

THE COUNTRYSIDE AROUND US

30th September 2003

I know, I could hear you all saying, 'she's wrong, the House Martins haven't all gone yet.' I seem to have made a mistake about them *all* leaving, and we still have a few left, although the main bulk of them have gone by now. I was very surprised to see that there were still two little heads peering out from one of the nests in my eyes, and the parents still flying in and feeding them. You have to admire the maternal instinct that would make them stay and wait for their last babies to fledge, even when all the others have left. They finally flew from the nest this morning, but only one of them made it into the sky, the other one got as far as the fir tree in the driveway. He called to his parents for some time, but now has gone and so can only hope that he made it into the sky with the others. I don't know if they will all be strong enough to make the long flight to Africa or not, but we can only hope they will, if only for their sheer determination.

We were lucky enough to be asked by one of the farmers in the area to walk in his woods one evening back in the spring. His woods have been untouched for years and harbour all sorts of wild flowers and wildlife. He himself likes to go and sit down there when he gets the time, and watch the animals passing him not knowing that he is even there. When David and I went down there with him, it was early spring when the bluebells and other early wild flowers were out and the scent of the bluebells and wild garlic was wonderful and the canopy above was still very thin letting in the evening light. We saw Roe deer on the ridge above us and he has a large active badger sett that has been there for years. If only we had had the time, I would have loved to have sat and waited for the badgers to come out for the evening and watched them, but he said that we can always go back again. It was a magical place and we certainly will.

Martha, (my chocolate Labrador), had to stay home that night because she would have startled any wildlife that may have been around, but she is always very well behaved any other time. On one of my walks with her not so long ago, she stopped beside a hedgerow and wouldn't move until I came to see what was there. I found a baby pigeon all tangled up in sweetheart or sticky willie what ever you call it. It had obviously fallen from the nest above, but Martha was very concerned that I should do something to help it. It took some unwinding, not made any easier by her nose in the way all the time, but he eventually hopped and flapped his way back up the tree. They are considered pests really, I know, but what else could I do. Although Martha likes nothing more than to hunt for mice and shrews in the undergrowth, she's never caught one yet, but is ever hopeful. She knows very well that pheasants and deer are a real no-no, and will ignore them, but she will often take off after a rabbit and if she gets too close, then she will stop when told to. She stays with Diana and Sidney if ever we have to go away without her, and she has a wonderful time being totally spoilt and playing with their dogs, cats and the horse. I went to pick her up once, and as I talked with Diana in the garden for a while, Martha disappeared out of sight. When I asked where she was, Diana took me around by the greenhouse, and there was Martha with her nose down a hole she had dug because she was convinced there were mice down there. Perched on the fence above her head was one cat, and sitting beside her was the other. It was so funny to watch the cat's waiting for Martha to dig out the mice while they waited to catch them. Perhaps she was a cat in her former life! She certainly forgets that she's a gun dog at times. She has lots of friends around the

village, Charlie, Winston, Ellie, Bracken and Flynn to name a few of her doggie pals, and even cats such as Rolly and Cookie our neighbours cats, who are normally very frightened of dogs. She always stops at the gate down the lane when the horses are there and has a friendly sniff with them. She's a real pal, and I don't know what I would do without her.

My one big fear are snakes and slow worms. Luckily I don't often come across them, but then, I don't ever go looking for those. I know that they are there, because I here them slither through the undergrowth sometimes, but just don't look. I have come across a few slowworms laying in the road to warm up during the summer, and very nearly picked one up one morning because it was laying in an 'S' shape, and looked just like a big hook. Not being one to ever pass something that might come in handy, I bent to pick it up, and got the shock of my life when it slid away. The daft thing is, that I am very interested in the natural history of snakes and slowworms just as much as anything else, and can probably tell you quite a bit about them, but will run like the wind if ever I see one. I have known people who have cats that bring them into the house sometimes, like mice, but thank goodness I have not had a cat that has ever done that. A son and daughter yes, but only the once, they valued their lives a lot more after that.