

BRIAN'S NATURE DIARY FOR AUGUST

I think wasps may well become a problem around our houses this year, because they have had a long spell of hot dry weather for their populations to burgeon. Whilst the colony is expanding they do considerable good in our gardens by devouring thousands of insects, their first choice of food. Then at summer's end their population explodes just at the time when their food supply starts to dwindle. It is then they become a nuisance, nibbling at and spoiling our ripening fruits on the trees, and entering our homes in search of sweet substances. Our regular Sunday forays for ale and wine to the Red Lion, our local hostelry, are sometimes marred by wasps as we sit in the gardens there. Like many I have often had them fall into my pint. I hasten to add this has not meant throwing my drink away. It is far too precious for that. I have merely hiked the unfortunate insect out, to dry out and fly off, perhaps with the wasp equivalent of hiccups as it did so.

Most folk are familiar with the wasps' nest, a huge papery ball made of chewed fragments of wood. It contains layer upon layer of hexagonal cells, within which they rear their maggot-like larvae. Nests are often found in the roof space of modern houses. When the wasps die off in the cold of late autumn the nests are abandoned, never to be used again. So if you do not want them to occupy the same space in a future year, leave the nest where it is.

Some gloomy news: our county, Northamptonshire, is officially at the top of a national list for having lost so many plants and animals. Particularly has this been the case over the past half-century. Modern intensive farming has to take a share of the blame, but bricks and mortar, and concrete have swallowed up vast areas of what was once diverse habitat. And this looks set to continue, with well over a hundred thousand homes to be built here over the next fifteen years or so. A stretch of former lowland acid heath nearby, which still has rare wild flowers, along with a grade 1 archaeological site within it, looks set to be swamped with over two thousand houses. Make no mistake we, and those who come after us, will be the poorer for uncaring acts like this. Protest seems to cut no ice with modern developers and speculators.

Sorry about that. I was watching a jay the other day. It still seems hard to think of this colourful bird as a member of the crow family, yet that is what it is. And it shares the 'murderous' tendencies of its relatives towards young birds and other helpless creatures. At this time of year it is feeding mainly on seeds and fruits as a prelude to the great autumnal harvest of the tree fruits, especially acorns.

The rudd belongs to the great family of fishes that includes the carp and the goldfish. Even the lowly minnow, the quarry of many a childhood fishing expedition with net and jamjar, belongs to this important group. The rudd lives in lakes, canals, and some slow-flowing rivers. It feeds at or near the surface on aquatic insects or those that fall or are blown from marginal herbage. It has a small mouth, and eyes that are set towards the top of its head, the better to see its prey. It is a favourite quarry for the angler.

The gadwall is a close relative of the mallard, but is much less common. Northamptonshire is considered to be one of its strongholds in England. It is found all the year round on some larger waters. Here it breeds at Pitsford Water, and at the Higham Ferrers former gravel pits, among other places. At a distance the male seems all grey, thinner-necked than the mallard, and with a black stern. The females have orange sides to the bill, and a brown tail. In flight both sexes reveal a large white patch in the wings.