

Confined to the Garden – July 2021

On the 19th of July, England lifted the remaining covid restrictions. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are keeping some of theirs in place for the time being, but in England the legal requirements put in place 16 months ago to reduce the spread of the virus have been removed. This was controversial as infection rates were still increasing rapidly. The statistics are a bit more complex now as infection rates seem to be falling this week, but hospital admissions are still rising. Over 84 million doses of covid vaccine have now been administered in the UK, with about 70% of the adult population fully immunised. Travel is still restricted, with a traffic light system requiring travellers from red and amber listed countries required to quarantine on entering the UK. However, even planning a holiday to a country on the green list is risky as your destination could be reclassified at very short notice. Another new word has been added to our pandemic vocabulary as the NHS covid app goes into overdrive. The term 'Pingdemic' has been coined to describe the huge numbers of people being 'pinged' by the app and told to self-isolate because they have come into contact with someone who has the virus. In some cases, whole workforces have been affected and the 'pingdemic' threatens to be more disruptive than the pandemic. Discussions are ongoing about how isolation could be replaced with frequent testing for those 'pinged' by the app, and possibly for returning travellers too.

2021 has been heralded as the year of the 'staycation', so for some, the great British weather is more important than ever. The weather this spring was so unusual, it is bound to have had an impact on wildlife. The summer started promisingly, but quickly turned a bit cool and damp. July eventually brought some hot weather, and with heat comes thunderstorms and flooding, so summer is turning out to be just as much of a challenge for wildlife as the previous season.

In the garden, there are still plenty of plants in flower, including one large spike of Ragwort in the middle of the 'lawn'. This is home to a bunch of Cinnabar moth caterpillars. I love these stripy little characters. Their bright colours warn predators about their unpleasant taste, which they produce by absorbing alkaloids from the Ragwort they eat. If they run out of Ragwort, they seek out these alkaloids by eating each other.



Cinnabar moth caterpillars on Ragwort

To find out more about Cinnabar moths, click the link:
<https://www.buglife.org.uk/bugs/bug-directory/cinnabar-moth/>

Ragwort isn't just good for moths, this misunderstood plant is much maligned in the British countryside and its value for wildlife is often underestimated. As a native British plant, it is the foodplant of at least 77 species of insect and provides a valuable nectar source for hundreds more. It can be mildly toxic to livestock if cut and dried into hay and consumed in large quantities, but most animals avoid eating it when grazing.

To get the facts about Ragwort, click the link:

<https://friendsoftheearth.uk/nature/ragwort-poisonous-ragwort-mythbuster>

Although alkaloids from Ragwort make Cinnabar caterpillars distasteful to birds, the adult moths are perfectly harmless, which is fortunate considering next door's cat, Coco, finds them easier to catch than birds, although she still collided with my camera while chasing this one.



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

<https://youtu.be/tvtolVJ--AI>

This month, my long-awaited new shed finally arrived. Rats moved into my old wooden shed in the spring and although they are more welcome in my garden than most, I'm not willing to share my shed with them. The new one is made of metal and should keep them out for many years to come.



New shed

When emptying and demolishing the old shed, I found all manner of detritus left by my rodent squatters, including the desiccated remains of a half-eaten adult slow worm. The rats must have found it hibernating in the compost heap and taken advantage of its torpor.



The Rat shed



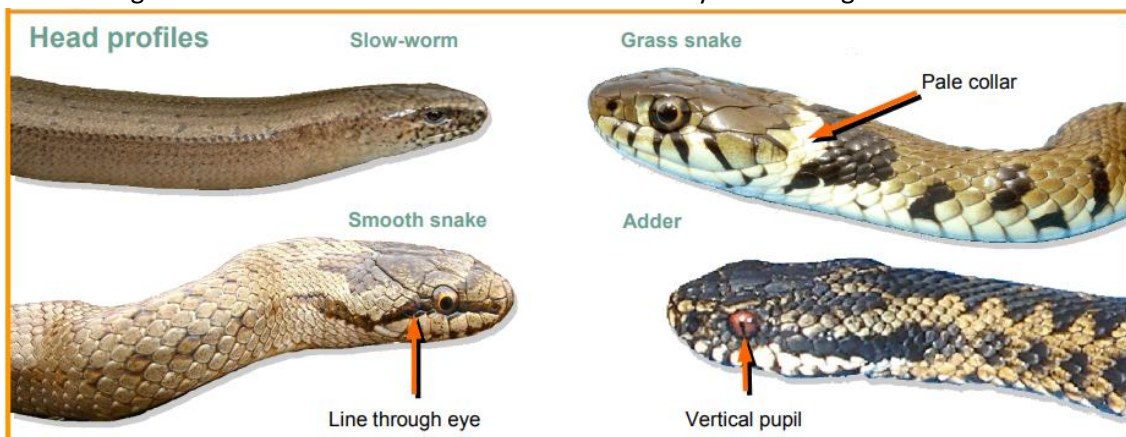
Debris left behind by rats



To see a video of the last night before the rat shed was demolished:

https://youtu.be/jcuUpf5Y4_E

I was sad to learn of the demise of the Slow Worm, but while trimming some Ivy from a fence in preparation for building the new shed, I saw another adult Slow Worm climbing through the Ivy. I was surprised to see it there as I think of Slow Worms as dwelling on and under the ground. I've seen Grass snakes and Adders climbing through dense vegetation, but somehow didn't expect the same behaviour from these legless lizards. After a quick internet search, it turns out it's not all that unusual in gardens, where at ground level there may be a lack of quiet places to bask in the sun without being disturbed. Although they are not as adept at climbing as snakes are, I found several photos, posted on various reptile forums, of Slow Worms basking on top of neat privet hedges. One of my favourite things about nature and wildlife is that there's always something new to learn.



picture from ARG UK reptile guide (link below)

If you don't know your snakes from your legless lizards, follow the link:

<https://www.arguk.org/info-advice/id-guides/440-reptile-guide-arc-arg-uk-2019/file>

Sadly, I still haven't seen a single Hedgehog in the garden. They've been absent for almost two months now. However, Foxes are still regular visitors, including 3Paws, the vixen with a missing front foot.



3Paws

The other animal I see most of is probably the domestic cat. Several of the neighbourhood felines visit regularly, but the most frequent is definitely Coco from next door. She is young and has only been allowed out to explore quite recently but she is making herself known amongst the more established garden regulars. Last month I shared some videos of her meeting Foxes. This month I captured what I can only describe as play behaviour between Coco and a young Fox. I'm sure there are subtle nuances to their interactions beyond my understanding, but it looks a lot like play to me.



To see a video of this, click the link:

https://youtu.be/aeOvY_nUBuw

Not all cats are as tolerant of Foxes as Coco. My own cats sent a very clear signal to a Fox who came too close to their territory one morning. They have an enclosed area at the back of the house which gives them access to the outside while keeping both them and the local birds and mice safe. This is

sometimes known as a 'catio'. In the summer, they spend a lot of time out there watching the garden and snoozing in the sunshine. Early one morning in July, a Fox tried to get a closer look and although the cats are just out of shot, they can be heard spitting at the Fox and the message is clear from the Fox's reaction.



To see the video, click the link:

https://youtu.be/aeOvY_nUBuw

To learn more about catios, click the link:

<https://catiospaces.com/catios-cat-enclosures/>

August is likely to be a quiet month in the garden as the cubs continue to grow up and explore further afield. I hope my cameras will capture more than just my neighbours' cats but you can never predict what will happen next in the natural world. Rest assured, if anything interesting happens, it will be included here next month.