

FREE!

**BEE
TLE
POSTER**

**DOORSTEP
NATURE**

Wildlife to spot
close to home



**SHARKS IN
OUR SEAS**

Six fantastic fish
found in UK waters



Issue 97 **Spring 2021**

Wildlife Watch



MAGAZINE

A SPRING IN THEIR STEP

Discover this season's
best dancers

ANTI-TASTIC!



Enter the wonderful
world of wood ants



Editor's corner

TOM HIBBERT
Editor, Wildlife Watch

Welcome to the spring issue of Wildlife Watch! The busiest time for most of our wildlife is just beginning, with birds, bugs, bees and other animals all getting ready to raise their young.

At this time of year there's so much to see, wherever you live. We've got some great suggestions for species to spot close to home in our new feature, *Nature on Your Doorstep* (page 10). Another new feature that will be running all year is our *Science Section* on page 4, where you can learn about recent discoveries in the world of wildlife.

On page 6 you can meet some of my favourite animals – sharks! These fantastic fish are a vital part of our oceans, but are often misunderstood and feared. Another amazing animal that isn't always popular is the ant. On page 20 you can enter the world of the wood ant and learn all about their incredible nests, as well as how they help other woodland wildlife.

Have a great spring, and stay wild!

Tom



GET IN TOUCH

Email us at:
watch@wildlifetrusts.org

Ring us on:
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Write to us at:
Wildlife Watch
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WILD THINGS

News from our Wildlife Watchers



HEDGEHOG HIGHWAYS



Seven-year-old Joey has made a board game all about hedgehogs! You play as a hedgehog, avoiding danger and looking for food, water and a mate. Joey has even shared instructions for playing on his website: wtru.st/hog-game



BIRD BUFFET

Eight-year-old Martha and her grandmother helped feed their garden birds through winter by pushing seeds and lard into cracks in trees. They also have a bird feeder with lots of visitors, including a woodpecker!



WILDLIFE CHAMPIONS



Luca (aged 4) and his sister Nicole (aged 9) have been helping to look after wildlife in Beacon Fell Country Park with litter picks and other activities. They've even earned awards for their hard work! Here they are enjoying the park.



Clarification – Why ponds freeze

On page 23 of the last issue, we explained that ponds freeze on top because cold water is less dense than warm water, so rises to the top of the pond and freezes. It's actually a bit more complicated than that. Usually, cold water is denser than warm water, so it sinks. But when water gets colder than 4 degrees Celsius (°C), it actually starts to get less dense again. So when ponds get really cold, all the water that's under 4°C rises to the top, making ponds slightly colder at the surface than at the bottom. If the surface gets cold enough, it then freezes!



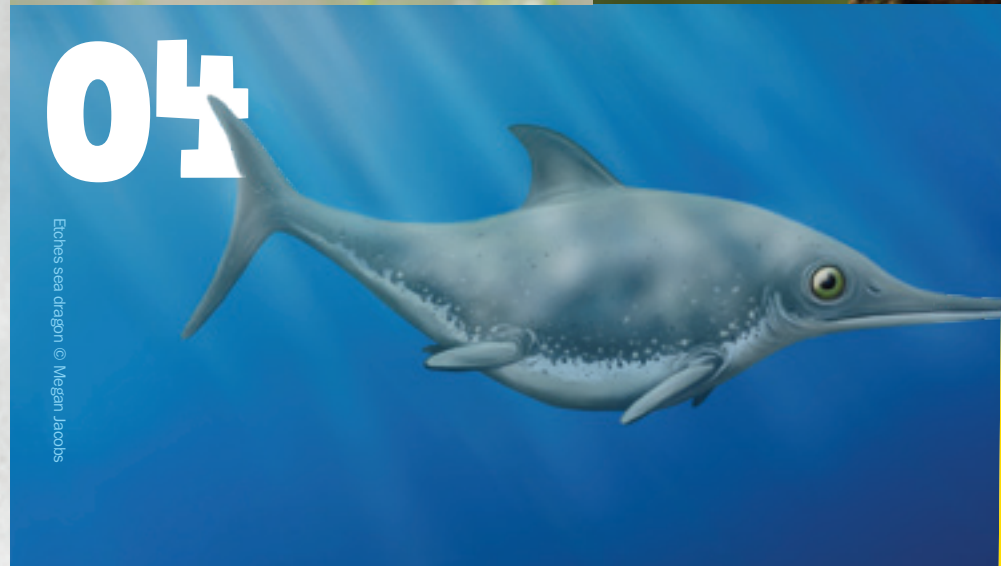
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Echus sea dragon © Megan Jacobs

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WILDLIFE WATCH 97

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What's Wildlife Watch?

Wildlife Watch is the junior branch of The Wildlife Trusts. Join Wildlife Watch and start your nature adventure. Prices range from £10-24 per year for child-only membership and £30-60 for family membership. You'll receive a starter pack and four issues of Wildlife Watch magazine a year. This is

packed full of amazing pictures, posters and competitions. We also have a really wild website and e-newsletter full of wild ideas and nature-spotting tips. Plus you get access to local events and groups. Go to wildlifewatch.org.uk to find out more.

KEEP WATCHING!

The Science ³⁴ Section

In every issue this year we'll be bringing you a fact-packed science section, sharing recent discoveries about weird and wonderful wildlife and explaining the meaning of some scientific words.



WILD WORDS

Impress your friends with new words from the world of wildlife science!

ECOLOGY

(pronounced i-kol-eh-ji)

Ecology describes the way all living things interact with the other living and non-living things around them. For example, catching fish is part of the ecology of kingfishers. People who study this are called ecologists.

RADULA

(pronounced raj-oo-leh)

A horny ribbon (like a tongue with tiny teeth) that snails, slugs and other similar animals use to scrape food into their mouths.

DECIDUOUS

(pronounced di-sij-oo-uhs)

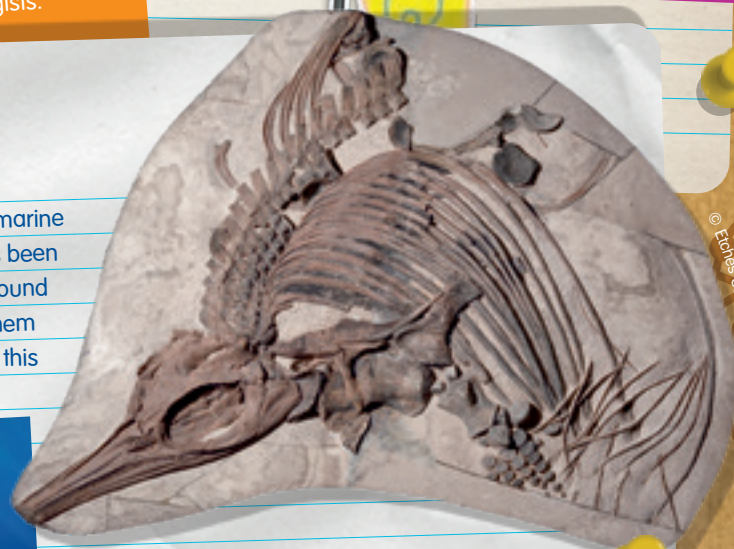
A tree or shrub that loses all of its leaves each year and regrows them again. They usually shed their leaves in autumn and regrow them in spring.

RECENT DISCOVERIES

JURASSIC DRAGONS

A

new species of ichthyosaur (extinct, prehistoric marine reptiles sometimes known as sea dragons) has been discovered on a Dorset beach. A fossil hunter found the fossilised skull, ribs and other bones and sent them to the University of Portsmouth, who confirmed that this species had never been seen before.



© Etches Collection, Dorset

Named 'Etches sea dragon' after Steve Etches, the person who discovered the fossil, this ichthyosaur was two metres long and lived 150 million years ago, during the time known as the Jurassic period!



© Megan Jacobs

WE'RE STILL LEARNING!

I

t's not just extinct animals that are still being discovered. Last year, thousands of new living species were identified around the world, from a monkey in Myanmar to a seaweed in the South Atlantic. But you don't need to travel across the world to find new species; there were discoveries in the UK as well, including six new British toadstools! One new reddish-brown mushroom was found by fungi expert Andy Overall, growing near Heathrow Airport. Andy named it *Cortinarius heatherae* after his wife, Heather.



© Andy Overall

YOUR STORIES



Seals of Bardsey

by Zephan (aged 8)

I took a boat from the end of the Llŷn Peninsula, over the choppy Sound to Bardsey Island. When we came into the harbour, we heard the seals singing like a mystical choir. The seals were sitting on the rocks to say "Hello".

We went all round the island, up the big hill to see the best view in Wales! One way you could see all the way up the Llŷn to the mountains of Snowdonia, and the other way, the whole of Bardsey and the sea stretching to the horizon, like the edge of the world. We walked all the way back down the hill, past an old chapel and Celtic crosses.

In the bird observatory, they had recorded lots of wildlife sightings: birds, dolphins, even whales. There

was a shop with toy orcas and handmade items for sale. We walked down to the rocky shore near the lighthouse and saw lots of seals! It was September so we went looking for seal pups among the rocks.

"We went looking for seal pups among the rocks"



We saw a small, chubby, newborn seal pup, fresh and furry, like a white blob of blubber on the rocks. It was asleep, and its mum was

swimming nearby. It woke up and it wanted feeding. It started crying. It sounded like a human baby. Its mum came and rolled over on the rocks and the baby wriggled over and started suckling. We watched from a good distance. It was a special memory to take away from the island, and I will always remember it.



THANK YOU to Zephan!

Do you want to write for the magazine? Send your stories and ideas to watch@wildlifetrusts.org!

More than 40 different shark species have been seen around the UK!

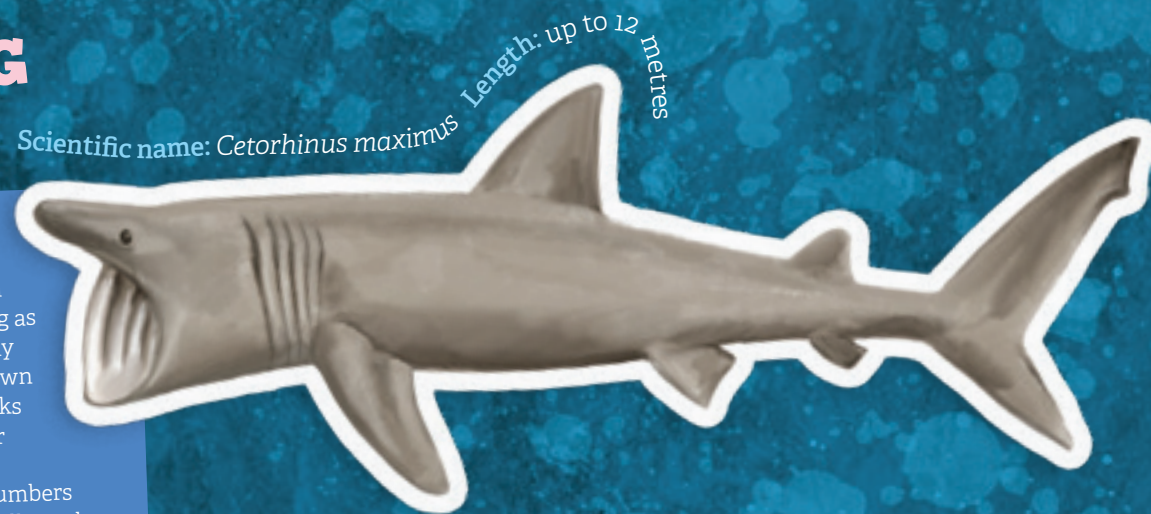
SHARKS IN OUR SEAS

Illustrations by
KATY FROST

Sharks can be found in seas all around the UK, though most of them stay far from shore. Some are here all year, though we're very unlikely to see them. Others are just visitors, here for a few months before making incredible journeys to other parts of the ocean. They're impressive predators that can feast on fish, crunch up crabs and snaffle squid. Let's meet six of the wonderful sharks that share our seas!

BASKING SHARK

The second biggest fish in the world spends the summer in our seas. Despite being as long as a bus, they only eat tiny creatures known as plankton. The sharks swim along with their massive mouth open, hoovering up huge numbers of these seriously small snacks.



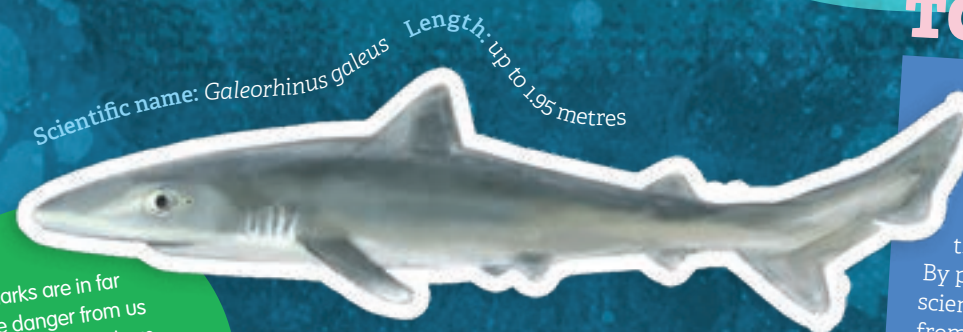
SMALL-SPOTTED CATSHARK

This cute little catshark spends its whole life in coastal waters, living close to the seafloor where it feeds on small fish, crabs and other shelled sea life. When threatened, they curl up into a donut shape! They're one of the most common sharks in our seas.



BLUE SHARK

This sleek shark is also a summer visitor to UK seas and is usually found far from the coast. As the name suggests, they're a beautiful blue colour. They love hunting fish and squid but will sometimes catch seabirds at the surface. They make incredible journeys across the Atlantic Ocean between the UK and the Caribbean.



Sharks are in far more danger from us than we are from them. Many of our sharks get caught by fishing boats and are considered threatened or endangered.

TOPE

This slender shark is found in shallow waters around the UK. They feed on small fish but will also snack on other small sea creatures they find, like crabs and squid. By putting special tags on them, scientists have discovered that tope from the UK can travel thousands of kilometres – tagged sharks have been seen around Iceland, the Azores and the Canary Islands.

PORBEAGLE

This hefty shark is a relative of the great white, though is half the size of its more famous cousin. Like great whites, they have a special skill – they can keep their body temperature higher than the water around them. This lets them hunt in colder seas than many other sharks. They usually stay in deeper water, hunting smaller fish, squid, cuttlefish and octopus.



THRESHER SHARK

This acrobatic shark is a fast swimmer and can leap right out of the water! Like porbeagles, they can keep their body temperature higher than the water around them. They herd smaller fish into tight shoals, then use their incredibly long tail like a whip to stun some of the fish and make them easier to catch. Thresher sharks pass through our seas in summer.



Right now, all kinds of creatures are strutting their stuff in the name of LURVE...

Nature's Greatest Dancers

by Pete Dommert



There's nothing like spring to put a, er, spring in the step of many an animal. It's the mating season for lots of species and, across the UK, they're getting their groove on with some spectacular courtship dance displays!

© Mark Hamblin / 2020VISION



BLACK GROUSE

A bunch of these big birds gather together on boggy moorland in the dim light of dawn. They're here for a 'lek' – when male grouse show off to the watching females in a dramatic dance-battle. The boys are dressed to impress with shiny black bodies, white bottoms and red 'eyebrows' (called 'wattles'). They circle each other like country dancers at a ceilidh* and spread their tail feathers wide like a pair of muscly arms. It's a hoedown showdown! Yee hah!

Watch black grouse lekking in the Cairngorms National Park, Scotland:

wtru.st/grouse

* a party with Scottish or Irish folk music and traditional dancing

SMOOTH NEWT

In garden ponds across the UK, male smooth newts are slipping into their breeding 'costumes' by growing long, wavy crests along their backs. Then these fancy fellas follow female newts through the weeds and treat them to a flamboyant flamenco dance. They vibrate the tips of their frilly tails to waft a special scent through the water that the ladies find irresistible. Smooth by name, smooth by nature!

Watch smooth newts throwing some shapes:

wtru.st/newt



© Niall Benzie / 2020VISION



GREAT CRESTED GREBE

The famous courtship display of this fabulous waterbird is a tantalising tango for two! On lakes and reservoirs all over the UK, pairs of grebes float face-to-face and mirror each other's moves exactly. This usually involves lots of head-shaking, a bit of pretend preening and some synchronised swimming. A few extra-special dance moves are often thrown into the mix, with weird names like 'The Penguin', 'The Cat' and 'The Weed Dance'!

See them in action at:

wtru.st/grebe

The black ear-tufts on top of a great crested grebe's head are called tippets.

SPINY SEAHORSE

Off the south coasts of England and Wales, love is in the water! Before breeding, male and female spiny (or long-snouted) seahorses meet first thing every morning for a romantic smooch. The affectionate fish begin by gently approaching each other and changing colour. Then they swim in circles around a patch of seagrass, before rising up through the water together with their tails entwined. It's a wonderful, underwater waltz that can last for hours!

Watch courting seahorses off the coast of Dorset:

wtru.st/seahorse

Seahorses (and some relatives) are the only animals in the world where the male gets pregnant! He gives birth to hundreds of babies!



© Nick Upton / 2020VISION

COMMON CRANE

If it's elegance you're after, then look no further than these giant, but graceful, wetland birds. In early spring, crane pairs perform a beautiful pre-breeding ballet. They flap their wide wings, leap up in the air, stomp their feet, fluff out their feathery tails and throw back their heads in a loud, trumpeting call. Sometimes a whole flock of cranes joins in the show. Encore!

Take your seats:

wtru.st/crane

Measuring 1.1 to 1.2m high, the common crane is the UK's tallest bird!

MATING RATING!

Why not give these wild dances a score out of 10 for each of these different elements?

	Black grouse	Smooth newt	Great crested grebe	Spiny seahorse	Common crane
ENERGY	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
STYLE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
DRAMA	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
OUTFIT	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Total	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Now add up your scores to discover who you've crowned as nature's greatest dancers!

You don't always have to travel far to see amazing wildlife. **EVERY ISSUE THIS YEAR** we're taking a look at some of the natural treasures that can be found close to home.

NATURE ON YOUR DOORSTEP

SPRING SPECIALTIES

Spring is a time of change, with insects, reptiles, amphibians and plants appearing after a long, dark winter. Many birds are returning from warmer countries, getting ready to find a mate and nest. Every day can bring a new, wild surprise! **HERE ARE SOME WILD WONDERS TO LOOK OUT FOR...**

House martins



These beautiful birds are natural acrobats, chasing insects through the air. They appear around April, after spending the winter in Africa. They're best recognised by their dark blue back with a white rump (the area just above the tail). They nest on the walls of houses and often feed above cities, towns and villages. If your house is near farmland, you might see swallows as well.

Holly blue butterfly



These pretty, silver-blue butterflies appear around April. They're often seen in parks and gardens, visiting flowers like brambles and buttercups. They often fly high above the ground. As the name suggests, the caterpillars like to munch on holly.

Tadpoles



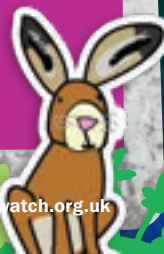
DID YOU KNOW
Dandelion comes from the French dent-de-lion, meaning lion's tooth, because of its jagged leaves.

If you're lucky enough to have a pond, spring could bring clouds of tadpoles to your garden. Even large puddles or water-filled tubs could be used by a spawning frog. You could also find them in ponds in local parks or nature reserves. The frogspawn that tadpoles hatch from can appear as early as January, or sometimes even in November or December.

Dandelion



This beautiful golden flower is so common in gardens, parks and even around pavements that it's often called a weed. But dandelions are really popular with lots of insects, including bees and butterflies (like this green-veined white!). Watching a patch of dandelions on a sunny day can offer lots of minibeast activity.



www.wildlifewatch.org.uk

Pretty but pungent

These beautiful flowers belong to the lords-and-ladies plant, also known as cuckoo pint. The flowers appear in April and smell a bit like wee to attract flies to pollinate them!



© Guy Edwards / 2020VISION



ELLEN loves exploring woodlands and looking for treasures like fungi, moss and lichens.

HIDDEN GIANTS

by
Ellen
Kinsley

Discover the
secret fungi that
help trees and
plants thrive

MEET THE MUSHROOMS

When we think of fungi, we usually think of mushrooms, but did you know that a fungus is actually much bigger than just its mushrooms?

Most fungi are made of strands called hyphae (pronounced hi-fee), which are many times thinner than plant roots. If you could look into the soil beneath your feet with a microscope, you would see it is full of these strands of fungal hyphae, forming a web throughout the soil. The magnificent mushrooms that we see are the 'fruiting bodies' of the fungus. They produce spores, which are like its seeds. You can think of a mushroom as being like an apple, while the hyphae are like the apple tree.

Fungi are not
plants or animals
- they are as different
from a plant as you are!
And they are actually
more closely related to
us than they are to
plants.

HUGE BUT HIDDEN

Even though we usually only notice fungi when they produce their mushrooms, fungi are there all the time, living in the soil, rotting wood and inside plants, trees and animals. Because hyphae are so thin, fungi can go unnoticed even though some can be enormous. Some of the largest living things in the world are fungi, and their hyphae can cover several square miles (that's over 1,000 football pitches!). Fungi can also live to be thousands of years old!

SHARING IS CARING

As many gardeners know, fungi do a brilliant job of breaking down dead plants and animals, recycling their nutrients back into the soil. But many fungi also have a very special relationship with living plants. Their hyphae grow closely around, and even within, plants' roots. Plants use sunlight to make sugars (food) through a process called photosynthesis (fo-to-sin-th-e-sis), and

they share these sugars with the fungi that they grow with. In return, the fungi give plants some of the water and nutrients that they have taken in through their hyphae. This means the plants can get nutrients from a huge area of soil that they couldn't reach by themselves, and the fungi get sugars that they can't make themselves. By sharing, the fungi and the plants can both thrive!

NUTRIENT NETWORKS

Trees and plants living near each other are connected by this amazing underground network of fungi. Just think - every time you take a walk in the woods, you are walking over millions of miles of hyphae, growing through the soil and among the plants' roots!

The network carries water, nutrients and chemical signals between different plants and trees. Struggling plants can receive nutrients and water to help them survive. Or if a plant is under attack from aphids, fungi can carry a chemical message to other plants, warning them of the attack. The plants then get ready to defend themselves with chemicals of their own!

By keeping plants healthy, fungi make sure the plants continue to supply them with the sugars they need. And, without even knowing it, fungi are supporting all the wonderful wildlife that depends on plants, too!

Around
90% of plant
species on earth are
dependent on fungi.
Without fungi, many plants
would not be able to live -
including food plants and
crops that we rely on,
and beautiful flowers
like orchids.



Fly egiene © Alex Hyde / naturepi

Clustered bonnet © Guy Edwards / 2020VISION

Gallery

Send in your photos, poems, artwork and letters for your chance of featuring in the gallery. If your artwork is picked as the star entry you'll win your very own drawing kit! The perfect start-up set for any budding wildlife artist.



1



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11



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6



12

HOW TO ENTER
Email watch@wildlifetrusts.org with the subject line 'Gallery entry' or write to us at:
Wildlife Watch Gallery
The Wildlife Trusts
The Kiln, Mather Road
Newark
Notts NG24 1WT



If we feature your artwork we will include your first name and your age, so don't forget to include them. We might also share it on our website and social media.

1) Foxes by Tess, aged 11 ★
This adorable pair of foxes brought us so much joy. It's impossible not to smile when you see them! The shading on the fur is really impressive.

2) Octopus by Kayzia, aged 5
We love how creative Kayzia has been with this entry. What a brilliant idea to make a sea creature out of fallen leaves, and the acorn cups make great suckers!

3) Magpie by Anna, aged 7
Anna's love for magpies is clear in this detailed drawing, which perfectly captures the glossy feathers of these beautiful birds.

4) Pine marten by Beatrice, aged 12
This wonderful drawing highlights the curious nature of these rare mammals. Did you know individual pine martens can be identified by the pattern of their pale bib?

5) Ladybird by Amber, aged 9
The colours in this photograph are so vibrant! It takes us straight to a warm spring day with insects buzzing around the flowers.

6) Dab by Grace, aged 16
Grace has done a spectacular painting of a dab, the weird flatfish featured in the autumn issue of Wildlife Watch. It's even glistening like we're looking through the water at it.

7) Blue tit by Joseph, aged 6
This is a lovely, colourful representation of one of our favourite garden birds. It's so bright and beautiful!

8) Badger by Cara, aged 9
The soft lighting on this badger in its woodland home makes for a very pretty picture. We love how much detail has gone into the background, as well as the badger itself.

9) Sea creatures by Finley, aged 4
What a great collection of sea creatures! The use of pipe cleaners really makes it feel like these animals are floating around in the water.

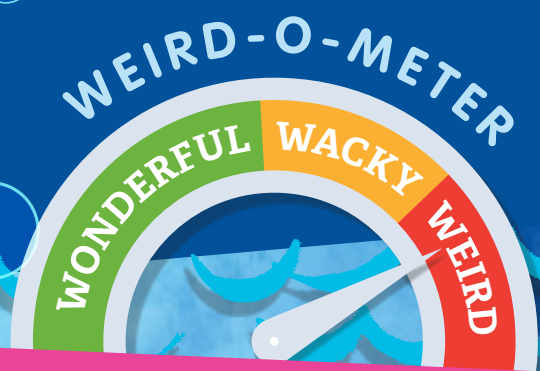
10) Robin by Nixie, aged 12
Nixie has painted a cheerful little robin with a lovely red breast. It even has its own sprig of holly to perch on!

11) Fly agaric by Paloma, aged 6
Paloma has really captured the colours of autumn with this bright fly agaric mushroom. These spotty toadstools are often pictured in fairy tale books.

12) Eel by Wayland, aged 7
This is a great underwater scene, complete with a slippery eel. Did you know that eels migrate from our rivers to the Sargasso Sea to breed – travelling over 3,000 miles!

WEIRD NATURE

THIS ISSUE: WEIRD WATER CREATURES



CADDISFLY



Caddisflies are flying insects often found near water. There are many species, but almost all young caddisflies live underwater until they're ready to become adults and grow wings. To stay safe, they make a protective shell by sticking stones, sand, twigs and other items together with silk. It's like building their own suit of armour!

WATER STICK INSECT



Water creatures don't get much weirder than this! They're underwater predators that hide by pretending to be a stick, snatch small fish and tadpoles with their front legs, and breathe through their tail like a snorkel. They're also the largest water insects in Europe.

GREAT POND SNAIL



As the name suggests, this is the largest pond snail in the UK. Their shiny, pointed yellow-brown shell can be up to 6cm long and 3cm wide. They love still and stagnant water, and lay large, goopy bundles of eggs on pond plants.

DIPPER



Dippers might not look too strange, but they're songbirds that hunt for food along the bottom of rivers and streams – that's pretty weird! Dippers use their wings to swim down to the riverbed, where they catch insects and small fish.

COMMON BACKSWIMMER



These bizarre bugs are a common sight in ponds. They use their long, paddle-like back legs to swim upside down, often just below the surface. They are impressive predators, hunting insects, tadpoles and small fish. They even have toxic saliva, which paralyses their prey and turns its insides to liquid, so the backswimmer can suck it all up.

BROOK LAMPREY



This secretive, eel-like fish lives in streams and sometimes lakes. Lampreys don't have jaws – instead they have a round sucker for a mouth. The brook lamprey is the smallest and most common of the three lampreys found in the UK. Unlike the other lampreys, brook lampreys only feed when they're juveniles. Once they become adults, they don't feed and so die shortly after spawning.

How to build a bumblebee nest



You will need:

- terracotta flower pot
- trowel
- dry grass or moss
- sheltered spot that gets some sun



1 Dig a small, shallow hole under a bush.

Your chosen site should not get too hot or too cold, and be in sun for about half of the day.

2

Fill the flowerpot with dry grass and/or moss.

3

Half-bury the flowerpot upside down in the hole. Position it at an angle so that the hole in the bottom points out.



(preferably under a bush)

www.wildlifewatch.org.uk

Discover some of the magical myths and frightening fairy tales about our favourite animals.

WILD FOLKLORE

by Andrew Millham

Folklore is a mixture of the traditional beliefs and stories of a community. Even fairy tales like Pinocchio can be thought of as folklore! These stories are usually passed from one generation to the next by word of mouth. Through the ages, our folklore has been full of tales about the animals around us – let's explore some myths and legends about badgers, foxes, bats, and butterflies...

FOXES

Are you familiar with the phrase 'as cunning as a fox'? Well, that is exactly how they are represented in folklore: smart, sly, and prone to trickery. This is because they are exceptionally good at getting through fences to find their supper. Roald Dahl's book



'Fantastic Mr. Fox' illustrates this perfectly – telling the story of a fox stealing food to feed his family. A far older folk tale tells of how the fox stole fire from the heavens to give it to mankind, which made their fur a burning orange colour!

BADGERS

In British and Irish folklore, badgers symbolise persistence, confidence and strong will. In the 16th century, some even believed that badgers could grant protection from witchcraft! They likely came to symbolise protection because they defend their sets so aggressively. Badger folklore is not all positive. Many folk tales unfairly show badgers as bringers of bad luck, like in this 200-year-old rhyme:

Should one hear a badger call,
And then an ullot [owl] cry,
Make thy peace with God, good soul,
For thou shall shortly die.



BATS

Bats are often linked to vampires. This is because when European explorers reached the Americas in the 15th and 16th centuries, they found a flying animal in South America that feeds on blood, just like the mythical vampire – it was named the 'vampire bat'. Some even thought that bats were fairies or ghosts in disguise. This is why bats are popular around Halloween! For others, bats are a very welcome sight – according to folklore from the Isle of Man, seeing a bat flying at sunset meant that you would be getting fine weather.



BUTTERFLIES

The name 'butterfly' may have come from an ancient belief that witches took the shape of butterflies to steal milk and butter. Or it may have been first used just for yellow (butter-coloured) species like the brimstone, and over time been applied to all butterflies. They're usually positive symbols, representing summer and beauty. Their change from a caterpillar into a flying creature means they have also come to represent rebirth, transformation, and hope. The colour of butterflies has even been used for weather predictions! It was thought that if the first butterfly seen in spring is white then clear, cloudless days are ahead, but if you see a dark butterfly, a long stormy summer awaits you.



Humans are experts at creating stories about things, including nature. In reality, all of these creatures are vital parts of the natural world and should be celebrated – never feared. Badgers out for nightly strolls, foxes disappearing around garden fences, bats circling overhead, and butterflies fluttering by all go about their business, unaware of the mystical meanings and tales we have attributed to them.

RICK is Forest Waters Officer at Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust and loves exploring the Forest of Dean for insects.

WONDERFUL WOOD ANTS

by
Rick
Mundy

WHAT ARE WOOD ANTS?

We have about 50 different species of ant in the UK. This includes four species of wood ants, which are our largest ants. We call them wood ants because they're usually found in woods and forests. All four look similar, with black and red bodies.

They are found in most parts of Britain but are more common in southeast England, in upland areas in the west and north of England, in Wales and in northern Scotland.

ANT CITIES

Wood ants live in nests that can be more than two metres tall, 50 years old and home to a colony of as many as 250,000 ants!

The nest might look like just a heap of dead pine needles, but inside is an incredible construction of chambers, corridors and tunnels, with food warehouses and nurseries full of young ants. All of this is protected by a waterproof thatched roof, solar heating and air conditioning. The ants even bring balls of pine tree resin into the nest, probably to use as a disinfectant.

Nests are well defended. The workers have a powerful sting and can also squirt formic acid to irritate the eyes and skin of intruders. You can often smell the formic acid around the nest - it smells like salt and vinegar crisps. Birds like jays and blackbirds visit the nest to deliberately get their feathers sprayed with formic acid, probably to protect them from parasites and diseases, rather like us using hand gel!

BIG FAMILIES

All the ants in the colony work together. The colony is run by the queen, whose role is to lay eggs. The queen is the mother of all the other ants, which are almost all females - known as workers, as they're always busy. Older workers leave the nest to collect food. Younger workers usually stay at home tending to the queen, eggs and immature ants, as well as cleaning, building, repairing and guarding the nest.

TINY FARMERS

Wood ants have two main sources of food. They catch insects, particularly caterpillars, and they 'farm' aphids. Aphids are tiny insects that feed on plant sap. The ants protect them from danger and in return, the aphids produce drops of sweet 'honeydew' that the ants drink, take back to the nest and regurgitate for the larvae and for the queen.

FOREST HELPERS

Wood ants are an important part of our woodlands. A healthy forest has 500 wood ants for every square metre. This means lots of food for animals that like to eat ants, including spiders, larger insects and birds like green woodpeckers. Wood ants also help plants grow by dispersing seeds and digging, which helps air, water and nutrients to move down through the soil. They also eat a huge number of caterpillars and other insects, helping to maintain a healthy balance in the forest.

So when you see a wood ant nest seething with busy ants, you are not seeing nasty scary creepy-crawlies, you are seeing a beautiful and complex ant city and a vital part of a healthy forest. So treat them with respect, look at the ants in amazement and leave them to get on with their important work.

Some beetles actually live inside ant nests. They produce chemicals that make them smell like the ants, allowing them to roam about the nest unnoticed.

Wood ant queens can live for 15 years!

© Mark Hamblin / 2020VISION



© Luke Massey / 2020VISION



Jay 'anting' © Andrew Cooper / Nature PL

FEATURE CREATURE

ROE DEER



© Jon Hawkins / Surrey Hills Photography

LOCAL DEER

Roe deer are an extra special species of deer because they are one of only two species that are native to Britain. Although, they were nearly hunted to extinction in the 18th century! However, thanks to their reintroduction in the 19th century and an increase in woodlands, their population is on the rise. Roe deer are found in every area of mainland Britain with most being found within woodlands in Scotland and southern England. In some places (particularly in England) their populations are now so high they are preventing woodland from growing as they feed off the new growth.

HOW TO SPOT THEM...

Roe deer can be tricky to spot because their fur colour changes depending on the time of year! In summer they are a rusty red and in winter this fades to a duller brown. They also differ in colour depending on their age. Young roe deer (fawns) have a spotted brown coat, which is designed to keep them hidden. On their rump (bottom) roe deer

ESSENTIAL FACTS

Scientific name

Capreolus capreolus

Average lifespan

7-10 years

Amazing fact

Despite mating season taking place in the summer, females don't give birth until May or June of the following year. This means that their young can avoid the colder weather.

have a small white patch. When they are alarmed their fur puffs up, making this patch more obvious. Males (called bucks) have short antlers that are shed in early winter and regrown almost straight away. The females (called does) have no antlers.

TALK THE TALK

Although roe deer often live on their own, they still have ways to communicate with each other. For example, roe deer can produce a yap, like a dog, which allows them to signal danger to one another. Communication is also very important when it comes to attracting a mate. The females produce a high-pitched cry when trying to attract a male. Any interested male will then respond with a rasping sound... so ROE-mantic!



© Mark Hamblin / 2020VISION

DO SWANS PAIR FOR LIFE?

by Tom Hibbert

Swans are often used as an example of long and lasting relationships, but do they actually stay together their whole life?

HOW LONG DO MOST BIRDS STAY TOGETHER?

Most birds are thought to be monogamous – this means that one male and one female pair up and form a bond, then often work together to raise the young. But being monogamous doesn't mean that they pair for life. These bonds can last for life, but more often they last for a couple of years, one breeding season, or even just one nesting attempt. Some birds breed several times a year, forming a new bond with a different bird each time!

CHEATERS

Lots of birds do cheat at being monogamous. They stay with their partner and help raise the young, but sneak off to mate with other birds. Studies have shown that the chicks in one bird's nest often have different fathers, and sometimes even different mothers – some females are so sneaky they manage to lay an egg in another female's nest!

WHY DO SOME PAIR FOR LIFE?

The birds that pair for life are often ones that live for a long time, like many of our seabirds. It's thought that sticking with the same mate brings lots of benefits,

like having to spend less time finding a partner. This means birds may have more energy for nesting, as they don't have to spend all their time displaying. Birds that live for many years would waste lots of time finding a mate if they had to choose a new one each year, so they often stay with the same partner.

DO SWANS STAY TOGETHER?

Most geese and swans do usually pair for life, including the mute swans that we see at our parks and lakes. Not all swan pairs are successful, some do 'divorce' and find new partners, usually after a bad breeding season. However, many mute swan pairs last a lifetime – and they can live for 30 years!



© Lynne Newton

Many seabirds, like puffins, form long-lasting bonds



© Amy Lewis

COMPETITIONS

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FOR YOUR CHANCE TO WIN:

Tell us which one of these is the name for a badger's home
a) Eyrie
b) Setts
c) Lodge



COMPETITION RULES

Send your competition entries to us: **By email** watchcomps@wildlifetrusts.org **By post** Wildlife Watch, The Kiln, Mather Road, Newark, Nottinghamshire NG24 1WT
Don't forget to include your name, age and a way of contacting you with your entry! **DEADLINE: 31 May 2021**

Competition entries may be used on our website and social media channels.