

NATURE SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Now including Bee & Mammal news

August - October 2019 Issue 29



NATURE SOCIETY
Making a real difference



GOOD NEWS

Following the assessment made earlier this year Professor Bellamy has awarded Mercia Marina the Gold accolade.



Also, we are one of the first recipients of their new 'Going Green Together' badge. As well as the Woodland Badge.

In addition, we received a well done on all the hard work we've done to help Britain's bees and achieve yet again a Honey Bee Friendly park award.

This last award in particular is all due to the efforts of our original Bee Group who continue to come up with ideas to further help these essential beleagued insects.

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There have been quite a few sights and sounds of various creatures over the last few months. Let's take a closer look at some of them.

NOISY SQUIRRELS

Noisy? Not something we initially associate with squirrels. However, there have been many strange and unusual calls coming from the trees by the roadside opposite FB2. Looking closely and trying to identify what the bird is, it was seen to be a squirrel.

Most squirrels, make several sounds, although the type and amount of noise they make vary by species. They generally vocalize to each other and to intruders. Grey squirrels have a variety of identifiable vocal noises.

Squirrel sounds and their volume depend on the circumstances and on the squirrel's age and gender.

Chattering noises might sound like some kind of bird, and squirrels can make a screeching noise similar to a jay. We might hear an alarm call, raised because of the presence of an intruder. Other calls for different purposes are much quieter. The calls aren't discussions between squirrels, they're one-way signals.



Warning Calls

In addition to vocal sounds, squirrels chatter their teeth. This signals aggression and a squirrel making this warning may bite if you get close. Many squirrels also communicate with tail movements and foot stamping. When first alarmed, a squirrel waves its tail. If the source of alarm continues, such as if a predator continues to approach, the squirrel makes warning calls. These calls tend to continue while the threat is present. The alarm cries warn other squirrels of danger and also communicate to the predator that the squirrel sees it.

So, keep your ears open when around that area and have a good look in the trees if you hear a strange call.

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Another recent sighting was of Painted Lady butterflies on August 3rd by FB3. Apparently, there was a mass migration of Painted Ladies this year which saw this butterfly rise up the ranks to become the most seen species of 2019's big butterfly count.



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MIMICS

Recently sent a picture taken by someone's friends and asked what kind of bee is this?



Well the answer was, it is not a bee at all. It is in fact a very clever Hoverfly mimicking a bee.

Most bee-lookalikes are hoverflies. Convincing, yes. Impossible to identify? No. hoverflies generally have small, short antennae, whereas bees have long and more obvious ones. They're wannabes in disguise. But go easy on them, because like bees they're expert pollinators. These harmless flies cannot sting. Some hoverflies resemble solitary bees or honeybees such as Drone flies.

But watch out, there are also hairy species that mimic bumblebees. Check out the costume on this Bumblebee hoverfly.



Differences between hoverflies and bees.

Hoverfly characteristics:

- 1 pair of wings (Bees have 2 – difficult to spot when folded)
- No narrow waist
- Short antennae
- Eyes that cover most of their head (sometimes meeting in the middle)
- No biting mouthparts (mandibles)
- Often hover in mid-air



This picture of a White-tailed bumblebee clearly shows the longer antennae and the 'waist', the wings and eyes look different to. Last week there were many of the mimics on the Dandelions around the Marina. Look closely and see if you can spot them.

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GRASS SNAKES

Something else seen here in the last few weeks and indeed causing consternation was a grass snake. It was swimming across the marina which is a very common occurrence. They are sometimes known as a Water snake.

Afraid of snakes? There is no need to be afraid of these fascinating reptiles.

So what do we really know about them?

The grass snake is usually greenish in colour, with a yellow and black collar, pale belly, and dark markings down the sides. Females are bigger than males. Our largest snake, measuring between 90 – 120cm it is particularly fond of wetland habitats, but can also be found in dry grasslands and in gardens, especially those with a pond nearby. Its lifespan is 15-25 years.



During the summer, grass snake can be spotted basking in the sun near their favourite ponds or swimming in the water. They hunt amphibians, fish, small mammals and birds. Females lay 10 to 40 eggs in rotting vegetation, such as compost heaps, incubating them until they hatch in early Autumn.

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Did you know?

When threatened by one of its many predators, the grass snake often 'plays dead', perhaps making itself less appealing to eat. Predators include badgers, red foxes, domestic cats, hedgehogs and a number of birds; when caught, grass snakes hiss and release a foul-smelling substance from their anal gland.

Although they may also strike with the head, they do not bite and are harmless to humans.



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FROM REPTILES TO BIRDS - WHEATEAR

A lovely visit from a Wheatear on August 30th.



First time recorded here at the marina.

A lovely little bird of the chat family.

(This photo courtesy of Martin Jordan)

Very distinctive Robin sized, the wheatear is a summer visitor, arriving here in early March and leaving in September for its African wintering grounds. It is fairly certain that the one seen here was on its way back to Africa. Our habitat would not be its usual haunt. It frequents open, rocky country, pasture, moorland and heath. Mainly a ground-dwelling bird, it can be seen running or hopping along. It breeds mainly in western and northern UK.

It has a characteristic tail pattern: a black 'T' on a white rump, which can be seen when it is in flight.



Males are smart-looking birds, with blue-grey backs and heads, black wings, black cheeks with white eye stripes, and pale orange chests. Females are browner and juveniles speckled.

The wheatear diet mostly consists of insects and other invertebrates, but it will also eat berries.

An estimated 230,000 pairs breed in the UK each year. A nest will typically be built in a sheltered cavity between rocks, a rabbit burrow or man-made hole in a wall or other feature. Eggs are normally laid in May, with the chicks fledging around two weeks after hatching. They can be seen nesting in the dry-stone walls of the Peak District.

These visitors make one of the longest journeys of any small bird, crossing oceans, ice and deserts.

Miniature tracking devices have shown that its migratory flight averages 30,000 km (18,640 miles).

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NOW TO MAMMALS

Pygmy shrew

Always assumed they were here but recently saw the first one. Sadly, not in good circumstances. This tiny character was literally being battered about by a cat. Rescued and picked up VERY carefully in a tissue it was carried a good distance away from said predator and released. Incredibly it was still alive and active. Any shrew can die very suddenly from shock, so this seemed to be a good result as it scuttled off. Picking up agitated shrews is not something to be recommended it has to be said. The tiny teeth are extremely sharp and they will not hesitate to bite. Indeed, when live trapping of mammals is undertaken, a license is required in case shrews are caught and there are many regulations to be observed.

The pygmy shrew, as its name would suggest is our tiniest mammal.

Length: 4-6cm, Tail: 3-4.5cm, Weight: 2-6g

Average lifespan: 1-1.5 years



Tiny but fierce. Requiring to eat every 2-3 hours in order to survive. The pygmy shrew is always hungry: it can eat 125% of its body weight every day!

It mainly preys on insects, spiders and woodlice, but, unlike the common shrew, does not eat earthworms.

The pygmy shrew has tiny eyes, very small ears and a pointy face with a long nose. It is dark brown above and grey or silver below. It is smaller than the common shrew, it also has a smaller, narrower snout and the head can appear quite bulbous.

Found in most habitats and active by day and night, they are very territorial and aggressive for their size and can sometimes be heard fighting, their high-pitched squeaks particularly noticeable during the summer. Adults may only live for a year, just long enough to have one or two litters of around six young.

Surprisingly it is at the limit for warm blooded animals, any smaller and it would not survive yet it can live on open moorland and even on the summit of Ben Nevis.

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COMING UP

Hopefully, we will be having a BIRDS AND BEES stall on November 17th. Weather permitting especially as November can throw any kind of weather at us. A little later we will be asking for volunteers to help out.

MUSIC QUIZ



The start of the monthly winter quizzes is on October 30th.

Music? You may wonder why on earth are we mentioning this here? Even though it will be a totally 100% music quiz, all the proceeds will be going to our Wildlife Charities. It is hoped we will have a raffle as well.

All music types will be catered for from Folk to Pop to Classical absolutely something for everyone. Do you know your Beatles songs? Can you tell one instrument from another?

Well come along and join in the fun, it always is a good night.



If you would like to make any contributions, or have ideas for the newsletter please contact Jane Wakeham at janetavi5@aol.com

SPOTLIGHT

By April Showers (your eyes and ears for Marina wildlife)

This time, on September 8th I took a trip under the road bridge and out into the Wildlife field.

This can be a beautiful month and so I went to see what was about to enchant us. First taking in the lovely view from the car park bridge.

Do you ever stand on the top and just look? The water under the bridge attracts a lot of wildlife and this morning I was lucky enough to see Dragonflies coming under from the Marina and bursting out into the sunlight. Now getting ready for home, a Swallow also appeared at speed swooping through.

We never notice how many spider webs there are on grassland until they are be-speckled with dew and shone on by the morning sun making them glint like diamonds and when they are tickled by a light breeze it is stunning to see.



In the hedges Blackberries, some in flower others still red and some glistening with a blue/black tinge waiting for us to pick and taste them. Too sharp still? Leave them for a few more days to let the sunshine do its work but not too long as the Blackbirds will get ahead of you. Also, to be seen growing among the other plants is a berry you certainly do not want to be trying. Woody Nightshade, its lovely purple and yellow flowers now



giving way to its fruits of shining red. Pretty but poisonous. Hawthorn berries hang in festoons also turning into their autumn colours.



The shining Birch trees almost invites you to touch, to feel the silky bark. Clover and plantain still going strong in the short grass.

The leaves of the Aspen turning in the light breeze lending truth to the phrase of 'whispering trees' just listen to them. The reeds also add to the chorus with a rustling, whisper. Sitting and watching them drift from side to side becomes almost hypnotic, creating a relaxing and peaceful aura.



Many birds are now getting back in song. The Reed Warbler still adding its voice and if you look closely you may be lucky enough to spot them moving around the reed bed. The Chiff-Chaff is very much in evidence with the repetitive call of its own name. Of course, everyone's friend the Robin is very much in the forefront when it comes to song, staking its claim to territory and warning off others. The sound of its song is certainly filling the air this morning. Another sound which can be very peaceful and tranquil is the Wood Pigeon with its contented sounding hoo,hoo,hoo call. Bands of Blue and Long-tailed tits proliferate with their constant, squeaky calls, seeming to say wait for me, wait for me, as they flutter rapidly through the trees and shrubs. Coots argue and squabble as they cross the water of the pond, diving into the reeds, always looking for food. Two Canada Geese fly overhead with their constant mournful cry. All adding to the atmosphere.



Reluctantly leaving my seat on the bench and strolling further round I came across a number of white feathers on the grass. Preening swans, fighting pigeons who knows but wherever they came from it is just something else to see instead of walking by oblivious to everything that surrounds us. Looking across the water I suddenly notice streaks of movements across the surface. Another mystery? Most probably fish but imagination can make it into anything you want. It made me remember Wind In The Willows when Mole and Ratty were picnicking by the river and bubbles suddenly appeared. For them it was Otter but sadly not for us. However, the reflections in the water were indeed beautiful. From its Willow Spiral and beautifully carved seats to its wild flowers, even nettles in flower have their beauty, this is an area you should not just tramp through to reach the bridge over the canal. Take that little bit of extra time to SEE and HEAR what is there. Sit down for a few minutes and let your mind and imagination bring you some peace and tranquillity in your busy life.