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Opening extract from

The RSPB Children's Guide to Nature Watching

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Meadow, pasture and downland

Don't be fooled into thinking that all open grass fields are the same. In general, the oldest ones that have had the least fertiliser put on them and have had just the right number of animals grazing them are the best. These are the downlands and wildflower meadows. In June they can be alive with butterflies, orchids and beetles.

Greener grassland that has had more grazing may still have wildlife, especially in neglected corners, but is likely to be poorer – the greener the grass, the fewer species it is likely to hold.

Grassland animals

Cows and sheep graze on grasslands. They can attract their own wildlife. Look for magpies trying to steal wool from sheep's backs to line their nests. Or swallows flying around cows looking for flies. Watch for wagtails and starlings grabbing insects that have been disturbed as the cows walk about.

You may also see brown hares in the fields – the larger the field the better for them – but not for other wildlife.



Grazing cattle attract their own wildlife!



The pyramidal orchid is a favourite with the day-flying burnet moth.

Hedgerows

In most cases, garden hedges are planted from just one type of bush. However, hedges in the countryside tend to be much more interesting. Some countryside hedges are among the oldest features in a landscape, especially if they form a boundary between two landowners. And the older, taller and thicker they are, the better they are for wildlife.

To work out roughly how old a countryside hedge is, count the number of tree species in about 30 big paces and multiply by 100. If the hedge contains mainly hawthorn, it was probably planted in the 18th or early 19th century.

Some hedges are so old that they are just thin strips of ancient woodland. These can have fascinating flowers, including bluebells and Solomon's seal, along with climbers such as honeysuckle and old-man's beard. Look out for fruit trees such as damsons and crab apples here too.

Wildlife-friendly

All these plants mean that hedges can be great for wildlife. Look for nesting yellowhammers and whitethroats in the summer, feeding redwings and fieldfares in the winter, and small mammals such as bank voles and shrews at any time of year.

Some insects are particularly associated with hedges, such as the very rare black hairstreak butterfly which lives on blackthorn.

As well as their resident and visiting wildlife, hedges provide safe corridors for wildlife to travel between otherwise separate pieces of woodland – think of them as nature's cycle paths. You can sometimes see wild animals crossing at gateways, going from one hedge to the next.



Old and thick hedges provide food and shelter for a lot of wildlife.

Parks and gardens

Just because somewhere looks nice and tidy for people doesn't mean it won't work for wildlife. It's true that many parks and gardens aren't brilliant for wildflowers because any that appear get pulled out as weeds. But there is usually a forgotten corner with a few weeds growing through, or that hasn't had too many garden chemicals thrown on it. These are the places to look first for interesting minibeasts, which, in turn, provide food for other garden wildlife such as hedgehogs and robins.

However, a lot of garden wildlife simply goes unnoticed. Over 100 different types of moths visit most gardens every year, and garden soil can contain all sorts of goodies.

Also garden flowers can be full of nectar. Simpler, older varieties of flowers are often better than some of the more modern ones, and these will attract butterflies.



Even in the tidiest park, you'll find some wildlife.

Tidy places

Many town or city parks look too tidy for much wildlife. Some will have old trees that have their own wildlife. Others may have ponds and lakes. However, whatever is there, some form of wildlife will usually move into it.

Country parks are often more interesting for wildlife.

Remember though, make sure that you have permission to look in any gardens and don't go wandering in areas of parkland on your own.



Bees visit nectar-rich garden flowers.

Urban environments

Towns and cities can be great places for watching wildlife. In some places they are even better than the surrounding countryside because parks, gardens and waste ground provide a range of habitats that may no longer exist elsewhere in the area.

In general, if you are looking for wildlife in towns and cities, try to find the oldest, most run-down and wettest parts of town. Tidy modern places have less wildlife.

Almost every town river and canal will have its fish and water life. Park lakes and streams and rivers running through towns are great for birds, and will have plants that you won't find anywhere else.

On buildings

Some urban wildlife depends on buildings, from nesting swifts and house sparrows to roosting bats and garden hedgehogs. Old-fashioned sewage works, usually on the edge of town, provide some of the best places inland to see wading birds and the first swallows migrating through. Pied wagtails and starlings may roost in towns in winter because they will be warmer than the countryside.

Tall city buildings can provide nesting sites for birds of prey, including kestrels and peregrines, and old churchyards, especially the neglected corners, can have all sorts of wildflowers and insects. Don't forget to look at the lichens on the gravestones themselves – the dates will tell you how old the lichens could be.

Any cracks in pavements or walls will soon be colonised by wildflowers. Don't just think of them as weeds – they may have been around since before the city was built.

Keep your eyes open

The key for the urban wildlife watcher is just to keep your eyes open. You may spot gulls flying overhead on their way to roost for the night, ladybirds and zebra spiders on the walls and windowsills – and even moths and other insects splattered on the front number plates of cars in the supermarket car park!



House sparrows depend on buildings.

In your home

Most wildlife lives outdoors, but you will be able to find something alive in any home, however clean and tidy it is. There will be spiders, carpet mites and beetles, perhaps dog or cat fleas, the odd sleeping ladybird and lacewing, and maybe even mice. If your home isn't centrally heated, you may find silverfish, and perhaps even woodlice or slugs in damper patches. Occasionally a trail of ants may get in.

Your garage or shed is likely to have all these and more. If you leave windows open in the summer, all sorts of things may fly in!

Some wildlife, such as the daddy long-legs spider, is only ever found indoors in the UK! It usually lives in warmer climates farther south, but can survive here because we heat our homes to make them comfortable to live in.

If you get any new houseplants, you are likely to bring in more new animals. There may be tiny slugs that creep out of the soil. Very occasionally you may even find an exotic caterpillar in your shop-bought salad!



This daddy long-legs spider would not survive outside.



Wildlife everywhere

Wildlife really is everywhere. It's often a nuisance in the home – especially the beetle grubs or tiny moth caterpillars that eat natural fabrics or stored foods – but isn't it also amazing that such creatures choose to move in with us?

So before you decide to evict a newcomer from your home, take a good look at it, find out a bit more about it and enjoy it for its own sake. It's alive, it's here and it's fascinating!