

NATURE WATCH

Pigmentation of the skin evolved to protect humans from the ultraviolet rays in sunshine. With the reduced level of sunshine in northern latitudes there is a reverse process where the skin loses its pigmentation to allow ultraviolet to penetrate the skin and make vitamin D, which is vital for health. The Celts, who seem to have favoured the less sunny places of the planet, have a gene that results in very pale skin and that also creates red hair. The drawback for redheads is that they are 100 times more vulnerable to developing melanoma and as climate change is leading to more sunshine redheads may well become extinct.

Hot summers are likely to become the norm for the British Isles. In the 1940s and 1950s a hot summer was rare but studies now suggest that over 80% of our summers will become more intense and longer by the end of this century, with temperatures reaching over 40°C in the countryside and over 45°C in cities. Energy to power all those air conditioning units will only add to the problem of generating power without contributing to climate change.



Back in my youth I was always excited by the arrival of the threshing machines at harvest time. One of the delights was the discovery of the harvest mice as they ran for cover when the stooks were lifted. Unfortunately, with the advent of the combine harvester, the nests of

the mice were destroyed and today the harvest mice are more often found in seedbeds and long grass. These tiny golden-brown mice, weighing only about five grams, come out mainly at night to feed on seeds and berries. At least they have survived and are making a home in new habitats.



Ants, on the other hand, are making their annual nests in my garden and in the cracks of my patio. The males will be waiting for the new queens to emerge and when the weather is suitable, hot and muggy, they will fly for miles and will mate

while airborne. The males die and the queens will then fall to the ground, shed their wings and set up a new colony. There is usually more than one ant flying day during the summer, depending on weather conditions.



These flying days are a nuisance to humans but to birds such as black-headed gulls and starlings it is a feast day as they swirl in the skies in pursuit of the flying ants.



Butterflies seem to be everywhere but one particular beauty is difficult to spot as it favours just one tree, the oak, and flits about the topmost branches; this is the purple hairstreak. They look black but at certain angles they appear purple with silver undersides. They will live on the oak tree all of their lives and colonies can survive hundreds of years on the same tree. For a chance to see them you will need a pair of binoculars. Another butterfly that likes oak trees is the silver-washed fritillary. It has orange wings with black spots and silver streaks on its underwings. The female will lay its eggs within the bark crevices and the resultant caterpillar will hibernate in the tree until the following spring.

The singing of the garden birds was a delight during June but it will now fade during July. Blackbirds will not be heard again until next February and the thrush will not sing until at least November. They are also becoming less noticeable as they are moulting and will hide away in the bushes. When the blackbirds do make an appearance, hopping around a bush, they look scruffy with loose feathers and grey streaks. After a few weeks they will reappear with new glossy plumage but the song has gone for a while. The robin will also take a rest from singing but will be back in the autumn to sing through the winter.

The flowers will have gone from the bramble bushes but their berries will be forming by the end of the month. They will start green and then change through red to black as the summer progresses. The mountain ash, or rowan tree, will also have green berries which will change to red but in my garden, once red, they will not last long as the blackbirds seem very partial to rowan berry.

Enjoy the summer months and the wonderful wildlife of our countryside.

Jack Falcon