

Biodiversity and the Secret Diary

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With so many opportunities to enjoy the outdoors during the summer months, we could easily be fooled into thinking that biodiversity only makes an appearance during summer, but of course we know different. From the time when swallows start gathering on telephone lines to make the journey to Africa, right through to the first one arriving back on our shores and signaling the beginning of summer, there is still so much to see and enjoy. Can you remember, or imagine, getting your first diary as a child, and keeping it for a year. What kind of wild adventures came with each new month? Were they something like this...

January 15th – Dear Diary, The frogs are back!!! Saw one coming out of the mud at the bottom of a lake today. I think it's freaky that they can breathe through their skin when they're hibernating under water. They'll be off now hunting for slugs and worms and woodlice and flies and anything else they can catch with their sticky tongue. It's like, eugh! But that's not even the worst of it; they can't swallow, so they have to push down their food with their eyes!!!

February 6th – Dear Diary, It must be spring, the snowdrops are here. They're really cute with their little heads nodding in the breeze, and apparently, they produce a natural medicine that could help treat Alzheimer's disease, which is pretty cool. I really like the old story of the first snowdrop – you know – when Eve was expelled from the Garden of Eden, she sat weeping and an angel came to comfort her. It had snowed continually and no flower had bloomed for ages. Well, the angel caught a snowflake, breathed on it, and it fell to the earth as the first snowdrop. The little flower bloomed and Hope was born. Isn't that sweet!!

March 21st – Dear Diary, Saw a beautiful brimstone butterfly today. It must have just come out of hibernation – I know, this is one of the few butterflies that actually hibernate! It was flying in a sun trap beside some buckthorn. Apparently, wherever you find buckthorn, you'll find brimstones. It must have been male because its wings were a really bright sulphur-yellow colour with a single orange spot on each one. I heard a cool story recently. The word butterfly actually comes from the male brimstone – as in a 'butter-coloured fly' – which is pretty cool.

April 11th – Dear Diary, Went for a walk in the woods today and all I can say is WOW! The trees haven't fully come into leaf yet and there's plenty of sunlight coming through, so it's like Joseph's technicolour dreamcoat in there with all the wood anemone, lesser celandines and violets, and in a few weeks there'll be carpets of bluebells and orchids. I love it at this time of the year because all the woodland flowers are out. They need to be pollinated before the tree canopy becomes too dense and blocks out all the light. There's something really magical about a ray of sunlight breaking through the canopy and illuminating all the wonderful colours, especially in the early morning when the scents of the flowers are at their strongest, and the air is full of birdsong and the strange noises of other woodland creatures.

May 24th – Dear Diary, They're crazy! The whole lot of them have been up before dawn every morning for the last few weeks. And why you ask. To go singing! And not just

any kind of old rock and roll, but war songs! They're using songs to defend their territories! They must be crazy!! Song thrushes, skylarks, robins, wrens, blackbirds, finches, tits, sparrows and chaffinches. They're all at it. Now they're not the worst bunch of singers I've ever heard, but come on, it's too early to be waking the rest of us up!

June 13th – Dear Diary, There are butterflies EVERYWHERE!!! Every flower and shrub seems to have the added colour of butterflies flitting around it. And if it's not butterflies, its dragonflies, damselflies, beetles, bees, or some other colourful creature. There seems to be loads more activity near water or in a shrubby suntrap. Every step seems to stir up a flurry of activity. And the names are so cool. Dinky skipper, painted lady, red admiral, peacock, orange tip, little comma, common darter, black-tailed skimmer, shield bug, frog hopper, beautiful demoiselle, ruddy darter, common hawkler, four spotted chaser and Ireland's rarest damselfly, the scarce emerald.

July 18th – Dear Diary, Those sea urchins look cool, all purple and prickly. Apparently, the old name for hedgehog was 'urchin' and that's where sea urchins got their name. And their mouth is known as Aristotle's lantern, because over two thousand years ago, Aristotle accurately compared it to a lantern, which is pretty cool too. Saw them in a rock pool. There's loads of life in those. There're crazy little crabs that walk sideways, and limpets that seem to be stuck fast to the rocks, and periwinkles, seaweeds, mussels, red anemones and sticklebacks which move through the water like tiny rockets. Did you know, the first people in Ireland, the hunter-gatherers, used to migrate to the seashore to gather shellfish whenever there was little food to be found further inland!!

August 7th – Dear Diary, I think there's bats in the attic, but its ok, they're probably just using it as a maternity roost and will leave themselves after a few weeks. It's funny how some people freak out when it comes to bats. They've probably watched too many horror films. I've never heard of a bat flying into someone's hair and they don't go around attacking people like vampires. The reason they come out at dusk is because that's when insects are most active. A tiny Pipistrelle, weighing less than a twenty cent coin, can eat up to 3,000 insects in one night. Now can you imagine what the place would be like if we didn't have bats to help control insects!!!

September 11th – Dear Diary, The warm days and early morning dew has left hundreds of mushrooms in the fields. I'm getting hungry just looking at them. Its strange how people in Ireland seem to avoid wild mushrooms. I guess it's all the superstition that surrounds them. The idea of eating a fungus probably repulses some people, while a mushroom sprouting up overnight probably adds to their association with fairies and evil spirits, and of course there're the poisonous and hallucinogenic, or magic, mushrooms. Well it just means they're missing out on around 120 types of edible mushrooms and a very tasty breakfast, so it's more for me. Yeay!!!

October 4th – Dear Diary, Those thieving red squirrels are stealing all the hazelnuts! I've been watching this lovely patch of hazel for the last few weeks waiting for the nuts to become ripe, and this morning when I came to collect my treasure, they were gone!!! Could they not stick to the acorns and the pine cones? Actually, pretty cool story, apparently red squirrels bury acorns in the ground to have as a store for the winter, but often forget about them, and an oak tree grows on the spot instead. They may be forgetful, but they're clever little critters too. They can tell whether a nut is good or bad

by giving it a shake. If it rattles, then the kernel has shriveled up and it's not worth eating. Obviously all my hazelnuts were perfect!!!

November 12th – Dear Diary, I was in the garden this evening when I heard these strange noises and saw something rustling in a clump of leaves by the back wall. The cutest little creature ever crawled out from under them – a hedgehog. For some reason, their Irish name, grainneog, means ‘the horrible one’, but I don't know how anyone could think that after seeing their little snout and small eyes. It must have been looking for somewhere to hibernate so I just left out some dog food and a bowl of water and left it alone. Hopefully it'll come back in the summer and help rid the garden of snails and slugs. After all, they are a gardener's friend!

December 26th – Dear Diary, it's really cold outside so I've left food on the bird table. There're lots of tiny birds that are depending on it to survive, but its great to see a bit of life and colour in the garden at Christmas and it's a perfect chance to get some good photographs, as they move about too fast during summer. There was a cute little robin singing this morning. They're one of the few birds that sing during the winter and they're really tame at this time of the year too. And I spotted some blue tits using the bird boxes over the last few weeks. There're a few wrens around as well, but they're probably in hiding today given that it's St Stephen's Day and there are wren-boys about!!

January 1st – Dear Diary, I came across so much wildlife last year, I wonder will I see even more this year. I bet I will if I keep my eyes open. Until next time...