

## **DRUMOIG WILDLIFE NEWSLETTER NUMBER 3 - JULY/AUGUST 2021**

July turned out to be a variable month with 29mm of rain spread over the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup>. There then followed a sunny, dry, humid spell of 16 days marred only by a haar on some days. The fairways were very dry with brown patches everywhere and the gardens were desperately in need of rain. The last week of July saw the much-needed rain arrive bringing the total for the month to 54mm – that’s just over 2 inches in old money!

August was mainly sunny with rain totalling 65mm spread over 12 days. This certainly greened up the lawns and fairways but there has been no rain for the last 10 days of August.

**GORDON TREIT** contributed this article about the coal tits in his garden:-

We’ve had the privilege of a pair of coal tits nesting under the step to our patio doors. Very small birds using a very small gap!

Over the weeks the pair have learned to ignore our presence on the patio. Nest building and feeding their young with not only us present but our dog too.

The only issue has been a prowling cat trying to intercept them as they came and went. This was overcome with a pile of holly tree clippings surrounding the area for protection – very picturesque!

One sunny Sunday afternoon whilst enjoying a coffee on the patio, the mother was chirping loudly on a nearby tree. Low and behold, a fledgling appeared from the hole and fluttered around in the corner for a while stretching its wings before flying off. Mother’s continuing chirps brought out another two who must have fluttered around us for 15 minutes or so before flying off towards mum.



Coal Tit fledgling



Guard dog and Coal Tit (on a branch in the foreground)

Soon after, the final two appeared, again much fearless fluttering around us. This pair though, got really close. First one landed on our table in front of us, the other landed on my arm. One final test flight from the table to the back rest of my seat right next to my head.



Coal Tit on chair



Coal Tit on Gordon's arm

Photos attached are not too clear, but we certainly feel honoured with our brush with mother nature.

### **CATERPILLRS IN RUGBY SHIRTS.**

I recently noticed these colourful caterpillars in our garden with black and yellow hoops.



A search of the internet confirmed that they are Cinnabar Moth caterpillars, and the description included the comment that they look as if they are wearing rugby shirts!! They grow to a length of 28mm and feed in groups on Common Ragwort from July to September. The plant in my garden had 9 caterpillars on it – how many can you see? Ragworts are toxic to some farm animals and therefore not liked by farmers. The toxins in the Ragwort are absorbed by the caterpillars which make them toxic to predators, and their bright colouring is also a warning sign in the animal world! Once I had seen them in my garden, I noticed that Ragworts are common around Drumoig especially on the golf course and at the



roadside going up Craigie Hill and most of the them are being systematically eaten by multiple Cinnabar caterpillars.



Cinnabar Moth caterpillars.



Yellow Ragwort plant

Apparently, once they have eaten a Ragwort plant, they start eating each other – it must be the “Essence de Ragwort” they are after! They are also unusual in the fact that they pupate underground whereas other caterpillars pupate by means of a chrysalis on a tree.

The Cinnabar moth is rather attractive, but I do not have a photo of my own. The following photos are an archive image and a photo supplied by a friend.



Cinnabar Moth (Archive).



Cinnabar Moth (Courtesy of David Beat)

Shortly after I had written this article there was a clip on Countryfile about these very caterpillars – with a gruesome twist. If you are squeamish move on to the next article! It seems that the Cinnabar Moth caterpillar can be a host for the larvae of the Ichneumon wasp. The wasp injects an egg into the caterpillar which hatches into a larva which slowly eats the soft tissue of the caterpillar, leaving the vital bits intact to prolong its life. The larva then stays

in the underground chrysalis until the following spring when it emerges as a wasp. Well, that's nature for you!

### **EVER HEARD OF THE BLACKHORN GRAVEDIGGER?**

Is it a serial killer?

This all came to light when my better half called me into the kitchen to see this interesting creature crawling across the floor. "It's a wasp" says I. "No, it isn't". Closer inspection confirmed that I was wrong again – it was some form of beetle, and was now climbing up the curtain.



You can see where I got the idea that it was a wasp. An internet search confirmed that it was a beetle called *Nicrophorus Vespillo* and my classical education told me that "Vespa" means "wasp".....or is it "Vesper" meaning "evening"? So my classical education wasn't much help .....again.

The internet didn't solve this problem, but it did tell me about the life of the beetle. Apparently, it lives on and lays eggs near carrion. There was a gory clip on YouTube which condensed 3 weeks work into 4 minutes in which a couple of beetles managed to bury a dead vole. They remove the hair and shape the carcass into a ball in an underground chamber and then lay their eggs. Once the young beetles hatch as larvae they are fed by both parents. The young eat the corpse as well as pre-digested food from their parents. They then pupate in the soil and emerge as adult beetles.

The beetle was first described by Carl Linnaeus in 1758. It is commonly found from Western Europe to Mongolia and is also called the Blackhorn Gravedigger. This leaves my wife and I with the vexing question of what horror lies below our kitchen floor?!!



**...AND A PARTRIDGE IN A PEAR TREE.**

Well not quite – but Heather Knight did see this very different visitor to her garden in early July – a turtle dove on its own, not the 2 required for the Christmas song!!

Looking in the RSPB handbook it seems that turtle doves are rare in Scotland and have declined in southern England by 86% although the period of time over which this has happened is not specified. The reasons for the decline are not certain but probably include climate change, drought in Africa, and changing farmland habitat here and in Europe.

They leave Britain between July and September and are passing through North Africa in September and October. They return in May to nest and normally lay 2 eggs. Turtle doves are the smallest of the doves in Britain after the collared dove, rock dove and stock dove. What's the difference between a dove and a pigeon? – not a lot, as far as I can see!!



Heather's turtle dove

**OUR SUNFLOWER**

A mystery plant appeared in our garden about 2 months ago. We eventually realised that it must be a sunflower and watched it grow and grow and grow. It ended up at about 5 feet tall. It must have self-seeded from one of our birdfeeders and we soon found several other examples although all of them were pretty weedy specimens compared with the original. I hadn't quite realised that the shape of the flower head changes dramatically after it is first formed and almost reaches the size of a dinner plate.



Flowering at last.



1 week later



2 weeks later – notice glamorous assistant



Sunflower and me

My 11-year-old granddaughter and I recently went on a mushroom hunt. We didn't have to go very far - we found 232 mushrooms/toadstools in our front garden. Needless to say, we did not have a fry-up – there was some pretty suspicious looking stuff. I haven't dared survey the back garden yet!!

#### **WHO'S BEEN EATING MY PORRIDGE GARDEN FURNITURE?**

Last year we bought two garden benches. They were finished in a natural wood which had been treated with a preservative and we were very pleased with the weathered appearance. As the summer progressed, we noticed some rough patches on the surface and presumed that the preservative finish was wearing off. Not a bit of it! Several more knowledgeable friends told us that it was all due to wasps.



The natural finish on the garden bench.



Wasp eaten wood!

Now that I have mentioned it, I'm sure a lot of you will remember this story. It's the cellulose in the wood that wasps eat to make their nests which are largely constructed of cellulose. These nests (or "bykes" in Scottish lingo) are complex architectural structures, about as big as a football or larger, often found under the eaves or in the roof space.



Wood-eating wasp

As always, this newsletter will not happen unless you, the members, contribute. Please, please, please send me any observations, comments or photographs – there's always something of interest happening around Drumoig!

Martin Hepworth