Wildlife Friendly Garden:

How to Attract More Wildlife into Your Garden

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Introduction: Nature in Crisis

Britain is currently one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, ranking in the bottom 10% globally. We have the lowest biodiversity of any G7 nation, with only roughly 50% of our biodiversity remaining. To put this in perspective, a large proportion of this loss has occurred within our own lifetimes.

The 2023 State of Nature report highlights a terrifying downward trend. However, there is a massive opportunity for change sitting right outside our back doors.

> The State of Nature Reports are produced by a partnership of over 60 UK-based nature conservation bodies including the RSPB, BTO and Butterfly Conservation. The latest report was produced in 2023.

The Power of the Gardener

The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) states that the UK's 27 million gardeners care for an area larger than all of the country's nature reserves combined. Research from 2025 shows there are 25.8 million gardens in the UK, covering 759,800 hectares—or 4.6% of the total land area. This means that individual actions in these spaces **can** make a massive collective difference.

The Problem with some Modern Gardens

Many modern gardens are designed for low maintenance but act as ecological "deserts." Common issues include:

- **Minimal planting:** Plus no concession for native species.
- **No water source:** Providing no water to drink, bathe or live in for wildlife.
- **Impenetrable fencing:** Turning gardens into isolated "islands" where mammals like hedgehogs cannot travel.
- **Excessive paving and plastic 'turf':** Artificial grass provides zero food or habitat, prevents plants from growing and contributes to plastic pollution.
- **Light pollution:** Garden lighting might look pretty but it disrupts the natural cycles of nocturnal animals.

The Basics: What Wildlife Needs

If wildlife is going to flourish, the best gardens need to provide **Food, Water, Shelter, Opportunities for Reproduction, Suitable Habitats,** and **Ecological Connectivity.**

Food

Background – The Food Web

We must think holistically. While many people enjoy supplementary feeding (bird feeders, hedgehog food), the most sustainable way to feed wildlife is through a healthy food web and that means the whole of the food web including what gardeners often think of as "Pests". These are the Primary Consumers which includes caterpillars, beetles, slugs, and snails. These animals form the foundation. They are important in themselves but we also need them to feed the secondary consumers.

Food Web: The Producers - Plants

Plants are the engine of your garden. The RHS estimates that British gardens are roughly 70% non-native plants with just 30% being native. They suggest that we aim to "Flip the Ratio"— why not try to make your garden **70% native**?

The reason we should try to have more native plants in our gardens is simple; native plants and native wildlife have evolved together over millions of years, so they are clearly best suited to each other.

Silver birch provides food and habitat for more than 300 insect species – the leaves attracting aphids which provide food for ladybirds and other species further up the food chain. The leaves are also a food plant for the caterpillars of many moths, including the angle-shades, buff tip, pebble hook-tip, and Kentish glory. Birch trees are particularly associated with specific fungi, including fly agaric, woolly milk cap, birch milk cap, birch brittlegill, birch knight, chanterelle and the birch polypore (razor strop).

Woodpeckers and other hole-nesting birds often nest in the trunk, while the seeds are eaten by siskins, greenfinches and redpolls.

The Woodland Trust

- **Trees & Shrubs:** Most gardens are not big enough to have a number of trees so, when choosing trees for a garden, try to get the most you can from each one. Look for a combination of nectar in spring, dense cover in the summer for nesting and fruit in the autumn. Good examples are Oak, Rowan, Holly, and Hawthorn. Silver Birch is excellent for smaller gardens.
- **Perennials and Annuals:** The main rule when it comes to these plants is to squeeze in as many as possible from as many varieties as possible over as long a period as possible. That way the largest array of wildlife as possible will find the plant that it particularly likes. However, avoid having too many "Doubles". Highly

bred flowers with extra petals often block access to nectar for bees so they are not generally good for wildlife.

- **Season Stretchers:** Non-natives still do have a place in our gardens. They can be used well to stretch the seasons for example Crocus and Winter aconite will flower early while Sedum and Fuchsia will flower late into autumn when fewer native plants are flowering.
- **Focus on Perennials:** Many perennials are attractive to wildlife such as Comfrey which is popular with bees. The Globe Thistle which bees and finches like and Cranesbill for bees again and Bullfinches that like the seed.

  But don't be too tidy in the autumn. Many gardeners cut down the dead stalks late in the year. But those Bee Hotels we buy are simply mimicking the natural resting places found in perennial stems. When they are left to stand through the winter,

  they can look quite attractive in the frost and snow too.

- **Climbers:** These add height in a garden which is especially valuable in a small space that might not be big enough to take a tree. Birds will happily nest in a climbing plant.
- **Don't forget Scent:** Look for plants that have a strong scent which will attract insects both during the day and at night. An increase in insects in your garden will quickly result in more birds and bats too.
- **Hedges:** Hedges are nature's superhighways. So, it is a tragedy that, according to The Tree Council, over the past 75 years we have lost half of them. When a hedge is removed, not only do we lose all of that valuable habitat but also the ability of wildlife to move around the landscape. It is thought that the Hazel Dormouse is partly struggling because it is often isolated in pockets of woodland where they cannot connect with other good habitats.

  If you are thinking of putting in a hedge, use the same rule for trees and shrubs, buy native plants that give you flowers, shelter and fruit so you get the most for your money. And it's worth remembering that using bare-rooted native plants for hedging can be much cheaper than a wooden fence too!

  If you have a hedge, then you will need to trim it from time to time and there are rules covering this. Cutting a hedge on or next to agricultural land, forestry or common land is a criminal offence between the 1st of March and 31st of August. This is because it is nesting season. This does not apply to hedges within or marking the boundary of a private garden. However, under the Wildlife and

Countryside Act 1981, it is illegal to intentionally disturb, damage or destroy the nest of any wild bird while it is being built or in use. Many birds will have more than one brood so it's not all finished in spring. Therefore, although you could legally cut your hedge at this time of year, if you care about wildlife and want to encourage more into your garden, then it is best not to cut during the breeding season.

Natural England recommends that hedges are trimmed in January and February when the majority of the fruit is gone and before nesting begins. They also suggest that we don't cut our hedges every year but have a 2-to-3-year rotating cycle because this suits wildlife better. In the past hedges had to be cut this way as it is a large job. But now we have mechanical tools to do it, we tend to cut our hedges every year. To demonstrate why we shouldn't do this we can look at the example of the Brown hairstreak butterfly…

Brown Hairstreak butterflies only lay their eggs on Blackthorn and Blackthorn is quite common in this area and so we should see lots of them but we don't so why not? Well the Brown Hairstreak only lays its eggs on 2- to 4-year-old growth, so if the Blackthorn is cut every year there is no 2- to 4-year-old growth for them to find. As a result, if there is no 2- to 4-year-old growth on the Blackthorn there will be no Brown Hairstreak butterflies either.

Grass:

Many of us that value wildlife in our gardens have taken to Plantlife's 'No Mow May' campaign, and it has proved to be an exceptionally effective way to increase wild plants in our gardens and the insects and other wildlife that love them. But there has been some concern recently that it is a bit of a blunt instrument. Have you heard people refer to No Mow May followed by Genocide June?

There's no doubt we need to do something to increase places for wildflowers and grasses to grow because, according to Plantlife, we have lost a horrifying 97% of our species-rich grassland since the 1930s! So, what's the controversy about 'No Mow May' then?

Well, it's all to do with how, when and where you cut. Professor Jeff Ollerton of the University of Northampton is an expert on pollination, and he suggests that we try implementing a **"Mindful Mow May"**. By that he doesn't mean we all go and sit in the grass meditating, although that might be quite nice, no, what he has in mind is varying our mowing by implementing Matrix or Mosaic Mowing.

Ollerton points out that different wildlife like grass at different lengths. Letting our lawns grow freely is great for the grasses and wildflowers that pop up in them but flowers like daisies, clover and dandelions need the grass to be short. Many solitary bees need bare ground for nesting while reptiles like bare ground for basking and long grass for cover.

Ollerton also points out that many wildflowers are still flowering in June so mowing then will cut them down in their prime!

As far as the length of the grass is concerned, Ollerton suggests having different lengths in various parts of the garden. A possibility might be to keep it short near the house where you want to sit. Then, cutting the grass a little higher on paths through the long grass that is going to be left untouched.

When you finally do cut the longer areas, Ollerton suggests you do not do it all in one go. Instead cut one area, then another and another until it is all mowed. This gives the invertebrates you have encouraged into your garden time to move away to a safe area.

Always remember to check the long grass before mowing because wildlife will have moved in and you don't want to do any damage to whatever is hiding there. And lastly, don't mow from the outside in. If you do, you might find you are corralling the wildlife into the middle where the mower devastates large numbers of creatures… that's the genocide June bit!

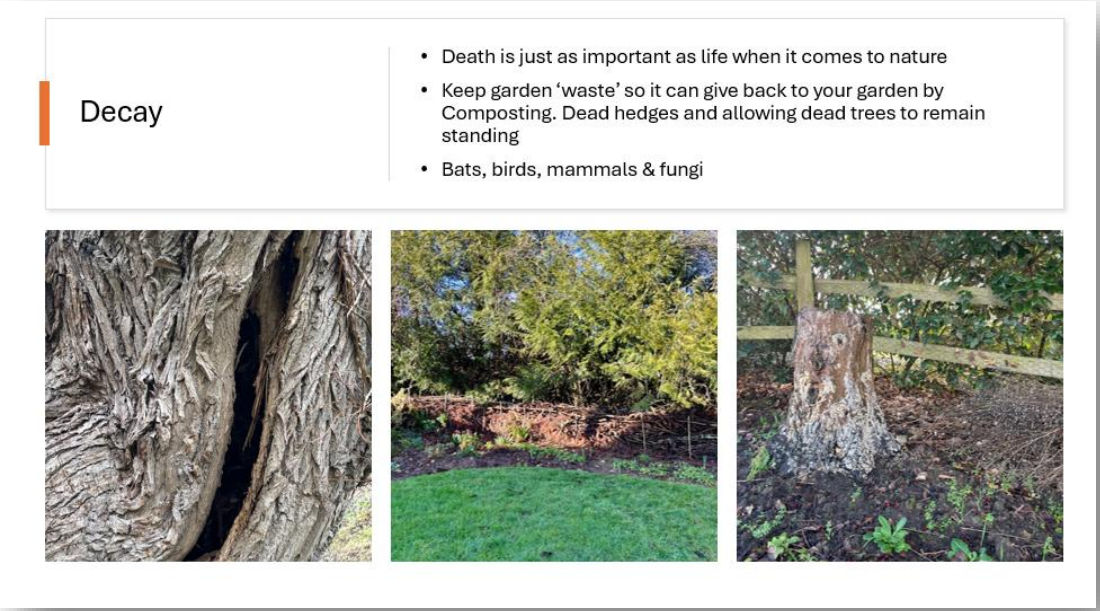
The Beauty of Decay:

All the wonderful plants in your garden will eventually die. But, from a wildlife point of view, they do not lose their value at this point. As plants decay, they provide food and shelter for so many different plants and animals.

Gardeners don't need to be told how useful a compost heap is but it's also a great habitat for invertebrates, reptiles, amphibians and small mammals.

This first picture is from a tree I saw in someone's garden recently. The tree itself looked like one many people would think needed to be cut down but this crack in the bark is ideal for bats to roost or breed in.

If you are concerned that a dead tree might fall in a storm cut the top off and leave the trunk for peace of mind. You can turn the rest into a log pile!



The second picture is part of a dead hedge. Dead hedges are made from plant waste and work as a vertical compost heap providing shelter for animals to hide in and an access route they can travel along while being safely hidden from predators

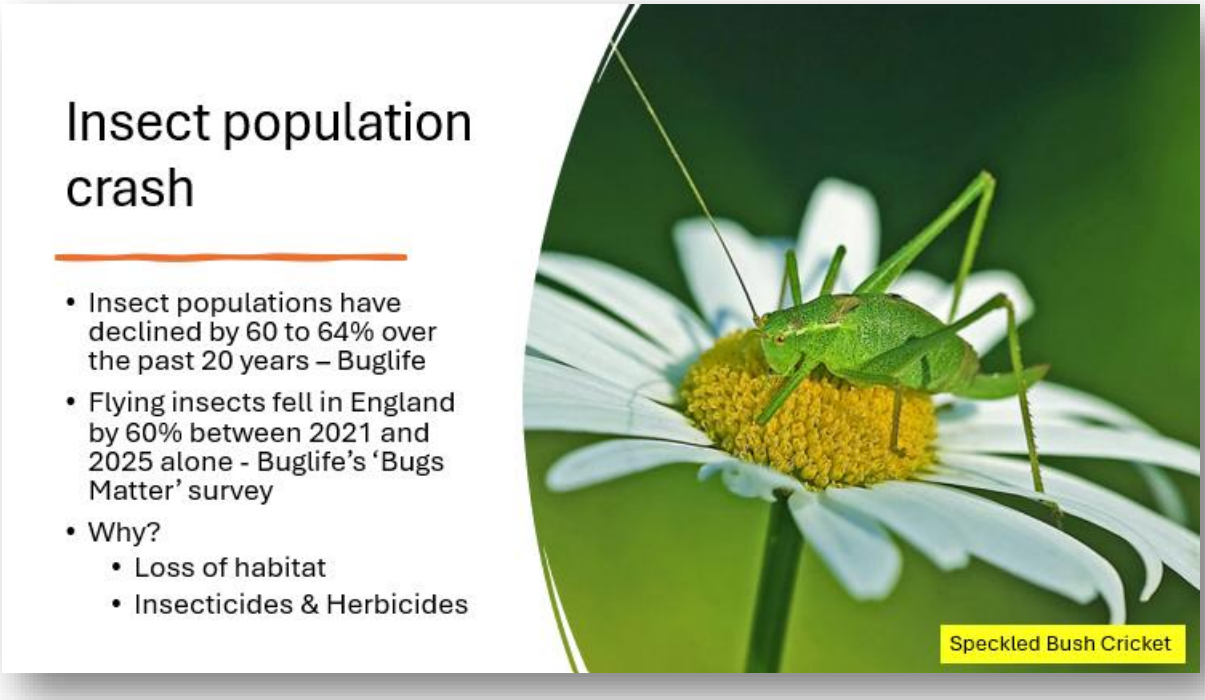
The final photograph is a stump slowly decomposing at the back of a flowerbed. It can't be seen very well most of the year but it is gently breaking down there covered in a layer of white fungi which I rather like!

Food web: Primary and Secondary Consumers

The Primary Consumers group comprises of animals such as rabbits, caterpillars, beetles, mice, slugs and snails etc. These animals feed on the plants that gardeners are trying to cultivate which can be very frustrating.

Many of these Primary Consumers are insects. A lot of us remember years ago, if you went for a drive in your car, your windscreen would be covered in splattered insect bodies by the time you got home. But that doesn't happen anymore. Not to the same extent anyway. And that's because our insect populations have crashed. Just look at these numbers. And why have the numbers fallen so dramatically? Well, it's all down to loss of habitat, insecticides and herbicides.

So why should we care about this dramatic loss… well, let's face it, they're mostly creepy crawlies aren't they!



Apart from the fact that they are often rather gorgeous to look at if you take a really close look, they often serve a purpose too. It's incredible to find out that roughly 1000 species of beetles in the UK are, in fact, considered to be pollinators.

Plus, ladybirds and their larvae are renowned as great consumers of aphids. Importantly, these animals are often eaten in turn by the **Secondary Consumers** which we tend to really care for… So, we need to learn to love the bugs because, if we remove them with insecticides, we starve the predators that depend on them like this hedgehog.

Supplementary Feeding

While the ideal way to ensure wildlife has the food it needs, is to grow the right plants to feed the Primary Consumers which will then be eaten by the Secondary Consumers, sometimes supplementary feeding is worthwhile but it is important to know what is safe and advisable.

Given the dramatic decline in the hedgehog population, providing food and water for them is highly desirable. The best food for hedgehogs is kitten food followed by cat food or dog food. These are all cheaper than hedgehog food on the market. It is a good idea to provide the food and water in a feeding station so that the hogs can eat it without being disturbed by other animals. Do remember to keep it clean though.

Many people also feed meat to foxes and peanuts to badgers – this is simply a matter of preference. Far larger numbers of people though choose to feed the birds in their gardens and this has attracted some controversy lately.

Primarily the issue concerns two bird diseases, Avian Pox and Trichomonosis. The symptoms are listed on the diagram. The fear is that birds gathering at a feeding point

are more likely to pass on these diseases. Therefore, if you think you have spotted any of these symptoms, the advice is to remove the feeders, clean them and do not return them for at least two weeks.

Trichomonosis has been generating the most concern lately as finch populations have been decimated by the disease. It is passed from bird to bird through saliva and faeces both of which can collect at feeding stations especially flat feeders. As a result the RSPB no longer sells flat feeders and suggests that, if you have a bird table, to stop putting food on the table itself but instead to hang feeders from it.

The latest advice from the British Trust for Ornithology is to stop feeding nuts and seeds on the 1st of May and not to return to this until the 1st of November. The disease is at it's most contagious in the spring and summer months which is why it is being avoided but, there is still great value in providing supplementary food in the hard winter months when the birds may struggle to find food.

Water: The Lifeblood

The single most important thing you can probably do to encourage wildlife in your garden is to 'Just Add Water'! Whether it's a small dish with stones in to allow bees and butterflies to drink, a container-pond made from something like an old sink, a medium sized pond like the pre-formed ones you can buy in any garden centre or a large pond. You can even have more than one. In fact, it is actively encouraged that, rather than

building a larger and larger single pond, a series of smaller ones providing their own unique ecosystems results in greater biodiversity.

Water isn't just needed for drinking. This is a whole new habitat to add to your garden supporting a range of wildlife you would not have otherwise. For some animals, their reproduction depends on it like frogs, toads, newts and dragonflies. Insects will be attracted to the water, and they will attract bats and birds that will feed on them. Birds will bathe in the shallow areas and the rocks around the pond are a whole other habitat in themselves!

There are some considerations whatever the size of the pond though. Firstly, make sure there is an area where animals can crawl in and out. Every year many hedgehogs die because they have fallen into ponds that they cannot climb out of and after a while swimming around, they drown. Even frogs and toads have difficulty if the sides of a pond are too upright.

What we are suggesting is that you put in a WILDLIFE POND and wildlife ponds should not have pumps or filtration systems. Plants and bacteria will manage the waste if there are no fish and small animals can get caught up and shredded in filtration systems.

Lastly, as a general rule, fish do not belong in a WILDLIFE POND. They are top predators so will eat a lot of the wildlife we are trying to encourage. Their waste increases nutrient

levels in the water acting as a fertiliser which in turn can lead to algae growing uncontrollably.

Shelter

Once you have managed to encourage wildlife to visit your garden the next step is to make it attractive enough for them to choose to stay.

Shelter can take many forms and quite a lot of them have already been mentioned. Plants offer spaces to hide from the cold, from the heat in summer and places to build nests. Water provides essential shelter for aquatic animals and for those that require water for a particular stage in their development like frogs, toads, newts and dragonflies. But there are other forms of shelter that we can add to our gardens too:

1. Log piles – don't burn or otherwise get rid of old branches and trees. Cut them up and stack them, leaving them to decompose where invertebrates will live in and eat them and amphibians and small mammals will hide in them too
2. Log pyramids – alternatively, turn the logs on their ends, bury them up to a third of their length into the soil and they will provide the same benefits as log piles but below the surface too
3. Compost heaps – as plant waste decomposes it heats up and as a result it often attracts slow worms and grass snakes which use them as places to breed. Hedgehogs too find compost heaps cosy places to hibernate in the winter
4. Dead hedges – invertebrates again are attracted to dead hedges as the plant matter is decomposing. Birds will nest in them as will small mammals
5. Leaf piles – these are attractive in the same way that compost heaps are especially if they are left in an out-of-the-way location
6. Rock piles – favoured particularly by cold-blooded animals, these provide safe holes to hide in and warm spots for basking on in the sunshine
7. Sheds, Barns, Houses and Garages – many animals live in or under our buildings. The key thing to remember is that they need to have access at all times. If butterflies are over-wintering in a shed or garage they need to have a window cracked open or some other way of getting in and out or they may simply die there. Birds like Swifts live in our roofs and are dedicated to these nesting sites so repairs to roofs generally leads to them failing to reproduce. Bats also often choose to live in roofs and blocking or damaging their roost sites is against the law. It is advisable to seek advice if repairs are planned in either of these cases.
8. Artificial shelter – man-made solutions can help where problems arise. For instance, where a roof needs to be repaired and a Swift nest access will be blocked, a Swift nest box can be put in its place. There are many artificial shelters available on the market but research where they need to be positioned before putting them up. Bird boxes for instance should face between north and east to avoid westerly winds and the heat of the sun from the south killing chicks on hot afternoons in the spring and summer. Here are some other options:

a. Hedgehog house
b. Bat box
c. Bird houses
d. Bug hotels

Reproduction

Now that we have persuaded wildlife to live in our gardens, we can try to provide the right conditions for them to breed as well.

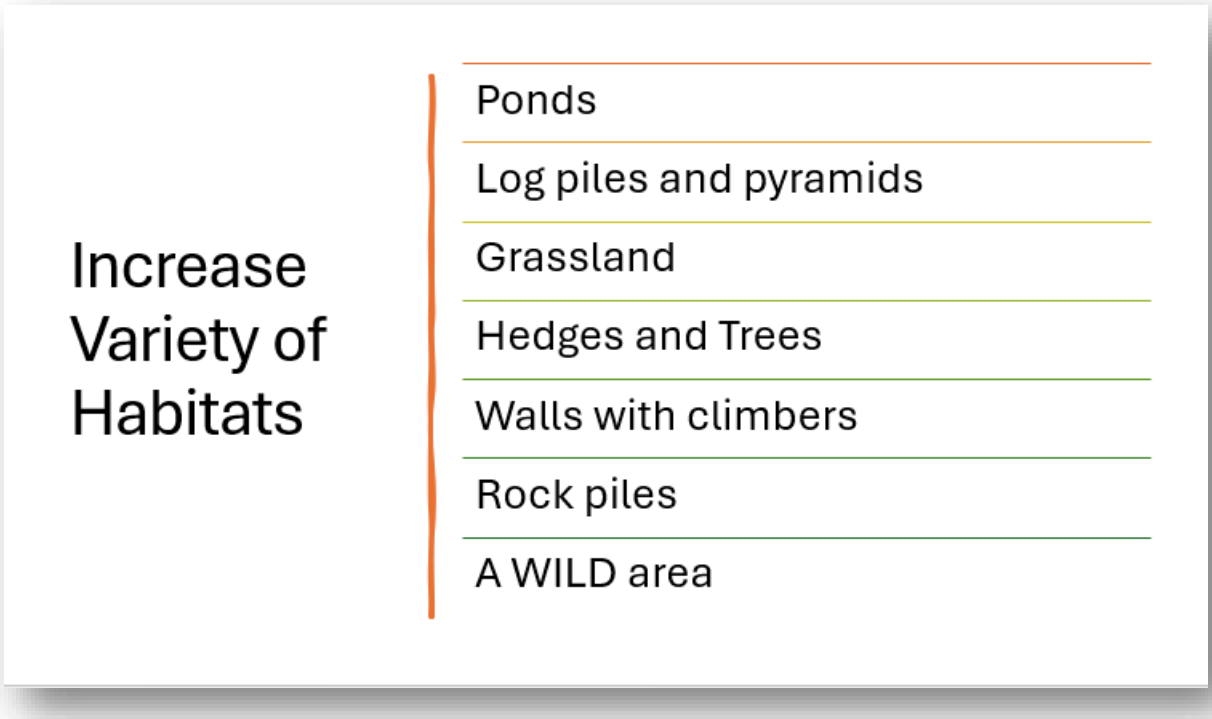
A lot of the things we have already talked about will do this. By this I mean the ponds, shrubs, climbers and compost but some animals have very specific requirements. Butterflies and moths are a good example of this. Many need particular food plants for their larvae to feed on and, if those are not available, they will not lay their eggs in your garden. This Garden Tiger Moth favours docks, bramble and stinging nettles… ALL A GARDENER'S WORST NIGHTMARES!!!

The common nettle is not usually well loved by gardeners. But all these butterflies depend on nettles to feed their young and so do all these moths. So, it's a good idea to allow nettles to live in a corner of your garden if you can. Other butterflies and moths have dependent relationships with other wild plants.

Suitable Habitats

Not only do some animals have very specific requirements for reproduction but also they are frequently tied to very particular habitats.

How many of these habitats do you have in your garden already? We have covered the advantages of the first 6 habitats listed here so I'm now going to focus on the idea of a WILD area.



For some people introducing wildlife measures throughout their whole garden is a big step so why not think about leaving one area to grow wild? Leave it largely uncultivated. Only cut the grass twice a year which would be late summer and late autumn. Put your compost bin or heap in this area and if you can't bear seeing the ***mess*** you could screen it off with a hedge, dead hedge or garden screen which you could allow dog rose and honeysuckle to scramble over.

In your WILD area you can let the weeds grow. We all know that weeds are just plants in the wrong place so this place can be their home. Let the nettles live in this area. Add to that some brambles, dandelions, teasel and ivy. A lot of gardeners worry about ivy damaging their trees as they grow up them. But ivy is such a valuable plant for wildlife especially late in the year. I allow the ivy to grow up the trees in my garden, but I cut it at head height as a compromise.

Ecological Connectivity

Ecological connectivity is a grand phrase to describe the need for wildlife to 'get about'. If wildlife cannot get in or out of your garden they won't live there.

Most animals need to forage for food and that means moving around. Hedgehogs, for instance, travel 2km per night looking for food and the males will walk 3km when they

are looking for love! They, like birds and other small mammals, will travel along the inside of hedges which connect them to other areas. But fences are barriers blocking their way.

Solutions include training climbers up fences for animals that can climb and holes at the bottom for those, like this chap, who can't. Trees planted next to boundaries can help too. Birds will often land in a tree while checking a garden is safe before they decide to swoop in.

Now, these solutions are great in themselves but, if you live in an area with lots of other gardens surrounded by fences with no access it will all be in vain. So, in that case, you need to talk to your neighbours. I know in some of the new developments around Malmesbury, the developers were obliged to put in hedgehog highways so, if you don't have them, you can go back to them and insist.

Don't Forget the Night

It is easy to forget that a considerable proportion of our wildlife is either nocturnal or crepuscular. They have evolved to avoid much of the daytime often for their own safety.

It is a sad fact that the night sky where we live is usually covered with an orange glow caused by man-made Artificial Light At Night (ALAN). It is sad that we have to travel a

long way these days to see the Milky Way lighting up the night sky. But, while that is sad for us, it is devastating for wildlife and the cause is down to us.

ALAN is particularly disruptive for moths. A survey carried out by Butterfly Conservation found that hedgerows illuminated by streetlights had a 47% reduction in caterpillars. Obviously, this means far fewer moths and much less 'baby food' for birds. But the list of problems caused to moths by ALAN doesn't stop there…

Moths are attracted to lights wasting energy and stopping them from feeding, breeding or pollinating. Nocturnal moths use the moon for navigation; lights confuse them leading to circling and exhaustion and ALAN makes moths more vulnerable to predation – if you can be seen you can be caught more easily.

Other animals such as badgers and hedgehogs are affected in similar ways. They avoid artificial light which reduces their available habitat. This also means there's less area to forage and that they may have fewer places to go to find a mate.

Birds are affected too in similar ways, but they are specifically affected by artificial light when migrating causing them to collide with buildings leading to injury and death.

So, what can we do to return the dark to our nights? Well firstly, ask yourself, is that light for visibility or decoration? Do we really need it on? If you consider it is needed. Do you need it all the time? If you're not using a light, turn it off or use sensors and timers so they go off when they are not needed. And even when lights have to be on, shield them so that the light is directed where it is needed – downwards! Lastly, and we don't tend to

think of this, light shining outwards through our windows is just as damaging so shut the curtains when you need to turn the lights on at night.

Well, that's just about everything. Clearly the amount of information here has been vast so here is a summary of things that you can try. Maybe not all at once but have a go at some and then try others once you've got those done. Here is our Top Ten things that could be done to encourage wildlife into your gardens.

Top 10 Actions Summary

1. **Stop using chemicals** (herbicides and pesticides).
2. **Install a pond** (even a small one).
3. **Go Native:** Aim for 70% native plant species.
4. **Stretch the Seasons:** Ensure flowers from early spring to late autumn.
5. **Add a Wild Area:** Leave a corner completely uncultivated.
6. **Don't be too tidy:** Let grass grow and don't cut the perennial stalks down until after the winter.
7. **Keep Garden Waste:** Build log piles and compost.
8. **Stop Light Pollution:** Keep the night dark.
9. **Provide Man-made Aids:** Nest boxes and bug hotels.
10. **Allow Access:** Create gaps in fences so your garden isn't an island.

Useful References

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How to build a Log Pyramid for Stag Beetles from the People's Trust for Endangered Species

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