

Wildlife at Plover Cottage

The previous owners of the cottage had asked us to keep feeding the birds, which we were more than happy to do. Early visitors in the year that cause great excitement are the long-tailed tits. These are drawn to the garden by the fat balls we put out. (No nets please, the thin green plastic is dreadful for breaking the legs of small birds.) I love their almost pink plumage and the dark tails, I think they are the prettiest of birds. Another bird to visit us for fat balls was a woodpecker, who came all last summer. He/she was visiting to collect food for their nest, so we were happy to provide food throughout the season. Other visitors last year included a family of starlings that took up residence in a hole in our apple tree. I believe the tree is over a hundred years old, so it provides many opportunities for wildlife habitat.

This year the starlings were beaten to their accommodation by a family of great tits. The starlings did come along to check out their old home but the great tits had already moved in. We have to cover the trunk of the tree with wire mesh as we also keep cats at the cottage. The mesh keeps the cats out but lets the birds in. We believe the bird families managed to fledge despite the presence of the cats. Unfortunately a family of blackbirds had a disaster this year as our cats had been allowed their first outings into the garden just as the baby blackbirds fledged. The three little bodies buried by our pear trees weigh heavy on my mind. With hindsight I can see that the blackbird parents didn't have time to prepare their offspring for the risk of the cats and their babies were easy prey. Knowing that the parents would have witnessed the murder of the fledglings makes me even sadder.

Our hawthorn hedge is full of sparrows, we call it the tenements. Any one walking past will know they are there as they chirp and call all day. Sparrows will only travel a few feet from their roost to look for food, so again a wildlife garden and bird food for them is important. Unwittingly I provided a tasty breakfast for a sparrow one morning this summer. The night before I had heard wings fluttering in our conservatory, but as it does not have lights I was unable to find the insect that was trapped. In the morning, one of those July mornings where time went dripping slow and the heat had not fallen all night, I found a beautiful moth trapped in the room. I removed some cobweb that had snared it, took it to the door of the conservatory, opened my hands and let the moth escape. But moths don't like daylight, the natural protection of the night had gone, and the moth flew straight ahead directly into the flight of a sparrow that, hawk-like, took the moth to the ground before killing it and carrying it away for food. Nature; red in tooth and claw.

Other visitors to our garden include a colony of honey bees that moved into the apple tree, to a hole lower than the one inhabited by the great tits. I was very pleased with this and had plans for buying a beehive for next year. An apiarist friend told me that the bees would probably swarm into the apple tree next spring and from there I'd be able to collect them and form a colony for the hive. Sadly the bees appear to have been defeated by the hot summer weather, and no longer live in the tree. My garden is full of plants that will support bees; foxgloves, sweet peas, buddleia, as well as the roses and lilies I love in all shades of pink.

So, that's the birds and the bees, and now I'm going to tell you about the bats. I didn't know they were in our garden until one evening I was trying to encourage our little girl cat to come in at the end of the day. She crouched on the lawn, looking up into the sky, ready to pounce on the bats she could see racing above her. They move so quickly it is hard to see them but once your eyes can see them they are amazing! I love to stand by the pergola (schoolgirl fears of bats in my hair die hard) and I wait for the bats to arrive. Just one will flit past, then the rest can be seen. In a swoop they are here then gone. Sometimes I think there is just one in the garden then I realise there must be four. They are so quick it's hard to track them as they fly above the lawn and into the apple tree. Where do they live? I wondered if they might be in the ancient apple tree. Then I heard that bats in the houses at

Chestnut Avenue had prevented the refurbishment there. I don't think my bats live that far away though. They can't be in our cottage, the bedroom ceilings go up into the eaves so I don't believe there is room for them there. Though if they did live here, they would be welcome.

I could go on; telling you about the butterflies, the sparrow hawk that flies through our hedge, the sound of the swans flying over in the winter, but some of this you will know already. You are Welney residents, you must understand what a wealth of incredible and invaluable wildlife there is here!

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