

A SNIPPET of the COUNTRYSIDE

Well just where did the summer go to? And that is just what we all seem to be saying, but gone it has, and so now we have the autumn to look forward to and all that it brings. Blackberries, and the hedgerows are so full of them this year, great big fat juicy ones, my freezer is full of them waiting to be made into pies or jam! The garden needs putting to bed for the winter but we can still enjoy the last of the flowers for a while longer, I always find it so hard to pull up flowers when they are still bringing some colour to the borders, but it must be done to prepare for next spring. And worst of all, the dreaded Christmas presents! But that can wait for a bit longer.

Anyway, put all those aside for the time being and take a look and listen around you. To me the Robin's song at this time of year is a real reminder that autumn is here because it's so shrill at the moment after being quiet for a month during their molt. There seems to be one for every bush and tree in the village. Like other birds, this summer has been a good one for them and so now they are all busy setting their territory for next spring. Most people think of Robins as sweet little birds sitting on a branch singing his heads off or sitting on your spade handle waiting for you to dig up any worms, but just take a good look next time you have one in the garden. Woe betide any other Robin who should fly in, battle is fierce and sometimes fatal, even to a member of the opposite sex. The only time one Robin will tolerate another on its patch, is in the spring when they are on the lookout for a mate, and even then they can sometimes be fooled for a second or two because they both look identical. How they tell the difference between male and female is still a mystery but they have the power to know the difference, and that appears to be their own little secret! Some people think that the only one with a red breast is the male but no, both male and female have the red breast and only the young of this year have a speckled breast until they are fully mature. But whatever their gender, they all have a soft spot in our hearts and we would surely miss them should they not be there.

The last few stragglers of Swallows and Martins are still swooping down over the fields and farmyards now. They are mainly House Martins as most of the Swallows have already left, but if you look closely at the flocks diving and weaving around, you can see the odd forked tail of a Swallow in among them who has missed his mates and teamed up with the Martins. I have two House Martin nests in my eaves, and the remaining three babies of the second brood have only just left the nest at the end of the week and so they will be among the ones practicing their flying skills over the fields that I am watching at this moment. The Swallow and Martins have also done very well in their reproduction this year, raising at least two broods each and I can't remember seeing so many on the telephone wires gathering for the migration as there are this year. Some people don't like them nesting under their eaves because of the mess that they make, but I feel privileged to have them there, and a bit of poop down the wall and over the garage roof (which will wash away soon) is a small price to pay to be able to watch their air supremacy all summer, and just think how many fly's and midges we would be plagued with if they were not there to keep the numbers down. We were plagued with flies a lot this year, but without the Swallows and Martins it would have been unbearable. If you look and listen and be aware all the time of what is going on around you, you can see so much more. Just listen to the House Martins some times, and if you here their alarm call (or them just making a lot of noise overhead), then look up, you will probably see the Sparrow Hawk diving among

them, it is often around and we even had it land on our shed roof the other evening not 10 feet away from us. I know it seems hard to think of it taking wild birds, but it is only nature doing what it should and sorting the weak from the strong just to keep a healthy stock for next year. As I am talking of listening and looking, if you want to know what birds you have around you, then most times you are more likely to hear them than see them, so try and learn their song, that way you will know what birds you have rather than waiting for them to appear, and of course, only the males sing, not the females who might just make the odd tweet.

Walking down the lanes yesterday, I sadly found two toads who had been squashed by cars overnight. In the spring we all know about them on the roads coming out of their hibernation, but also in the autumn they travel back to where they normally would spend winter, and so it means crossing the roads once more, if you are driving down the lanes at night and see a stone in the roads, try and miss it (if it's safe to), because it just might be a toad.

I must have one of the smallest back gardens in Puddington, but consider it to be large with the amount of wildlife that visits. I made a small pond at the end of last year, but already it has had frogs, toads and newts laying their eggs in it during the spring. The undergrowth at the moment is full of baby frogs leaving the pond to find shelter for the winter ahead. I must admit, they may not all be from the frogs-spawn laid properly in my pond, but from the bucket loads that I liberated from various puddles where the silly frogs had laid them in during the spring around the village. Any bit of water when you are desperate seemed to be the answer of the day due the shortage of natural ponds now! I had to stop bringing it home in the end, as the pond is only small and was getting rather full. I have also had water boatman, water beetles, dragonfly nymphs and lots of others taking up residence and so I must have got it right for them all, no fish at all or they would just eat the lot, but purely as a wild life pond which can give lots of pleasure while sitting or working in the garden and watching all the comings and goings, and the grandchildren love to come and see what they can find, it's a great way of teaching them about nature and how to observe things around them, the more they look the more they find and are always thrilled to see a frog, and be able to watch over the months how the tadpoles turn into frogs. I had to put some wire netting over the shallow end as I found a big fat blackbird helping himself to the tadpoles one day, and so the birds will have to stick to the bird-baths for their daily dip now.

It is now safe to put nuts and seeds out for the birds again as the young are away from the nests and no longer in danger of being killed by the nuts that parents may have taken to feed them. During the summer, it is best not to put nuts out for the birds for two reasons. Firstly, if the nuts are anywhere near to the nest site of a pair birds, then they have to spend so much time chasing off others away from their territory that that they will simply go away and abandon the nest. Secondly, if the parents should take nuts, seeds or bread back to the fledglings, instead of the normal food of caterpillars etc., then it will kill them. I know it's great seeing all the wild birds in the garden, but be patient, they will be back within hours of you putting the food out once the babies are fledged.