

Confined to the Garden: December

We have now passed the solstice and days are getting longer again. It feels like there has been a lot going on in the news since my last update. The second national lockdown ended but then the virus mutated and now everyone is talking about “the new variant”. This more transmissible version has taken hold in the South East of England, where case numbers are now increasing rapidly, despite the introduction of new ‘tier 4’ restrictions. This means Christmas is effectively cancelled for many people and tougher restrictions could be introduced at any time. Over 40 countries have closed their borders to us, including France. With the Port of Dover and Eurotunnel closed, hundreds of lorry drivers are parked up on the M20, hoping they may still get home in time for Christmas. On the bright side, vaccination has begun and as far as we know, will still protect against the dreaded new variant. We are being assured that some form of normality and freedom will resume in the spring. 2020 has been a difficult year, to say the least. I’m sure I’m not the only one who will be glad to see the back of it and welcome the new year with the hope it will be better than the last.

As the year comes to an end in the garden, it is wet and mostly dark, but not very cold. There have been no significant frosts yet, the temperature has barely dipped into single figures. This means that despite the lack of sunlight, the grass hasn’t stopped growing, or even slowed down much. I don’t cut it at all during the winter as keeping it longer provides shelter for insects. If we don’t get some cold weather soon, it will be very long indeed by the time I cut it again in spring!

How soil temperature affects grass growth:

<https://thelawnman.co.uk/soil-temperature-grass-growth/>

Advice on managing your lawn for wildlife:

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/gardening-for-wildlife/lawns-for-wildlife/lawn-care-and-management-basics/>

As we pass the darkest day, the mating season begins for Foxes. I’ve been hearing them call at night, but no courtship behaviour has been caught on camera, yet.



Lone Fox

3paws has visited four times this month, but she has been alone each time.



3Paws

Just when I think all the Hedgehogs have gone to bed...



Fox investigates Hedgehog

At the end of November, the single male Hedgehog suspended his regular visits. Two weeks went by without a hog, then in mid-December there was a spate of very long visits to the garden. I think it's the same male, but the pale mark on his left side is fading slowly. I don't think I'll be able to identify him for much longer.



11-28-2020 01:54:32

12-14-2020 01:25:00

Fading marks

He stayed over five hours in the garden one night. He arrived just after 11:30pm and didn't leave until 04:45am. He visited the feeding station four times and foraged in the long grass and flower beds in between. As long as food is available, it isn't essential for Hedgehogs to hibernate to survive.

In warmer climates, such as some parts of northern New Zealand (where they have been introduced) they don't hibernate at all. The problem for our native hogs is the amount of energy it takes to 'wake up' exceeds the amount gained by foraging in winter, when invertebrate prey are scarce despite mild temperatures. This depletes their reserves and can be especially dangerous if it happens repeatedly. If they could stay awake and keep feeding they would be ok, but when a cold snap comes they repeat the cycle and further deplete their energy reserves. Climate change is causing milder and more erratic weather in winter, so the future is looking pretty bleak for our spiky friends. This is why I always make sure some food is available in the feeding station, even when I think they have all gone to bed.

For an in-depth look at Hedgehog hibernation, click the link:

<https://www.wildlifeonline.me.uk/animals/article/european-hedgehog-hibernation>

This Fox thought there was something interesting going on inside the feeding station and tried to break in through the roof, making me glad I reinforced it with some rigid plastic. This classic pouncing manoeuvre can punch accurately through several inches of snow to reach small mammals underneath.



To see a short video of this, click the link below:

https://youtu.be/axTfrBq_mng

There has been a bit more rat action captured on camera, mostly at night but also once during the brief daylight hours. A Brown Rat seems to have taken up residence in the compost bin. There is a bird feeder next to it which could provide some nourishment, but it doesn't seem to like Hedgehog food and stays mostly at the bottom end of the garden.



Brown Rat

The Wood Mice are busy as always, taking away pieces of Hedgehog food and tidying up the stray peanuts I spill when refilling the bird feeders.



The bird feeders are also very busy during these short days. I thought it would be appropriate to end this month with a Robin, as it's Christmas and all.



Christmas Robin

I will be back in 2021, with more news from the garden. Look out for an update at the end of January. I wish you all a happy, healthy and peaceful Christmas, however you may be spending it this year. I hope next year brings better things for all of us.