



WILDLIFE GARDENING FORUM

E-newsletter: December 2022

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As I write this, world leaders are gathered in Egypt at COP27, the world agenda on climate change having moved on from target setting to urgent action and the need to fund huge costs of effects already hitting vulnerable communities, human *and* wild.

What on earth (quite literally) can be done? It's easy to feel powerless in the face of such a daunting task. Yet we do have ways we can make meaningful change and take heart from things we're doing already. Nowhere more so than in our gardens. Think of gardens as tiny parcels of planet earth where we can all make good choices, grasping opportunities to reverse biodiversity loss and mitigate some of the effects of our changing climate.



In January we open 2023 with a positive step by holding our first ever online Wildlife Gardening Forum conference. In it our speakers will be exploring a cross section of challenges and solutions that face today's wildlife gardeners. We're delighted to have well-known insect conservationist, author and researcher Dave Goulson as keynote speaker, followed by experts from BTO Garden BirdWatch and Plantlife. They'll show how gardens can offer refuge and resilience when all around feels doom and gloom. From how to halt worrying insect declines to using citizen

science to track extreme weather events, plus why our lawns may be the low-cost answer to just about everything! The event is taking place on Zoom at 7.30pm, Thursday 12th January, and while tickets have now all sold out, we plan to record the event so those who miss it will be able to catch it on YouTube afterwards.

Meanwhile, do enjoy this issue, packed yet again with the latest research, stories and book reviews. In a brand-new feature – “Patron’s Patter” – we hear from Forum patron Chris Baines. Thanks to Karen Murphy for compiling our newsletter and all the contributors, and don’t forget to contact us at info@wlgf.org with your events or activities for the Members’ Noticeboard.

Helen Bostock, Chair WLGf, Warwickshire

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Forum news

Work starts on the Natural History Museum's new gardens

As part of its Urban Nature Project, the Natural History Museum has started the redevelopment of its gardens. The five-acre South Kensington site will be transformed into an accessible and biodiverse green space in the heart of London, with work expected to be completed in spring 2024. The new designs –



which Wildlife Gardening Forum members, including Dr Steve Head, Founder Patron, have contributed to – have people and nature at their heart and incorporate an ambitious approach to sustainable construction.

Starting in the east of the grounds, new outdoor galleries will tell the story of the evolution of complex life on Earth, from 540 million years ago to the present day. An immersive geological timeline will bring visitors face to face with a life-size bronze *Diplodocus*, set within planting evocative of the Jurassic. Further along the timeline, in the Early Cretaceous zone, visitors will encounter a group of *Hypsilophodon* dinosaurs and explore the diversification of flowering plants. The West grounds will focus on the present and future of biodiversity, with emphasis on the positive roles that we must all play if we're to secure a brighter future for nature and people. This includes an extension of the existing Wildlife Garden, doubling the area of native planting and providing better connected habitats. New planting in the de-paved Darwin Centre Courtyard will explore the future of urban biodiversity under a changing climate. As well as providing a relaxing space for reflecting on our individual connection with nature, the western gardens will become a long-term hub for scientific research and training, with a focus on methods and tools for restoring biodiversity in the UK's urban areas. A site-wide network of bio-acoustic and environmental sensors will be built, along with a new Learning and Activity Centre to help inspire and train the next generation of advocates for the planet.



Work on reinvigorating and extending the existing wetland network has already started, with special care being taken to protect the wildlife that already utilises the site. This includes the painstaking translocation of existing pondlife to a new temporary holding pond (on-site), while the current ponds are extended and degraded liners replaced.

Museum staff are carrying out population studies, environmental DNA and bio-acoustic surveys to monitor and track how the redevelopment impacts nature across the gardens and will be sharing a number of detailed case studies over coming years.

- If you'd like to find out more about the garden designs, scientific studies, or the associated UK-wide urban nature programme, please visit the project's [website](#), or email urbannature@nhm.ac.uk

John Tweddle, November 2022

Patron's Patter

Welcome to our new section of the newsletter, where each issue we'll feature a piece written by one of our esteemed Forum Patrons, in which they share their thoughts on wildlife gardening.



*Chris Baines is one of the UK's leading independent environmentalists and an award-winning writer and broadcaster. He trained as a horticulturist and landscape architect but works mainly as a professional advisor to government and industry. He was one of the original presenters of BBC Countryfile and his film *Bluetits and Bumblebees* is often credited with starting the trend towards gardening with nature. In 1985 Chris created the very first wildlife garden at the Chelsea Flower Show and he created a Rich Habitat Garden on BBC Gardeners' World as long ago as 1979. His 2019 film *The Living Thames* has won awards across four continents. His book*

How to Make a Wildlife Garden has been continuously in print for almost 40 years and a new edition is due for publication by the Royal Horticultural Society in Spring 2023. Chris is a national Vice President of the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts and has been awarded lifetime achievement medals by both the RSPB and the British Naturalists' Association. He is Honorary President of the Thames Estuary Partnership, and he is also Patron of the Countryside Management Association and the Wildlife Gardening Forum.

I've spent 50 years enthusing about the wildlife we can attract into our gardens. The list is long, and for many species, domestic gardens have become lifesavers in that time. Our garden ponds are safe havens for frogs and newts and dragonflies. Woodland songbirds such as blackbirds, thrushes and robins accept our mature gardens as sheltered woodland glades in the urban forest. Many of our remaining bees and butterflies would be lost without the nectar and pollen in our flower borders. But what about the wildlife we can't accommodate? Few, if any, of our gardens can offer sanctuary for snipe or bittern, (although I live in hope that nightingales may one day find salvation in the leafy wildlife gardens of south-east England.) Few gardeners are lucky enough to see red squirrels or pine martens on their feeding stations, or purple emperor butterflies in the treetops outside their bedroom windows. Tawny owls may be thriving in urban parks and gardens, but barn owls are struggling.


I've always loved the immediacy and the detail of the wildlife on my urban doorstep. I've learned to revel in the skill and industry of leafcutter bees, the amazing adaptation of pond skaters to walk on water and the nest-building expertise of wrens – but I also love the haunting call of curlew over summer moorland and winter mudflats. I never fail to be thrilled by the sight of a dipper wading into a fast-flowing stream. The sight of a brown hare, loping across an open field, is a joy that's become all too rare over those same 50 years.

As wildlife gardeners we also have a vital role to play in that wider landscape, supporting the wildlife we can never hope to help directly. We're a strong community of people with a passion for the natural world, and we've shown that we have the skills and the commitment to make a difference. Now, at a time when we're seeing the progress of recent years being cast aside by politicians, we need to stand shoulder to shoulder with the UK's exceptional family of campaigning conservation organisations and demand political commitment to nature recovery across both town and country. Our wildlife gardens make a wonderful contribution, but they can never be enough.

Chris Baines, October 2022

Forum noticeboard

Appeal for help with the WLGf website



Our web manager Steve Head would like to improve the coverage of garden butterflies on the site. At present there's just one page and he'd like to emulate the coverage of the birds with a page on each species, and where related species can be confused (e.g. browns, whites and blues), an introduction page showing species side by side. The current butterfly page is [here](#), and the bird pages start from [here](#). Steve would also like to increase the number of wild plant species descriptions on the website from the approximately 100 already there. He's put a list of chosen species to add to the website [here](#). If any of you would like to have a go at drafting some butterfly or plant profiles, please contact Steve at steve@wlgf.org for guidance. We would be very grateful for your help!




Viper's bugloss, *Echium vulgare* – one of the species of plant we want to add to the website

Donate to the Forum



We'd like to remind our readers that we're a registered charity on Amazon Smile – this means that with eligible purchases on Amazon they'll donate 0.5% of the price to your chosen charity – go to www.smile.amazon.co.uk, click on AmazonSmile in your account and search for The Wildlife Gardening Forum – all funds raised will go towards promoting and educating on the protection and improvement of gardens for wildlife. Much appreciated and thanks!

Call for notices



If any readers have any wildlife gardening events, advertisements or news you'd like to publicise in this newsletter here on the forum noticeboard, then do please send details over to info@wlgf.org and they'll be included in the next issue.



Making the headlines

New RHS posts in 2022 bring garden biodiversity into focus

Along with Forum Chair Helen Bostock transferring into her new role as RHS Senior Wildlife Specialist, a new Senior Ecologist, Gemma Golding, has joined the Plant Health team at the Royal Horticultural Society. The new post, a first for the RHS, will design and lead ecological surveys at the charity's five gardens, establishing baseline data on wildlife and developing recommendations to increase biodiversity in gardens across the UK. Together their work will help bring nature into people's lives through gardening. These new roles go some way towards reaching targets set out in the RHS' 2021 Sustainability Strategy.

The BES is opening school doors to nature in north-east England



Photo: BES website

The British Ecological Society, the oldest and one of the most respected ecological organisations in the world, has widened its scope to practical school-age education. Supported by the same Green Recovery Challenge Fund that funded our project [Polli:Gen](#) with partners Learning through Landscapes, the BES project had similar aims, in this case to improve 10,000 school children's connection to nature across 47 primary schools in disadvantaged and isolated areas of the north-east of England.

Working with citizen science organisation MammalWeb and engagement charity SMASH-UK, the 12-month project promoted nature in school grounds through creating wildflower meadows, building hedgehog highways and installing insect hotels and camera traps, allowing children to discover and monitor the wildlife in their schools. The final phase, starting now, is centred on birds, with schoolchildren installing feeding stations and nest boxes. It's really pleasing to see a top academic body like the BES investing in grass-roots garden education.

Birds and birdsong improve mental health



Academics from King's College, London, have found that everyday encounters with garden birds not only boost the mood of the general population, but also people with depression. Participants in the survey were prompted at random intervals to record where they were and how they were feeling at the time. Mental wellbeing scores increased among those who were in and around birds and nature, and the effects lasted well beyond the initial encounter. Researchers suggested that visits to

natural places with lots of birdlife could ideally be prescribed by doctors to treat mental health conditions, and that [the survey's](#) results highlighted the need to further protect our urban biodiversity.

Wildlife gardening research

Invasive species: it's in the life strategy

Ecologists are very concerned over the impact of invasive alien species on native floras and faunas. This is particularly of concern to wildlife gardeners, since most invasive plants in Britain and Ireland are escapees from gardens. It would be very helpful, especially in the changing environments of climate change, if we could find ways to predict which species are likely to be a problem.



A multi-national [team of ecologists](#) have identified a useful indicator from the reproductive strategy of plants. Species can be placed within a 'Competitor/Stress/Ruderal' (CSR) framework where 'C' (competitor) species are long-lived and resilient, 'S' (stress) species tolerate conditions that exclude most species, and 'R' (ruderal or weed) species are adapted for high reproductive rate and ability to find new sites. Looking at a large database of Czech flora and vegetation, the team showed that naturalised alien species, which survive on their own in the wild without causing

problems, are most likely to be R-adapted, while invasive species causing a problem are likely to be C-strategists. This makes a lot of sense, because R-strategists are usually fleeting, capturing space in new habitat, but not surviving long in one place. C-strategists are slower reproducing, but out-compete native species, and are more likely eventually to spread and be a problem.

Baby bear's porridge choice works with alien plants and pollinators

Alien plant species must have influences on animals as well as native plants, and the closest relationship will be with pollinator species. So how do pollinators react when confronted with a new alien plant? What difference does it make if the new plant is closely related to a native, or instead, not similar at all? Perhaps a new plant could lure pollinators away from the natives, or could it be that insects used to a native species can more easily accept a closely related alien?

The same but different...

A [study from](#) the University of Konstanz in Germany devised a test using 34 potted alien plant species placed within native plant communities. They compared insect interactions with a total of 151 alien-native combinations and also measured how closely related the species were, and how similar their flowers. The results showed that co-flowering native species can indeed help insects accept closely related species, but equally, those not closely related profited from a lack of competition.

Looking at the flowers rather than relatedness, it became clear that aliens with flowers very similar to natives suffered from competition, while those most dissimilar lacked visitors. Those with intermediate similarity did best, not too close to suffer competition, and not so different that no insects bothered with them. Like baby bear's porridge – not too hot or too cold!

Water habitats work like green space to provide solace in Covid

It's now well accepted that green spaces, parks and gardens helped people during Covid lockdowns, but did visits to 'blue spaces' such as rivers, lakes and coasts have the same benefits?

Tokyo city



The answer from a [Japanese study](#) of residents of four big cities is yes – but with some interesting provisos. Japanese people took lockdown very seriously during the pandemic and most visited neither green nor blue spaces, choosing to stay at home to reduce risk. For those that did, however, it was clear that blue spaces did provide safe places that people in urban areas could use to manage their stress and disorder during the pandemic.

However, the study showed that childhood experience of blue spaces made people more likely to choose to visit them, as did having young children they could take to play in them. There were some differences between motivations to visit rivers and coasts. People wanting to walk for health or just to get outdoors were more likely to go to rivers than the sea, while connecting to nature and 'wanting to be alone' were slightly more popular reasons for going to the sea. It's clear that facilitating access to blue spaces is beneficial, especially if the habit is established through happy childhood visits.

Brain scans prove that green space reduces stress after a short walk

Deep in our brains is a small region called the amygdala, which is the centre for processing emotional and threatening stimuli. Stimulating the amygdala causes strong emotion, including aggression and fear. It's very significant that a [new study](#) by German neuroscientists has firmly linked amygdala activity with the environment to which people are exposed. They assigned 63 people to one-hour walks in either a busy city or a leafy urban forest, then used magnetic resonance imagery to look at their amygdala response to a series of stress-inducing emotional face images. As expected, the people exposed to the natural green space showed significant reduction in amygdala response, while no effect was seen with the city walkers. This is a pretty conclusive proof of the stress-managing benefits of green space.

Domestic gardens should be central to long term urban planning

Even now, domestic gardens tend to be neglected in city and urban planning, even though their individual and collective benefits are so clear. It's good to come across Oxford ecologist [Ricardo Rocha's recent paper](#) in Academia Letters, which shows their importance in a post-pandemic world where nature contact is at a premium. Cities with a good number of private gardens provide a sustainable situation between very high-density cities like Barcelona with no gardens and urban-sprawl communities, as in parts of the USA.

Barcelona has 171 people per hectare, while Atlanta, for example, has only 6/hectare. High density means many people housed within a small area – good for communication and services, but subject to heat island effects and without green space to help mental and physical health.

The recent pandemic has emphasised how important green space is for people. Low density cities have abundant green space but are extremely wasteful in terms of resources and sustainability. Rocha points out the significance of private gardens taking the example of Cachoeira do Sul in Brazil. Here gardens provide green infrastructure in the absence of communal parks. This is much better for people and nature than the high-density/low area model currently favoured by many urban planners.

Nature is stinging nettles and bad smells as well as pretty birds and butterflies



With all the talk and acceptance of how nature can be good for people's health and wellbeing, we must not forget there's always another side. Masashi Soga and Kevin Gaston have published [a cautionary review](#) of negative associations that makes rather scary reading, starting with graphs showing increases in the number of bear, shark, snake, scorpion and other attacks over the years. They characterise negative impacts through trauma, touch, sight, sound and smell from plants, animals and the environment as a whole – as in getting hurt on a mountain.

These stimuli vary in frequency, intensity and consistency but while some impacts (such as smells) may be more trivial and safer than others, all can combine to spoil nature experience and keep people away. A lot of the perceived increase in bad nature encounters is explained by there being increasing numbers of humans and more ecotourism, bringing people into more dangerous areas. Fortunately, Soga and Gaston could identify lots of simple mitigation strategies, many of which involve more sensible precautions by people.

It's important that we acknowledge those negative aspects of nature that can cause biophobia as well as the positive ones that create biophilia. We must seek ways to help people better understand their role in nature, or the perception of the danger of nature could have a big impact on support for conservation. Home gardens are an exceptionally controlled and safe space to encounter nature, especially for young children, and for them to learn to accept minor negatives like nettle stings in the context of the major positives.

Gardening makes people feel good about invertebrates



Following on from the last story about negative nature feelings, a really [encouraging study](#) from a mainly Japanese group of ecologists – including Masashi Soga, has shown that people can develop understanding, respect and positive feelings for invertebrates through gardening. This is a bit unexpected since some gardeners think immediately of slugs, aphids, wasps and other 'undesirables' when prompted on invertebrates.

The study analysed questionnaire responses and found that frequent gardeners were more likely to express positive feelings towards 16 species of invertebrates and less likely to have negative views. True to form, the most liked invertebrates were ladybirds, honeybees and adult cabbage white butterfly, while stinkbugs, aphids and slugs were most disliked. Any insect looking like a wasp or hornet tended to be feared (even harmless hoverflies). Overall, the time spent gardening and in nearby nature made people significantly less likely to show fear or disgust. Young people and females were more likely to express fear, and young people were more likely to feel disgust. Gardeners and people with better identification skills were more likely to see invertebrates as beneficial. Clearly, the more people find nature in gardening, the more they respect it, and by extension the more likely they are to support conservation. This was exactly the reasoning behind English Nature setting up the Wildlife Gardening Forum nearly 20 years ago!

Size doesn't matter for bird populations

Green space in Reykjavik



There haven't been enough studies on how wildlife makes use of different sorts of urban green space, so a new piece of [research](#) on a suite of parks in Reykjavik is important, especially since the results are counter-intuitive. The Icelandic scientists looked at bird abundance and species diversity in 15 green spaces in Reykjavik, Iceland. These ranged from large to small areas and were in different locations in the urban sprawl. Unsurprisingly, large parks had larger populations than small ones. Surprisingly, species richness was not related to the area of the park, and sites in the suburbs were *less* rich than those near the city centre. The highest bird species diversity was in

old or intermediate aged parks, centrally located, where presumably the habitat was more mature than in the much younger outer urban parks. Clearly simple measures of area alone aren't enough to predict bird species richness, and even small but mature urban parks can be of value.

Urban squirrels pig out on junk food



Red squirrels are common in European cities and enjoy supplemental feeding from people. But is it good for their health? A [German study](#) compared squirrels caged together but taken from urban and forest populations, examining their physical condition and use of supplemental food provided. The forest squirrels were used to a natural diet, while the urban squirrels were accustomed to being deliberately fed on peanuts, but also scavenging a variety of bird food, fast food and biscuits dropped by visitors. All squirrels were provided with a mix

of forest and urban food. Over two weeks the initially underfed urban squirrels gained significant weight but remained in a poorer physical state than those from forests. Both sets of squirrels ate the 'natural food' supplied but only the urban squirrels ate the unnatural foods to which they'd become accustomed. All squirrels liked hazelnuts and fats best, but urban squirrels consumed much more sugar, mainly from eating biscuits, and at the expense of more nutritious food. Clearly urban squirrels are in danger of picking up bad eating habits!

Wild bees need extra support in intensive agriculture landscapes

Wild bees can be scarce in intensive agriculture environments for lack of all-season nectar and pollen resources, and indeed [earlier studies](#) have shown flower-rich domestic gardens can benefit pollination in such areas. Farmers are often encouraged to plant hedges or flower-rich strips to help bees. A [study in German apple orchards](#) has shown that providing both is much better than one or the other. Apples need insects for pollination, so keeping populations going through the year is vital.

The study showed flowering hedges provided the best resources early in the season from March to June, while flower strips took over from June to August, or when well established from as early as April. Overall, well-established perennial flower strips are best for the greatest variety of pollinators, but ideally should be used with flowering hedges as well. Flowers, hedges and shrubs characterise many gardens and taken together are great resources for pollinators.

Do bumblebees play?

Research that shows an insect with a propensity for playing around with balls is almost bound to make it into the mainstream press – including the *Today* programme. This happened recently for the group at Queen Mary University of London led by Lars Chittka (see *Book Reviews* below).



The experiments arose from an observation made during a previous experiment where bees were trained to roll balls to gain a reward: some bees appeared to carry on doing it without reason.

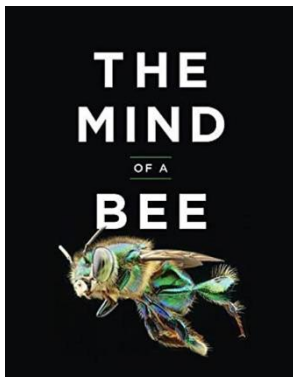
[The paper](#) first gives the five accepted criteria for play in animal studies and describes the types of animal behaviour that are regarded as play: social (play-fighting etc), locomotor (e.g. needless jumping/running) or object play (appropriating objects with no purpose). Play in animals is recognised to

have ultimate survival value in terms of improved cognitive and motor skills or improved mental states. It's also to be expected in animals that need complex motor skills during, for example, food collecting (e.g. chimps). Bees use many motor skills to find, select and manipulate flowers during pollen and nectar collection. Social bees are also particularly multi-skilled when it comes to nest construction.

An arena was designed with a feeding area accessed via an unobstructed path through a chamber with two spaces to the sides, one side with mobile, the other immobile, coloured balls. Video records of bees moving through the apparatus and their interactions with the balls on each side of the central pathway were analysed by two observers (number of foraging bouts, number of entries into each ball area, number of actions in the ball areas, duration, distance and colour of each ball that was rolled). They repeated and varied the set-up to test the influence of the bees' age on the behaviour and ran it with both workers (female) and male bees present. In another run, bees also entered empty areas that had previously contained balls, indicating that they anticipated the possibility of ball-rolling. They found that all criteria for play were satisfied, that rolling varied between individuals, younger worker bees rolled balls more often and male bees for longer periods. A criticism that the behaviour may be an off-shoot from nest-cleaning behaviour is presumably contradicted by the participation of males. They suggest that their findings add to the evidence of sentience in bumblebees and that further work could explore how play influences brain development in young bees.

Book reviews

The Mind of a Bee, by Lars Chittka
(Princeton, 2022) [Reviewed by David Perkins](#)



Every year at this time, with my strawberry tree hummingly full of fattening queen bumbles (and a large number of workers from autumn nests), I thank the earth for their presence, almost more than in spring. Watching the queens in the crown of the tree is absorbing, entrancing and there are thousands of fallen flowers on the patio beneath, each sucked upon by a bumble: what do they experience, how do they find us, what do they feel when resting to digest on the sunny, south-facing October wall of the house?

Lars Chittka and colleagues in his lab at Queen Mary University, London, have been researching bee senses and cognition for a good couple of decades (see a recent paper summarised *above*). Now he's distilled some of this research

into a very readable and easily digested book. Without focussing on honeybees – much of the lab’s work uses bumblebee colonies – this is a very well-written, enlightening and thought-provoking book. Current knowledge of bee senses and cognition are explained concisely, with a good balance of illustration and with reference to the relevant history of experimental science with bees.

There’s enough humour, personal and social commentary (but not too much, as can sometimes be the case these days) to give the science a humanist context. He describes experimental work that teases out the cognitive abilities of bumblebees in the contexts of their own sensory world. This is, indeed, a very enjoyable addition to the literature, bringing us face-to-face with non-human intelligence. Lars Chittka reminds us that we should never underestimate the complexity of animal cognition: it’s not just apes, not just mammals, not just birds that have complex cognitive worlds, and we aren’t the only important animal on this planet!

Songs of Place and Time: Birdsong and the Dawn Chorus in Natural History and the Arts, Eds. Mike Collier, Bennett Hogg and John Strachan.
(Gaia Project Press, 2021) **Reviewed by David Perkins**



The intelligence of birds is perhaps more widely appreciated than that of bees (Lars Chittka, above, recounts a challenge made between jay researchers and the bee group!) and has a much longer research history. When we’re in the woods or on the heaths, cycling around the fields and hedgerows or in our gardens, we hear the birds sing. The song of birds permeates our human lives – our music, our singing, perhaps the evolution of language – as it has done in perpetuity, and we might also ponder on how birds react to each other’s song across species. We might begin to meld birdsong into the complexity of our lives – into our own creativity. The 29 contributors to this volume have all become forgers of such an act of alchemy, bringing their creative work and birdsong together.

This is an impressive, and in the words of Prof. Kate Rigby, *polyphonic* volume. The essays, poems, artworks and photography brought together by the editors, Mike Collier (Prof. Of Visual Art, Univ. of Sunderland), Bennett Hogg (composer, sound artist, lecturer, Univ. of Newcastle) and John Strachan (Prof. Eng. Literature, Bath Spa) represent personal experiences, political or activist approaches, the natural/human sciences (anthropology/ecology/biology), aesthetics (musicology, poetics, the elegiac), artworks (birdsong transformed into prints and wood sculpture) and the historical: ‘creative synaesthesia’ springs to mind! There are also fascinating perspectives from Suriname and Australia.

The book arises from the *Dawn Chorus* project collaboration between Mike Collier, Bennett Hogg and natural sound recorder and artist, Geoff Sample, from 2016, that resulted in several exhibitions of artworks and music. Emerging from the exhibitions ‘as with the birds responding to each other and as with the root-tangles negotiating under the woodland floor’ there came ‘a network of inventive connections’ (‘A Dawn Chorus as Ecological Art, and its Significance in a Time of Environmental Alarm’, essay by Dave Pritchard). The editors have invited such a range of contributors to the book that inventive connections occur constantly as you read through the essays.

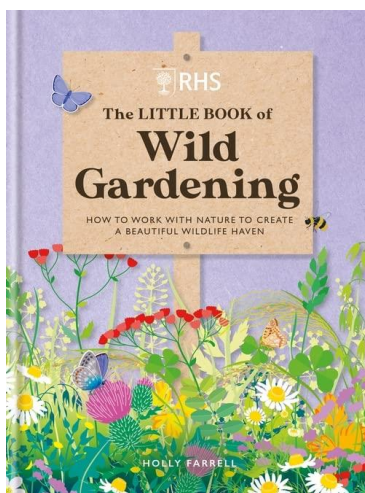
Here’s a selection of associations and thoughts that arose as I read (and re-read): John Berger (Rachel Mundy’s essay *Why Listen to Animals*) / song bird evolution in Australia / environmentalism, from John Clare’s reactions to the Enclosures, through to the day I sat in Berkeley Square with Sam Lee for *Singing with Nightingales* in the 2019 Extinction Rebellion / the RSPB’s defence of nightingales in Kent against

the MOD: how we treat the migrant nightingale, a Syrian refugee in Kent / drawing and song (look up the work also of Hanna Tuulikki, not in this book) / the ‘musical roles’ of different species in the dawn chorus (the latter can be imagined beautifully, for example, in one of Geoff Sample’s recordings from Białowieża forest, available on Bandcamp with melody from thrush nightingale and golden oriole, rhythm from the cuckoo and on percussion, black woodpecker).

There are essays on the history of birdsong imitation in music, onomatopoeia in poetry, on birds in the music of Schumann, Messiaen and the contemporary composers Stevie Wishart and Bennett Hogg, on Edward Thomas and the Great War, on caged birds singing in Victorian London kitchens, on the techniques of recording and creative transformation of our experiences of birdsong, and on loss. Many of the essays were written during or just after the Covid pandemic. For some of us the personal losses were partially mitigated by the gain of a quieter urban environment: I was approached, for example, by a local primary school music teacher for simple audio-visual guides to the birds in south London gardens and there was a (brief) national surge in the discovery of birdsong. I feel that at least some of that discovery may have endured. Stephen Moss refers to hearing loss in his essay, an aspect that’s rarely considered in celebrations of this kind. I lost most of my upper register hearing overnight after an infection in 2015 and to this day mourn my inability to hear even wrens and robins unless at close quarters. Chiffchaff song, which Edward Thomas sought every year, and which graced the shattered fields on which he died in April 1917, is lost to me (unless I turn up the volume on Geoff Sample’s recordings!). I now resort to internal memorised whispers and sing the songs to myself – but also find creative works on birdsong such as this book affecting and stimulating.

The book is beautifully designed by calligrapher Manny Ling, A4 landscape format on high quality paper (printed in the UK), with stunning photography by Tim Collier (witness the male blackcap on the cover). The texts are punctuated by fine (and pithy) short poems by David Borthwick, originally put out on his twitter account, it seems. It’s also comforting to know that it’s possible to be a Professor of Eco-poetry! £25 for this kind of book these days is a bargain.

RHS little book of Wild Gardening, by Holly Farrell
(Mitchell Beazley, 2022) *Reviewed by Steve Head*



My pedantic first impression of this book was spoiled by the fact a butterfly shown on the cover is actually the extremely rare vagrant, the Queen of Spain fritillary, and in a couple of places inside we see the now extinct large tortoiseshell butterfly *Nymphalis polychloros*. There are a few other gripes – daffodils are pretty useless for insects and elder isn’t a wildlife ‘hero’, compared with ivy for example. However, this book crams a lot of information about most important aspects of wildlife gardening into a small space, without going into great detail, except on some topics like lawns and meadow plants, which are excellent. Generally, the plant and management advice is valuable and it’s an easy read with a useful topic index. As a small, inexpensive book to inspire a beginner, I definitely recommend this one. More experienced wildlife gardeners should invest £25 in Forum Trustee Adrian Thomas’s excellent new edition of *RSPB Gardening for Wildlife*.

And finally...



Rachael Hearn

Giant sunflower challenge brings good mental wellbeing

The children and staff at Quince Tree Day Nursery in South Ockendon, Essex, grew this sunflower, which reached the princely height of 9ft 2in!

It was part of a challenge they set to raise awareness about mental health, which affects not just adults, but children as well.

“The idea of the challenge,” said one of the nursery teachers, “was to grow a sunflower to learn how to nurture and look after something – just as you should look after yourself.”

The newsletter is sent to all the members of the WLGf; you’re welcome to forward it to friends or colleagues. Do encourage them to join the Forum (it’s free!) by visiting www.wlgf.org and filling in the simple form.

The Wildlife Gardening Forum is a consortium of the UK’s leading wildlife, conservation, gardening and horticultural organisations, from both the private and the public sectors. We now have over 2,600 members. Formed in 2005, our core aim is to help gardeners and decision-makers understand just how important our gardens are for wildlife.

Newsletter compiled by Karen Murphy, with Helen Bostock, John Tweddle, Chris Baines, Marc Carlton, Steve Head, David Perkins, and Ken Thompson. Images from Pixabay and Wikimedia Commons unless stated otherwise.

