



Feeding the Birds



Feeding the birds can be especially helpful during the winter months when natural food sources are scarce. Whilst many people feed birds from October to April some organisations suggest feeding the birds all year round, provided peanuts are contained in a wire mesh hanger, or put out crushed on bird food tables. Whole peanuts are too big to be fed to chicks safely during the breeding season.

Do keep feeding stations clean to avoid food becoming contaminated and consequently harming the birds. We place our bird food table and hangers where they can be easily viewed from windows. We can therefore observe birdlife and squirrels feeding without disturbing them.

Good plants to grow in your garden to provide natural food for birds include; cotoneaster, ivy, elder, bramble, hawthorn and holly as all provide berries. Various trees are also good as seed providers or as insect hosts. Your local garden centre will be able to help you choose the right plants for a wildlife friendly garden.



Fresh Water, Nest Boxes & Bat Boxes

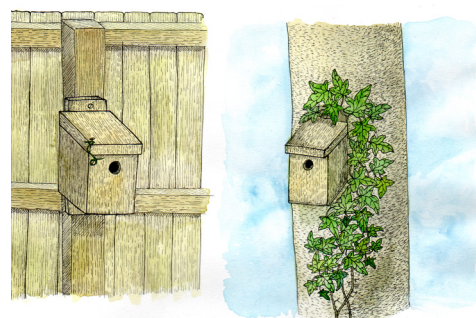
Fresh Water is essential for birds and other wild creatures that may visit your garden. Keeping bird baths clean and replenished will keep your birds and other garden wildlife happy. Our blackbirds are particularly fond of a bath in the spring and summer sunshine whereas our resident sparrows seem to dust-bath regularly and bathe in water less often.

We leave our Nest boxes up during the winter months as they are often used by birds as roosting boxes when the weather is very cold. Clean out old nests and debris from nest boxes at the end of October to avoid harmful bacteria building up.

Nest boxes for small birds should be erected preferably facing South-East and North. Erect them high enough, not lower than 2 metres, so that adult birds can feed their chicks in private. Too much human disturbance will cause adult birds to desert their young. Tilting the box forwards slightly allows driving rain to hit the roof of the box without accessing the box itself. We have one or two nest boxes placed high up against the eaves of the roof and our sparrows use them each year happily, their chattering being audible from our kitchen, lovely. Robins will nest in discarded teapots if pushed into a secluded part of the hedge. We had a robin make a nest in a pile of rope in a shed once so they are not fussy and like all sorts of nooks and crannies.

Bat boxes should be sited where bats are known to feed. Put them on isolated trees or on the sides of a building, as high up as possible and facing south. If you have several boxes to erect you can put them up facing different ways for bats to use in various weather conditions at different times of the year. Bats do not like perches/branches or other obstructions near their boxes. We have pipistrelle bats living near us but no bats in boxes yet, as they seem to have enough wild habitats and access to several roof spaces along the avenue.

Birds are generally paired up by Valentine's Day and therefore the BTO's National Nest Box Week runs from 14th-21st February, so have your nest boxes in place by then ready for the birds to use.



Tit Boxes

Giving Shelter

Shelter is important for the survival of garden wildlife. Ivy is wonderful and shelters all kinds of hibernating insects during winter. In fact the underwings of Brimstone butterflies resemble ivy leaves and are quite difficult to spot being so well camouflaged. Leaf litter areas are wonderful for hedgehogs to hibernate in, so leaving undisturbed areas of leaf litter is a good idea. Hedgehog and toad houses or boxes can also be purchased providing extra places for hibernation. Leaving a five inch gap at the bottom of newly erected fencing allows hedgehogs to feed from garden to garden. They need to eat a variety of invertebrates, caterpillars, slugs and snails in order to survive. You can feed them with chicken flavoured cat food or with 'Spikes Banquet' a specially formulated food for hedgehogs available from Ernest Charles Ltd.

Depending where you live, you may experience other garden wildlife. Foxes may visit urban gardens as they are opportunist feeders, although the new wheely bin system has made it harder for them to scavenge. Equally they may be enticed in to drink from a reliable water source or by food put out for them. Young foxes like to play, an important part of their learning, so if you are lucky enough to have foxes in your area you will no doubt be entertained if you are able to watch from a distance. One of our dogs became great friends with the resident fox. They would often play in the small woodland behind our house during our dog's last walk before bedtime and sometimes during the early morning run.

Rabbits may come in to some gardens to graze or to be a nuisance in the vegetable patch. If you want to deter them, there is such a thing as 'fox oil' (*Oleum animalis*) which you can obtain from your pharmacy. Making up a soap and water solution, adding enough fox oil to colour the water to a light coffee colour and soaking string to peg 15cm high around your vegetables should deter rabbits. Wear gloves as the solution is poisonous and try not to drip it onto vegetables you are going to eat.

Badgers may come into the garden to dig the soft soil of flower beds or lawns to find worms. They may be enticed in with peanuts, sultanas and honey if you want to watch them at night. Use a red torch or outside light as they will not be disturbed by it and you will still be able to view them. Our badgers became very friendly and started to come each night for a peanut feast. Keeping them out of a garden, as with most uninvited guests, may be tricky but a diesel soaked rag left at the usual badger exit/entrance place in your garden often works.

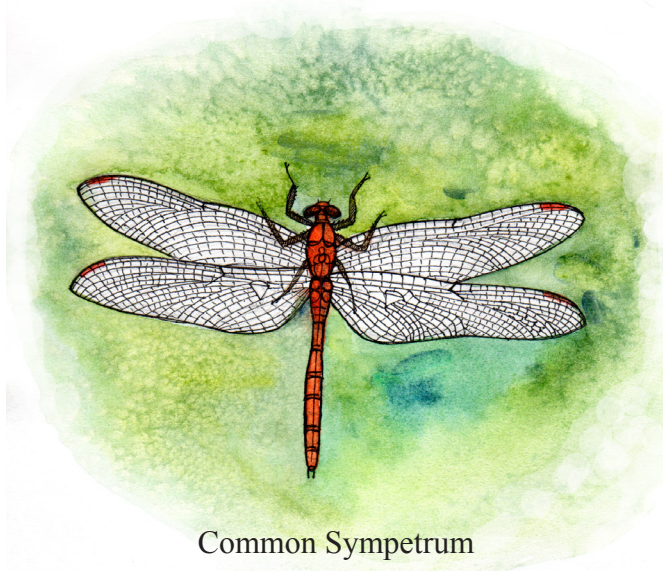
You have to renew the rags after a while as the smell does wear off. Crushed moth balls deter moles and cat dung is said to deter squirrels. However you can obtain various animal deterrents from Ernest Charles see website below. For the majority of us who like having squirrels about, peanuts are an absolute favourite. I find watching squirrels rather amusing. They have funny little antics and become quite friendly if encouraged. Our native squirrel is the red squirrel which prefers coniferous trees but the grey squirrel is a hardier species and can cope far better with the nuts of broad-leaved trees. Perhaps put them loosely on a feeding station to deter them from gnawing through bird hangers. You can also obtain a squirrel proof feeder for your birds from www.ernest-charles.com



Badger

Slugs can be a pest in the garden. One of the best remedies is to provide a tasty salad that slugs will want to eat underneath a half a coconut or half a hollowed out orange. The next morning you can remove the slugs to a new location such as a damp hedgerow in the countryside. Don't forget that although slugs make up a small part of a hedgehogs diet, frogs and toads also like to eat them. Do avoid using slug pellets as the poisons used hurt whatever eats the victim. There are eco-friendly slug pellets available but do read the backs of packets to make sure you have a safe product.

Sinking a jar half filled with beer into the ground attracts slugs which drink the beer and eventually drown in it. Incidentally ale is a good plant feed for tall plants such as hollyhocks. Hand picking slugs at night is time consuming but one of the best methods of pest control.



Common Sympetrum

Other Pests. Enviro-mesh can be used over growing plants and prevents adult insects from reaching them. This may protect against caterpillars, flea beetles and carrot fly.

Compost Heaps are very good for wildlife. They are excellent breeding grounds for worms and we even had slow worms or sometimes a grass snake taking up residence over the years. Worms are good because they continuously turn over the soil, introducing organic matter as they go and thus contributing to soil fertility. Do be careful as hedgehogs may find their way in to hibernate during winter since compost heaps are warm places in which to hide. Always check thoroughly before digging in with a fork!

Stick Piles are ideal for wildlife. Our own consists of unwanted branches, twigs and sticks and is located in an undisturbed part of the garden. We had a weasel take up residence one year and in the top part of the garden another stick pile was home to a wasp's nest built directly behind it. We were never bothered by the wasps and it was fun to watch them buzzing in and out. Wasps, like bees are important pollinators in the garden, but they are also ferocious predators of a lot of pest species, a gardener's friend. Fungi and beetles may also be attracted to stick piles so keep your eyes open and enjoy what nature brings.



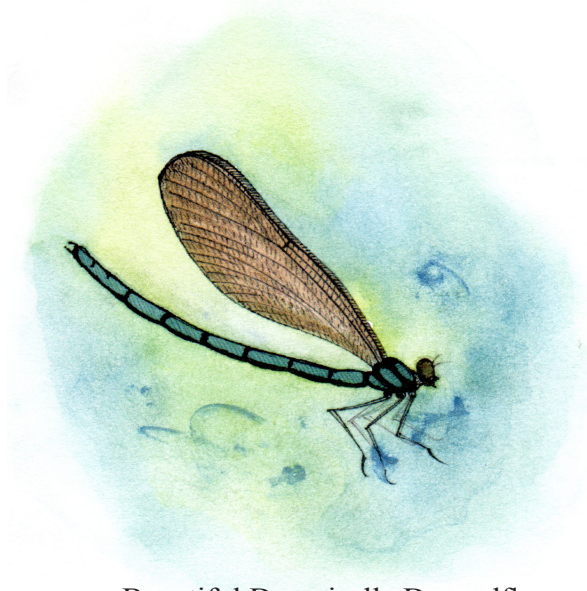
Hedgehog

Ponds are wonderful for wildlife but do keep toddlers away from them as they are capable of drowning in only 3 inches of water. Dig a pond as big as you can, in a sunny location, at least 45cm deep and add a bucket of garden soil to help get things started. Ideally the pond should have a deep end (60cm+) and a shallow end. Birds and hedgehogs will drink from the shallows and the deep end will not freeze solid in winter. Sloping sides or wire mesh fixed to one end of the pond, from the top to below the water's surface, will help any creatures such as hedgehogs that have fallen in to the water to climb out safely. The pond will need to be half filled with suitable vegetation to encourage wildlife. The stems will also give dragonfly and damselfly nymphs a way to climb up out of the water in order for metamorphosis to complete. Clear ponds from invasive plants in autumn but don't remove more than one third of any species and be sure to remove fallen leaves from nearby trees.

Don't stock fish in your pond as they will consume tadpoles. The best ponds have clean water so fill your pond liner, which should be laid in the ground fairly loosely before you place stones and logs around the edge, with tap water.

Don't let your pond ice over completely in winter. Use a fishing float or in a large pond a football works equally well to prevent this. If the ice is not too thick you can sit a pot of hot water directly on top to melt a drinking hole for birds.

What kind of wildlife may you attract to your pond? An established pond may have water snails, shrimps, pond skaters, water beetles, dragonfly and damselfly nymphs, caddis and alder flies, frogs and toads and other wildlife depending on location.



Beautiful Demoiselle Damselfly

Insects. You can purchase Ladybird and Lacewing Habitats, Ladybird Towers, a variety of Bee Boxes or a Solar Insect Theatre to attract insects to your garden. Nectar bearing plants, especially those with yellow or purple flowers, will attract butterflies, bees and other insects in to drink. The biggest problem for bees is a lack of nesting sites and suitable food plants. The purple flowering buddleia, sedum, thistles, knapweed, lavender, bird's foot trefoil, clover, scabious, dandelions, Michaelmas daisies, hebee, and sweet williams among other plants, are good nectar providers.

However, the stinging nettle is a food plant for the caterpillars of our most brightly coloured butterflies. Peacocks, small tortoiseshells, red admirals and comma butterflies all use young stinging nettles on which to lay their eggs. Perhaps grow stinging nettles in a contained area. Nettles like disturbed soil. In early June cut one third of the nettle patch, one third in July and one third in August. This will ensure plenty of young shoots for butterflies to lay their eggs on. Then cut the whole nettle bed in December. Before cutting, wear gloves and always be sure to look under the leaves to make sure you are not discarding eggs, caterpillars or pupae. If you find any leave them. The discarded nettles can be used to make nettle manure for the garden or another year perhaps grow blackcurrant bushes in the old nettle bed as they will be disease free and bear only the best quality fruit. Nettles also attract a variety of ladybirds, scorpion flies and other insect life. Good to have in the garden. We do a ladybird count on ours each year and find that aphids will go to the nettles rather than the roses then the ladybirds feed on the aphids, so it is a good balance.

Nettle manure recipe;

Soak a good bunch of nettles in a bucket of water for five days. Using one part of the liquid to five parts water as a spray for plants will get rid of aphids.



Toad



Frog

Old Folk Rhymes for sowing.....

One for the rook, one for the crow,
One to die and one to grow.
Plant your seeds in a row,
One for pheasant, one for crow,
One to eat and one to grow.

When you hear the cuckoo shout
Tis time to plant your tatties out.

Plant Kidney beans, if you be so willing,
When elm leaves are as big as a shilling.
When elm leaves are as big as a penny,
You must plant beans if you mean to have many.

Weather Lore for gardeners;
A full moon bodes fair weather
A clear moon, a frost soon.

Red sky at night, shepherd's delight
Red sky in the morning, shepherd's warning.

When the halo round the moon is far – rain is soon
When the halo round the moon is near – rain is far
away.

Make hay while the sun shines.

When frost and snow are both together,
Sit by the fire and spare shoe leather.



Two Spot Ladybird