

**AUGUST** - and yet another dull, windy, rain-sodden month. **Richard Angwin**, the **BBCs Points West** weather forecaster gave some depressing figures for the amount of summer sunshine recorded over the past few years. **2006** was sunny with **688 hrs.** recorded in Bristol. Last year was nowhere near so bright with **488hrs**, but this year, we will be lucky to experience **388hrs**. However, the record level of rain has proved beneficial for the trees which, over the past few dry summers, have been greatly stressed.



At least, it has been excellent for *cloud-spotting*. On the left, is a spectacular **Cumulo-nimbus** which made its way up the **Severn Valley** early on the 14<sup>th</sup> August which just missed **Bristol** but many others did not. This fuzzy capped cloud is typical after a cold front has gone through, clearing the air (note the blue sky) but generating great billowing shower clouds.

In **Leigh Woods** (and our garden), The **Hemp Agrimony** has been in full bloom. Indeed, there seems to be greater areas of feathery pinkish flowers every year, especially around the walls of the Iron Age fortification.



Right: **Ragwort** and **Hemp Agrimony**.

I went 'fly spotting' on these flowers one afternoon during the middle of the month but was surprised by how little there was on what, in 'normal' summers, are insect restaurants. Nevertheless, I did manage to get a few interesting shots of flies when the wind calmed for a second or two, and the flowers and their pollinators stayed still.



Foremost among them, was a peculiar, squat fly (*Allophora hemiptera*) with smokey pointed wings which was very scarce around **Bristol** but is apparently having a good year. A member of the **Tachinidae**, the larvae of this and related species spend their lives as parasites, chewing the insides of their insect (often caterpillar) hosts.



**Above:** Views of *Allophora hemiptera* showing the huge eyes and the flat abdomen



**Left:** Not everyone's favourite fly – a **Greenbottle**, the grubs of which live in carrion and dung – some even in wounds of sheep and other creatures. There are a number of species which look similar, but I think that this one might be *Orthellia cornicina* because its 'face' – the area between its eyes - is metallic **green** and not black. **Greenbottles** rarely bother us inside our houses, unlike **Bluebottles**!



This is a more agreeable insect – a **Hoverfly**, of a very common type belonging to the genus *Eristalis* which includes the comparatively large **Drone Fly**. This is a good hive bee mimic – but several like this smaller one mimic bees to a greater or lesser extent. The adults sip nectar and their grubs grow up in muddy ponds or boggy farmyards enriched by manure.

After I left the **Hemp Agrimony**, I came across a very pretty **Hoverfly** feeding on a crucifer that was completely new to me. It struck me as being very unusual because of its coloured abdomen – **blue** with black bands instead of the far more usual **yellow** and black.



When I got home, I rushed to my study to look it up and found that it was very appropriately named *Leucozona glaucia*. Apparently this rather local species normally has yellow markings on the body but in some, the abdomen is dusted grey and so perhaps this accounts for the very blue colouration of this beautiful specimen.

And continuing with the fly theme, our **Hemp Agrimony**, **Buddleias** and **Lacecap Hydrangea** attracted some good insects. Foremost among the fly VIPs has been arguably the most impressive of our British species and as good a **Hornet** mimic as you could wish for. It goes by the name



of *Volucella zonaria* (above). A century ago, only two specimens were known from this country but it started to establish itself in the 1940s and is still quite a localised species. Bristol and in particular Leigh Woods is one of the areas where it has been regularly recorded. I have seen three or four in our garden over the years – one dead in the conservatory – but this one turned up on the **Buddleia** a couple of days around the **14<sup>th</sup> August** and I had my camera ready. When entering houses, it tends to cause panic in those who cannot tell their wasps from their flies! This one has no such difficulty as it probably places its eggs in **Wasp**'s nests where the larvae live. According to **Ray Barnett** of the **Bristol City Museum** who is also an expert Entomologist, this year seems

to have been a good one for this species – and another spectacular **Hoverfly** – *V. inanis* – which has a particularly striking wasp-like abdomen. But I am still looking for that one!



Our **Hemp Agrimony** did host another species of *Volucella* – *V. pellucens* – with a characteristic translucent second abdominal segment. Found in woods and copses throughout the Kingdom, this is a fly that is known for frequenting the flowers of **Blackberries**.

And last, but not least, I have to mention a species that seems to occur the world over – *Erisyrphus balteatus* (below).

It is quite a delicate little fly and must be one of the most frequently seen **Hoverflies** in this country. You can immediately recognise one by the diagnostic ‘double’ transverse bands on the abdomen. Some probably manage to survive our increasingly mild winters but during the summer, our own population is probably greatly enhanced by immigrants blown over from the continent.



Now for something completely different!

My contribution to **The Link**, the Parish Magazine which is being delivered in September was entitled ‘**OH DEER**’ – and addressed some of the problems that various residents of the Parish have with the burgeoning **Roe Deer** population, and the impact that animals are having on their gardens. The nice portrait on the left was taken by **David Davies** behind his garden in **Abbots Leigh**.



I remember my first introduction to a ‘wildlife film’. It must have been during the late 1940s when my mother took me to the cinema, and I can recall the

magic of seeing the rippling image of the opening projected onto the curtains of **Colchester's Regal** to reveal **Bambi**. Of course, it was all fantasy but **Walt Disney** did a wonderful PR job for deer as dainty, timorous and inoffensive creatures of the forest. Talk to any forester or, increasingly, to several residents of the Parish, and you will quickly learn of a less desirable side to Britain's 'big game'. The fact is, there are now more in the Kingdom than ever – and I mean *ever* – and they are doing their best to strip the countryside bare. Although there are six kinds - four are introduced – it is the **Roe** which is the problem around here. With no means of control, especially in **Leigh Woods**, the number has increased to where deer are now regularly grazing on cherished

plants. For example, **Peter** and **Shirley Burling** returned to their home on the main road to find their garden had been re-landscaped by deer; **100 rose plants** had been nibbled to the ground. **Anne Lowson** who lives on the edge of the **Avon Gorge** regularly finds her plants prematurely pruned, and her garden is infested with deer ticks. I have seen **Roe Deer** in our modestly sized patch which means that they



must be trotting up **Church Road** to visit us. Perhaps this is the price of living with nature and well worth tolerating (unless you lose a hundred prize roses!). **Oliver Rackham**, the distinguished botanist and authority on the British countryside, reckons that browsing pressure by deer is the chief obstacle to conserving and regenerating our forests. When expensive deer fences are erected around woods to protect them – as in the case of **Hayley Wood** near **Cambridge** to save the **Oxlips** – recovery is remarkable. So I am afraid that, for the moment, deer have the upper hand. Perhaps we should bring back the **Wolf!**



**Butterflies** have been a washout this year in terms of numbers. So far, I have not seen any **Small Tortoiseshells**; once among the most numerous on our **Buddleias**, the species which has seen a disastrous decline nationwide over the last ten years. We have had the odd **Red Admiral** and **Peacock** this month. Most frequent – and not *that* frequent – have been **Large (Cabbage) Whites** and **Gatekeepers** (left).

**Birds** have been coming in to the feeders as though there was no tomorrow. Among them, several **Bullfinches** referred to in the previous **Nature Notes** are still around. The **Tits** seem to have had a good year judging by the number of immatures visiting the feeders. At least two young **Dunnocks** (or **Hedge Sparrows**) have appeared. I caught them **sun-bathing** (yes – we did have the sun fleetingly one afternoon!).

The posture is curious as most sun-bathing birds orientate broadside to the sun, staring straight into it with eyes wide open, and ruffle and spread their feathers (see **right**).



**Left-** another view showing the fanned tail.



These **Dunnocks** occasionally raised a wing to expose the underside of the flight feathers and the relatively bare under-arm. You can also just make out the exposed *preen gland* at the base of the tail.



No one is quite sure why birds do it – but one theory has it that the heat of the sun makes parasites in the plumage very active and they can be preened out more easily. Certainly, a session of sun-bathing is invariably followed by vigorous *toilet behaviour*.

A positive indication that our summer visitors were on the move came on **20<sup>th</sup> August** when a **Spotted Flycatcher** (right) came into the garden for about half an hour. This was an especially welcome sight because during our first few summers here way back in the early 1980s, these birds were frequently noted. **Colin Trapnell**, a distinguished botanist and local naturalist who previously owned our house, told us that flycatchers regularly nested in the garden. Even further back in the 1950s, these flycatchers were so familiar that one hardly raised ones binoculars to look at them.



Nowadays,

**Spotted Flycatchers** are scarce as a nesting species throughout the mainland **Britain**. The picture on the **right** was a long-shot taken of our garden visitor, but the one on the **left**, was taken in **County Cavan, Ireland**, last year. Perched on a **honeysuckle**, the birds were feeding young in a nest built against the side of a barn.

As Invertebrates have dominated this month, I finish this account with a rather nice orange **Sawfly** that appeared in the garden the other day ....

.....it looks like a small **Fly** but is actually related to the **Wasps** and **Bees**. The long segmented antennae gives it away and, if you could see them, it has 4 not 2 wings. It might even be the one which lays eggs on **Gooseberry** or **Currant** bushes and the larvae then strip the plants of their leaves. But the other abiding image of the month has to be a **Mollusc**. With the abundant rainfall, **Slugs** and **Snails** have had a field day.....

(Below –a huge *Arion ater rufus*)

