

Up From Woolridge Cross – Not Counting the Cost?

Here's a question. We hear lots about bird and butterfly-counts – the Big Garden Birdwatch, from which the RSPB draws its annual list of bird species in decline, and the Big Butterfly Count (2012 was the worst year on record for UK butterflies, with declines in 52 out of 56 species). Of course, we hear about awful things happening to bees, and the debate over whether pesticides are to blame. But what about other insects?

I'm not really asking about the number of species but about populations. Do we even have a reliable way of *counting* them? Maybe we do, but I've never read anything about the average number of insects in a cubic metre of air at a certain time of year, or those on a square metre of soil surface, which might be easier to count. And yet the numbers *must* be important for all insect-eating birds and animals, and probably for how well plants pollinate. Shouldn't we be thinking about these lesser – admittedly often objectionable – sharers of our lives?

What follows is unscientific, though I expect it will ring bells with many, especially older readers. I don't pretend these memories were all enjoyable: that's just the trouble!

As a child in the 1960s, when I used to explore the Halsdon woods in summer, I sometimes stopped under a tree and thought that there must be a wild bees' nest in it, so loud was the buzzing from above. But then I'd stop under the next, and the next, and each time it was the same. While there certainly were wild bees around – some lived in the roof of Halsdon House, and I remember Mr Hutchins the postman arriving to shake one of their swarms off a low branch and into a brown cardboard box, to take off to his own hives – they were obviously not responsible for all that loud, contented noise in the sunny leaves.

Any walk through a cow field involved avoiding dried-out cow-pats with holes all over like colanders, and glistening fresh ones from which a dark lid of flies would rise – a mixture of bluebottles and iridescent green flies, and a kind speckled like tweed, and usually large numbers of a long, tan-coloured fly, plus some horse-flies. Passing through any meadow meant being hit on the knees by grasshoppers. No house was without its bunch of house-flies angling to and fro and putting brown spots on the lampshades. No summer picnic was without pestering wasps, no drive without a thickly-splattered windscreen.

If you are middle-aged or older, you may remember glow-worms, but I doubt you have seen them in many years. And when did you last see a May bug?

What has happened to them all, and why?

I've just mentioned the most obvious insects, some of those we have ordinary names for. The vast majority of buzzing, flying, hopping, crawling things pass virtually beneath our notice and only with Latin names. English doesn't *have* a word that covers the whole class of small creatures that aren't mammal or reptile or bird – “insects” is incorrect for spiders, woodlice, worms, earwigs, ants, slugs and snails...

And, mostly, we detest them, and wish them away (me too, when it comes to slugs and greenfly). Life is pleasanter without them. Only the honey-making or decorative ones, and the earthworms that help our gardens, seem to merit our attention, let alone regret. But shouldn't we be paying attention to just how “successful” we are at eliminating them?

I have another question: is there anything at all that we can do about it? Set up an RSPBICC (. . . Bugs, Insects and Creepy Crawlies)? I don't know the answer, but it strikes me that nature-lovers ought at least to ask how we begin to assess the wellbeing of these creatures, to discover how they are faring, and what their loss may mean for our countryside and wildlife. Anyone any ideas?

Frances