



JENNIFER OWEN

NO 'WILD' AREAS For 30 years Jennifer Owen recorded the wildlife that visited her modest suburban garden in Leicester

ECOLOGY BEGINS AT HOME



RHS HORTICULTURAL SCIENCE

Mullein moth larva, one of many thousands of species recorded in the garden



Jennifer grows a wide range of plants, and keeps pruning to a minimum

In 1971 Jennifer Owen began to identify exactly which species of wildlife made use of her typical British garden. Her 30-year pioneering study is celebrated this month in a new book published by the RHS, as **Ken Thompson** explains

EARLIER THIS YEAR, zoologist Jennifer Owen received two awards with little, at first sight, to connect them: the RHS Veitch Memorial Medal, and the British Ecological Society's Ecological Engagement Award. The former recognises Jennifer's unique contribution to gardening and the latter to the science of ecology. Both were for her long-term study of the wildlife inhabiting her modest suburban garden, and it is the garden's ordinariness, coupled with the length of the project – three decades – that makes her results so valuable.

Jennifer graduated in zoology from the University of Oxford in 1958, then gained a PhD at the University of Michigan. In 1962 she moved first to the University College of Makerere (now Makerere University) in Uganda, then to Fourah Bay College, now the University of Sierra Leone.

In Sierra Leone she first noticed that there seemed to be more wildlife in her garden than in the neighbouring forest. When she returned to a post at Leicester University in 1971, she wondered

exactly what lived in her garden. Thus began the study that was to occupy the next 30 years.

Determination and knowledge

Jennifer brought to this endeavour a thorough academic training in zoology, passions for natural history and gardening – and what turned out to be almost superhuman 'staying power'. Few would contemplate assembling a complete inventory of the species in their garden for even one year; to persist for 30 years is an achievement that will probably never be equalled.

She recognised long before 'wildlife gardening' was fashionable (14 years before Chris Baines' first wildlife garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show), that gardens were an important, but unrecognised habitat for native wildlife. She saw that this did not depend upon creating 'fake countryside': her own Leicester garden is a neat, productive suburban garden for growing flowers and vegetables. Her only concessions have been to avoid pesticides and excessive tidiness.

UNEXPECTED OUTCOME The study found that non-native garden plants can support extensive wildlife

Jennifer Owen with her RHS Veitch Memorial Medal

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ASTONISHING REVELATIONS

Over the whole 30-year study period, Jennifer recorded 2,673 species: 474 plants, 1,997 insects, 138 other invertebrates (such as spiders, woodlice and slugs) and 64 vertebrates, 54 of them birds.

In some groups, including bees, butterflies, moths, hoverflies, ladybirds and harvestmen, this one small garden in Leicester was visited by a quarter or more of the total numbers known from the whole of Britain for these groups.

Great diversity

These totals are not the full story, however: no attempt was made to identify or count many large groups of insects in which many species are particularly similar. Making some reasonable assumptions about these 'missing' species, it is probable that many more than 8,000 insect species alone visited the garden at one time or another.

For three years only, a detailed study of one of these 'difficult' groups – a large family of parasitic wasps – recorded 533 species. These included seven species new to Britain, and four new to science – forcibly illustrating that our knowledge of Britain's wildlife is far from complete. Most of these wasps are tiny and harmless – unless you are a caterpillar or an aphid that they parasitize – and make up a significant part of your garden's free, volunteer pest-control service.

i *Wildlife of a Garden: a thirty-year study*, by

Jennifer Owen, RHS, 15 Nov 2010, RRP £30, ISBN 9781907057120

● RHS offer price (until 31 Dec) £25; call RHS mail order, 0845 260 4505 or visit: www.rhshop.co.uk

From the start, Jennifer reported her findings in scientific journals, but she soon also began to communicate with a wider audience. Early results were published in a book, *Garden Life* (1983), and there were numerous articles in *The Garden*, *New Scientist* and the magazine *Organic Gardening*. In 1991 Cambridge University Press released an exhaustive summary of all her research in the book *The Ecology of a Garden: the First Fifteen Years*.

This remains compulsory reading for anyone seriously interested in garden wildlife, and was at the time the most complete account of the wildlife of any garden anywhere in the world. This month, the RHS publishes the complete story: *Wildlife of a Garden: a thirty-year study*. A third of a century is long enough to record many changes, the reasons for some obvious, others less so. For example, the effects of climate change are clearly shown by the arrival in the garden of gatekeeper and speckled wood butterflies, among the most abundant butterflies in the garden when surveying ended in 2001.

Surprising results

The study has demolished the belief that gardens are wildlife deserts – clearly the only reason anyone believed that was because no-one had looked for wildlife there. Her meticulous records of herbivore host plants also led her to the insight that non-native, exotic garden plants can support a surprisingly high diversity of native herbivores.

Jennifer has shown that any garden can be home to a range of wildlife. With recent well-documented declines in biodiversity in the agricultural landscape, this is a timely message – gardeners have never had such a responsibility for wildlife.

The Ecology of a Garden feels like a textbook, with long lists of Latin names. *Wildlife of a Garden*, though not a beginner's guide, is more accessible: anyone interested in garden wildlife will find it absorbing. You may think that does not include you, but this book could change your mind. ■

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