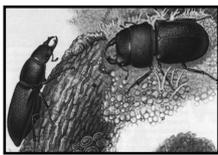


COUNTRY FILE

May proved to be one of the most beautiful months I can remember. The weather was fine and warm and the blossom on the May hedges gave a magnificent display. There was a fine brood of orange tip butterflies which fluttered across the lanes and gardens. After an absence of a couple of years, we had the hint of a cuckoo establishing a territory in the fields around the village, but after a few days it fell silent, possibly moving off elsewhere to find a mate. Other birds have fared well. Partridges abound and the warm dry weather in June will ensure plenty of insects for the new broods to flourish. Kingfishers have nested by the fishing lake close to the old nature reserve, and barn and tawny owls have also bred successfully. I have seen 2 pairs of lapwings which may be nesting on the land established by Fred Myers under the Countryside Stewardship scheme. During the winter months the scrapes have filled with water and have been quickly colonised by a wide range of insects including water-boatmen or whirligig beetles which skim across the water using the surface tension to keep them afloat. The ponds are patrolled by a range of damselflies of the most beautiful metallic colours. The damselfly is smaller than the more brutish dragonfly, with a needle thin abdomen and banded segments of brilliant blue and green colours. Midsummer will herald the appearance of the dragonfly which breeds in great numbers in the ponds and dykes around the old nature reserve.



We tend to ignore the creepy crawlies in our gardens, but next time you turn over an old log, (no, not your sleeping spouse!) spend a little time examining the vast range of creatures which inhabit this underworld. You may well find a lesser stag beetle, not the large horned insect found in the South, but a smaller version about an inch long. It will probably play dead when you disturb it, but when the coast is clear, it will slowly amble off to find some cover. There is the black and yellow striped wasp beetle which lays its eggs in decaying wood and the soldier beetle which has a liking for aphids. There are many others, in all shapes and sizes and colours – all harmless and all part of a wonderful “below stairs” infrastructure which forms part of the food chain for other creatures. May I put in a plea on behalf of this underworld – if you must have one of those immaculate gardens with neat flowerbeds and hanging baskets – set aside a part of your garden for the lesser legions such as the beetles, centipedes, spiders and other insects. Don’t burn up every log in your garden but leave an area undisturbed for the creepy crawlies to munch away undisturbed – you will be well rewarded!

For the first time in 5 years I have a willow warbler nesting in the shrub border close to the house, its activities closely monitored by a robin in a nearby tree. A small, sleek little bird which has migrated from Southern Africa, it is very difficult to spot as it darts quickly in and out of the nest.

The last attempt proved to be a unique experience that sadly ended in tragedy. The nest was built close to a path which made it vulnerable to passing animals, but 6 eggs were laid and all hatched successfully. The couple then set about finding food for the nestlings.



Watching from the window there was sudden commotion as a robin swooped down to the nest, only to be driven away by the adults. It happened again but this time the warblers waited patiently as the robin perched by the nest to be greeted by 6 very tiny, scraggy beaks. The robin was actually feeding the youngsters! After several attempts, the robin was accepted as a surrogate parent by the warblers, but it presented some considerable logistical problems as it had little concept of size. The robin would offer enormous worms and caterpillars to the nestlings which it tried to thrust down the tiny throats. Somehow they managed to swallow the huge portions and with the activities of the parent birds, the youngsters grew rapidly in size.

After ten days when the nestlings were almost ready to fly, tragedy struck. I looked out of the window one morning to see the contents of the nest strewn across the path and a cat disappearing over the fence. Sadly the cat had destroyed the nest and left the 6 young birds lying dead on the path. The parents were greatly agitated, flying between nest and tree in disbelief. The robin was inconsolable. For three days it perched in the tree above the nest, feathers fluffed out, not knowing what to do – it was grief-stricken.

The story is not unique but highly unusual. The robin is a very maternal bird and may have lost its own brood but retained the paternal instinct. There are several sightings of robins feeding fledgling wrens but none that I can establish, of a robin adopting the nestlings of another species. I will watch developments with interest. I know nature can be cruel but I will not be contributing to the Cats Protection league!

GH

British Dragonfly Society www.dragonflysoc.org.uk