

Nature Notes February 2010.

A tree, a shrub, a packet of seeds

Gardens are so important to wildlife, and with a little thought, it is possible to have your own mini-nature reserve. When choosing plants for the garden, it is worthwhile thinking whether they will encourage bio-diversity there. When choosing a tree, for instance, it is best to get a native species which will support a large number of insects that will be a food source for birds. The silver birch is a good example as it is very attractive to aphids and to the ladybirds and hoverflies that prey upon them, and acts as a magnet to insect eating birds, such as blue tits. Tree creepers are often seen searching for insects on the trunk.

If you do not have room for a full-sized tree, there are lots of shrubs that are good for wildlife. One of the most decorative must be the buddleia. They are attractive to butterflies and bees together with other insects that are looking for an abundant supply of nectar. You can expect to see many of our native species of butterfly such as the tortoiseshell, red admiral, peacock and small and large whites. 2009 was a good year to see the migratory painted lady which amazingly flies here from as far away as Morocco.

You do not have to go as far as planting permanent trees and shrubs to help wildlife. Even a packet of seeds can make a difference, and it is cheap and quick enough for children to enjoy a reward. Sunflowers are always good for children to grow as they grow quickly and are very colourful. They can compete with their brothers, sisters and friends to see who can grow the tallest, and it can provide an opportunity to spot the different pollinating insects that are attracted by the flowers. Later the seed heads attract greenfinches and great tits. Another annual to grow is the foxglove, but as all parts of it are poisonous, care must be taken where children are likely to be. The tubular flowers are nectar-rich and are excellent for bees which follow the spotted path inside the flower. Other insects do the same, which in turn may attract spotted flycatchers, and other birds look for the caterpillars of the foxglove pug moth.

Other ideas: Rowan, hawthorn and cotoneaster have colourful berries in autumn/winter and attract blackbirds, thrushes, redwings and fieldfares. Hawthorn is particularly beneficial to wildlife as its prickly, dense growth offers cover for large and small animals, while its foliage provides food for over 50 species of moth, and its berries are a favourite food of waxwings if any are around and you are really lucky!

Recent Local Sighting

Many winter migratory birds have been in Bugbrooke during the winter, amongst them redwings and fieldfares. These are both members of the thrush family, the redwing about the size of a song thrush but with red patches under the wings and the fieldfare larger and greyer. They are often in mixed flocks and feed on berries such as hawthorn, holly and cotoneaster. Another migrant I have seen is the blackcap feeding on holly. Until recently, the blackcap was only a summer visitor, but although the summer migrants still leave, eastern European blackcaps have started to come here for the winter.

RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch, 30th-31st January

If you took part, let me know what you saw and where. You are not too late to do it up to the first weekend in February.

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