



The countryside charity
Hertfordshire

Countryside Close to Home

The weather, fledgling birds, pond life, pine trees and more

As spring turns into summer gardens and the countryside change rapidly. In my garden and the countryside the hedges become filled with white elder flowers and pink dog roses. New life is emerging everywhere: there are seeds or tiny fruits on many trees and shrubs, and seed heads on early-flowering plants which haven't yet died down or been deadheaded.

Baby birds start fledging from nests, like this young blue tit, venturing out into the world for the first time from the security of its nest box in my garden.



Record-breaking weather

Spring weather can be notoriously unpredictable. In 2020 spring (which is measured from 1st March to 31st May) broke the record for sunshine in the UK, for which data have been kept since 1929. Over the country as a whole there were 626 hours of sunshine, exceeding the previous record by 70 hours. Following the second wettest autumn and winter ever recorded in the UK, the spring of 2020 was also exceptionally dry. In England only 17% of the average rainfall for the month fell in May of that year.

A year later there was a marked difference. April 2021 was also exceptionally sunny and dry, but unusually cold. The month broke the record for sunshine in the UK, narrowly beating April 2020 to become the sunniest April in a series since 1919. April 2021 was also the UK's fourth driest April in a series since 1862, while the number of days of air frost in the UK was the highest in a series since 1960.

In the first three weeks of May 2021 the average temperature across the UK was among the lowest ever recorded for the month, until the warm final week improved the monthly average somewhat. Rainfall in May 2021 was also well above average with heavy downpours and prolonged spells of wet weather. The UK's rainfall for the month was the fourth highest ever recorded.

Late frosts and the ice saints

After enjoying temperatures up to the mid-20s in April and early May of 2020, there was a sudden change. In mid-May thermometers across Britain plummeted as cold northerly winds replaced the warm weather. Overnight on the 11th we recorded -2°C in our garden, and an even lower temperature two nights later. Tradition in Europe says you can blame this phenomenon on the ice saints, a trio whose feast days fall on May 11th (St Mamertus), May 12th (St Pancras) and May 13th (St Servatius). When the garden was turned white twice in three days I feared the worst, and immediate damage was obvious to plants like tall bearded irises, just coming into flower. Fortunately later in the month the warm weather re-established itself.

In 2019, when this cold period struck as well, The Times reported that it had occurred 60 times in the previous 100 years. A cold snap like this in mid-May is feared in wine-growing countries as it occurs just as the vines are flowering, when a frost in unprotected vineyards can wipe out the year's crop. Tree fruit blossom is also very vulnerable to frost, resulting in few fruits or none at all. We're in the bottom of a dry valley in the Chilterns, so cold air tends to flow downhill and gather in our garden. Such periods of unusual weather, which go against the general trend of conditions at around the same date each year, are called singularities. They were first recognised by Scottish meteorologist Alexander Buchan (1829 - 1907).

Fortunately in May 2021 there was no sudden plunge in temperature, although overnight frosts continued in many areas, including in my garden, causing browning of new growth on roses and clematis. As the season was so late, the iris flowers had not yet appeared and were undamaged.

Blue tits



These common garden birds are widespread in the countryside throughout most of the UK. They nest in holes in trees but have taken readily to using nest boxes. The birds eat a mixture of insects, seeds and nuts and regularly visit bird feeders. A clutch of eight or more eggs might be laid, typically in April and early May, which take 13 to 15 days to hatch. Wet and cold weather at this time can have a huge impact on the survival of blue tit nestlings.

Adult blue tit

The young stay in the nest for about three weeks before they fledge, and during this time the parents scour the surrounding area for caterpillars and other insect larvae to feed them: these are often garden pests so the birds are truly a gardener's friend.



I happened to be watching a nest box in my garden when several fledgling blue tits emerged from the box and flew the short distance to a nearby tree. One of the parents arrived with some more food just as this young one was leaving the box.



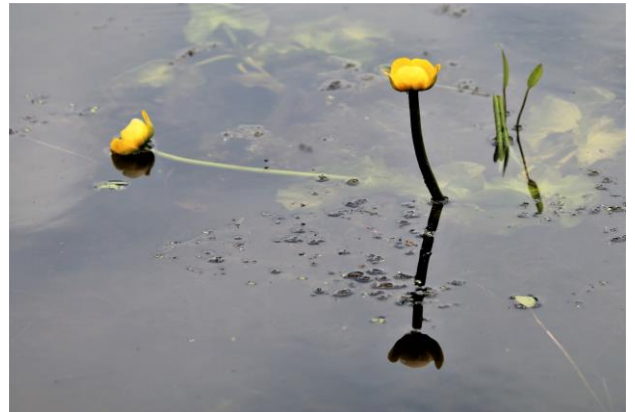
Pond wildlife



Greater spearwort (*Ranunculus lingua*) is a member of the buttercup family which grows in the shallow margins of my pond. It is quite rare in the wild, found in fens and marshes; the plants in my pond came from cultivated stock. They normally come into flower in early June and flower all summer. They seed happily around the pond margins. There is a smaller native species of spearwort, *R. flammula*, which is more common in the wild.

Greater spearwort

In the deeper part of my pond the native **yellow water lily** (*Nuphar lutea*) spreads its huge fleshy roots through the mud beneath the water, putting up large and thick floating leaves as well as thinner submerged leaves. This plant is common in rivers, canals and ponds in Britain. Single yellow flowers are held above the water, or collapse as one of these on my pond has done.



Yellow water lily

What look like petals are actually the sepals, which encase the other flower parts until opening wide to reveal the much smaller petals. A country name for this plant - brandy balls - reflects its smell or possibly the flagon-shaped ripe seed heads.

There is also a white water lily (*Nymphaea alba*) native in Britain, which flowers later in the summer, with larger flowers more like the classic water lilies often found in park lakes and garden ponds. It is common in still water throughout Britain.

In late spring and early summer broad-bodied chaser **dragonflies** are very active around the pond, with sometimes five or six chasing each other and pursuing the yellow females, which after mating oviposit their eggs into the pond water.

As the weather warms up clouds of **damselflies** appear over the pond: a few are red but many of the males are blue. These are almost certainly common blue damselflies (although my identification skills for this group of insects need improvement!). In this species the females are blue or green with some black colouring.

This species is on the wing from April to October. It is one of the most common damselflies in the UK, frequently seen over water throughout the British Isles.



Common blue (?) damselflies



We enjoy watching **newts** in the garden pond - with all three of the UK's native species present. This male smooth newt left the shelter of the weed and ventured into the shallows briefly.

Usually in May or June the number of newts in the pond declines suddenly: when we first noticed this we thought they might have been the prey of the herons which regularly visit the garden. Newts however are amphibians, which breed in water but spend a great deal of time on land, hiding under vegetation. On land they can be mistaken for lizards, although unlike lizards which bask in the sun newts hide away during the day.

Male smooth newt

Common frogs are also amphibians, and after their brief breeding frenzy in our garden pond in early spring, most of the frogs return to land leaving behind their spawn which soon hatches into tadpoles. I often encounter frogs while gardening, hiding under vegetation, such as this fine specimen which I disturbed one day while doing some spring cutting back in a border.

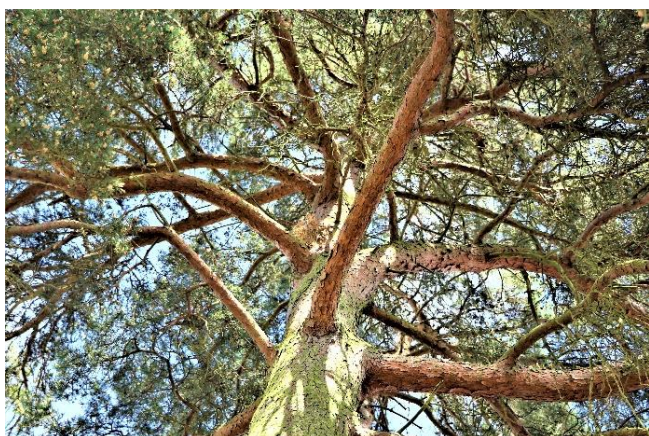


Common frog

In 1985 the naturalist Chris Baines created the first-ever wildlife garden at the Chelsea Flower Show. He had already transformed his own garden into a wildlife haven and in the same year published his book 'How to Make a Wildlife Garden'. He wrote that 'a wildlife garden without a pond is like a theatre without a stage'.

In the countryside ponds have gradually filled with vegetation, dried up, become polluted or been deliberately removed, and amphibians (which also include toads) have lost many of their breeding sites. Chris Baines reckoned that the survival of the common frog was due to 'the gnome-fringed ponds of suburbia'. I would add that many amphibians undoubtedly thrive in the numerous well-tended village ponds I have encountered on my walks around Hertfordshire.

Pine trees



Two tall **Scots pine** trees grow on one of the garden boundaries, quite close to our garage, although this only seems hazardous when there is a strong gale blowing.

Their species name, *Pinus sylvestris*, means woodland pine. The reddish bark is a feature of this species.

Scots pine is one of only three conifers native to Britain, the others being yew and juniper. Conifer means cone-bearing. Strictly, the red fleshy fruit of a yew is an aril.

Scots pine

Conifers belong to the class of flowering plants called gymnosperms, meaning they bear naked seeds. The Scots pine is monoecious, with separate male and female flowers on the same tree. The woody cone is the female structure, with individual plates called scales, to which the seeds are attached. These mature on the female flower shoots only in the second year after fertilization, and stay attached to the branches for long periods after the seeds have been shed.



Left - female Scots pine cone (the dark brown structure) forming after fertilization on a shoot tip.



Right - last year's cone - still green. It will later turn brown.



The male flowers carry pollen and cluster towards the base of the male flower shoots. They are tiny orange or yellow structures which soon fall off after the pollen is shed, and can get blown into piles on the ground.

Male flowers of Scots pine and needle bundle

There are 80 species of pine across the globe, with many in Mexico. The needles are held in bundles of two (in the case of Scots pine), three or five. Five-needled species often have long and slender needles which look very distinctive: you might see these in gardens and arboreta. There is huge variety in the shape of pine cones in different species.

Scots pines spread northwards through Britain as trees returned after the last glaciers retreated. By around 4-5,000 years ago its range was restricted to the highlands of Scotland, the only part of the country where today it is truly native. Elsewhere it has been widely planted. Often found along tracks and drove roads, these trees marked the route in poor weather and, where the pines grew in clumps, indicated where overnight hospitality was available. Scots pine seeds freely, especially on heathland. As the trees age the bark becomes reddish-brown in colour and the lower branches drop off.

Most but not all conifers are evergreen, meaning that they retain green leaves or needles all year round. This does not mean however that they don't drop their needles. Our trees drop many needles in the autumn, making quite a mess, but they never look bare because new ones have already grown to replace them. Larch is a deciduous conifer (losing its needles in winter) commonly seen in the countryside, usually in woods.

Birds love our pines for perching and both birds and grey squirrels eat the seeds in the cones. The cones make good kindling, while the resin which seeps out of the bark has antiseptic qualities and was once incorporated into a sort of homemade chewing gum and used to treat sore throats.

Butterflies



Adult **small copper** butterflies may emerge at the end of April. The species overwinters as a caterpillar or larva, then spends three to four more weeks as a chrysalis or pupa. The eggs are laid on plants of the genus *Rumex*, which includes two species of sorrel and numerous different dock species, some of which are growing in and around my garden. This is a small butterfly, with a wingspan of around 1 to 1½ inches (32 to 35 mm). Early in the year the butterfly can be skittish and difficult to photograph. The second and third generations may settle for longer periods on a flower.

Small copper butterfly

Small tortoiseshell butterflies overwinter as adults and are often found hibernating in outhouses and sheds. If the spring weather turns warm, adults may appear as early as February or March. This one was photographed in my garden on the final day of May. It may be an overwintered specimen, nearing the end of its life, or perhaps an early new generation butterfly, normally on the wing from mid-June to mid-August. The second generation adults emerge each year in September and will eventually settle down to hibernate.



Small tortoiseshell butterfly

Small tortoiseshell numbers have declined alarmingly in the last 30 years, with numbers down by up to 80% in some places. Eggs are laid onto the underside of nettle leaves. By not cutting or spraying herbicide onto nettles we can help this beautiful butterfly to survive.

Cow Parsley



Richard Mabey in his book *Flora Britannica* calls **cow parsley** 'the most important spring landscape flower in Britain'. In late May and June this flower dominates roadside verges and footpath edges.

Also known as Queen Anne's lace (for reasons that are not entirely clear), the flower has numerous local names too.

Cow parsley

The plant belongs to the umbellifer or carrot family: the species in this family have small flowers grouped into heads called umbels. Close contact with other members of this family must be avoided, including hemlock which is very poisonous.

The hollow stems of another relative, hogweed, have been used by children to make blow pipes. Then, beginning in the 1970s, its cousin the giant hogweed, a garden escape which had become widespread in the countryside, began to be used in a similar way, with damaging results. Children especially were getting blisters on their faces and hands from picking and blowing into giant hogweed stems. The sap causes skin blistering, especially when exposed to sunlight. So it's best to avoid touching any of the umbellifers unless you are certain which species it is.

I let the frothy cow parsley flowers reach their full height in some parts of my garden, such as under an apple tree where some of my cowslips flower earlier in the year. Then I mow the whole lot later in the summer and keep it cut into autumn. This mimics traditional hay meadow management and avoids the cowslip plants being overrun by falling stems of the taller plants and grasses.

Birds overhead



Red kite

Common buzzard



Red kite (above left) and **common buzzard** (above right) are both now widespread in Hertfordshire. Seeing these photos together helps to distinguish between these two large birds of prey.

The kite has a typical wingspan of 55 to 65 inches (140 to 165 cm), while the common buzzard is smaller with a wingspan of 43 to 51 inches (110 to 132 cm).

The tails are the best way to tell the two apart: the red kite's forked tail contrasts with the fanned tail of the common buzzard. In the air the red kite is also much more acrobatic and will often be seen flexing its tail to steer and balance itself.

Neither bird was present in the county during my Hertfordshire childhood. I first saw buzzards regularly in Devon where I worked in the late 1970s. Buzzard numbers were heavily impacted by illegal killing and pesticide use until the late 1960s. They have gradually spread across the country and now breed in every UK county; they are the commonest and most widespread UK bird of prey.

Red kites were once widespread in Britain, but were regarded as vermin and nearly became extinct, with just a few pairs surviving in Wales. They were reintroduced into a number of UK locations in the 1990s, including the Chilterns, and are now widespread.

Goldfinches

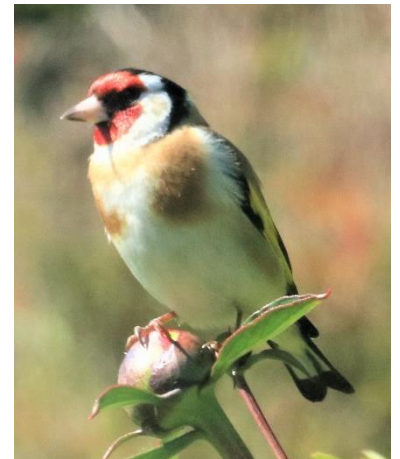
A flock (or charm) of goldfinches is a frequent sight in our garden. The birds are very mobile: they seldom stay in one place for long and flit about among the trees and borders. Their song is a quiet and light but persistent twittering. The combination of black, white and red on the head is unlike other finches.

Their strong beaks are thinner than in some finches: this makes them masters at pulling seeds, their favourite food, from all sorts of plants including thistles and teasels. They also eat insects.

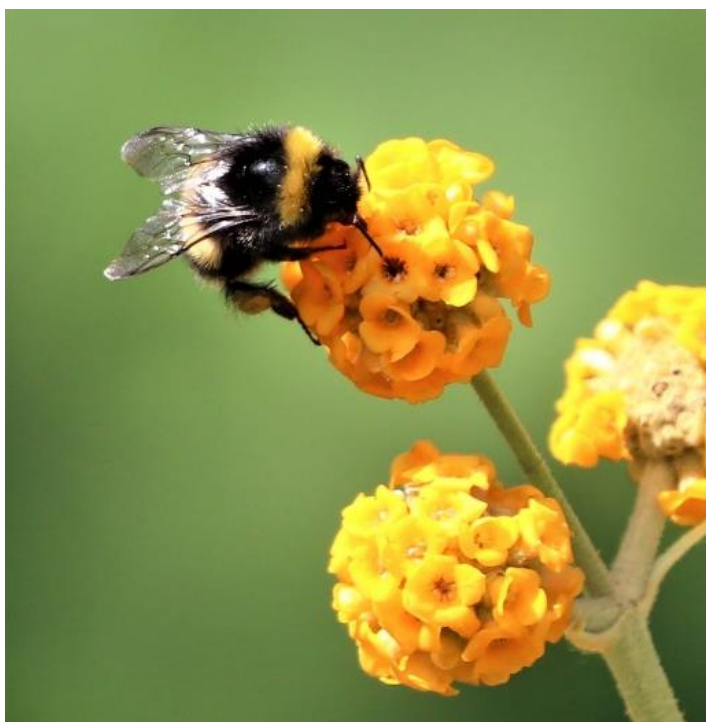
Some goldfinches stay in this country all year while others migrate to southern Europe in the winter. In our garden goldfinches feed on seed heads in our borders in the autumn, winter and early spring. I leave cutting back as late as possible in the spring for this reason.

Juvenile goldfinches don't feature the adult head colouring and have creamy green bodies, rather like a pale greenfinch.

Goldfinch



And finally....



Plant species don't have to be native to Britain to be good sources of pollen and help pollinators survive.

This bee is taking nectar from a flower of *Buddleia globosa*, an early-flowering species of this genus which is renowned for its nectar supply. This buddleia is native in Chile and Argentina.

Bumble bee on *Buddleia globosa*

Since the autumn of 2018 I've been planting a sheltered area in the garden with plants which attract bees, butterflies and other insects in search of nectar. As they land on flowers they collect pollen on their bodies which they spread to other flowers.

This vital process of pollination ensures the continued survival of many plants and supports food crop production. Together with their larvae or caterpillars, these species also sustain many birds as well as bats.



Bumble bee on greater knapweed

I've planted three **greater knapweed** (*Centaurea scabiosa*) plants in this area. The first flower heads open in late June and the plant continues to flower all summer: they are very attractive to bees. This is a native species widespread on dry soils over chalk and limestone, preferring sunny conditions.

Other plants I've added to this area which attract insects include lavender, marjoram, *Buddleia davidii* (known as the butterfly bush), verbena, teasel and sedum. There are also self-sown foxgloves.

At the back of this area alongside a hedge I've left grasses to grow long. Many butterfly species lay their eggs on grasses, caterpillars feed on them and pupa establish here, often to overwinter. It's important to protect the habitat of all stages of the butterfly life cycle, not just the adults.



Another butterfly in the 'pollinator' garden - Peacock butterfly on *Buddleia davidii*