

handson

PART 2I: PREPARING GARDEN

Meals for mammals

FEEDING WILD MAMMALS IN THE GARDEN CAN BE AT LEAST AS REWARDING AS FEEDING THE BIRDS, BUT IT REQUIRES A LITTLE MORE PATIENCE AND KNOW-HOW, AS PAT MORRIS EXPLAINS.

Many wildlife enthusiasts put out food for the birds and, in return, enjoy watching them feed. Creating a similar partnership with mammals is more difficult because most of them are nocturnal and only put in an appearance after dark when they cannot be seen properly.

However, some mammals do come out in daylight, especially squirrels, and they will readily feed in our gardens. This gives pleasure to many, but annoys a few because grey squirrels are especially good at raiding bird feeders. In a way it's a bit illogical to put out food for wildlife then complain when unintended wild animals turn up to eat it! Moreover, a squirrel's antics in attempting to defeat the various defences intended to frustrate it can be very

Perhaps the favourite garden dinner guest? Food put out for hedgehogs will bring them regularly to your garden where they are usually tolerant of observers.

entertaining and also illustrate what adaptable and clever creatures squirrels are. In some areas red squirrels will also come to feeders, although they seem to be less ingenious and persistent in their raids than greys. Please don't try to feed squirrels in areas where reds and greys both occur. Sadly for the beleaguered reds, the risk of contracting fatal disease at shared feeders outweighs the benefits of the extra food.

Honoured guests

Increasingly we hear of dormice coming to feed at peanut baskets, having been lured out in daylight and away from their woodland and hedgerow haunts. Attracting such elusive species to your garden is likely to be more a matter of luck than planning, but if you have good reason to suspect dormice

are present locally, a ready supply of nuts, ripe fruit and a few small mealworms will appeal to them.

Other rodents are relatively easy to feed, indeed many will make a habit of checking out bird tables whether you intend it or not. Bank voles, wood mice and yellow-necked mice are agile climbers and will often access feeding platforms from above and below. But if you wish to encourage these charismatic species you must also accept that rats and house mice may also take advantage. You can reduce the risk of unwanted infestation by not overdoing the food supply. Food in small

KILLERS AND THEIVES

Sometimes cats and magpies take advantage of food put out for wild mammals, but you can keep both at bay by putting the food bowl inside a wire cage, which can only be accessed through a small tunnel. Hedgehogs can manage tunnels, but cats can't easily do so and magpies usually won't dare. Rats are more of a problem, but wet foods tend to be less attractive to them (and more useful to hedgehogs).



BETTY MCKAY, DAVE BEVAN, LAURIE CAMPBELL

quantities is less likely to cause a problem.

Larger animals you might be able to attract to your garden include badgers, foxes and pine martens. The latter are of course only likely to be seen in the wilder parts of Scotland, where a few individuals have been enticed into appearing before visitors by the provision of sponge cake and jam tarts! This may sound like an inappropriate menu, but it is often forgotten just how much fruit occurs in the marten's natural diet. Sugary things make us fat and we do well to be wary of them, but for wild mammals body fat aids survival by providing a valuable reserve for when the weather is too bad to go out foraging.

Feasting foxes

The food available in gardens has long been an attraction for urban foxes. Indeed, this additional easy grub could be one of the reasons why foxes are today so abundant in towns, and may even be the main reason why foxes invaded the urban environment in the first place. Food put out for dogs and cats is also available for foxes to take with little effort on their part. Urban foxes do best in places where houses have large gardens that back on to each other. The intervening fences are only a minor inconvenience to an athletic creature like the fox, which then has access to a considerable area, with plenty of sheds and bushes to provide shelter, with compost heaps and bird tables to provide a suitably varied diet. Often there is little need to venture out into the streets and risk getting run over. These animals are also used to streetlights and the fact that urban

areas never get really dark at night. It is easy to persuade them to feed under stronger lights on the patio or at the back door where they can be observed closely without disturbing their behaviour.

Town and country

As urban areas expand, they engulf badger territories, and as badger numbers expand, they seek new places to live. In some places they appear to be enjoying the same rewards of urban life that foxes discovered half a century ago. They too can be encouraged to become bolder and feed close to the house where they can be seen easily, sometimes even in daylight. They are especially fond of peanuts in golden syrup, a meal that is better (for the observer anyway!) than bits of meat or other large items because the badgers cannot easily carry it away to eat discreetly somewhere out of sight.

There are drawbacks to feeding urban badgers and foxes. If rabies ever became established in Britain, rabid foxes living so close to so many people would be a serious problem for us all. Too many urban badgers may become a problem too because they pose a threat to hedgehogs. Badgers are really the only natural predators for our spiky friends, who find relative safety in our gardens and towns, but not where badger numbers are increasing. Hedgehogs are in serious decline nationwide, and although we all love badgers, it is important that we do not forget that they kill and eat hedgehogs in both towns and countryside.

The hedgehog is another animal that benefits from food we put out for them (and from what they can pinch out of dog bowls and off

A well-provisioned feeding station will increase the chances of local wildlife visiting your garden. Dormice (left) benefit from oily nuts and sugary fruits. Badgers enjoy nuts too, especially mixed with syrup or honey – well who wouldn't? Pine martens also have an unexpectedly sweet tooth. The trust exhibited by this wild individual (right) is based on regular generous offerings of bread and jam.

HYGEINE

Hygiene is important when feeding wild mammals. Wash bowls and feeders regularly and do not allow food put out to rot.

bird tables). Often more than ten animals may use a single garden. Traditionally people put out bread and milk, which hedgehogs like and may travel over a quarter of a mile for. But too much of this gives hedgehogs an upset tummy. Overall, if well watered down, it probably does more good than harm, especially in dry weather when the natural food is hard to come by, but it is better to avoid cow's milk and offer tinned dog food or moistened dog biscuits. Serve in a heavy dish to prevent it being tipped up and split.

Just browsing

Some wild mammals will visit your garden without the enticement of specially prepared meals. Deer and rabbits can become the bane of gardener's lives, nibbling shoots and buds. If you enjoy seeing these wild animals but are trying to grow ornamental plants or vegetables for your own consumption, use fencing to protect the produce and offer alternative foods in another part of the garden.

Who nibbled the nuts? Garden feeding stations can be a great source of reference material to use in identifying the feeding remains of wild animals. Put out unshelled nuts and see the distinctive ways your visitors open them. The nuts below were gnawed by (left to right) wood mice, squirrels and bank voles.

