



The countryside charity
Hertfordshire

Countryside Close to Home

Purple flowers, birds and beaks, butterflies, pond life and more

As August arrives, the look of the garden varies from year to year, depending on the weather earlier in the year. If we have already had plenty of summer rain, the August garden should remain very green. When a dry spring is followed by dry and hot weather in June or July, the garden and especially the grass can look very dried out. I resist the temptation to water a dried-out lawn and it always recovers once the rain comes again.

Towards the end of July the birdsong, which has filled the air from dawn to dusk since the spring, begins to diminish. In gardens and parks, and out in the countryside, many birds stop singing once their breeding season is over; they retreat into the undergrowth to moult and renew their feathers. During this time they tend to hide away on the ground as they become flightless, and you might just catch glimpses of them as they scurry around amongst vegetation.

Birds continue calling to each other to warn of possible dangers.

Birds of prey, including owls, need to keep flying as they hunt their prey from the air, so they moult their flight feathers on their wings in succession rather than all at once. This red kite has the same flight feather missing on each wing.



Red kite

As the blackbirds stop singing from their favourite high perches, they are replaced for a while by the songs of thrushes, immortalized by Robert Browning's words in his poem 'Home thoughts from abroad':

That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,
Lest you should think he never could recapture
The first fine careless rapture



The songs of the song thrush and the mistle thrush are quite similar and not easy to tell apart: they are both less melodious than their blackbird cousins, with shorter staccato phrases, always repeated. I've yet to photograph a song thrush in the garden, but did see this mistle thrush in our neighbours' apple tree. They are the larger of the two species, more upright when on the ground and with a greyer appearance.

Mistle thrush

In August the countryside is often dominated by wood pigeons making their repetitive and rather mournful calls. You might also hear the soft twittering of goldfinches, and yellowhammers in the hedges singing their refrain, which sounds like 'a little bit of bread and no cheese'.

Buzzards usually nest in woodland near our garden. By late summer the young are learning to fly: we hear their plaintive calls as they perch on nearby trees and take to the air, closely supervised by one or both parents.

Wood pigeon



With many birds silent and often hidden, August is the time for insects to take centre stage. On a warm August day, the soft hum of bees gathered on nectar-rich flowers may predominate, unless the insistent buzz of a stationary hoverfly intervenes.

Another group of insects which you can often hear as well as see are the dragonflies - in flight the wings of the larger species in particular make a sort of metallic rustle, which has been described as like a small football rattle.

Hoverfly (*Heliophilus pendulus*)

In grassy places you might hear the chirping of grasshoppers and crickets: the sound is created by parts of their bodies - either two wings or a wing and a leg - rubbing together. Grasshoppers have shorter forward-facing antennae, while crickets have antennae which extend backwards beyond the ends of their bodies.

This meadow grasshopper was photographed inside our house: we often find these insects inside.

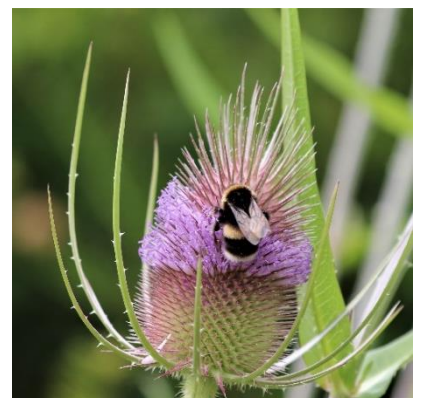
Meadow grasshopper



In our garden on sunny days in late summer honey bees and bumblebees are everywhere, enjoying a variety of nectar sources including teasel, a native plant species, and numerous lavender flowers. Weeding the borders at this time of year can be quite hazardous.

Taking photographs is good way to get to know some of the insects which you might encounter on walks or while gardening. Enlarging the images may reveal details which are impossible to spot while you are watching the insect.

Bumblebee on teasel



Purple flowers



In August purple flowers are everywhere. Three distinctive purple-flowered native plant species grow in my garden. The first, purple loosestrife, roots in the shallow margins of the pond. Its tall stems carry flowers for a long period, often from late June to late August. It occurs throughout the British Isles except in the north of Scotland, growing by rivers, ponds and lakes, and in marshy ground. Three plants were introduced when the pond was built. They seed very freely and new plants pop up all around the pond.

Purple loosestrife

Growing up to six feet tall, rosebay willowherb is widely regarded as a weed in gardens, but I've allowed a clump to grow alongside a fence, a backdrop to a bed which includes pink roses and yellow St John's wort. It needs to be kept in check and I weed out suckers and seedlings each year - but it is worth it for the impact of this plant.

Flowering in July and August and common throughout the British Isles, this plant grows in sun and light shade, alongside woods and hedges, on waste land and beside railway lines.



Rosebay willowherb

Rosebay willowherb seeds are attached to fine hairs which blow great distances in the wind. The plant used to be quite rare, growing mainly in damp ground, but in the 19th century it began to exploit disturbed ground such as felled woodland and burnt land. Perhaps the spread of railways across Britain helped it to disperse widely. It became known as bombweed or fireweed when it colonized bombed areas of London in the early 1940s. Caterpillars of a number of moth species, including elephant hawk-moth, feed on this plant.



Marjoram

A third native pale purple-flowered plant, which is hugely attractive to bees and butterflies, is marjoram. The leaves are used as a culinary herb (more often called oregano). Native in Britain especially on chalk and limestone soils, marjoram flowers in July and August. In cooler climates its flavour is less pungent than in hotter places. It thrives on poor soil and in my garden it grows alongside rosemary in a very dry and sunny place. There are other marjoram species used in cooking, but this one is the wild and hardy species (*Origanum vulgare*).

Birds and beaks

Three birds which have I photographed in my garden have very different beak shapes.



The first is a bullfinch, with a short stout beak typical of finches. In late winter and early spring they appear, sometimes in large numbers, to feed on the flower buds of a very early flowering species of plum - the cherry plum - which forms a tall hedge at the end of the garden. Bullfinches eat all types of fruit buds and were once regarded as a serious pest in English orchards. Later in the year they eat seeds and insects. The male (seen here) has a bright salmon-pink breast, while the female looks mostly grey with the same black on her cap, wing tips and tail as the male.

Male bullfinch

Bullfinches have declined in the UK by 36% since 1967. They are mainly seen in scrub and woodland, less often in gardens. During the summer I often see a pair in the garden - presumably when they are nesting somewhere nearby. Their nests are usually in dense undergrowth, where a pair will typically lay a clutch of four to five eggs. They are resident throughout most of the British Isles except in parts of northern Scotland and on high open ground.

Quite early one morning I spotted this tree creeper on the trunk of one of the Scots pine trees which grow close to the house. I watched it for some time as it made its way up the trunk, using its long narrow beak to probe into the crevices of the bark in search of insects and spiders. Treecreepers always move upwards then fly down to the base of another tree to resume their search. Mainly found in woods but sometimes in gardens, tree creepers nest in cavities in bark, laying a clutch of five or six eggs in late spring.

Treecreepers are present throughout the British Isles (wherever there are trees). In winter they sometimes join large flocks of tits and other small birds, and at that time of year they also eat seeds.

Well camouflaged for their life on tree trunks, tree creepers can be hard to spot, but they are quite common and their populations are stable.



Tree creeper

Red kites have appeared quite frequently in this series of articles - they are striking and sizeable birds as well as being recent returners to Hertfordshire's skies.

Each year in midsummer the hay is cut and baled in the field next to our garden. In recent years as red kites have become more common they have gathered over the field and nearby, looking for prey displaced by the hay making. Often described as only feeding on carrion (dead carcasses), they also take live prey as well, like birds, small rodents and rabbits. They also eat earthworms.



Red kite

This red kite flew low over our house roof, and you can see that its beak is designed to tear the meat of its prey.

Red kites nest near the tops of trees, building an untidy structure of twigs and small branches, often including shiny and colourful items which they love to find. Pairs mate for life, returning to the same nest each year; usually they lay three eggs. After hatching the chicks fledge after about two months but remain with their parents for perhaps another month.

Butterflies

On sunny summer days in the garden there are usually plenty of butterflies on the wing. Some species may only put in a brief appearance and I don't see them every year. Others like the comma and gatekeeper are regulars in the garden every year. These are some late summer species:



The comma butterfly spends the winter as an adult, emerging when the weather warms in April. The name derives from the comma-shaped marking on its underwings. It also has a distinctive jagged outline to its wings, unique among British butterflies. A medium sized butterfly, commas have a wingspan of around 2 inches (55 mm).

Comma butterfly

Common in the countryside and in gardens in the southern part of Britain, this butterfly is spreading northwards, perhaps in response to climate change. The comma lays its eggs on hop, nettle and currant. Eggs laid by the overwintered females in the spring become adults by late June and these fly until August. The next generation emerges in the autumn and may often be seen enjoying a feed on ripe fruit. These butterflies will hibernate on tree trunks, in hedges or in undergrowth. Their resemblance to dead leaves undoubtedly aids survival.

Comma butterfly on *Verbena bonariensis* (sometimes called purpletop or purpletop vervain)





The **gatekeeper or hedge brown** butterfly might be mistaken for a meadow brown, but it is smaller, with a wingspan of between 1½ to 1¾ inches (40 to 46 mm). It has two white dots in the black spot on each forewing, as well as a small white dot on each hindwing (which you may only spot in a photograph). The males have a dark band across their forewings (as here) which is missing in the females. The underwings also have distinctive patterns of white spots (see below right).

Gatekeeper or hedge brown butterfly

Gatekeepers are found in England and Wales, in grassy places, woodland rides and along hedges, as well as in gardens. Like the comma this species has been expanding its range northwards. The eggs are laid on various species of grass and they pass the winter as a larva or caterpillar. The adults only emerge in late June or July and are on the wing until mid-September.

Gatekeeper or hedge brown butterfly on marjoram



A ringlet butterfly has occasionally appeared in the garden. The colouring in this photo is rather misleading: normally the males in particular are very dark brown or almost black, while the females may be paler. The white fringe to the wings is distinctive. The appearance of the small black spots with white dots also varies - sometimes these are ringed with orange.

Ringlets typically have a wingspan of just under 2 inches (48 mm).

Ringlet butterfly

The underwings have conspicuous ringed spots which give the butterfly its name. This butterfly inhabits clearings in woods and hedgerows, as well as the occasional garden, throughout most of the UK except northern Scotland: like many butterflies it has expanded its range as the climate has warmed. The adults fly mainly in July and August, when eggs are laid on various grass species, then the species overwinters as a caterpillar.

Ringlet butterfly on buttercup





Another occasional visitor to the garden is the silver-washed fritillary, a large butterfly which is a woodland specialist but occasionally seen in gardens. There are a number of fritillary species in Britain, some widespread and some restricted to very small areas of the country. This one is widespread in southern England and Wales but less frequent further north.

Unlike other fritillary species this one has quite pointed wings, and silver streaks on the underwings which give the butterfly its name. The adults fly in July and August, laying eggs on members of the violet family, and the species overwinters as a caterpillar.

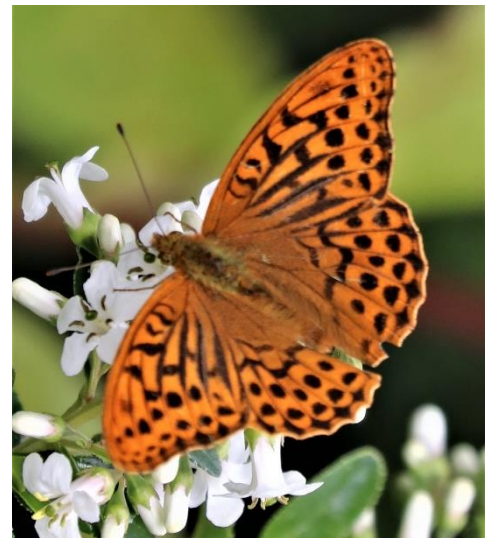
The wingspan is between 2¾ and 3 inches (72 to 76 mm).

Silver-washed fritillary butterfly underwings

The butterfly photographed is almost certainly a male as females tend to be less brightly-coloured. Sometimes females with greenish-grey colouring on their upperwings are seen: these are known as valezina forms. This tendency to have two different colours in one species is known as dimorphism.

This butterfly was seen feeding on a white-flowered escallonia.

Silver-washed fritillary butterfly on Escallonia 'Iveyi'



Marbled whites are distinctive medium-sized butterflies, with a wingspan of 2¼ inches (58 mm) and are also on the wing in July and August. They frequent grassy places and woodland edges. In Hertfordshire they are often seen in large numbers on flower-rich grassland, especially on chalky soils. They are only present in southern and midland counties in England.

Marbled white butterfly

Marbled whites lay their eggs on various grasses and have become more common in my garden since I have left areas of the grass uncut for longer periods. They are skittish butterflies, sometimes difficult to photograph, but they need to settle on flowers to feed on nectar, so patience will eventually be rewarded.

More pond life



This **southern hawker dragonfly** is seen here hanging from a branch on a plum tree near our pond.

This large species (typically 2½ to 3 inches or around 70 mm long) is often found around garden ponds as it prefers to breed in well-vegetated small ponds. It also frequents canals and lakes, especially near to woodland.

It will often hunt in woodland and other places well away from water. It is common in southern and central England but less frequent in the rest of Britain.

The males typically have blue and green markings, although some (less commonly) have a mostly blue abdomen. The females are green and brown.

I think this specimen is a female.

This species can be seen between May and November.

Southern hawker dragonfly

The biological classification system used today groups species together in genera (plural of genus), genera into families, families into orders and orders into classes. Insects form a class: they all have six legs and are usually winged. According to the book I am using, there are 29 orders in the insect class, but not all insect orders are found in the wild in Britain. Dragonflies and damselflies are grouped together in the order Odonata. Creatures like spiders are not insects because they have eight legs - they belong to a class called arachnids - but they can get confused with insects.

A much smaller dragonfly species frequents the pond from the middle of July and is often seen well away from the pond in other parts of the garden as well. This is the **common darter**. Seeing them paired gives a good impression of the red colouring of the male and the pale gold colouring of the female.

This is the most common species of darter, measuring 1½ to 1¾ inches (38-43 mm) in length. They are common in England and Wales but less so in Scotland. They prefer ponds, including small ponds in gardens, and other still or even brackish water. They are also often encountered in woods.

They fly from July until October, or from May to December in very mild weather.

Pair of common darter dragonflies on purple loosestrife





Male common darter (left) and female common darter (right)

If you watch dragonflies for a while you might notice them resting every so often on some vegetation. This is thought to be so they can cool down after their exertions. They may fold down their wings, or hold their abdomen up to catch the breeze. Darters get their name from their habit of suddenly moving from a hovering position in an attempt to catch their prey (of other insects). If successful they then return to rest in a favourite spot to consume their catch.

And finally.... Green woodpeckers



I have heard and seen in the garden two of the three woodpecker species which breed in Britain: great spotted woodpecker and, here, green woodpecker. The other breeding species, lesser spotted woodpecker, is much less common in this country and I've never seen one in the garden.

Often I hear the loud laugh-like 'yaffle' flight call of a green woodpecker, or see its lime-green rump heading away from me. They are shy birds and it's not easy to get close enough to photograph them while they are still.

Green woodpecker

This one was searching for its favourite food - ants - in the grass just behind our house, on a very wet day. It was using its long beak to probe the damp ground, sucking up ants on its sticky tongue. I looked up from my desk and happened to have my camera to hand. The spots on its plumage indicate that this is a juvenile bird. Adults lose these spots; their back and wings and the tip of their tail are green and they have pale underparts. In this photo you can just see the red crown which the adults retain. Adults have distinctive white eyes surrounded by a black patch.

Green woodpeckers breed in woods, farmland, parks and commons, and sometimes in gardens. They are found in most of England and Wales and in parts of Scotland. They climb up vertical tree trunks on specially adapted feet, then utilize their strong beaks to excavate nest holes. When vertical they are supported by their stiff tail feathers. Typically nest holes are 6 to 7 metres up in a tree. They lay four to six eggs which take around three weeks to hatch and a similar period to fledge. If you hear drumming it is likely to be a great spotted woodpecker, as green woodpeckers rarely drum.

Woodpeckers have a characteristic undulating or dipping flight. Green woodpeckers spend a lot of time on the ground searching for ants.