

Craigentiny Allotments Wildlife News 3 (late September/early October 2021)

Superficially, a much quieter wildlife period has set in on our site, but a closer look has shown that quite a lot of activity has still been going on.

One slight surprise, to me at least, has been continued butterfly activity and not only on fine sunny days. At least one member of four species has been seen at least once, even in early October, and each was at a different point in their life cycles.

The few **Small Whites** that are still around will soon die, but most of their caterpillars will by now have pupated, and will overwinter as pupae, hanging, most often on a wall, and so well disguised that they are very difficult to see.

The **Speckled Wood** that George photographed recently will also not survive the winter, but this species is unusual because, while some of the next generation over-winter as pupae and will emerge as adults in late March or early April, others (maybe most of the ones that we get on our site) over-winter as caterpillars, will pupate in the Spring, and do not emerge until May at the earliest.

The **Small Tortoiseshell**, that George also photographed, has, hopefully, a quite different life ahead of it. It will be looking to hibernate, most often in a shed or in a roof space of one of the nearby houses. It will not naturally wake up again until warmer days return in the Spring (so, if you find one in your shed, please don't think it needs to be let out!).

Finally, the quite large, black with red stripes and white tips on its wings, **Red Admiral**, that I spotted ten days ago, is very different. It was a member of a species that migrates north each Spring from southern Europe, with some returning south in the Autumn, before they or their offspring return the following year. There is a recent idea that warmer winters mean that some Red Admirals have now begun to over-winter in Britain, but this is still being argued about by experts. But, interestingly, the specimen that I saw struck me as very darkly coloured, so it's possible that it was a migrant from Scandinavia (where they are darker) and it had been blown off course to Scotland. Or, just maybe, the Red Admirals that have started to overwinter in Britain may actually be Scandinavian ones and not those born here at all – quite a few of our winter birds are migrants from Europe which have replaced at least partly those that nest here in the summer.

There have also been a few other (to me at least) unusual insects on our site recently.

Among the several different and so far unidentified small moths, there was, along the golf course fence, a whole cluster (having presumably just emerged) of a species that I had certainly never seen before (see the photo). These beautifully patterned insects are tiny, triangular, with each side less than a centimeter long. They are **Nettle Tap Moths**, a species which has two generations of adults each year (the other flies in May). The caterpillars, like many other butterflies and moths, feed on stinging nettles, so I'm pleased that we have been keeping some!

The most visibly striking insects of this month were, as Laurel's photo shows, bright blue, shiny, and about 1 centimeter long. We think they are probably **Blue Mint Beetles**.

If so, they are an invasive species, first found in Britain in 2011, though widespread on the continent. They are still mostly concentrated in south-east England, but they have also been in Edinburgh for some years. As their name suggests, their grubs feed on mint leaves, but The Royal Horticultural Society website says that they are unlikely to cause serious damage, and anyway, if you eat your mint, they can only safely be removed by picking off the black grubs and squashing them.

As for other insects, a few **Carder Bees** have survived until quite recently, as well as some wasps, notably some from a nest beside the communal pond. Several of our number have been stung recently by wasps and had very nasty reactions – so care is clearly needed, and a visit (e.g. to the excellent (in my experience) Minor Injuries Unit at the Western General Hospital) is advisable if swelling gets very large or starts to spread to other parts of the body. But, as last month, not all wasp-like insects are wasps – there have also been rather small, thin and flattish hoverflies about – which are to be encouraged because their larvae feast on aphids. And there are still quite active small black ants, if you disturb their nests.

Otherwise, it seems to have been a fairly quiet month for birds. As last year, most of the **House Sparrows** have left, quite likely to go out into fields which have been harvested or cut in the wider Lothians. Nesting being over in the city centre, our over-flying **Herring Gulls** have almost all stopped, most now feeding in big flocks along the coast. A few **Wood Pigeons** and **Magpies** are around on most days. And on 9th October, as a distraction during the (wet) allotment meeting, a flock of seven (probably **Mute Swans**) flew past our site.

Most surprisingly, perhaps, because there are so many apples lying under our trees, there don't so far seem to be many **Blackbirds** feeding on them (as certainly they did last year). This may be because the majority of our winter Blackbirds are immigrants from Scandinavia (they form small flocks and don't defend territories). And, until recently this autumn, we have had very few days with winds from the north-east to encourage migrants to make the journey. However, over the last week, large numbers (estimated by one report at 'hundreds of thousands') of another Scandinavian migrant, Redwings (small thrushes with russet under-wings and feathers on their sides, and very prominent cream eye stripes) have been arriving on the east coast. These beautiful birds are avid berry and fruit eaters and also forage on the ground. On Sunday, more than 13,000 were counted flying onto and over the Isle of May – so it's well worth watching out for them. And, where Redwings lead, Blackbirds are almost sure to follow.

The one undoubted star bird of this autumn has been the **Robin**, photographed most notably by John earlier this month, but obviously visiting any plot where digging or other

tidying of vegetation is going on. And this year's Robin is particularly tame, coming much closer than any other bird on our site.

Why is it so tame? Robins have a very long history, having certainly been around in parts of Europe for much more than two million years. And they evolved as a forest species, especially in forests with lots of big deciduous trees and with, as such forests naturally have, lots of clearings within them. In the autumn and winter, Robins are principally ground feeders (small spiders are a favourite food). And they have evolved to be attracted to the noise of digging and scrabbling. In much of continental Europe (where they are much less common around gardens and houses and often live deep in the forests and are usually very difficult to approach), Robins particularly follow Wild Boar as they dig through the soil looking for roots and worms and other food. So, when we dig our plots, we are exactly matching their expectations that digging produces food – and because, unlike in much of Europe, we have not for some decades caught small birds for food, they have evolved in Britain to tolerate us being close to them (which we call them being tame – but really we are just being boar-substitutes!).

But clearing vegetation can also produce other surprises. One of our plot-holders was pulling away vegetation that had grown up around her small pond – when she suddenly realised that, just above the water, there were eight pairs of eyes watching her! These **frogs** were, she estimates at least two inches long, so they, like a few others also seen in the last month, are probably from this year's hatchings – which is good to know.

Otherwise, just for the record really because we all I think have met her (and maybe him too), we still have probably two very tame **Foxes**. Hopefully, they are still catching lots of rats as they have in the past, but they certainly have not caught all the **Wood Mice**, because we have caught two in our humane trap (and released them with some spare food in the wood below the golf course) and there are still clear signs that there are more around. And, two **Grey Squirrels** were spotted on our site on 29th September.

I hope this is of interest. If you see anything that you think others would be interested in, do please let me know.

Best wishes

Mike