

BRIAN'S NATURE DIARY for July 2007

I made a mental note last month not to go on about climate change again for a while. But events have compelled me to refer to it yet again. To recap, the hottest April on record (records began around here in 1880!), has been followed by the wettest May AND June, and here it is July 1st and it is still raining heavily. We have been unable to get on the allotments, the potatoes are keeling over from the blight, which always strikes hardest in damp warm summers, while everything else has either been eaten by the rabbits (bloody rabbits as Dave has taken to calling them), or is smothered in weeds.

The local farm shop has a blackboard outside on which is scrawled 'We have grown new potatoes but the ground is too wet to dig them.' Fresh food is destined to rise sharply in price when the weather does eventually relent. The house martins outside are having a particularly tough time, needing to forage for airborne insects in the brief intervals when it is not raining. I am sure that many broods of their young will starve to death in the nest.

These sharp swings in weather patterns are exactly what the experts had forecasted. And although it has been very unpleasant here, I do sympathize with those in other parts of the country who have had their properties, indeed their very lives, threatened by the extreme weather. It seems likely that, when the rain does end, we will be in for a baking hot period, perhaps going on into the autumn.

Yesterday was a particularly trying day for us locally. It was the day when light airplanes were competing in a Grand Prix style race for the British Championship. It meant that for hour after hour they were flying low over my house with their engines flat out and screaming like banshees. All I could think of was the noise and oil pollution they were causing. In fact if they were on the roads instead of being in the air I am pretty certain they would have been given tickets for the pollution they caused.

On the bright side, despite the weather, I have seen more small tortoiseshell butterflies around than for several years past. Also in my garden there have been odd speckled wood butterflies. As a woodland species they do not ordinarily occur in gardens. But there is an avenue of tall hybrid limes close by, and this is close enough to being woodland for the butterflies. Its caterpillar feeds on various kinds of tall grasses.

The old Victorian collectors of shells (they called themselves conchologists) and of insects (the entomologists) grew very sophisticated in devising ways to satisfy the mania to fill their display cabinets. And they would undoubtedly have taken advantage of the freak weather conditions. To many of them money was no object, and they had a network of people like road and railway labourers who they paid to collect for them. As the floods recede they leave in their wake a strand line of flotsam. This would include countless numbers of molluscs, insects and other creatures swept from their homes by the swirling waters. This unsavoury mass would be gathered into sacks by the workers, and sent by express train to collectors all over the country.

They in their turn would spend hours and days poring over this pongy treasure, extracting choice specimens to add to their collections. Quite a number would be of species never before seen by humans, or 'new to science' as they put it.

The great naturalist Norman Joy, whose passion was for beetles, wrote 'The sack is best left hanging up for two or three days; it can then be examined by passing small portions of it at a time through a sieve into a white earthenware basin. It will be found to be swarming with living things, and all sorts of rarities have been taken in this way. I have had sacks of flood refuse sent to me from various parts of the British Isles. In one of these sacks, which came from beside a railway bridge in the wilds of Scotland, I took a beetle new to science.'