

## Frenetic garden activity – an ant hatch

(This article refers to events in August so I am a bit behind in my calendar!)

On the 9th August, as we drank our morning cup of coffee in the conservatory we gradually realised that the bottom lawn was the scene of much frenetic bird activity. Birds were dropping down to just above the lawn where they hovered and then snapped up airborne prey. The penny dropped - it was an ant hatch - and we were kept busy trying to identify which bird species were involved. The final tally was: 4 Spotted Flycatchers (two adults, two juveniles), two Chiffchaffs, one juvenile Blackcap, one juvenile Bullfinch, one adult and one juvenile Robin, one juvenile Chaffinch, two juvenile Blue Tits and a Wren. It was a bit like sitting on the veranda in some tropical country watching the birds at the feeders, with the rather obvious difference that all our birds were pretty well brown or dull-coloured, with the notable exception of the late-arriving Great Spotted Woodpecker!



A flying ant with its non-flying helpers

The August ant hatch is a regular occurrence – on warm calm humid days in early August if you see birds behaving oddly then this is usually the reason. Bob and Annie Haycock wrote the following on the Pembrokeshire Bird Blog:

“17<sup>th</sup> August: On warm calm sunny days at this time of year (all too rare this summer) millions of ants (mostly Black Ants *Lasius niger*) take to the air in mating flights where one of the millions of males hopes to get lucky with one of the much smaller numbers of females. Yesterday afternoon was one of those occasions around Angle. Large numbers of temporarily winged-ants were rising into the air having been helped/dragged to various launch pads by numerous worker ants.

Gulls of course and other birds recognise that large numbers of ants are on the move. So it was not surprising to see various species - Herring, LBB, Black-headed and Mediterranean Gulls (at least a dozen, perhaps 20 Mediterranean Gulls) circling around the bay, as well as over the harbour and the Angle peninsula coast, hunting ants flying high in the air. Other gulls (perhaps wiser ones?) were swimming around the bay catching hapless ants that missed landfall on return to earth and ended up in the sea.”

And on August 15<sup>th</sup> on Skokholm the wardens wrote: “Late afternoon, at least 90 Herring Gulls and 370 Lesser Black-backed Gulls were attracted to North Plain by an emergence of flying ants”.



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