Beginnings - a wild childhood

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Like many people who have turned their hobby into a job, I am often asked what sparked my interest in wildlife. The questioner expects me to name a single event, some kind of Damascene conversion, but in my case, it was a gradual process which deepened and broadened thanks to encouragement from my parents and in particular, two grandfathers.

Until I was eight years old, our house was at Lutley in Halesowen and my mother's parents were just a few doors up. Grandad Payne was a keen gardener and from the age of four, I practically lived in his greenhouse, helping him to sow seeds of blue Lobelia and white Alyssum, Salvias, Nemesias and Ageratum, later pricking them out into cardboard seed pots and eventually planting them in neat rows in the flower-beds which bordered his front and back lawns. In late summer, we would put paper bags over his favourite chrysanthemum blooms to keep the earwigs out. Our soundtrack to this horticultural activity was the chatter of House Martins which nested under the eaves and I helped to change the newspaper beneath their nests, put down to keep the slabs clean.

My paternal grandparents had a much larger garden on the edge of Hagley and Grandad Westwood also grew his own plants. Like Grandad Payne, he nurtured houseplants such as Coleus, but also grew Schizanthus which he called Poor-man's orchid, a term used in the Black Country for any exotic-looking, but available flower: Himalayan Balsam was another of these honorary orchids. I absorbed this local folklore while reading about the real names for animals and plants in the Ladybird, Observers and I-Spy books which I devoured in my early years. They didn't help me with "quice" though, my grandparents' name for Woodpigeon, or "tailor-birds" which was what Grandad Westwood called Goldfinches, because the pale tips to their secondary wing-feathers reminded him of stitches. I remember him lifting me up to see a Goldfinch nest in one of his rose-arches and pointing out Bullfinch damage among his apple trees.

Back in Halesowen, and equipped with a butterfly net, I hung around the Buddleia bush which overhung Grandad Payne's garage in the hope of catching a Peacock (butterfly), at the time an almost unattainable prize. There were lots of Small Tortoiseshells (how times have changed) which my grandfathers called King Georges, but Peacocks with their flamboyant art deco eyespots were always just out of reach. I had more luck on a tiny local patch of waste-ground which was bright with knapweed and bird's foot trefoil and at the right



season, saw good numbers of Large and Small Skippers. Burnet moths were the main attraction here, whirring dreamily through the grass jungle which was as tall as I was. Not only were they beautiful, they were catchable by hand and were one of the first insects I took time to identify and read about. They contained cyanide apparently and had papery pupal cases which looked like alien life-forms: best of all they were a few yards down the road. Possessing nature was all-important back then and I would come home, often after missing lunch, triumphantly brandishing a jam-jar greasy with the scales of imprisoned butterflies. Very rarely I would catch a Peacock and drink in its rich colours and patterns before killing and setting it. Grandad Westwood even procured wooden cigar-boxes for me to display my catch. Looking back, this seems like heresy, but photography in the late 1960s wasn't really an option and butterflies seemed to be everywhere, so where was the harm? I still wasn't entirely happy though and my collecting phase only lasted a couple of years or so. Later I moved onto less damaging items such as feathers and I will forever be grateful to Grandad Westwood for illegally smuggling a Peacock feather from Brownsea Island in Dorset by stuffing it down his trouser leg.

At this time, I was also exploring my own garden and finding other creatures. I was fascinated by the ants which ran over the tight green peony buds in spring and it was several decades later that I learned that they were looking for secretions from extra-floral nectaries. The weeping willow on the

front lawn trailed its branches down to the ground and I would hide in this green tent to avoid being asked to tidy my room or do household jobs or eat meals or indeed anything that interrupted nature studies. Occasionally I would find a hawk-moth larva as fat as my fingers among the hanging curtains of leaves and sometimes the Poplar Hawk-moths themselves, impossibly large and approachable. At this pre-binocular age, I was most interested in butterflies and moths which were usually easy to identify, but at the age of six, I found something utterly confusing. I was exploring the local waste ground for the marbled turquoise "slag stones", relics from iron-ore smelting, which littered the area, when I noticed a long brown shape hugging a willowherb stem. It had marvellous mauve-tinted eyespots and was silky to touch, softer than the finest pigskin gloves. Its legs gripped me as I prised it from its perch and rushed home with my prize. Was it an insect or a strange reptile? Eventually, after consulting my books, I managed to identify it as the caterpillar of an Elephant Hawk-moth and paraded it around my friends who were fascinated and horrified in equal measure. There is no single moment which galvanised my interest in wildlife, but this comes closest: a spectacular creature which encouraged me to research its identity, to investigate its life-style by feeding it and allowing it to pupate, and to enthuse others by spreading the word to friends and family. Nothing has changed really and thanks to the support I had from my parents and grandparents, I've been doing it for nearly 60 years.



Elephant Hawk-moth Larva. Brett Westwood



Peacock butterfly. Brett Westwood