

Tidiness Kills!

Tidiness in the garden that is. This realization has been dawning more strongly of late, though I have always tried to manage the garden in such a way to benefit wildlife which sometimes means it looks a bit of a mess. For example I always leave the stems of my herbaceous border plants in situ until the spring and only cut them down at the last minute, as I knew that the hollow stems were good place for a wide range of insects to safely spend the winter.

Since finding Spotted Bush-crickets on the raspberries, I have been keeping the pruned stems in an out of the way place over the winter as I found out that Bush-crickets lay their eggs in the stems of various shrubs, including raspberries. They don't hatch until the spring so tossing the stems on the bonfire was not a good idea.

More recently, I have bought a fascinating book called "Micro-moth Field Tips – a guide to finding early stages." This book tells you how to find the caterpillars and pupae of a wide range of small moths. I am finding out that there are several moths which spend the winter inside teasel heads, and several more inside knapweed heads. And more in the stems of hogweed, angelica, hemp agrimony, willowherb and spear thistles! This was brought home to me on Skokholm recently, when Robin Taylor, the Pembs Moth Recorder, showed me that every hogweed stem had holes in it and if you opened them up the pupa of the Parsnip Moth could be seen.

So I am now in a dilemma – how can I keep the garden tidy and at the same time avoid incinerating or chopping up all these creatures?? I usually cut the wild flower areas down in October as recommended by wildflower experts – but this recommendation ignores the requirements of many insects including moths (and indeed any little Common Blue caterpillars which overwinter at the bottom of grass clumps) So should I keep all the prunings somewhere? I have decided to compromise – I will keep all the big stems and stalks and also knapweed heads but further than that I cannot go!

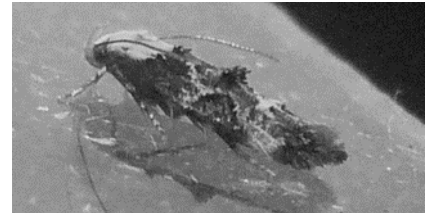
As if this wasn't all bad enough I haven't even started to think of the little leaf miners which pupate in leaves which then fall to the ground and get swept up and composted

And oh yes, those herbaceous plants. Anything inside those stems would not emerge till April or May so cutting them all down in March is not much help unless I keep the stems somewhere..... Oh it is all getting too difficult!

But you can see now why untidy corners of gardens and fields are so important. We really do need some good big areas of wild plants which are NOT cut down in winter.



Two tiny moths (5mm long) in the Mompha family whose caterpillars live in willowherb stems



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