

Wildlife Gardening Forum Talks

All talks are free but people are invited to make a small contribution towards speakers' expenses and the cost of hiring the venue. Everyone is welcome.

1 Michael Blencowe – Gardening with Wildlife in Mind

The formal launch of the Forum was on 17 March, when more than 50 people crowded into the Parish Hall to be both informed and entertained by the inimitable Michael Blencowe, the subject, suitably enough, being gardening with wildlife in mind.

Michael is one of those very rare people who combine an encyclopaedic knowledge of, it seems, virtually all forms of wildlife with an ability to see the funny side of everything. He could probably have made a very good living as a stand-up comedian. Perhaps he still could. Instead, after spells as a psychiatric nurse, time with Natural England (which he described as the worst job he'd ever had) and more recently at the Sussex Wildlife Trust (in which capacity he was voted Lewes Personality of the Year, in the days of the much-lamented Viva Lewes, edited by Kingston's own Alex Leith) he has gone freelance. He now devotes his time to writing, conducting surveys, public speaking and leading walks and tours – all with a wildlife theme. His website michaelblencowe.com has further details.

His approach was very far from the didactic “this is how to do it” that some may have been expecting. Instead we were treated to an illustrated account of all the many birds and beasts that Michael encountered in and around his own garden during the early days of the pandemic lockdown. These included hedgehogs, bats, the family of foxes which made a home underneath his next door neighbour's shed, hyperactive yellow-necked mice and a vast range of invertebrates and amphibians which colonised his pond.

Although Michael is a superb all-round naturalist, if he were ever to appear on Mastermind his first specialist subject would probably be butterflies and moths. In 2017, he co-authored, with Neil Hume, *The Butterflies of Sussex* and it was therefore no real surprise to hear that the 30 or so butterfly species he has recorded in his garden include Purple Emperor, White Admiral and even the elusive Brown Hairstreak. He was delighted to find that Brimstone butterflies had laid eggs on the Alder Buckthorn shrubs which he'd planted especially for that very purpose! Among the birds, perhaps the biggest surprise has been Yellowhammer, a bird not normally much associated with gardens but which has apparently made an exception of Michael's garden where there is now a small visiting winter flock. He regularly runs a moth trap which has attracted, literally, hundreds of species (there are only 54 species of butterfly in the UK but more than 2,500 moths).

To say that Michael is no fan of closely mown lawns would be an understatement of almost criminal proportions. Showing consecutive slides of his near neighbour's perfectly manicured but dull and lifeless lawn followed by his own newly created wildflower meadow, ablaze with colour and humming with invertebrate life, made words unnecessary. Not everyone in his locality, greeted this radical step with enthusiasm, though, and when he started stripping the turf from his front garden in preparation for sowing wildflower seed, there were dark mutterings in the community: the local vicar even accused him of being an “ecomaniac”. However, opinion shifted so dramatically when the meadow burst into life with annuals like poppies and cornflower that several of the severest critics of his methods even began to adopt them in their own gardens. The result is a series of linked mini-meadows, while many people in the area have also made spaces beneath their fences to allow hedgehogs easier access. New ponds are being dug too. Could this happen in Kingston too? We were left wondering and hoping.

Michael has little time for the range of expensive aids to attracting wildlife to your garden now available in garden centres and online. Bug hotels? Instead, drill a series of holes of different sizes into logs. How about a "Bee and butterfly bath"? (A mere £28-95 from The Worm That Turned). Why not just put some water in a shallow dish!

All in all this was a quite inspirational talk and one that made you go away filled with enthusiasm and ideas to try out in your own garden. I'll be getting out my own drill very shortly!

