



Rupert Evershed's monthly diary of the natural world  
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# Variety is the spice of life with all its flavour

**As the poet William Cowper declared, "Variety's the very spice of life, that gives it all its flavour." If so, then nature at this time of year is very spicy! Almost everywhere I go I am stopped in my tracks by the busy-ness of wildlife.**

Last week it was the squeak of baby tawny owls from deep within a wood. I couldn't see them in the twilight but could tell there were at least three from their squeaked geography. Another tree let out a rasping yet pleading call telling me that a family of little owls had just fledged. In the gloom of dusk I made out the shape of a large adult fox, just ahead of me, sniffing at the remains of the day.

This week, as the sun shone down, it has been insects that have distracted my attentions. A multitude of marbled white butterflies have emerged – on one small bank I counted upwards of one hundred, fluttering and dancing through the tall grasses and settling briefly to secure a mate.

In between these larger butterflies wove meadow browns, ringlets and the tiny skipper butterflies so easily dismissed as moths. Large, small and Essex skippers all superficially little orange butterflies and yet each distinct in its own right.

Walking on past some old oak trees I espied more fluttering butterflies at the very top of the leaf canopy. These were purple



The growth stages of the Harlequin ladybird - adult.

Picture: RUPERT EVERSLED

hairstreaks dancing in relentless and dashing courtship circles in the warm evening light.

And then, in a moment I shall never forget, the glimpse of purple I had been longing for – not a hairstreak but the lord of butterflies: a purple emperor, quietly resting beneath a fold of oak leaves. As I watched he slowly opened his wings just enough for me to glimpse that mesmerising purple upper-wing. It was a rare treat and my first ever encounter with "His Imperial Majesty" as butterfly enthusiasts are wont to call him!

It is not just the immense variety between different species either and recently I encountered the extraordinary evolution of just one species across a few plants in my garden. I have left a stand of self-seeded tall thistles to grow and they are just about to flower. Hopefully I am not unleashing a thistle plague on neighbouring gardens but the appeal for wildlife is too great an opportunity to miss!

Many of the thistles are beset with dense swathes of black aphids cashing in on the thistles' sap but not far off lurks the aphids' nemesis – ladybirds! There's nothing that ladybirds enjoy more than to feed on the rich and no doubt sweet aphid hoards and in this they do the weakened thistles a service. After a closer inspection of each plant I realised the whole thistle stand was a nursery for developing

aphid-munchers!

Underneath one leaf, just out of view, stood the bright yellow, miniature bowling-pin eggs of the ladybirds. On another plant a ladybird larva was hungrily tucking in to the aphids, unrecognisable from the adult ladybird this larva possessed none of the attractive qualities of the shiny red and spotted fairy book adults. On yet another plant an orange pupa stood upright, perpendicular to the leaf, as if performing some kind of pupal gymnastics maybe in a bid to be finally freed to fly as an adult.

Each stage of the ladybird's growth to adulthood was so different from the next that viewed alone no connection could be made to the bright shiny bug we know and (mostly) love. In just one small area of 'weeds' I felt I had uncovered a thousand mysteries, barely scratching the surface of the true variety on offer. All the while a rotation of bees dived into the newly emerging purple spiky petals, eager for the new nectar within.

Later in the year, as the thistle heads dry and die, I hope they may draw down a flock of goldfinches, their tinkling notes and red and gold adornment ensuring that variety continues long after summer is gone. It is this variety that means that nature is never bland and, if we allow ourselves to be distracted by it for a moment, our lives will be flavoured all the more richly.



A bee on a thistle.

Picture: RUPERT EVERSLED