

## DIARY for JULY

A warm damp evening gave me the chance to watch a female hedgehog and her three well-grown young, trundling about on the lawn looking for worms and slugs, their favourite food. One of them found a large dor beetle and crunched it up with obvious pleasure, sounding like a child with a stick of seaside rock.

Occasionally we hear tawny owls, their mournful cries or sharp `kewick' contact calls echoing through the trees. Mice and voles have a rough time of it. If they come out at night they risk ending up as a meal for the silent winged tawny owl. Come out at daylight and they are likely to be pounced on by a kestrel. And these are only two among a long line of predators that will eat them.

One of our rarer ducks, which passes through every spring and autumn on their long migratory journeys is the beautiful garganey or summer teal as it is sometimes called. Only a very few remain to breed. Although not brightly coloured it has a range of subtle shades and its plumage is delicately penciled. Neat and very lively you may catch a glimpse of it on a large lake or gravel pit near you, especially where there is dense marginal cover for them to hide in.

Now that the breeding season is ending, the dispersal of young birds is already well under way. Buzzards have spread widely in the lowlands in recent years, and here in Northamptonshire for example, we may have as many as a hundred pairs breeding with us. They often appear to alert birdwatchers as a mere speck in the sky as they soar effortlessly in warm summer thermals. They will prey upon any bird or mammal that they are able to overpower. Frogs and grasshoppers also feature on their menu. If they come upon it they will also eat carrion, especially the all too frequent road kills.

In a hot summer I often hear about large mystery plants growing in people's gardens. Sometimes they turn out to be the poisonous thorn-apple. Related to the nightshades it is a spectacular plant up to three or four feet tall. Its long fleshy leaves have jagged toothed margins. Its flowers are pale purple and tubular, and they are followed by spiky seed pods a little like those of the conker or horse chestnut. It grows best in soil that has recently been cultivated, which is why it is often reported in gardens. In hot weather it flourishes. All parts of the plant are very poisonous. If children are around the best policy would be to dig it up and burn it.

Following the flowering of spring and early summer, nature's great harvest gets into full swing this month. Heavy seeds often bear hooks by which they become attached to animal fur or our clothing, cleavers or enchanter's nightshade being two examples. Feathery parachutes transport many lighter seeds such as the dandelion and its many relatives. The pineapple mayweed spreads by means of its seeds becoming wedged in the tread of car tyres, or in our shoes.

So much going on, so much to tell you about, I almost forgot to mention that our brand-new CD DAWN CHORUS is out. We are very pleased with it. Get an early copy from us for only £5 postage included