

## Exploring the garden at night

Rosemary Winnall

As daytime slips away and the evening darkens, I often venture out into my garden with a torch and camera and find there is always something to discover.

Dusk is a good time to look for moths as many start to fly at that time when birds have retired for the night and most predatory bats are not yet on the wing. Experiencing several white male Ghost Swift Moths lekking together with their distinctive hovering flight just above the grass at dusk is impressive. Unusually it is the males of this species that emit a pheromone that attracts the orange brown females, and their white colour probably acts as visible signal too.

Not all moths are able to feed, but those that do need nectar or honeydew for energy and moisture. Some garden flowers as well as wild flowers are favourite nectar sources, such as *Salix* catkins, Ragwort, Valerian, Rose-bay Willow-herb, Lavender, Buddleia and campions. You can soon get to know which plants are favourites in your garden at different times of the year, not just for moths, but also for beetles, flies, bugs, lacewings and other invertebrates. In the winter months the flightless female Winter Moths with their tiny wing stubs may be found on the trunks of deciduous trees, and I record them every year in November on our apple trees (01).



01. Female Winter Moth. Rosemary Winnall.

Of course, using an actinic or mercury vapour light will attract many moths and other creatures, but information about their natural behaviour cannot be obtained by using these lures or by sugaring using a cooked mixture of treacle, sugar and beer which is painted on fence posts and tree trunks. But those methods do provide information about what species are around, and some moths that don't come to light will come to feed after sugaring or from wine ropes (ropes of a natural fibre soaked in mixture of red wine and sugar).

At dusk, the Walnut Orb Weaver spider *Nuctenea umbratica* emerges to spin a new web on trees, gates and fenceposts. These spiders are very hard to find in the daytime as their flattened bodies enable them to hide in cracks and small crevices. The large Garden Spiders *Araneus didematus* also construct new orb webs at night with precision and perseverance, eating the old web first to recycle the silk protein. You can watch the same female for many nights constructing her web, catching prey, and mating. She lays her cocoon of eggs in a safe refuge nearby and stays with it until late autumn when she gets weaker, is unable to repair her web each night and eventually dies. An attractive orb web found near house window frames with two open sections at the top (02) is likely to be that of *Zygiella x-notata*. I find that delicate web construction can be seen better after a rain shower or by using a fine water sprayer.



02. Web of *Zygiella x-notata* spider. Rosemary Winnall.

After rain the slugs emerge from everywhere. Sometimes I get to know individuals that seem to be in the same patch night after night. We have Green Cellar Slugs *Limacus maculatus* that live close to the house, Leopard Slugs *Limax maximus* that come out from the woodshed, Tree Slugs *Limax marginatus* with their watery body slime that can be seen climbing the garden trees, and increasing numbers of Green-soled Slugs *Arion flagellus* roaming the garden with their large tubercles and greenish soles. The latter are interesting because they come in all sizes and colours and mating pairs are frequently of two different colours (03).



03. *Arion flagellus* mating. Rosemary Winnall.

Down on the lawn torchlight might reveal many earthworms feeding by sticking their front ends out of their holes and reaching around for loose vegetation (there are 11 worms in 04). A warm night after rain is the best time to see them and to find them mating (05). Nocturnal beetles may be seen scurrying across the ground, and butterflies may be discovered roosting in the foliage.

The sounds of the night can make interesting background listening and provide more information about what is around. In the winter the fox's shrill scream at mating time can be spine-chilling. Sometimes one can hear the sound of shrews fighting in the undergrowth. Redwings migrate at night in loose flocks and on a still night it is often possible to hear their soft 'seep seep' calls high above in the darkness. Although Tawny Owls are said to mate for life, each winter they reinforce their bond by courting which involves all kinds of strange noises including a vibratory purring not heard at other times.



04. Eleven earthworms feeding. Rosemary Winnall.



05. Two earthworms mating. Rosemary Winnall

Late summer and early autumn are the best times to look for most harvestmen (as their name implies) and many are active at night. They can be seen scampering around tree trunks and over vegetation as they search for food which is generally small invertebrates, although I have seen them sucking juices from ripe damsons and blackberries. They are also frequent visitors when sugaring for moths. The difference between males and the larger females can be observed when they are found mating which they do facing each other (06). The harvestman *Dicranoplalpus ramosus* is often found in gardens and seems to like to inhabit shrubs and trees conveniently at head height. It can be identified easily as it is the only harvestmen in the UK where the pedipalps look forked due to a long apophysis, more slender in the male (07). It is sometimes seen in its typical resting pose on house walls in the daytime when it rests up (08). This species was originally from Morocco and was first recorded in Europe in Portugal in 1948. It was found in Britain in Bournemouth in 1957 from where it spread quickly round the country, reaching Worcestershire in 1985 and Scotland by the year 2000.



06. *Leiobunum rotundum* mating. Male on right. Rosemary Winnall.



07. *Dicranoplalpus ramosus* male. Rosemary Winnall.



08. *Dicranoplalpus ramosus* female in resting pose. Rosemary Winnall.

Watching newts in a garden pond at night with a torch is a great experience and it is possible to tell the difference between male Palmate and Smooth Newts, as the male Palmates have webbed back feet. The females are more difficult to identify to species unless you manage to see the underside of their heads - spotty on Smooth Newts and unspotted on Palmates, although hybrids do occasionally occur. The male Great-crested Newts are splendid with their silver tail stripe and impressive crest (09). Newts are likely to be disturbed with direct torchlight so it is worth experimenting with different types of light, or making it more diffuse with a tissue overlay. It is a delight to watch courtship and egg laying in spring, and as the summer progresses young 'newtpoles' can be distinguished from frog and toad tadpoles by their frilly external gills (10). During late summer I sometimes see Great Crested Newts moving around the garden and it is always a surprise to come across this large amphibian out of water (11). I also find tiny young Palmate and

Smooth Newts recently emerged from the pond, hardly bigger than a fingernail and with their minute delicate feet (12).



09. Male Great-crested Newt in garden pond. Rosemary Winnall.



10. Newtpole in pond in June. Rosemary Winnall.



11. Female Great-crested Newt in garden. Rosemary Winnall.



12. Young male Palmate Newt in garden. Rosemary Winnall.

After rain Pfeiffer's Amber Snails *Oxyloma elegans* with their black bodies, can be seen leaving the water to graze on lichens on the path nearby (13).



13. *Oxyloma elegans* feeding out of pond. Rosemary Winnall.

It is always worth checking deadwood where some strange creatures can be seen emerging from beetle holes (14).



14. *Ptilinus pectinicornis* on dead pear tree. Rosemary Winnall.



15. *Porcellio scaber* shedding skin. Rosemary Winnall.

Many woodlice come out to feed at night and can be found easily. The females carry their young around in a brood pouch for several weeks and these may be spotted. All woodlice moult as they grow, but the skin detaches one half at a time (15). In our garden I find the occasional Tree Ant *Lasius brunneus* in the daytime on the bark of our Blue Atlas Cedar tree, but when I look at the same trunk at night I see many swarming up and down, showing that they are a lot more active at night. They run down the tree swollen with honeydew having fed from aphids up on the leaves, and occasionally I see them bringing down insect prey to take back to the nest.

During the autumn toads start to gather near their hibernation site in our old rockery. I usually have to wait until after midnight to find many and then I see all sizes, often recognising the same ones in the same spot night after night. I can count up to 10, each in their own part of the garden pathways and patio. Occasionally one is found climbing a tree, and to find one a metre off the ground is strange to see (16). I never seem to see them climbing back down again which must be a lot more difficult.



16. Toad up a tree. Rosemary Winnall.

We are never quite sure what mammals visit our garden at night unless we use appropriately sited stealth cameras and then they can reveal a lot. With this method I soon discovered that foxes and badgers were using our garden as a thoroughfare, but the Muntjac outside our dining room window a few weeks ago at the dead of night was a recent surprise. Did you hear about the Red Deer stag that has been frequented suburban gardens on the edge of Dartmoor? Over the last two years he has learned to dislodge peanut feeders with the tip of his antler in order to consume the contents! Clever chap, but I hope this doesn't catch on!

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-somerset-39371060>

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