

WILDLIFE IN THE VALE OF LORTON: WATERY HABITATS

Written by Alan Gane

Water, whether static in ponds, tarns or lakes, attracts a very wide range of life forms, including microbes, plants, worms, insects, amphibians and mammals; while fast-flowing water can be exciting, slower-moving water is a more heavily-populated habitat. Within the valley, we have Buttermere, Crummock and Loweswater lakes, a few ponds, and tarns and, of course, the River Cocker, which gradually expands throughout its length, being fed by a host of becks, some of which can be quite spectacular when in spate. Warnscale Beck, Combe Beck, Sourmilk Gill and Scale Beck, which includes Scale Force, and the Liza, which is born high above Coledale Hause, are significant in this respect.



To some extent, the wildlife present in any given situation is dependent on the degree of movement in the water. Plant life in fast-flowing becks is mostly limited to the margins, where species of moss such as Sphagnum and Polytrichum abound, sometimes with king cups, whereas in slower-moving situations there is likely to be skullcap, figwort, and the less well-known, 'policeman's helmet' or Indian balsam, one of our less-welcome imports. There is water lobelia and water lilly in Loweswater and species of bladderwort have been recorded in some tarns. Other marginal plants include marsh lousewort, which can be found around the pond near Crummock pumping station, yellow iris, bogbean, water parsley, water parsnip and water mint, together with the primitive water horsetail.

In wet and boggy places, and at some of the lowest margins of the fells, where water oozes out, there is often bog asphodel, bistort, and two of our very few insectivorous plants, round-leaved sundew and butterwort. These are often to be found along side the track leading from Buttermere to Scale force, for example.



While much of our pond life is the preserve of the dedicated aquarist, equipped with net, collecting jars and a microscope, there is pond life which can be observed from the bank with the naked eye. Still water, even in ditches, often attracts groups of small, black, whirligig beetles, which twist and turn rapidly across the surface. Dragonflies and damselflies are both aquatic in their larval stage, when they are voracious predators. The larvae emerge and climb up the stems of plants to pupate; once the adults have left, the dried husks of the pupae can be found there. The adults themselves may be seen flying

over and around the water, including the golden ringed dragonfly, which is our largest. The southern shore of Loweswater is a favourite haunt in the appropriate season of the year.



Some other aquatic larvae, such as those of gnats and mosquitoes, wriggle their way to the surface and extend their spiracles above the surface, to breath as does the water boatman and the great diving beetle, *Dytiscus marginalis*, which can measure up to 38mm in length. The bird most commonly associated with fast flowing streams is the dipper, equipped as it is for 'plopping' into the water and walking along the bed in search of its prey. Chestnut in colour, with a cream bib and with the famous false eyelid, which can be clearly seen, the dipper

is about the size of a large blackbird. Singly, or in pairs, they are often to be seen along the Cocker between the Lanthwaite Wood car park and the weir. Their droppings can also be seen on rock protruding above the water.



Where the water slows, on this same stretch, a grey heron sometimes stands motionless, awaiting a passing fish, or wandering with that stately gait through the shallows. Fast flowing water margins also attract grey wagtails and yellow wagtails too, in search of insects. Others to be seen on our rivers and lakes include Canada geese, greylag, red breasted merganser, goosander, mallard, pochard, tufted duck, common sandpiper, teal, crested grebe and cormorant. The latter congregate at Holme Island, at the southernmost corner of Crummock Water, where they roost and there are often one or two below the car park by Loweswater lake.

Relatively small areas of still water attract frogs, toads and newts in the spring, when spawning occurs. Frog spawn, which is deposited in large amorphous clumps, appears even in puddles, where there is little or no chance of survival, partly because it will dry out before the eggs hatch, and partly because in any case the concentration is enough to spell disaster. Mating frogs are often to be seen in large numbers on the bottom of shallow ponds early in the year and again, the Crummock pump



Pochard



Common Newt

house pond is frequently, but not invariably, such a site. In some years it appears to be devoid of frogs altogether. Toad spawn is quite distinct, being laid in long strings as opposed to clumps.

The eggs of our three species of newt, however, are laid singly on the leaves of aquatic plants and will not be seen unless searched for very diligently.

Frogs are devoured by a number of predators, some of which, such as the buzzard, will reject the white gelatinous ovaries, which can be found lying

on the ground in the vicinity of ponds, being clearly indicative of the presence of both frog and predator.

The return of the otter in recent years adds yet another dimension to river and lake watching. A secretive and largely nocturnal mammal, the chances of seeing one are slim, but again, cautious observation in late evenings or early morning may be successful, while the appearance of their droppings or 'spraint' at least tells us that they are around.

Some Lakeland streams contain crayfish which are also difficult to spot and largely nocturnal.

Brief notes - merely scratching the surface of a vast subject, but perhaps enough to generate interest? - Keep looking!!



Crayfish

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