

## BRIAN'S NATURE DIARY for November 2007

For the last couple of weeks I have been watching a grey squirrel in my garden, busily hiding sunflower seeds filched from the bird table. He even buried one in a flowerpot on the patio, in which my parsley plant is growing. In the wider environment they bury huge quantities of nuts, especially acorns. Watch them closely and you can see that they take great care to make sure that no other squirrel is watching them. Then they dig a small hole and push the nut into it. In soft ground they merely push it in, then they tamp it down and cover it with a tuft of grass or moss, or a few dead leaves. This stash of food is meant to tide them over during the hard times of winter, and studies have shown that they remember where a majority of the buried items are hidden. Inevitably, though, some are forgotten, to germinate, perhaps to survive as saplings and eventually as trees.

But the grey squirrel is not the major planter of trees in our countryside. Neither, despite what you may think, is humankind, in the guise of forester. According to expert opinion most of the oaks are planted by a bird - the jay. This colourful cousin of the magpie and the crow spends most of its time in autumn ferrying an endless stream of acorns from the trees, perhaps to a nearby field, where they are carefully buried, once again as a winter food source. The jay can carry a cargo of three acorns at a time, two stuffed into specially designed cheek pouches, and a third carried in the bill. A little hole is made, into which a nut is placed, tamped down with the bill, and then covered with dry grass. Evidence shows that many of them are later recovered. In Scandinavia jays have been watched recovering nuts covered by several inches of snow.

So how do they, and the squirrels, know where they have hidden food? It is tempting to think that just digging around in a likely spot is likely to reveal some of them. But these food hoarders know better than that. Our best guess is that they appear to take a mental image, a kind of snapshot, of the surroundings, and this serves to guide them back.

These two species are not the sole hoarders of food likely to be seen in our gardens. Several species of tits, notably the great, the coal, and the much rarer marsh tit, regularly store food. Generally they hide it in crevices in tree bark, or under patches of lichen. Indeed this habit is so widespread amongst birds and mammals that it must have considerable survival value in a hard winter. Next time you catch your dog burying a bone.....

Environmental tip of the month. I have changed my tailor, to Oxfam. Wanting a presentable shirt to wear to a formal function, I found in my local charity shop a white shirt in pristine condition, for the princely sum of £2.50. No-one will ever know, if you don't tell them!

DON'T FORGET that we have hand-made Christmas cards and loads of other items suitable for presents in our e-bay shop at: <http://stores.ebay.co.uk/Country-Eye-Images>