The countryside charity Hertfordshire

Countryside Close to Home

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, some birds, late flowering plants, insects and more

No wonder the British talk about the weather all the time. It is so changeable that no two years are the same. On some days in August and continuing into September the view from our garden looks much like this photo below: huge clouds threatening rain and thunder.

Towering, flat-bottomed clouds like this are called cumulonimbus clouds: the towering shape is caused by powerful updraughts of air warmed by the sun. Clouds consist of tiny water droplets (each around 0.01mm in diameter), which form as rising water vapour cools.

Cumulonimbus cloud

A typical cumulonimbus cloud might weigh two million tonnes. Clouds stay up in the air because the individual water droplets are light enough to be suspended on rising air. Rain falls when the droplets grow or collide until they are too big to remain suspended.

(With thanks to the 'Weather Eye' column in The Times newspaper.)

Often though the weather becomes more settled in September, the first month of autumn, with high pressure established over the country. We enjoy some warm spells with clear blue skies, a late taste of summer. As the days grow shorter the nights get cooler and we often wake to misty mornings, with heavy dew causing cobwebs to sparkle as the sunlight eventually breaks through.

Cobweb in the grass

The poet John Keats in his poem 'To Autumn' described this time of year as the 'season of mists and mellow fruitfulness'. It's the time to gather in fruits from gardens and hedgerows, to store or preserve them in jams and jellies or in the freezer, to enjoy during the long winter.

By mid-September the birds are helping themselves to the elderberries in our garden. Over the garden fence, on our neighbours' elder bushes in a shady position, the berries are often still ripening. Elder is one of many hedgerow species which provide food for wildlife and humans alike. Elderberries can be made into wine, which has the same dark purple colour as the berries. In country areas the wine was often served hot and spiced at Christmas time, and was thought to ward off colds.

Elderberries

Some birds

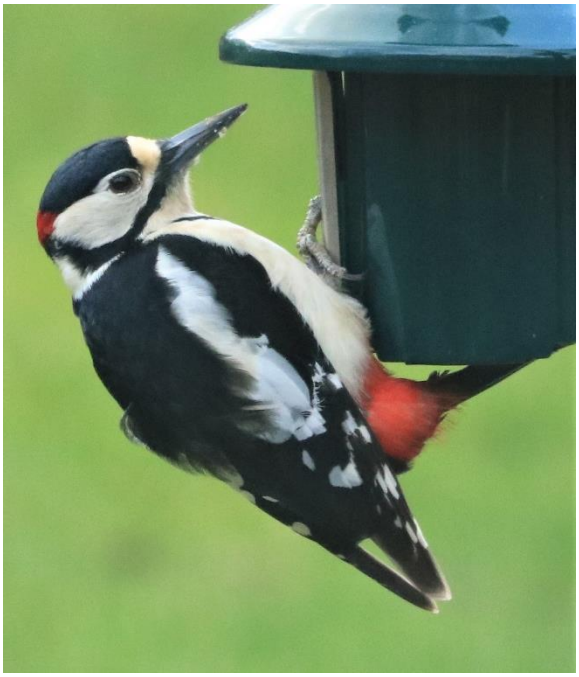
In August there is little or no birdsong as many birds stop singing once they have finished breeding. The robins, which sing for 11 months of the year, fall silent during most of August as they moult and replenish their feathers. In September, or sometimes earlier, the robins' song is heard again, a poignant reminder that summer is over. Until the end of the year both male and female robins sing, which is notable because female song is rare among British birds. Robins are usually the only birds singing for the rest of the year.

This robin often chose to perch on a high branch of an old hazel bush in the garden to sing on fine evenings in late September and October.

Robin

Great spotted woodpeckers are often in or near the garden: we hear their drumming in spring (part of their breeding display) and also hear their distinctive and loud 'kick' calls. We glimpse them on trees or fence posts, or see them in flight, in which they constantly swoop up and down – another distinctive feature which they share with other woodpeckers. All woodpeckers are shy and quite difficult to photograph, although great spotteds readily visit bird feeders.

This is a male bird. Adult males have a red patch at the back of the head (females don't have this) and all adults have a bright red patch on the lowest part of their belly. In juveniles this belly patch is pale red.



Great spotted woodpecker

The feet of all woodpeckers are adapted to perch on vertical as well as horizontal surfaces and their tails help with balance. Great spotted woodpeckers eat insects, seeds and nuts, but will also raid the nests of other birds, and have been seen enlarging nest box entrances to get to the nestlings inside. You can buy special metal hole surrounds to prevent this. They are mainly woodland dwellers but also inhabit parks and gardens with plenty of trees. They are found across the UK except in parts of Scotland. Dead and dying standing trees are especially valuable for great spotted woodpeckers, as they like to feed on wood-boring grubs and bugs, and they nest in holes in trees too. Their numbers have increased by 300% since the 1970s.

The great (never great**er**) spotted woodpecker also has two large white shoulder patches (one of which you can see in this photo), which distinguishes it from its much smaller cousin, the lesser spotted woodpecker, which has white bars across its wings and back. The lesser spot is also much smaller, the size of a finch or sparrow, and is rare, its numbers having fallen by 83% since 1970, so that only around 2,000 pairs remain in the UK.

The fence between our garden and the neighbouring field is a popular perching spot for birds, such as this magpie. Magpies are members of the crow family. Although they often appear to be just black and white, as this photo shows they are more colourful, with blue wings and greenish-blue tails. These noisy birds are not always popular, especially as they often feed on eggs and nestlings of other bird species. For the rest of the year they eat a huge range of food including berries and seeds, household scraps from bird tables and carrion.

Magpie

Non-breeding magpies form flocks, on which the well-known rhyme is based. Breeding pairs nest in thorn bushes and high up in trees, where around six eggs are laid in April. Young birds stay with their parents throughout their first summer and autumn, frequently calling noisily for food.

Another predominantly black and white bird is the pied wagtail, sometimes spotted on our house roof as well as on the grass. Similar in body size to a goldfinch, its long tail makes it look very slender. It feeds mainly on insects and sometimes on seeds. Pied wagtails seem to enjoy hard surfaces like roofs and car parks – perhaps its insect prey is easier to find here than among vegetation.

Pied wagtail

Pied wagtails and their cousins yellow and grey wagtails are all found in the UK, although yellow wagtails are summer visitors and mainly seen in England. They are identified by their distinctive tail wagging and head bobbing, and can often be seen scampering around in search of food.

For most of the year we see pheasants almost daily in the garden and in the neighbouring field, although they hide away in the tall grass while they are nesting and before the hay is cut.

Native to Asia, pheasants were introduced into Britain centuries ago as game birds. This handsome male isn't typical of many seen here – it is very pale and lacks the distinctive white neck band. Females are mostly mottled brown and black.

Male pheasant.

Many young pheasants are introduced into the countryside every year to be shot, but there are wild populations too. We are frequently disturbed by a male pheasant displaying in the garden early in the morning, often from a fence or the back of a garden seat. Their call is a loud croaking noise. Males often have a harem of females, which go on to raise their chicks alone.

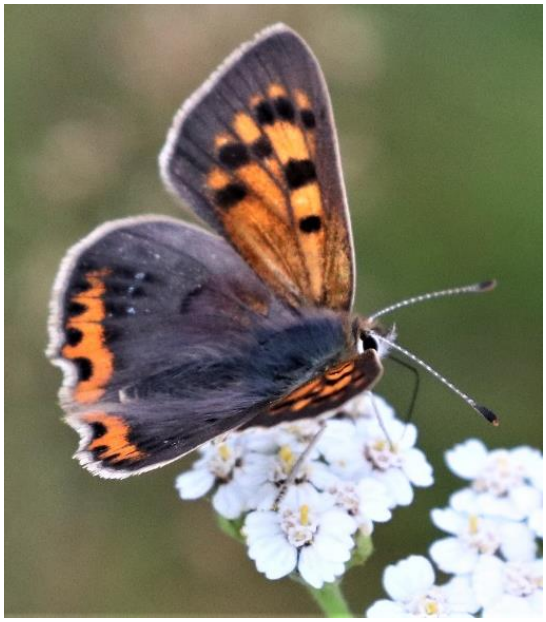
Late flowering plants

In recent years we have left some areas of lawn grass unmown well into the summer. In August the flat white flowers of yarrow dominate these uncut areas. Also known as milfoil, occasionally yarrow flowers in the wild are pink. The plant is in flower from June until late in the year. It spreads by stolons (modified stems) at or just below the ground surface to form mats, while its flat flowerheads are known as corymbs.

Gardeners may grow cultivated varieties and hybrids of this plant, Achillea millefolium, in various shades of yellow, orange and red. It has feathery leaves, including basal leaves which hug the ground. In drought years these leaves have remained green when the rest of the lawn has turned brown and not surprisingly the plant is common on dryer grasslands.

The flat flowerheads are often studded with bees, flies, butterflies and other insects.

Yarrow



Small copper butterfly on yarrow flower

Closer inspection of each individual and tiny yarrow flower reveals an outer ring of what look like petals, called ray-florets. These enclose an inner cluster of numerous tiny tubular flowers called disk-florets, each containing male and female flower parts. The disk-florets are initially yellow but fade to white.

From Anglo Saxon times the plant was used to stop bleeding and heal wounds, and was also used as a charm against bad luck and ill-health.

Yarrow flowerhead

Also in flower from August into the autumn, and very attractive to bees and butterflies, is water mint, Mentha aquatica. I originally planted a single plant in the pond margin and it has spread by rhizomes (horizontal stems). One of numerous mints native to Britain, its leaves smell strongly when touched. It was once used as a strewing herb – spread on floors to freshen the air, as today we might use air freshener. Most mints in the wild grow in damp places. Each flowerhead is a whorl of numerous small tubular flowers.

Peppermint is a naturally-occurring hybrid between water mint and the non-native spearmint. It was first recognized when it was found growing in Hertfordshire in the 17th century. It has been cultivated ever since, and used in medicine as well as in cooking and confectionery.

Water mint

Two non-native garden plants produce a great deal of nectar and are incredibly attractive to bees and other insects. Michaelmas daisies and their close relatives, members of the aster family, are in flower in September and continue into October, and the flowers are visited by butterflies, bees, wasps, flies and other flying insects.

Honey bee on Michaelmas daisy

Fuchsias, native in the southern hemisphere, are also very late-flowering and equally attractive to pollinating insects. The hardier fuchsias normally survive the winter in our relatively frost-prone garden. They die back and need cutting down in the spring but soon come back into vigorous growth, flowering from mid-summer until the first frost.

All summer our fuchsia bushes, especially those with single flowers growing in the sun, like the one here, buzz with bees. Later in the year they are also visited by common wasps in search of nectar. The wasps carry pollen from plant to plant, a reminder that this often feared species is a valuable pollinator too.

Common wasp on fuchsia

An assortment of insects

Well into autumn on sunny days southern hawker dragonflies will continue their patrols around the pond, seldom resting. There are usually plenty of common darters too. Both species frequently venture to other parts of the garden, and continue flying until the weather turns colder, often as late as November.

This seven-spot ladybird, photographed on top of a garden gate, is a gardener's friend. There are more than 40 species of ladybirds found in Britain and this one is the most common. Ladybirds are beetles and most species are predators, with both the larvae and adults eating huge quantities of aphids and scale insects, both garden pests. The bright colour is a warning that ladybirds taste very bitter. Adult seven-spot ladybirds are approx ¼ inch (5 to 8 mm) in length. During the winter ladybirds hibernate in cracks and crevices, under leaf litter and sometimes in sheds and buildings, then emerge in April to find a mate. They will fly until October.

Seven-spot ladybird

There have been bumblebees in the garden since the spring. They are large, furry and buzzing insects, with a rather bumbling flight. A total of 24 species are present in the UK. They live in nests, typically containing 50 to 400 bees. Only queen bees hibernate: in September or October they will start searching for a suitable spot underground to spend the winter. They live for a year while other bumblebees only live for a few months in summer.

Sometimes if the weather is very mild, queen bumblebees (usually they are buff-tailed bumblebees) emerge in winter and look for nectar on winter-flowering shrubs, like the honeysuckle seen here.

Queen buff-tailed bumblebee on winter honeysuckle

In early spring only queen bumblebees are present, until they produce their own broods. Only eight species are commonly seen in most gardens. Bumblebees have been declining due to the loss of flower-rich habitats. They are great pollinators of both cultivated crops and wild flowers, so growing garden flowers which produce lots of nectar and pollen will help their survival. They don't make honey though as they don't need food to survive the winter, unlike honey bees.

Identifying bumblebees begins by looking at their tail colour. When bumblebees visit flowers they are often curled up, making identification harder.

This is a tree bumblebee, a species which only arrived in the UK in 2001 but which is now widespread. It is one of the white-tailed bumblebees and has a distinctive ginger thorax (the part of the body closest to the head). This bee is feeding on sedum, a very bee-friendly plant.

Tree bumblebee on sedum

Two other species in the white-tailed group of bumblebees are difficult to tell apart. One is the white-tailed bumblebee, and the other is the buff-tailed bumblebee (although only the queens actually have buff tails). I think this is a buff-tailed.

This bumblebee is feeding on lavender: during the summer my lavender plants are usually teeming with bees, especially on sunny days.

Buff-tailed bumblebee on lavender

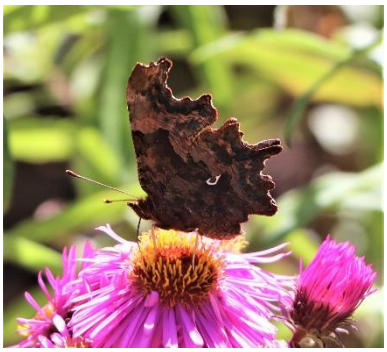
This is a common carder bee, another common and widespread bumblebee. It has a pale ginger top and cream-coloured sides to the thorax, together with stripes on the abdomen or lower body. This one is coated with pollen which partly conceals some of the features. This bee is feeding on hibiscus, a showy shrub which is not native to Britain, and another example of a bee-friendly plant, best grown in a warm sunny position to flower well.

Common carder bee on hibiscus

Many of the butterflies which are still flying in the autumn are those which overwinter as adults. These include brimstone, small tortoiseshell, peacock, comma and, increasingly, red admiral. They hide away underneath vegetation, within dense hedges and in outhouses and garages. If you find a butterfly hibernating, leave it alone. If there are spells of mild weather even in the winter sometimes butterflies take to the wing, which is why flowers of ivy, which persist into November or even later, are extremely valuable, as are early spring flowers like grape hyacinths and crocuses.

This red admiral butterfly is feeding on sedum, which will often be studded with butterflies and bees during its late summer and autumn flowering period. This large butterfly has a wingspan of around 2¾inches (70 mm). Males and females are similar. Foodplants include nettle and hop. Once regarded as a migrant, which returned each year to the UK from southern Europe, recently the species has also been hibernating in the UK. It is common in all habitats and frequently seen in gardens in the autumn.

Red admiral butterfly on sedum



The comma is another butterfly which overwinters as an adult. Its distinctive ragged wing edges make it resemble a dead leaf, which may help it to evade predators while it is hibernating in dense vegetation. Here you can also clearly see the underwing marking which gives the butterfly its name. Commas are especially fond of feeding on the sugars of over-ripe fruit in autumn, but here it is enjoying the nectar from a Michaelmas daisy. Its wingspan averages just under 2¼ inches (55 mm).

Comma butterfly on Michaelmas daisy

Brimstones are often the first butterflies seen in the spring as soon as we have a warm sunny day, sometimes even in February. I first mistook this one for a large white. Only when it had settled on a flower of Michaelmas daisy (they never rest with their wings open), did I recognize the distinctive pointed wings. This is a female, with very pale upperwings (hence my initial identification), and these greenish underwings. The wingspan is around 2¼ inches (58 mm).

Female brimstone on Michaelmas daisy

Both large and small whites may still be flying in late September and into October in warm and sunny weather. Together known as 'cabbage whites', they are the only two butterfly species in the UK which cause damage to food crops, as their larvae or caterpillars devour brassica leaves.

This small white, seen here on a Verbena flower (another nectar-rich species), has pale wing markings, whereas those of its larger cousin are a dense black. The wingspan of small whites is around 1¾ inches (48 mm), while the large white measures around 2½ inches (65 mm) – the females are larger.

Small white butterfly on Verbena bonariensis

Unlike the three butterfly species described above, both species of whites overwinter as a pupa or chrysalis.

Over the garden fence

Our neighbouring grass field is cut each year for a hay crop, usually in July. In spring it turns yellow with buttercups. The field is full of many different grasses and other plant species, which in turn support many insects, the most visible being butterflies. The most audible insects are crickets and grasshoppers. There are often skylarks over the field.

In winter and spring, and again after the hay has been cut, we see brown hares in the field. This hare came close to our windows early one morning. Just occasionally in the spring we see them 'boxing', when they stand upright facing each other and appear to be fighting.

It is thought that brown hares were introduced into Britain during the Iron Age from continental Europe where they are native. They are much larger than rabbits, and distinguished by their very long, black-tipped ears.

Brown hare next door

Hares can run at up to 40 miles an hour, making then the fastest land mammal in the country. They don't burrow but hide away in woodland edges and hedge bottoms, as well as in shallow depressions in grassland called 'forms'; they can lie flat and very still for a long period. They feed on grasses and other grassland plants, as well as on twigs and bark (and can cause damage to young unprotected planted trees).

Brown hare in a form

Having a field next to our garden means we get a good view of part of the sky, unimpeded by trees or buildings. In autumn, as the nights draw in, we often get a good view of a full moon.

Full moons occurring at different times of the year have been given names, which differ in different parts of the world.

In the UK a full moon before the autumn equinox might be called the fruit moon. If it occurs afterwards, it's the harvest moon. The following full moon, occurring in October or November, is the hunter's moon. Normally there are 12 full moons a year, but occasionally there are 13. According to some sources, this extra full moon is called the blue moon.

And finally – why being less tidy in the garden in autumn and winter helps tackle biodiversity loss and climate change

You can encourage wildlife into your garden, and improve their habitats, by being a little less tidy. Birds and many small mammals love to feed on fallen fruit. Cutting back herbaceous plants as late as possible means that birds like this goldfinch can enjoy the seeds all winter (this photo was taken in March). Good seed sources are Japanese anemones, asters, lavender and teasels. Berry-bearing trees and shrubs also help many bird species to survive during the winter months.

Goldfinch feeding on seed of Japanese anemones

Instead of raking up and disposing of fallen leaves, try scattering them under shrubs and hedges. Here they shelter invertebrates which birds like blackbirds and dunnocks feed on. You might see them searching in the leaf litter.

Plants absorb carbon dioxide and water, turning these simple ingredients into carbon-based sugars and starches, which are built into stems, leaves and roots as plants grow. The carbon is retained as plant material decays, broken down by fungi and micro-organisms and incorporated into the soil. This becomes humus, a soil component essential for good plant growth.

Dunnock (once known as hedge sparrow)