The weather has been dry for about a month, so the garden was grateful for some rain this week. All the talk is of how and when lockdown restrictions might be eased but for now, we're still staying at home. Newsreaders tell me police have had to turn people away from popular beauty spots. Perhaps the rain will make their job a little easier and encourage those thinking of breaking the rules to stay indoors.

The bee hotels are filling up fast now. Last week, I noticed the first mud cap and now there are several more in this hotel



Last week



Start of this week



Middle of this week

I've noticed that the bees seem to have preferences. Medium sized tubes are taken first. Some of the tubes in the new hotels seem too small to be immediately appealing. The biggest ones are also left empty until other options are all gone. It seems they want optimum space for pollen storage and larval growth but not too much work to do when capping the chambers. Makes sense, I suppose.

There is also a definite preference for the bamboo tubes over drilled blocks of wood. Maybe the longer spaces are better because they can fit more chambers and perhaps offer more protection from weather, predators and parasites. They also like to be close to other Mason Bees, apparently. Two other hotels I put up at the same time are as yet almost unused, and a drilled block I put up a few years ago has been completely ignored.



Other new hotels with smaller tubes have not been occupied yet



Drilled wooden block, still unoccupied.

This is all worth considering when buying or making bee hotels in the future. Activity has slowed somewhat with the wetter weather but I'm sure it won't be long before there's no space left. I'll have to get some more of these hotels for the leafcutter bees to use in the summer. They don't turn up until around June and last year they found very few vacancies left.

Click here for reviews of the best Mason Bee homes:
<https://beekeeperclub.com/best-mason-bee-house/>

There have been lots of birds visiting the feeders as usual, despite the breeding season kicking off. Recently, a pair of Feral Pigeons have taken to visiting in the evenings. I think they must be used to being fed by people. They are very tame and hardly blink while I go about my evening routine of watering pots, putting out food, setting up cameras etc. I can walk right past within a few feet of them and they calmly carry on pecking around under the feeders. They are cleaning up some of the seed spilt by the smaller birds, so they're helping me out and are quite welcome.

Pigeons are often overlooked birds, but their plumage can be beautiful up close. I took these photos early this week, while the sun was still out. The iridescence around the birds' necks was shining like jewellery.



For some interesting facts about these under-appreciated birds, click here:

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

They seem to be everywhere, whether its Feral Pigeons like these in our towns, Collared Doves in our gardens or Woodpigeons pretty much everywhere else. One of the reasons they are so successful is because they can produce 'crop milk' which allows them to breed at any time of year, even when insect food is scarce. Most other birds, even those that feed on seeds as adults, raise their young on insects to provide enough protein to grow into successful fledglings. A very small number of birds, including Pigeons, Emperor Penguins and Greater Flamingos can produce crop milk. As the name suggests, the milk is produced in the crop, a sac-like structure normally used for storing food.

For more information on crop milk, click here:

<https://www.sciencealert.com/mothers-milk-best-for-growing-babies-and-that-includes-baby-pigeons>

This time last year and several previous years; House Sparrows were nesting in the box on the back of the house. By the end of April, the chicks had hatched and were being fed regularly by their parents. Not this year. My box has been rejected as unsuitable. Maybe they didn't want their story told on the internet. I have been concerned ever since I put this box up that it is in the wrong place, being on a south-facing wall, it could easily get too hot inside. However, the overhang of the roof shades it from the midday sun and several successful broods have fledged from it over the years. I have been meaning to put boxes up at the front of the house, but I am notoriously bad at going up ladders! Sparrows love company and prefer to nest colonially. Sparrow 'terraces' with multiple nesting chambers and entrance holes are available and I've seen them prove popular elsewhere. I resolve to get a sparrow terrace and put it at the front. Maybe if petrol costs remain low, I'll be able to do this in time for next spring. If we're still in lockdown when I put it up, I'll treat you to a picture of my terrified face as I climb the ladder!

Click here to see a range of different sparrow terraces:

<https://www.wildcare.co.uk/wildlife-nest-boxes/bird-boxes/sparrows.html>



A House Sparrow chick contemplating the outside world.

For more information on nest box positioning, click here:

<https://blog.nhbs.com/how-to-guides/where-to-hang-and-how-to-maintain-your-nest-box/>

Rain provided a much-needed top up for the pond. Being small, the water level can get very low in dry spells. Sometimes I top it up with water from a rain collection butt as it can be harder for the Hedgehogs to reach the water when its low. I provide water next to the feeding station, but they often prefer the pond. Providing accessible water is the simplest thing you can do to attract wildlife

to your garden. So many different species can benefit, from Hedgehogs and Foxes to birds and bees. In dry weather, a simple shallow dish of fresh water can save lives.



Click here to see a short video of a Hedgehog drinking from the pond:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNv4nMLJNBU>

A little bit of rain makes it easier to find natural food such as earthworms, slugs and beetles, so there has been slightly lower demand for the feeding station this week. However, it's the breeding season so there has been lots of aggressive behaviour among the hogs. The feeding station camera captured one of the most violent examples I've seen in my own garden. It was not the first 'unprovoked' attack I've seen, but possibly the most violent so far. One hog was already inside the feeding station. Another comes along but instead of just barging in and shoving his opponent out of the way, he flips him, bites his underside and shakes him hard, just like a dog would shake a toy. It was all over in a few seconds and the perpetrator started eating as if nothing had happened.

Click here to see a short video of this violent outburst:

<https://youtu.be/yD2CJHjT-M>

I've moved Hogcam III from the hole under the fence to the original 'hog house', but it hasn't picked up much activity there. No sign of any nesting behaviour yet.



The original hog house.

However, some vegetation has sprung up in front of the new, more basic style shelter. It looks like there's a little pathway developing from regular traffic. So I will probably move the camera to see what's going on there.



Pathway to the 'hogitat'

The CCTV camera covers most of the garden, but as these hog shelters are both at the edges, they don't show up very clearly, so a closer view is required to determine exactly what's happening there. Of course, there's always the open compost heap. A nesting mother could easily decide that's a better spot than a man-made shelter. I'm hoping that the more options I provide, the more likely I am to see hoglets in my garden.

Click here to see reviews of different types of Hedgehog shelter for your garden:

<https://diygarden.co.uk/best-hedgehogs-houses/>

And finally, click the link below to see a short video of a behaviour I have not seen before, but I must warn you the content may be considered of an adult nature, so you might want to send the kids to bed at this point...

<https://youtu.be/KvIQMf5Cy98>

Watch the hog at the water bowl carefully. I have heard of a dance craze known as 'twerking', but I doubt the hog has. So what is he doing? After pleading for help on the internet from Hedgehog experts I discovered that frustrated male Hedgehogs will sometimes 'self-stimulate', and this is a fairly discreet form of this behaviour. Apparently, this is something the owners of pet (usually African Pygmy) Hedgehogs are aware of, as some hogs are not so discreet as this one. It is often politely referred to it as "boy time", although it is observed in females too. With wildlife, there's always something new to learn! In the process of my research into the private lives of Hedgehogs, I found out that structure of a male Hedgehog's genitals is quite unusual, his penis protrudes from the middle of his abdomen, includes "lateral horns" and a tip that looks a bit like a flower. Not only that but it can extend beyond the tip of his nose. If you're interested in this area of biology, you can find

more information here: <https://heavenlyhedgies.com/the-hedgehog-penis-structure-habits-and-disorders/>

Other animals with strange genitals:

<https://www.iflscience.com/plants-and-animals/strangest-genitals-animal-kingdom/>

Check back here next week to see what else I have learned about Hedgehogs, whether I am making any progress with my grand plans for pollinators, and what else has been happening in my garden.