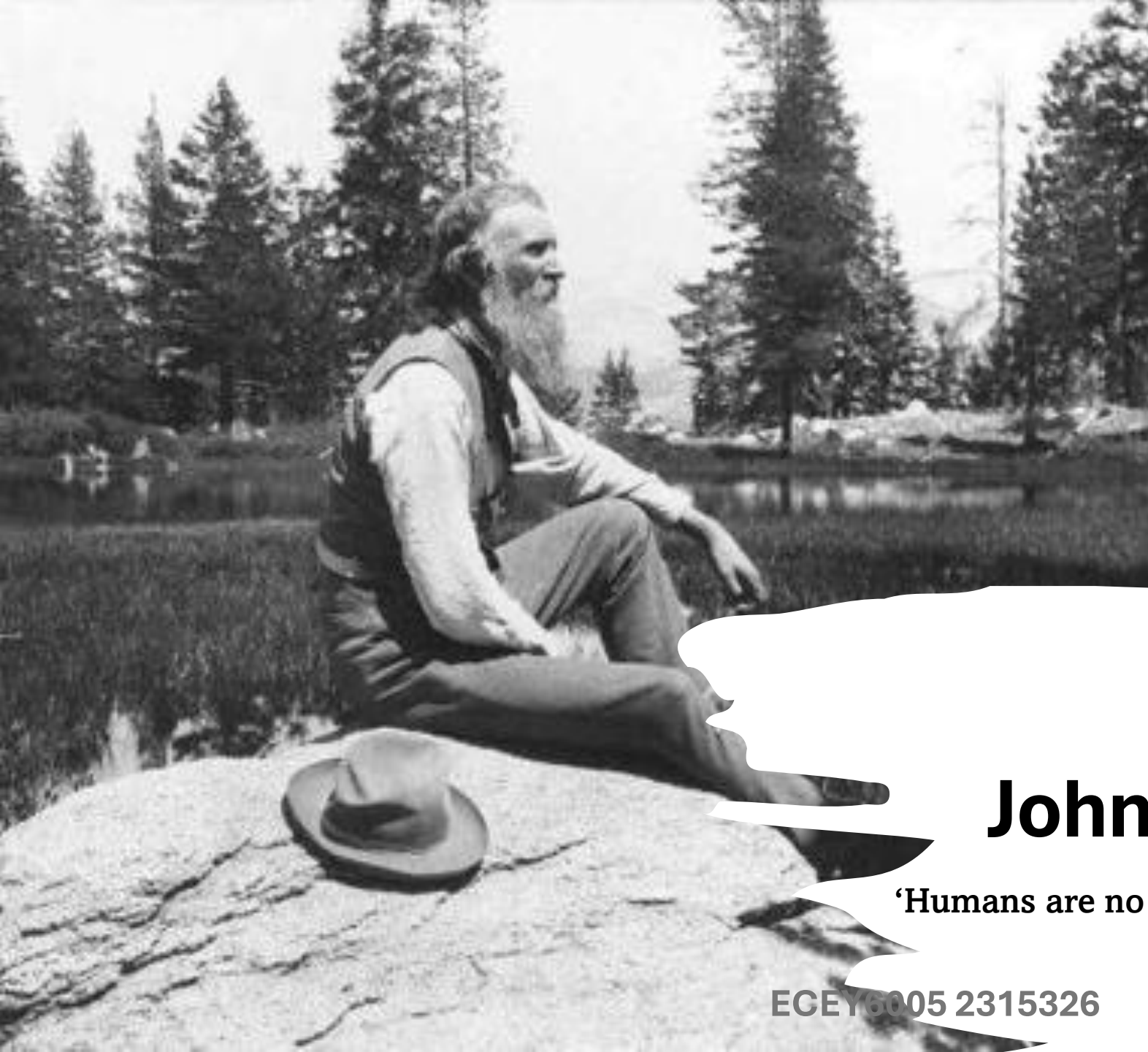




Sustainability in the Early Years.

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John Muir 1838-1914

'Humans are no greater or lesser than other forms of life.'

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John Muir was a Scottish-American naturalist, writer, and conservationist who devoted his life to exploring and protecting America's wild places, particularly in California's Sierra Nevada. During his lifetime, Muir explored and studied the Sierra Nevada mountains. He advocated and fought many battles to protect the land from destruction after commercial developments threatened it. These efforts played a significant role in the creation of Yosemite National Park. Roosevelt, the President then, was greatly influenced by Muir and established five national parks, including Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona and Sequoia National Park on the south side of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California. Muir continued to raise awareness of the natural environment through his work to support and protect it. Writing powerful words of poetry inspired people to act. This further helped to ensure that wild places would be protected for future generations.



John Muir spoke and wrote passionately about nature, often describing it as sacred, healing, and beneficial to the human soul. He saw all living things as interconnected and deserving of love and respect, stating that wilderness should be preserved for its beauty and spiritual and ecological value. I always feel connected to the world and myself in nature, it makes me feel calm and like I am inside my body rather than on autopilot. Present.

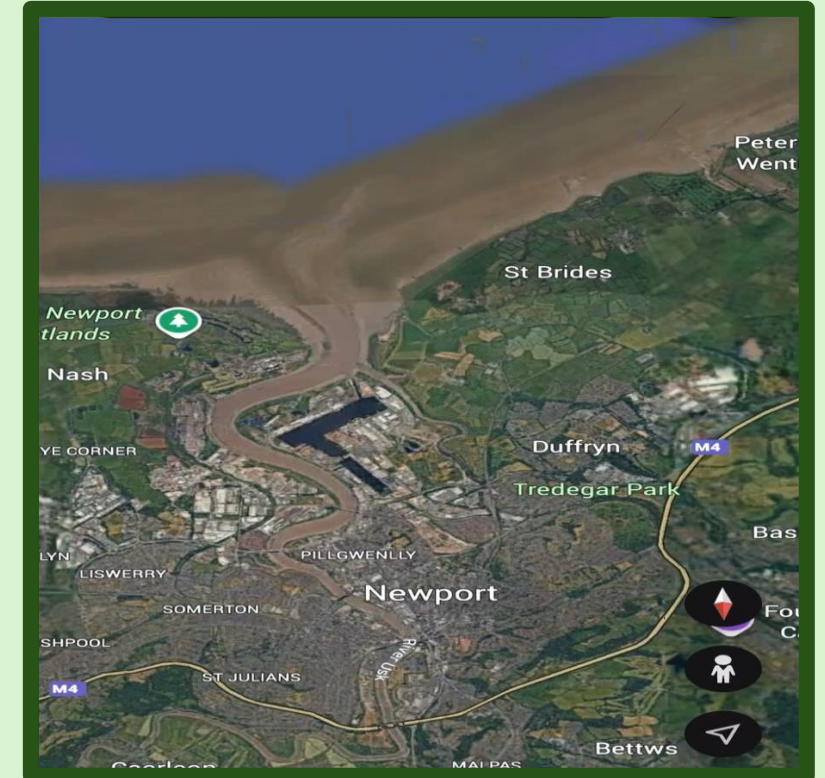
'When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.'

John Muir

‘We may be a small part of a big world, but we can make a BIG difference.’ Kevin Hall



Discover my local area



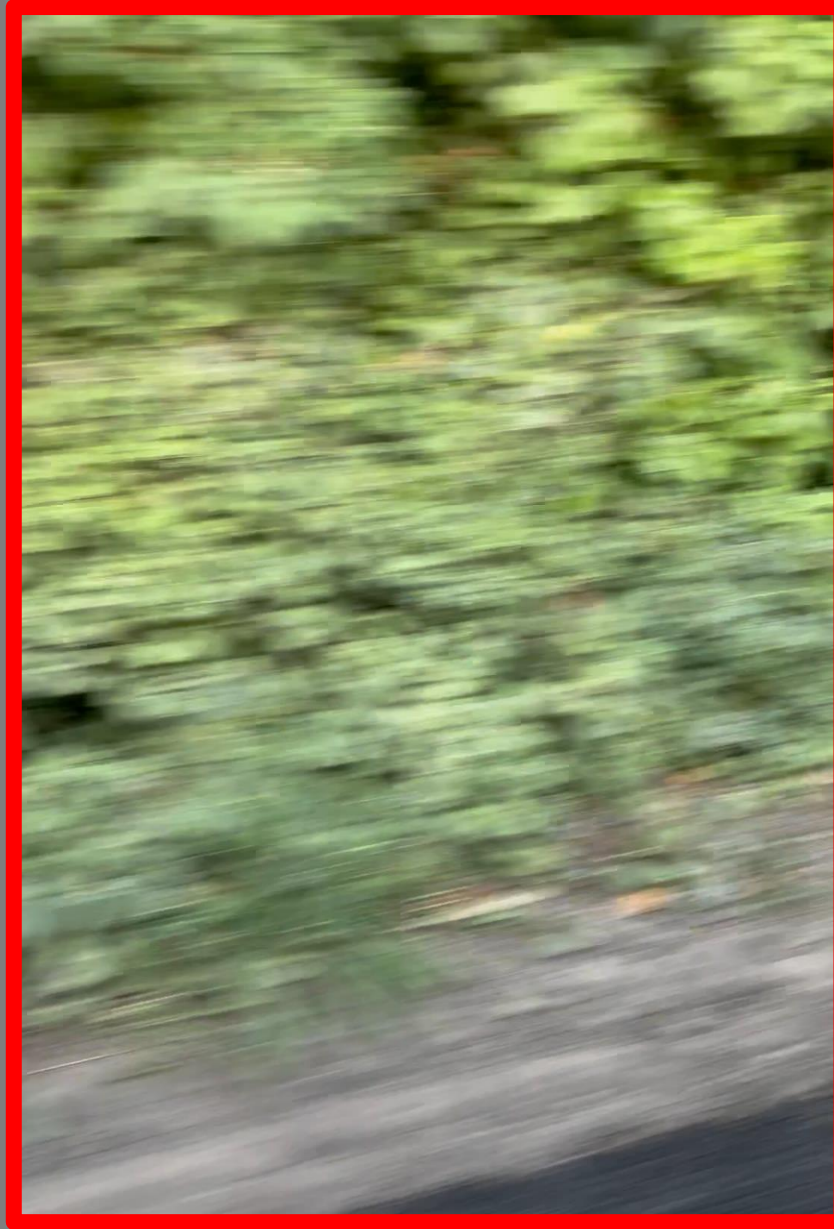
St Brides Wentlooge is a rural area within the reclaimed marshland of the Gwent Levels. It is a beautiful, tranquil area between Newport and Cardiff. The location is well known for the sea wall and picturesque coastal walks. Reens, which are used for drainage, are surrounded by long reeds and greenery, and are embraced by vibrant fields filled with sights and sounds of animals. Offering a unique glimpse into rural life in Wales.

One of the landmarks is the West Usk Lighthouse, which operated as a Bed and Breakfast pre-COVID and as a wedding venue. The lighthouse is visible just across the fields and through the space between the trees from my garden. I always remember my late Grandfather telling me that he lived in Lighthouse Park with his parents and 13 siblings in a caravan many years ago when he was just a little boy. He always had fond memories of growing up there.

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Unfortunately, fly-tipping has become an increasing issue in recent months. Almost daily, more items, such as household rubbish, mattresses, tyres, and building waste, are tipped along the coastal road. Apart from making this beautiful area look untidy, it also impacts its biodiversity.



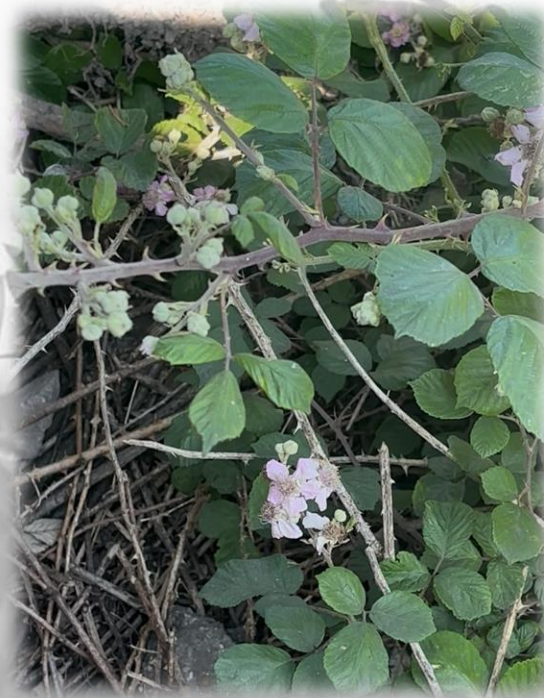
Discover my Garden

Although I am not particularly green-fingered, I admire green and natural spaces. To me, they are beautiful, peaceful, and grounding. As a child, I grew up on a small estate, Llanmartin, just on the outskirts of Newport. Apart from the built-up area of houses and flats, it boasted lots of lush green trees (I love a willow) and fields with copious amounts of daisies and buttercups, bluebells, and primroses. The sound of the wind rustling through the trees and the birds singing gave me that feeling of warmth, and I can remember thinking about how beautiful our world is, almost like Snow White, and seeing the beauty in everything (apart from spiders). I always remember going to Llanmartin reservoir with my mum and dad, walking carefully over the cattle grid, and there would be sheep all around. Sometimes we would walk to Ringland across the fields from the bottom of the estate, through fields of cows who would stop and stare as we passed (I would get a bit anxious when they started following us) we would be dodging the splats of cow poo. As an adult, I still find peace and tranquillity in nature. However, life gets quite busy, and as much as you notice some things, there is never much time to care. You do not stop to appreciate something so near to you. It is sad because the beauty and biodiversity of my surroundings and the area should not go unnoticed.



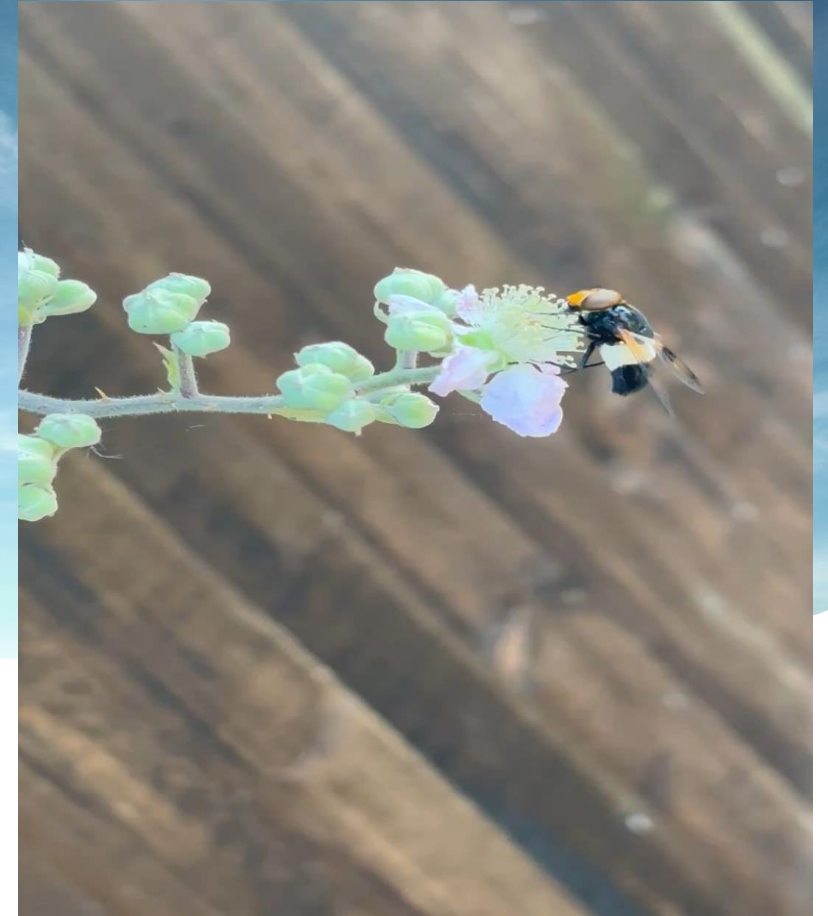
Explore . . .

What can you hear?



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Musca domestica- The common housefly



Volucella pellucens – Pellucid Fly

Fly

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Hedgehog



Hello there, little hedgehog, where have you been?

**The golden sun is still high in the west,
and you should not yet be seen.**

Hello there, little hedgehog, where do you scurry so fast?

Have you found something tasty in the garden? Are you taking it to your nest?

I'm wondering, little hedgehog, will you pause beneath the bush?

Are your babies home all alone? Are you in a rush?

Good night, little hedgehog. Snuggle safely in your nest.

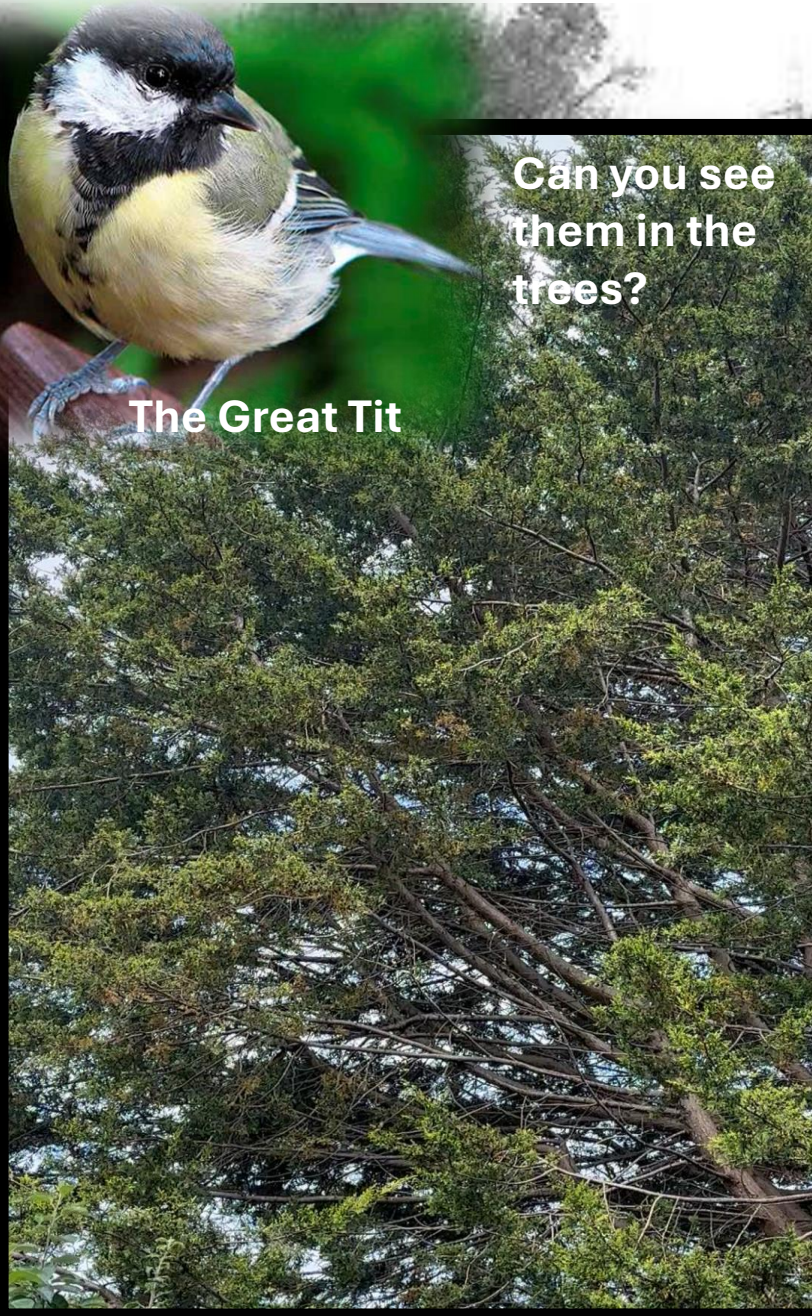
Dreaming of beetles and rustling leaves as you close your eyes to rest.

‘ Little Hedgehog’ By Emma Graham

Wood Pigeons



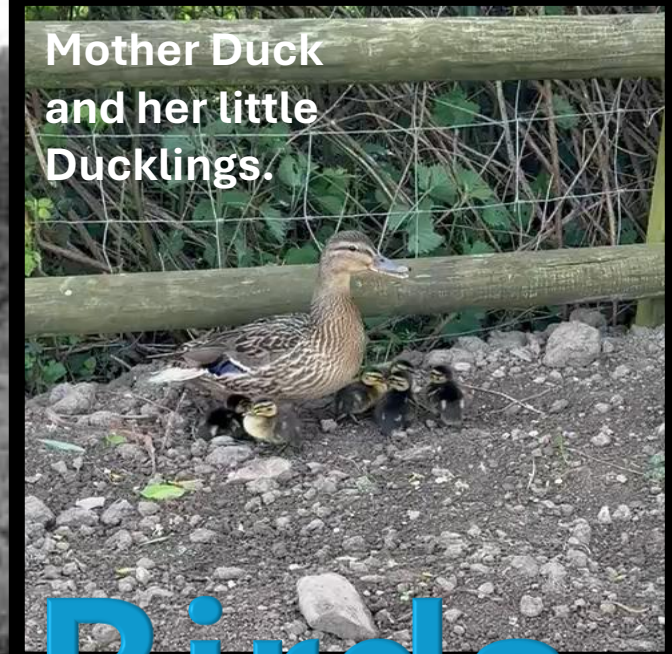
While observing the Wood Pigeons, I noticed they were eating the grass seeds we had put down to thicken and fill in patches. When birds eat seeds, they are later excreted in their poo. This is one form of seed dispersal called 'endozoochory', so the grass will grow wherever the seed is released (unless it gets blown around by a strong wind). This is an important and natural way to reproduce plants, including fruits, flowers and trees.



The Great Tit

Can you see them in the trees?

Mother Duck and her little Ducklings.



Birds



Crow



Can you identify any birds from the audio?

Caterpillars and Butterflies



The Cinnabar Caterpillar will eventually become a Moth. During my research, I found that they usually go to ground level when ready to pupate.

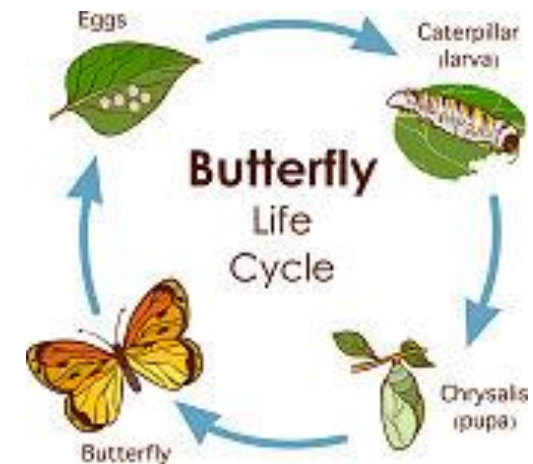


Peacock Butterfly

I found the Peacock Butterfly at the back of my garden, resting on some withered leaves. I thought it might need some energy, so I scooped it up and offered it a small piece of a banana, which has natural sugars. Quite soon after, the butterfly flew away.



Painted Lady



The Grey Squirrel



These cheeky little squirrels regularly visit my garden, mainly in the morning. I often see them running along the telephone cables, onto the tree, and down into the garden. I usually see them together, but I am unsure if they are the same pair that visits. The little troublemakers love going through my recycling and pulling out all my plastic and cardboard, leaving it strewn all over the garden. They have chewed through my brown food waste bin a few times. Of course, they are looking for food. Such characters they are. Who knew they would chew through hard plastic? They know when I am watching them, usually giving me the eye and then scurrying off. Sometimes, I leave fruit on the tree box, and they scoff it quickly, taking each piece up the tree and returning for more until it is all gone. I usually see their bushy little tails leaping into the fields and bouncing through the long grass into the distance. This is so lovely to watch, it makes me smile.

Ants

Fun Fact

Ants can carry between 10 to 50 times their own body weight!



Whilst exploring, my daughter and I moved a rock at the back of the garden. We found some Woodlice and an army of ants. They moved very quickly. The soil under the rock was quite damp, and ants like this environment. On investigating a little closer, my daughter pointed out that the ant was carrying something. We saw the ants working together to take something back to their nest. Although we did not see any ant hills or mounds, I think they were nesting underground. Ants are important for soil health and returning nutrients to the ecosystem by controlling and removing dead insects and organic matter.



Conserve

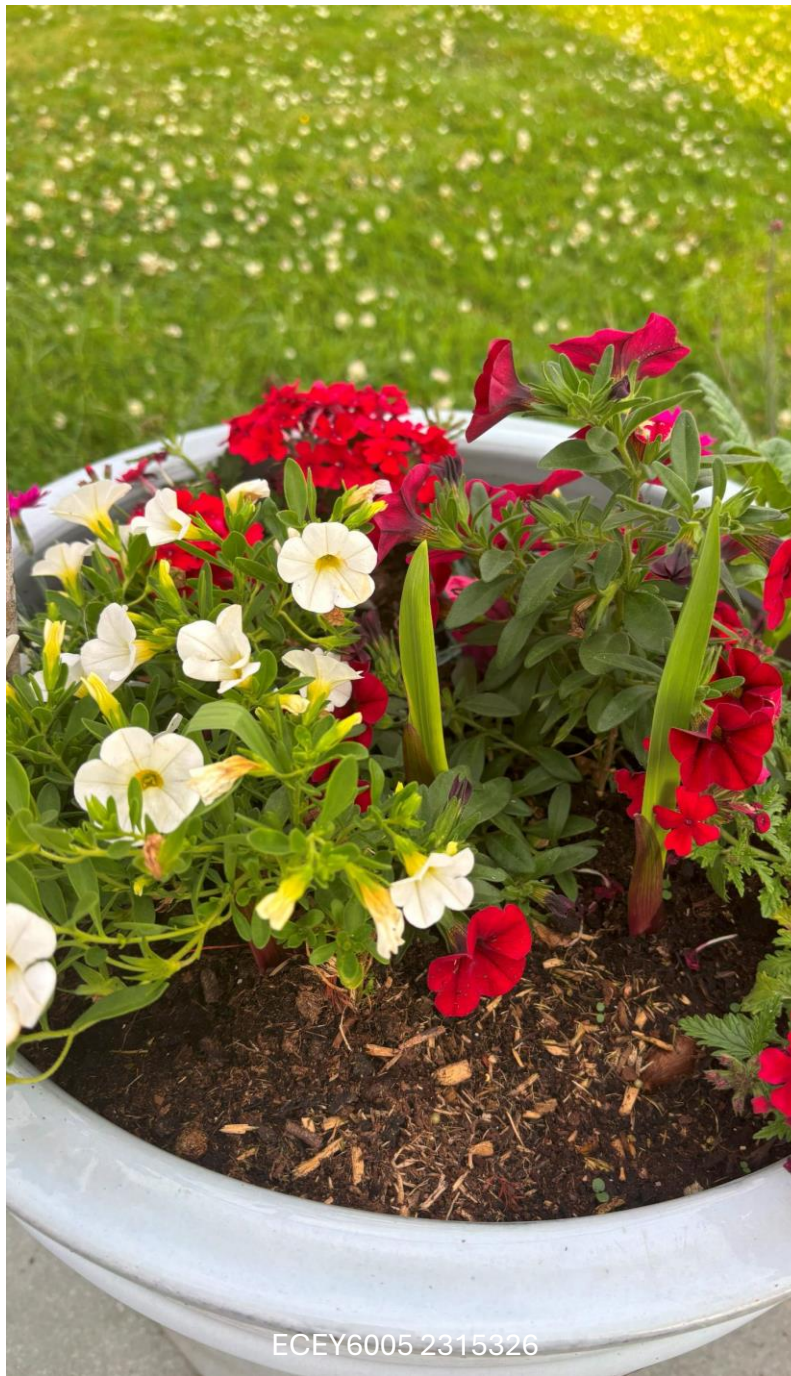
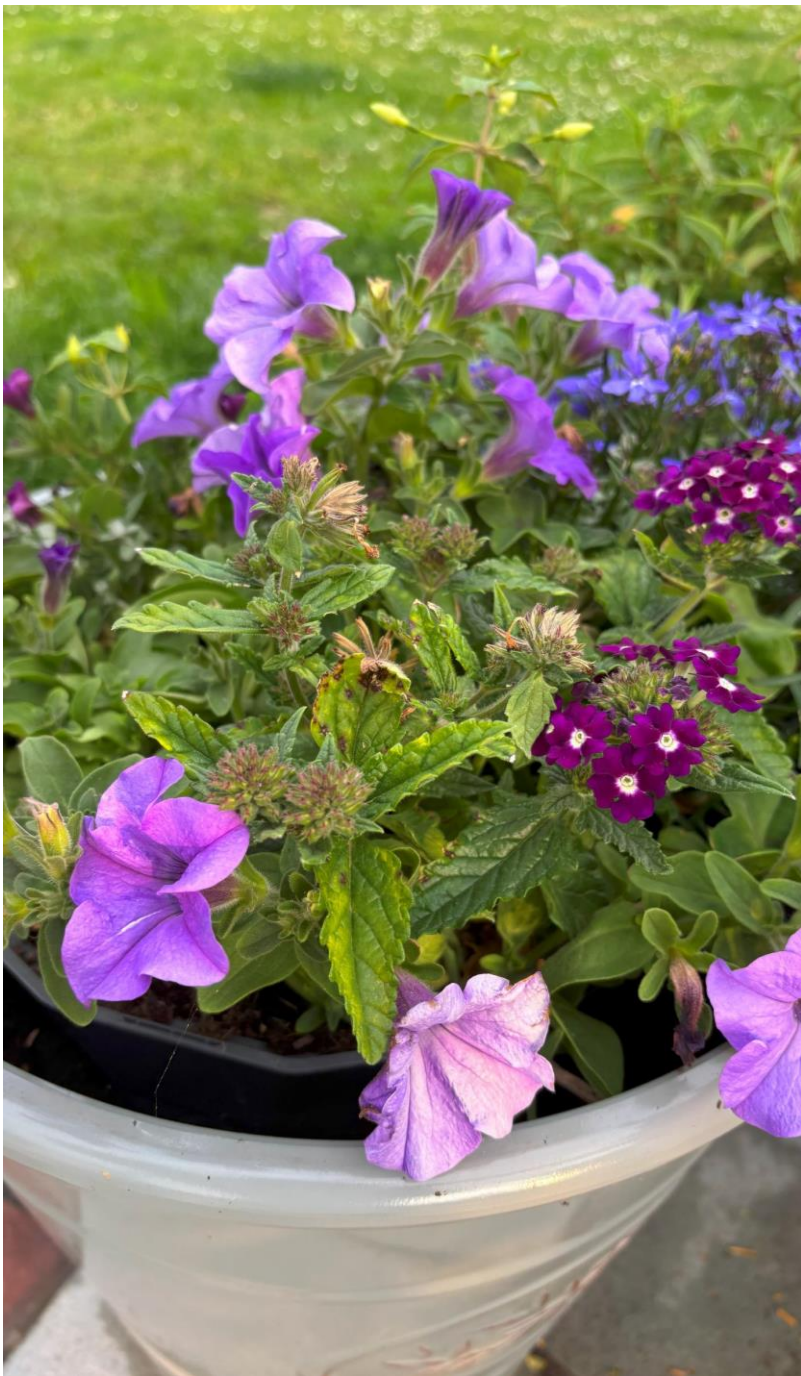
Before



After



While rebuilding our home, much destruction occurred not just to the building but also to the garden. In the garden, this involved removing and building new fences to prevent cattle from entering and making it more secure. The garden was a building site, full of debris, building materials, and things that were no longer needed to rebuild our home. This would have had a detrimental effect on some of the habitats and ecosystems in our garden. As soon as we were able to, we began to support life and its inhabitants in our garden, starting with a water feature. We knew this would attract insects and animals, such as dragonflies, bees, birds, newts and frogs. Natural materials, such as rocks, bark, tree stumps, and some plants, were added to attract many insects. Additionally, creating a calm environment in the garden. Grass seeds were placed to encourage regrowth where everything had been turned up.



After sourcing some pre-loved and new plant pots, my family spent a Saturday afternoon shopping in Cardiff Garden Centre and planting what we had bought. We worked hard, and the pots look lovely on our patio, bringing lots of vibrancy. With some luck, we will see many more bumblebees and butterflies.



I have sourced a pre-loved bird box from my in-laws (they have replaced theirs) and popped it on the side of the shed near the trees so birds might use it for shelter or nesting. Hopefully, next year, we might have some hatchlings. It looks a little worn, but it still has plenty of use. After all, recycling is environmentally friendly, particularly when society has a throw-away attitude at times. Additionally, the box seems nice and secure in a spot where it will be safe from predators.



I have purchased a bird feeder to continue inviting birds into the garden. It will keep the bird food dry and fresh, and I hope it will attract many more species of birds. I know plastic is unsuitable for the environment, but I hope it will last a long time. I am sure that other animals may be feeding from it, too, such as my regular visitors, the cheeky grey squirrels. I cannot be sure that finding food is an easy task for the birds this time of year in this area, but it is nice to know that if there are struggles, they have access, especially if they are still tending to their young.



Reflection

Embracing the journey and working towards the John Muir award has restored my connection to nature. Life gets so busy that you forget all the beauty surrounding you, spending much of the time in autopilot, just getting through each day, doing what you need to do.

Not only has participating in this award restored my connection to nature, but it has also helped me connect to my family and children and spend quality time with them (which we don't always get to do). Engaging them in nature has also taken them away from screens. They have helped, got involved with the activities, and have enjoyed it as much as I have. Shopping, planting, exploring and discovering about our garden's ecosystems. It has been an experience for all of us as a family. I have learnt so much doing this award, it has encouraged me to research and look deeper into things, such as the purpose of insects within an ecosystem, species of birds and connecting with the larger animals just on the other side of the fence.

How lucky are we to have such a beautiful planet that we call our home!