

Confined to the garden: March 2021

A whole year has passed since I started writing this blog at the start of the pandemic. It seems the end of our third national lockdown may finally be in sight. Over 30million people have now received their first dose of vaccine and the roll out continues despite continued discussion about the safety and efficacy of different vaccines and concerns about sufficient supply. The first two dates in the government's 'road map' have been met. Children have been back at school for a few weeks and we are now allowed to meet up to six people outdoors. We are even allowed to visit each other's gardens. A great relief for many. The next date on the 'road map' is a big one for me and I can't wait to go camping when I'm finally allowed to on April 14th, as long as all goes to plan. The last year has taught me to expect plans to change at the last minute but I'm daring to be uncharacteristically optimistic!

We have passed the equinox and changed the clocks, proper springtime is here. The weather is mixed, but when the sun shines it feels warm. There are lambs in the fields, buds are bursting into leaf and blossom, and migrant birds like Chiffchaff are returning to add their song to the dawn chorus. There's not much flowering in the garden yet, but there are plenty of signs of growth.

I've seen several species of birds collecting nesting material in the garden this month, including: Starling, Collared Dove, Blackbird, House Sparrow and Magpie.



Magpie



Blackbird



Starling



Collared Dove

Birds use all sorts of different materials to build their nests, including: twigs, moss, grass, wool, hair, spider's silk, and mud. You can help by leaving nesting material out for them at this time of year. However, some materials that seem suitable can be hazardous, so be careful what you provide. Long human hair can cause entanglement and parasite treatments on pet hair can be toxic to chicks in the nest.

To find out more, click the link below:

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/natures-home-magazine/birds-and-wildlife-articles/features/home-sweet-home/>

There are no signs of occupancy in the new sparrow terrace on the front of the house. Although I did see a pair of Sparrows mating outside it the other day. Unfortunately, the wireless cameras inside can still only be switched on at weekends as they interfere with the Wi-Fi and disrupt working from home.

I saw a buzzard flying over the garden in early March, the first since last summer. They become more visible in warmer weather as they use thermals (rising warm air currents) to soar effortlessly over their territory in search of food. Seeing these impressive raptors reminds me that even a threatened species can bounce back when given enough space. Once the victim of relentless persecution and pesticide poisoning, they were a rare sight when I was a child, associated with remote places. Today they are Britain's most common bird of prey and can once again be found nesting in every county.

For more information about Buzzards, click the link:

<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/animals/birds/buzzard/>

The rats are still around but I'm not seeing them every day. They mostly stay at the far end of the garden, around the shed and compost heap. This month, there have been three brief journeys made to the feeding station at the other end of the garden, but they ignore the hedgehog food every time. I thought rats would eat pretty much anything, but there must be better fare available elsewhere.



Brown Rat inside the Hedgehog feeding station

To see videos, click the links:

One rat's journey to the feeding station: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoXPiKdCz3w>

All three rats ignoring the food: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIvQVZQB4OY>

There was one sunny morning this month, when two rats explored the wider garden for a few hours, but I've seen little of them since then. They seem to come and go, probably taking advantage of other resources nearby. There is plenty of suitable habitat for them in the alley at the back of my garden and one of my neighbours keeps poultry, which probably means food is available to the rats there.



Brown Rat exploring the garden

Mouse visits to the feeding station are massively reduced this month. There have even been a few nights with none at all. I can only speculate as to why this might be. Perhaps natural food is becoming more available as spring progresses. Perhaps some individuals have died and the population is at a pre-breeding season low. Perhaps the increasing Hedgehog presence is putting them off. I honestly just don't know.



Wood Mouse

Despite lower numbers, I still managed to capture a feisty little character chasing off another mouse.

To see a short video of mice squabbling, click the link:

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

Wood Mice are generally nocturnal and much less likely to be seen during the day than rats. I usually see them zipping back and forth to the Hedgehog feeding station after dark. However, I did capture one mouse on camera during daylight hours this month, for the first time ever. It seemed a little dazzled on exiting the feeding station and hung around on the patio for a long time for such a vulnerable creature out in the open. It came to no harm though, and continued to run back and forth with stolen nuggets of food until well after dark.



To see a short video of this bold individual, click the link:

<https://youtu.be/XFVXMqmvS-I>

Last month I was experimenting with a trail camera inside the feeding station. I've so enjoyed having this internal view, that I've replaced the experimental trail camera with a permanent wired camera. It doesn't have audio and the pictures aren't quite as sharp, but I can view it live from the sofa, along with the sparrow terrace (when the cameras are switched on) and an overview of the whole garden.



Live video feeds

I've only seen one Hedgehog this month, but he has visited fairly regularly. Not yet two nights in a row but he turns up every few days or so. The live feed has enabled me to see when he has finished his first helping and pop outside to top up the bowl for an extra portion. One night he managed to polish off four separate meals! Not surprising as there is little natural food available this early in the year and I'm sure hibernation is hungry work. I know this is definitely the same male each time because he has some sort of injury on his head. I can't quite make out exactly what it is but it looks like it is healing. I'm keeping a close eye on it but will only intervene if absolutely necessary. For now, I'm calling him 'Big Ear' because the loss of spines on one side of his head makes that ear much more visible than usual.



Injured Hedgehog

Both of my most regular visitors this month are identifiable through injury. Apart from the Hedgehog, I've been seeing a lot of this fox with a badly damaged back leg.



Injured Fox

As with the Hedgehog, I will only intervene if absolutely necessary. Leg injuries are sadly not uncommon in Foxes, but most heal by themselves. This one does look pretty serious, but the Fox is still very much mobile and I have seen small signs of improvement in the last couple of weeks.

To see a video of these two injured characters visiting the garden, click the link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koHBHF2JWRo>

Whenever the hedgehog doesn't turn up, I put the uneaten food out for foxes the next night. I'm always glad when it's the injured fox who finds it first. There have been visits from a few other foxes, but mostly just the injured one. It often comes more than once in a single night, just to check whether there are any easy meals on offer.



Fox visiting the garden

3Paws, the vixen with a missing front paw, had not been seen in the garden since the 6th of March. I wondered if she might be tucked away in a den somewhere, nursing newborn cubs. Then she reappeared on the 25th. If she does have cubs, they won't venture above ground until mid-late April.



3Paws

Replacing the trail camera inside the feeding station has allowed me to re-deploy it in other parts of the garden. Using the same close-focus lenses as before, I was able to get some lovely close-up images of birds using the bath I created for them last year.



Female Blackbird



Male Blackbird



Male House Sparrow

To see a short video of images from the birdbath, click the link:

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

My favourite clip from this camera was of a group of House Sparrows having a bath together. Sparrows like to do most things communally, and bathing is no exception. The team bath is a

raucous affair, with a lot of noise and splashing. They were so enthusiastic in their ablutions that they splashed water all over the lens and eventually obscured the view.



House Sparrows bathing



House Sparrows bathing

To see a video of the Sparrows' bath time, click the link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfG7iPJbqA>

Predictably, the birds are not the only ones making use of the birdbath. Getting a drink requires a bit of agility, but it's not impossible for the average rat.



To see a video of an agile Brown Rat drinking from the birdbath, click the link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkJViqx42wU>

My next update will be at the end of April. I hope you will come back to see what has been happening as spring gets going. I hope to be spending some time enjoying nature outside of my garden. I'm sure there will be lots going on, finding the time to edit videos between camping trips might be a challenge but I'll make sure the highlights are available here.