

All Change - urban recording in Bewdley

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Recording urban wildlife has many advantages: there is no predicting what will turn up, the variety of species can offer some exciting identification challenges and most importantly, there is usually a coffee shop or pub nearby. As temperatures rise, our “heat-island” towns and cities are crucibles of change where we can record the arrival of new species either through range expansion, accidental or deliberate release. So when 17 members of the Wyre Forest Study Group (WFSG) met at Gardners Meadow car park in Bewdley on 7th September to explore the river bank and nearby parks, we had no idea exactly what to expect. Some changes were more predictable than others: a Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* which wafted upriver in search of the numerous fish fry which abound at this time of year, is now an expected late summer feature. We also enjoyed several views of Kingfishers *Alcedo atthis*, so bright that they almost left an afterglow.

After admiring clusters of Mexican Fleabane *Erigeron karvinskianus*, a plant which has firmly established itself along the Bewdley quayside thanks to warmer weather, we headed into Jubilee Gardens and were distracted enroute by an ivied wall at Old Tannery Court. It takes an iron will not to beat ivy in autumn as you never know what might be lurking in its

leathery foliage. Today we found a few Green Shield Bugs *Palomena prasina* and a Box Bug *Gonocerus acuteangulatus*. A decade ago the Box Bug was a scarce insect locally, but is now fairly widespread in gardens, parks and cemeteries. The best find here was a full-grown Southern Pill Woodlouse *Armadillidium depressum*, whose large size and distinctive “flanged” skirts caused by the flattened pleon, distinguish it from the much commoner *Armadillidium vulgare*. Worcestershire is on the north-western limit of its range in the UK and there are records from the south but this may be the first record of this impressive woodlouse in Bewdley. It is a synanthropic species (associated with human activity) and so well worth looking for anywhere on old walls and in cellars.

We pursued the theme of monitoring new arrivals in Jubilee Gardens where another ivied wall was home to dozens of green *Nigma walckenaeri* spiders, sitting in their webs stretched across the leathery leaves. In the last two decades this spider seems to have increased its range dramatically in England and can be locally common in gardens, parks and cemeteries, especially in the Severn valley. A much more elusive spider among the ivy leaves was the jumping spider *Ballus chalybeius* which is either scarce or, more probably,



Armadillidium depressum

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Jumping spider, *Ballus chalybeius* Rosemary Winnall

overlooked in Worcestershire but which occasionally turns up in summer in tree foliage along the Severn valley. A few years ago, I was pleased to find a single wing-case of the small ladybird *Nephus quadrimaculatus* in ivy on this wall and since then I have found just one live specimen. This black ladybird with four red blotches on its elytra was until recently confined to south-east Worcestershire, but is yet another invertebrate which is expanding and consolidating its range throughout the county. Today, we found at least 20 specimens among the leaves - proof that this attractive beetle is here to stay and well worth looking for in evergreen foliage in autumn.

Progress is always slower than expected with so many habitats to investigate and we spent much longer in Jubilee Gardens than anticipated. A wall near the pond produced the harvestmen *Odiellus spinosus* and *Opilio canestrinii*, both of which seem to be increasing in urban areas. With permission from the park manager, we explored the compost heap for molluscs and as we did, were serenaded from the yew tree by a loudly singing Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*. The yews in the park are traditional feeding grounds for Hawfinches *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*, whose scientific name means kernel-smasher; their powerful bills can exert (in old money) a force of 180 pounds per square inch which helps them break into the yew seeds. Although we didn't see any today, these scarce birds are one of the prime ornithological attractions of Bewdley town in winter and early spring.

After a park-based picnic lunch, we walked along Lax Lane to the High Street, then crossed it to navigate Old Pals Alley, part of the network of ancient paths that make the townscape so eminently explorable. An old wall here was full of spider webs, most of them the flimsy constructions of *Amaurobius* species, draped like tattered doilies across the brickwork. Among them were a few webs with strands of silk radiating from a central



Looking at *Segestria florentina* webs

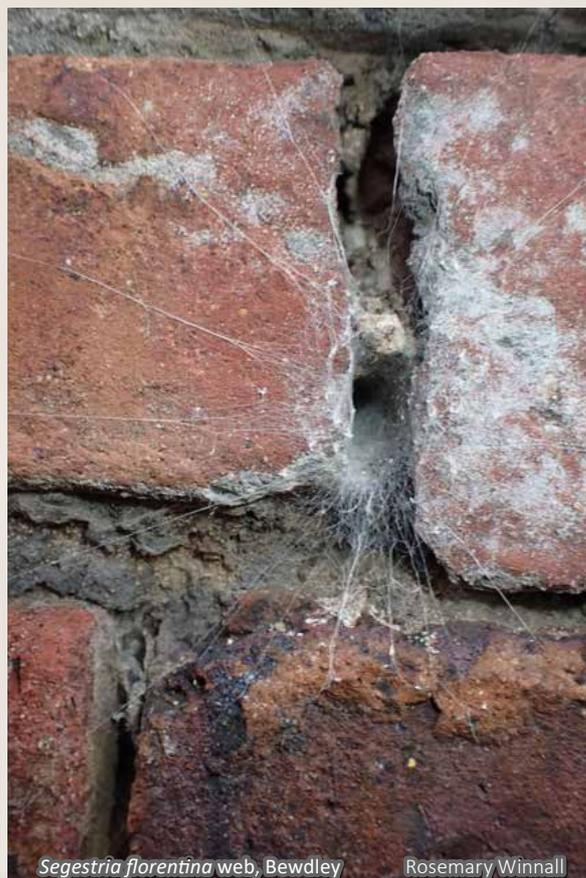
Rosemary Winnall

hole and this alerted us to the possibility of *Segestria* spiders. These spiders, which have six-eyes, live in wall cracks from which they spin a series of radiating tripwires like wheel-spokes. These tripwires are not sticky, so when a woodlouse, a fly or a solitary bee touches one, the spider rushes out at lightning speed to seize its prey. It's a heart-stopping moment which can make even experienced arachnologists jump and the photographer Stephen Dalton, a self-confessed arachnophobe, has recorded that even at a speed of one three-thousandth of a second, his shots of the capture were still slightly blurred.

We tested our nerves and the spiders' patience by tickling the tripwires, to see which of the three UK species of *Segestria* was living there and to our surprise and delight, we discovered that they were *Segestria florentina*, the Green-fanged Tube-Web spider. Andrew Curran and others managed to capture photographs of the females' diagnostic green chelicerae as they darted out to grab their

prey. This spider is native to the Mediterranean, but is an accomplished stowaway and so has entered the UK usually around ports where it has established colonies, mainly in southern England and South Wales. In recent years, its range has shifted north and inland, presumably due to climate change, though it remains scarce in Worcestershire with recent records from Pershore Abbey, Malvern and Worcester. Maybe if we checked our old walls, churches and other historic buildings, we might find more sites for this charismatic (and slightly un-nerving) creature: take a tuning fork or an electric toothbrush with you to tempt the spider to strike.

The day ended with most of us having seen at least one new species and all of us surprised at the scale of change we could find in a relatively small area. At a time when we are losing so much wildlife in the wider countryside, maybe there is some comfort in backing the winners and celebrating the creatures which are thriving on our doorsteps.



Segestria florentina web, Bewdley

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