**DRAFT**

**Craigentinny Allotments Wildlife News. August and early September 2021**

One of the stars of this autumn, like last year, has been the **Speckled Wood** butterflies which suddenly appeared in quite large numbers late in August, probably from a mass emerging from pupae, where they have been converting from caterpillars to butterflies somewhere on our site or nearby. John McK supplied this nice photo:

I’ve been surprised that Speckled Woods appear so frequently on our site, because they are normally said to be found displaying in sunny patches in well-established woodland - and until fairly recently they were quite rare in Scotland. However, they certainly now occur in the Lothians and Borders in more scrubby areas as well as in woodland, so our site, with its nearby trees and hedges, may not be so untypical. They are unusual among butterflies because the adults feed mainly on aphid ‘honeydew’ (‘nice’ word for their excreta – what makes the sticky mess on cars parked under trees!); the caterpillars feed on various grasses. They can have three generations in a year, but we seem mainly to get them in the autumn (there were reports on many days in August and September last year, and, as also this year, only a few earlier in the summer).

Otherwise, compared with last year, there seem to have been fewer butterflies on our site, even though there have been several flowering Buddlieias along the wall, a shrub which has traditionally been seen as a great butterfly attractor. In addition to lots of **Small Whites**, a **Small Tortoiseshell** has been the only butterfly that I have heard about recently. Last year we also had Red Admirals and Peacocks and a Meadow Brown in August – but the Spring weather has meant that most butterfly species have had low numbers this year.

Among mammals, members of our **Fox** family have continued to visit us in daytime regularly, though whether any still have dens on our site is not clear. There are certainly still at least two of this year’s youngsters around, and at least one of the adults – people who are visited regularly have suggested that there may be at least four animals in all, and various sightings seem to show that they are still doing a good job catching rats (and hopefully also **Woodmice**, which have again been chewing into pea pods on our plot). The foxes have certainly also been digging on our plot, presumably looking for worms, which in many rural areas are a standard part of fox diets – though, even if it had not been so dry, they might be having some problems finding any on our site because of the continued presence of New Zealand Flatworms.

At least one **Grey Squirrel** is also still around.

As in 2020, August and early September this year have been a quiet time on our site for birds. In part this is probably because there is now more food elsewhere than on our mostly still quite intensively cultivated plots, but especially because nesting is now over, and this is still the moulting season when birds tend to hide if they can, because, with fewer flight feathers, they are not so agile at escaping predators.

A nice example of this rather quiet skulking behaviour has been the appearance, for I think the first time since we started our recordings, of a **Chiffchaff** (photo below taken recently by a friend who lives in the Borders).

Earlier in the year, if they are around, Chiffchaffs are usually fairly obvious, being one of the earliest migrants, often arriving by the end of March, and singing in the tops of tall trees while the leaves are just breaking, loudly repeating their ‘chiff chaff, chiff chaff’ song. As late as the 1960s, they were quite uncommon in Edinburgh and the Lothians, but they are one of the many species which have moved north and westwards in the UK over the past fifty years. At one time they could be heard and seen quite frequently in the wood at the far end of our site – but not for a few years now. They nest on the ground, and it may be that rats and cats and foxes have become more of a threat, now that the shade from the growing trees has made the wood less suitable for good undergrowth plants to hide their nests. In the autumn, however, Chiffchaffs disperse quite widely, and, now that there is much less food in the trees, they can sometimes be seen skulking along hedgerows, making just a quiet high-pitched ‘contact’ call - and one has been seen twice doing that in the past couple of weeks along the golf course fence.

Otherwise, most of our usual bird residents have begun to reappear, if they ever went away. A few **Wood Pigeons** are nearly always around, as also are usually a couple of **Carrion Crows**. Overflying **Herring Gulls** have become fewer as they have been moving away from their city centre nest sites, but a pair were on the golf course this week, chasing off a begging youngster with the aim of forcing it to become independent. Most of the city’s Herring Gulls winter on the coast, but most of the **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** that we sometimes see over our site, migrate south, many as far as West Africa. Among other birds flying over our site, black and white **Oystercatchers**, with their noisy calls have been reported on a couple of occasions. And **Magpies** seem always to be present, seldom alone, and with seven on 2nd September.

Among the smaller birds, three **Long-tailed Tits**, sitting for a while on the golf course fence last week and apparently watching us as we were watching them, was a nice sight showing off brilliantly that their 8 centimetre long tails are longer than all the rest of the bird. One **Robin** has recently reappeared on two plots, a **Dunnock** is occasionally seen, and **Blackbirds** are starting to be more obvious, no doubt attracted by falling apples. **Goldfinches**, which were around all summer and into early August, have, I think, not been seen recently. What are now increasingly obvious, however, are **House** **Sparrows**, in small flocks, usually in just a few apparently very popular bushes on a small number of plots – are there lots of aphids or other insect food on these bushes?

Among insects other than butterflies, **White tailed and Carder Bumblebees** have still been around, particularly on raspberry and bramble flowers, but, unlike last year, there seem only to have been workers, with no second-generation White-tailed queens.

Several people have commented that there are a lot of **Wasps** on our site this year (and several nests have been found and destroyed) – but actually not quite all the insects that look like wasps are. The photo below, taken on our plot, is actually one of the ‘wasp-like’ **Hoverflies** – as the photo clearly shows, it has only one wing on each side, while true wasps, like bees, have two. However, looking similar to wasps means that this species is able to discourage birds from trying to eat it, even though they actually have no sting. Several other species of hoverflies (there are around 250 in Britain) have also been on our site this year; as well as visiting flowers, they feed particularly on aphids and are therefore very desirable, especially as we have had so few Ladybirds this year.

Finally, it is good to be able to report that at least one young **Frog** has survived all the dry weather.