

Confined to the Garden: January 2021

Welcome to 2021 in the garden. Where to begin? My last update, before Christmas, seems a long time ago now. The latest surge of Covid cases has put unprecedented strain on the NHS, bringing it to breaking point. Most people are dutifully staying at home and tutting at the rule-breaking minority, as we begin the new year in another national lockdown. Even the schools are closed again, and likely to remain so for some time yet. It seems to be working, and case rates are falling. However, we are reminded daily that restrictions cannot be eased until the death rate has come down significantly. Speculation about when this might be varies from February to May, in keeping with the ever-present uncertainty thrust upon us by this pandemic. Vaccination continues at a rapid pace and millions of the most vulnerable have now had their first of two doses of vaccine. Much is still unknown about the level of protection this will afford, but it is providing much needed positivity to counter the gloom.

In the garden, the new year has brought frost. The temperature hasn't been consistently low but there have been some beautiful frosty mornings. Other parts of the country have even had some snow. Despite the wintry sparkle, signs of spring are already beginning to show in the garden.



Primrose leaf rosette



Honeysuckle with new leaves and buds



Honeysuckle

I've seen even more signs of spring further afield on my permitted local walks. I've spotted a Magpie carrying a twig for nest building, heard a woodpecker drumming and seen Hazel catkins. While out for a walk with a friend, we saw these lovely Snowdrops surrounded by Winter Aconite.



Snowdrops and Winter Aconite (Photo: Tad Lapper)

Back in the garden, the bee hotels are looking a little battered and bedraggled from being out in the weather. I hope the larvae inside are still safe and cosy. From the pictures below, you might be able to see that the one with the biggest overhang (in the middle) has stayed dry while the others now have soggy mud caps, which could make the larvae inside more vulnerable. This year, I might take them down and keep them in the shed over winter. This is advised by the bee hotel experts to protect from predators. Apparently, Blue Tits have learned to raid these hotels since they started appearing in our gardens. If I do take them in next winter, the most important thing will be to remember to put them back outside again before the bees start emerging!



Bee hotels

The recent temperature drop seems to have finally sent the last Hedgehog to his nest as I haven't seen him since the 20th of December. As always, food will be available in the feeding station if a mild spell wakens any hungry hogs. Strangely, if the weather turns colder and a hog's nest turns out to be inadequate, they won't add extra insulation but start from scratch and build a whole new nest.



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The last Hedgehog of 2020

This hungry Squirrel has been back to collect his stash of food he cached in the autumn. I know it buried some peanuts in this plant pot, but I have a feeling the squirrel has also eaten the snowdrop bulbs I put in there.



Grey Squirrel

The garden acquired a new resident last month and I'm monitoring the situation very closely...



Brown Rat

Rats have only recently become residents of the garden. Until this winter, they had visited a handful of times but never stayed long. All wildlife is welcome in my garden, but I am well aware of the problems I could have if I encourage them to establish a colony. Personally, I think they're cute and fascinatingly clever, but I'm pretty sure my neighbours disagree. For the last few weeks, I've been seeing just one on camera. It appears to be a female and has set up home in a hedgehog shelter

under a bird feeder. It ventures out to pick up spilt bird food, darting back inside at the first whiff of danger. Rats are social creatures and where there is one there are likely to be more. Evidence of their presence was at first confined to the compost bin, but I have now seen signs that they've gained access to my shed. Nothing has been noticeably chewed yet, but a line has been crossed. I will not tolerate tampering with the contents of my shed! I will be replacing my dilapidated wooden affair with a rodent-resistant metal one. Less aesthetically pleasing but far more durable. Three sides of my shed are impossible to access for treatment with wood preservative, so rot inevitably sets in and holes appear. A metal one will last far longer.



Brown Rat

On 26th of January, for the first time, I saw two rats at once. Emboldened by safety in numbers, they explored further up the garden, which tells me they are starting to make themselves at home. I don't really subscribe to the concept of 'vermin' and I'm not bothered by the presence of a few rats in the garden (as long as they don't mess with my shed!). I will, however, remove some of their home comforts to discourage them from settling in to breed and upsetting the neighbours. I hope that acting now will avoid any problems arising in the future. Steps taken so far include removing the bird feeders from the area (if necessary, I may have to suspend bird feeding entirely for a little while). They seem to be inexplicably disinterested in Hedgehog food, so that is still available for now. The occupied Hedgehog shelter though, will soon be relocated. Rats are naturally cautious and 'neophobic' (afraid of new things). So changing things around frequently will put them off. Reducing food, shelter and familiarity should make them less attracted to my garden. For now, I will enjoy watching their antics and try not to encourage them too much.

To see a short video of a rat attempting to climb the bird feeder pole, click the link:

<https://youtu.be/6jUxD2VRUfA>

For advice on dealing with rodents kindly, click the link:

<https://helpwildlife.co.uk/problem-wildlife/rodents/>

Fortunately, there is already an effective form of natural rodent control present in my garden. Foxes are frequent visitors and this one was caught on camera during daylight hours, giving me some rare colour images.



Daylight Fox

The vast majority of the Foxes have stuck to the nightshift this month. January is the peak of their breeding season and there are several individuals roaming the area, looking for a mate. I often hear them calling at night, and I'm seeing lots of scent-marking behaviour on the garden cameras. Scent and vocalisations are two of the most important ways Foxes communicate with each other.

To learn more about Fox communication, click the link below:

<https://www.wildlifeonline.me.uk/animals/article/red-fox-behaviour-communication>

This sleepy individual decided to take a break from the dating scene and curl up for a nap on the grass. A bold choice, especially considering it was raining! It only stayed there for 15mins though. When it heard another Fox calling from outside the garden, it got up and left.



Sleeping Fox

Good old 3Paws is still around. She visited the garden seven times this month, which is more than the last two months. On a few occasions, what I first thought was 3Paws turned out to be another vixen (pictured below). She is holding up an injured front foot, but it's not missing. There is also a male with a damaged back leg. These types of injuries usually seem to heal well and although not

good for the fox, they can be helpful in identifying individuals for a while. Because of this, I know there are definitely at least three vixens and two dog foxes in the area, almost certainly more.



Limping vixen

I'll be getting involved with the RSPB 's Big Garden Birdwatch this weekend. As the world's biggest wildlife survey, it's well worth an hour of my time. I expect to see large groups of House Sparrows and Starlings, plus some Pigeons and Doves, but you never know what else might show up when you take the time to really look. An excellent excuse to spend an hour looking out of my window and call it science. If you'd like to take part too, follow this link:

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/birdwatch/>

And finally, click the link below to see a very short video of two rowdy mice getting into a fight on New Year's Eve:

<https://youtu.be/1kg4HxE1go>

I'll be back at the end of February with another update. I hope to have started some new projects by then. I must have been good last year because Christmas brought some exciting new toys to play with. Watch this space to see what I've got planned for 2021 in the garden.