

FEATURES

There's lots you can do to make wildlife comfortable in your garden this spring, says Alex Morss

W E MAY be a few weeks off barbecue season, but right now South Bristol's gardens are a hot-pot of wild hanky panky. I'm talking about the birds and the bees, as well as bold urban mammals such as the busy fox, and especially the amorous amphibians.

With spring beckoning them to get busy, here are some easy and fun garden upgrades you can do to welcome our wild, preoccupied friends.

BIRDIE HOLES

YOU'LL enjoy a chorus and a show if you stick up new bird boxes soon. The law says it's too late now to clean out old boxes. Plenty of garden bird species are checking out potential nesting sites and early broods such as long-tailed tits, robins, blackbirds and herons are already off the starting blocks.

Various bird box designs and positions will suit different species, so think which bird species are regular visitors to your garden, or likely new ones you could appeal to, then look up the right box type, hole size and location on the links below.

For example, 25mm holes for blue, coal and marsh tits; 28mm for great tits, tree sparrows; 32mm for house sparrows and nut hatches, 45mm for starlings.

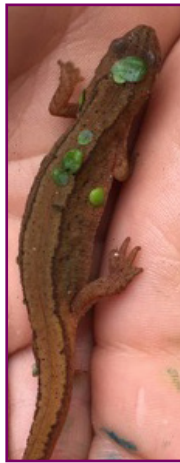
Check these websites for more:

- rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/how-you-can-help-birds/nestboxes/nestboxes-for-small-birds/
- avonwildlifetrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/basiclyboxes-part1.pdf

It's all about location with birds, so attract them by making your garden and nest box into a des res, adding nuts and seeds in bird feeders nearby, and vegetation cover to provide perches and extra safety. These will in turn attract insects for them to eat. Remember to position all these goodies away from prowling cats.

POND LIFE

IT'S A good time to tart up your pond with new plants that will



On your doorstep: You could see a smooth newt, left, a long-tailed tit or a Southern Hawker dragonfly

Provide a welcome in spring

benefit pond life, or create a new pond to attract spring visitors. Amphibians are getting jiggy about now, so avoid dredging, as there is likely to be mating and spawn.

Newts like to lay their tiny eggs on emerging vegetation, so try introducing a couple of aquatic and marginal natives such as water mint, water forget-me-not, water avens, brooklime and the gorgeous golden marsh marigold – also adored by pollinators.

We have both frogs and toads in our district, so you may find the newts eat some of the frog spawn, but that's perfectly natural. We have two of Britain's three native newts species – the smooth and palmate newt. Sadly, the magnificent and highly-protected great crested newt seems to be absent, but tell us if you know of any! It survives in a handful of places in Bristol. Newts only use a pond for breeding and live the rest of the time within a few hundred metres of water, so good wilder gardens and alleys with lots of insect food and hiding places are vital.

You could reasonably expect to attract zooming, egg-laying visits to your pond from spectacular local dragonflies and damselflies such as the Southern Hawker, Emperor, Banded, Azure, Blue-Tailed, Large Red and Common Darter.


Birds will also benefit from a shallow pond margin, as will foxes – vixens will be pregnant now and give birth to cubs in March and April. Also, our

popular local hedgehog population will be awakening from hibernation once night temperatures rise above 5C, and will need copious amounts to drink. If you can't manage a pond, then a shallow plant pot

tray, regularly topped up with rainwater, would help quench the thirsty.


Job done. Sit back and enjoy the spring spectacle!

• **Next issue:** The best spring flower ideas for a garden pollinator



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