

THE QUIET OF MIDSUMMER

For many people, “quiet” is the last word they associate with midsummer – lawnmowers and hedge trimmers, children playing in the sunshine, combine harvesters munching through fields - all contribute to a noisy man-made sound picture.

But at this time of the year, our birds are very quiet - and also pretty well invisible. There is no dawn chorus and the only sounds are from the odd tentative Robin or Wren, and maybe the Collared Doves cooing. Many people feel that their familiar garden birds have deserted them. But they haven't – they are moulting. While they are moulting they cannot fly very well and are therefore vulnerable to predation, so they keep a very low profile. Food is plentiful, whether they are seed eaters or insect eaters, so most of the day is spent just keeping quiet, conserving energy and growing a set of new feathers.

Our typical garden birds will moult all their feathers over a period of several weeks – not all at once but in a set sequence so that at all times they retain some sort of feather covering and can still fly if they need to. Young birds often have a partial moult at this time – for example the spotty breast of a young robin is replaced with red.

So while the birds are very quiet it is time for the insects to take centre stage. First it was an influx of Painted Lady butterflies in July. And then the Clouded Yellows. And what Clouded Yellows! I have never seen so many before, flying over the coastal grasslands and into gardens.

These butterflies are migrants – they come here as a result of a successful breeding season on the continent and the resulting overpopulation there. Nobody really knows whether they fly back again. Some certainly breed here but the resulting offspring cannot survive a British winter and so the population dies out. At least, that used to be the case – it is possible that these butterflies can now survive our milder winters. I look forward to seeing Clouded Yellows on the wing early next year which would mean that some adults had successfully spent the winter here.

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