

Nature Notes for LINK August 2011

In the garden, something stirs...

We tend to forget the contribution to our wildlife that mammals make in our gardens and close countryside. While some of us see rabbits and squirrels in the garden, and moles are obvious by their molehills, there are quite a few mammals that are less noticeable because they tend to be more active at night. As a cat owner I know that wood mice and shrews are common because their bodies are found in the kitchen in a morning. Mice have big eyes and big ears and shrews, which apparently taste unpleasant and are not eaten by cats, have long noses and barely existent eyes. Shrews eat insects and are a major food source for barn owls. Mice are rodents and eat mainly seeds and can be seen in hard weather eating food put out for the birds. The grey squirrel is another common visitor to bird feeders where they can become pests, but there are plenty of squirrel-proof feeders available if you can't tolerate their acrobatic antics.

Recently we have used an infra-red camera to see what comes into our garden at night. When it detects a warm-blooded animal in the dark, it takes its photo or a video. We have seen numerous cats, but also hedgehogs and a fox. The hedgehog forages around the compost heap. They primarily eat invertebrates such as earthworms and slugs, but they will take eggs and the young of ground nesting birds. In August and September they can often be seen during the day anticipating the colder weather and building up their fat reserves. The fox has returned on several occasions and we assume it is a vixen. The smell of a dog fox is a big giveaway, but we had no idea that the vixen had been visiting. With hindsight we had noticed yellow patches on the lawn similar to those a female dog makes when it urinates there.

Another mammal most of us are familiar with is the bat. Last year the bat survey showed that they were common throughout the village, but this year there seems to be fewer. We have managed to capture a video of a bat flying into our porch, but it was more by luck than by judgement. It shows just how small they are when they fold up their wings. **The Pipistrelle is the size of the end joint of a thumb.**

There are other mammals that have been seen in the village. A Muntjac deer has been seen in a garden in Great Lane. These small deer have been spreading north for some time and are becoming more and more common. A few years ago, we had a report of a badger being seen in the early hours, appropriately enough in Badgers Close, and more recently an otter has been seen in the brook. Weasels and stoats are often overlooked as they are not very big, but they are sure to be around **and are often seen scurrying across the road in front of your car.** They are both ruthless killers. The smaller weasel eats mice, voles and young nestling birds, whereas the stoat's staple diet is the wild rabbit.

The photos and videos we have taken can be seen on the LINK website at www.bugbrooklink.co.uk and if you have any more sightings don't forget to let us know.