

What a lovely time of the year. Spring flowers in all their radiance, birds singing, bees buzzing, insects scurrying, frogs hopping. Everywhere I walk, wildlife is speaking to me. What a privilege it is for every single one of us to share our life with the diverse members of God's family. A family of living organisms of every form imaginable encompassing our planet. God's gift He generously entrusted us to care for. The plants, animals, fishes, insects, birds and much more, each adapted to their own niche in the world. None living in isolation but all part of a most intricate and delicately balanced web. But let's pause for a moment and assess whether we humans have been worthy custodians of this precious gift.

We humans are a truly remarkable species endowed with the capacity to reason and to act on our reasoning. We have given ourselves the scientific name of *Homo sapiens*. The name means wise man, so I should expect that we would have exercised our wisdom to the full in nurturing our precious God given planet.

We were given so much, and what a gift! The number of species in our natural world is so staggeringly immense that we humans know so very little about our extended family. Our knowledge of the insect world for instance is so very sparse. We have identified and described over one million species worldwide, yet it has been estimated that there could be as many ten million on our planet. A similar situation exists with plants. Nearly 4,000 newly discovered species of plants and fungi were scientifically named in 2019. It's likely that there are thousands of plants as yet undiscovered some of which could be the key to new foods and medicines. We have merely scratched the surface in understanding our diverse world.

In return for our generous God given gift, the stark truth is that we have increased the extinction of all species by 1000 times what it would have been without the intervention of "Wise Man". Wisdom has been superseded by our selfish desire to extract more and more from our finite planet. In our quest to pursue our own interests we have wiped many many species off the face of our planet without knowing anything about them. In our short existence on planet earth, we have turned the circle of life into our personal conveyor belt.

We have to recognise that this delicate web of life is not ours to manipulate for our own ends but we are very much part of that web and we must conform accordingly.

It's crucial that we abandon our selfish ways because time is running out. If left unchecked or tackled in a half-hearted manner, our assault on the very foundations on which life itself is based will career out of control and have a devastating effect on the lives of future generations of all species. We are told by experts that we have precious few years left to arrest this crisis. There is no time to be lost. You and I have the potential to help heal this tremendous worldwide damage. So I look to you all to take on this challenge.

So, where do we start? There are so many ways in which we can make a difference. On this occasion I want to say a little about the wonderfully diverse natural world around us which we can readily explore at close quarters, and how by taking simple actions we can help restore our loss of species. One effective way immediately presents itself and this opportunity is literally on our doorsteps. I suggest we start by taking a fresh look at our gardens. Even if you only have a very small garden, a balcony or a few plants in pots, you can still play a most important part. Many gardens are adorned with a stunning variety of flowering plants in well kept borders and they display a riot of colours. The centre piece is usually a well tended lawn of almost velvet appearance. It's very pleasurable to tend to these masterpieces and keep them free from any undesirable visitors which might seek refuge. These gardens provide us with a haven of tranquillity

and an escape from the pressures of life. But is that all we want from a garden? I invite you to step outside your house and view your garden in a totally different light – the way I see my garden. Our gardens are surrounded by a world much depleted of the rich array of wildlife that abounded even into the 20th century. But here we have our very own potential nature reserve, a haven to all those depleted species seeking refuge. By providing the right conditions we can nurture our gardens into a microcosm of undisturbed wildlife.

A lady by the name of Dr. Jennifer Owen, an ecologist wrote a book entitled *Wildlife in a Garden* in which she gave the details of the species found in her garden over a 30 year period from 1972. She recorded a total of 2,673 species including butterflies, moths, beetles, hoverflies, bees, wasps, ants, dragonflies, sawflies, bugs, lacewings, grasshoppers, crickets, myriapods which is a collective name for centipede like creatures, spiders, molluscs and earthworms as well as garden and wild plants and vertebrates.

Recent research indicates that private gardens in Britain cover an area bigger than all of the country's nature reserves combined, so you can see the potential of our gardens to restore biodiversity.

You can pay to fly to a remote country to go on safari and observe spectacular wildlife, but I invite you to go on an equally spectacular safari every day in your garden and in the process the carbon footprint of your journey will be zero. There are some remarkable organisms out there, but you will need to equip yourself with no, not a trophy hunters gun, but a magnifying glass as some organisms are so very small – in fact at a microscopic level, in one teaspoon of soil there are more microorganisms than there are people on earth. Here are a few fascinating facts about mini creatures in our gardens.They can out-perform us in so many ways.

Bees are very industrious creatures. It takes about 10 million nectar collecting trips to make one pound of honey. Their wings beat at the fantastic rate of 230 times a second. Bees perform a dance to inform others in the hive of the precise location of plants that they visited which were rich in nectar. Well, despite all the dancing we've done at St Anne's over the years, I'm afraid I'd have little success in devising a dance to direct you to the nearest cafe!

The common earwig is regarded by some as a pest, but take a closer look. The female earwig has strong maternal instincts. She carefully guards her eggs and will retrieve them if they are disturbed. When they have hatched, she protects and feeds her offspring until they are ready to fend for themselves. Earwigs are equipped with wonderfully shaped wings which are seldom used or seen.

A dung beetle can drag 1,141 times its weight – that's like a human pulling 6 double decker buses.

A ladybird might eat more than 5,000 insects in its lifetime.

Butterflies taste with their feet. Caterpillars have 12 eyes. I never cease to be amazed at how a caterpillar is transformed into something as delicate as a butterfly, yet these flimsy creatures can navigate and cross oceans. Remarkable creatures. What a wonderful world!

There's much we can learn from the social life of ants. Proverbs 6:6 tells us "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise".

We couldn't manage without the aid of mini creatures. Without their composting services we'd be knee deep in dead leaves, dung and dead animals. Worms, ants and other mini creatures keep the

soil fertile and aerated. Bees, wasps, butterflies, hoverflies and lacewings pollinate flowers and ensure our food supply, in fact one in three mouthfuls of food we eat depends on pollination. We must save our pollinators.

Next time you go into your garden, take a closer look at your plants including the ones that over the years you have become accustomed to wrench out at first sight. I invite you to stop in your tracks and take a closer look. Get out your magnifying glass, see how the flowers are adapted to attract pollinators by their showy colours and by their joining together to make them more conspicuous to insects as in the daisy. Observe the wonderful way that some flowers direct insects to their nectar treat by way of markings on their petals and the way plants ensure that in return for their generosity their visitors take away some pollen grains to deposit on another flower. Observe the ingenious ways in which the weakest of plants use others as ladders in order to display their flowers more effectively. Plants are rooted to the ground and cannot move about, but explore the wonderful ways they have of spreading their seeds. Seeds have developed ways of moving from their parent plant by hitching a lift either by way of air or water currents, explosive mechanisms, using animals and unsuspecting humans as taxis by clinging to fur or clothing or by offering juicy berries to birds which in turn deposit the seeds. Take a look at your grasses, their minute flowers are just as varied as insect pollinated ones but they are not as showy as they don't need to attract insects, their pollen is spread by wind. At ground level and on trees we see mosses which are often regarded as undesirable, but, take a closer look and you will see that mosses are as varied as flowering plants. Mosses harbour some amazing creatures. These are just some of the wonders awaiting you in your very own nature reserve. Let us all view our natural world as the miracle it is. We should endeavour to attract all manner of wildlife to our gardens by providing the right conditions to suit their habits. Consider the needs of butterflies and their caterpillars, bees, birds, hedgehogs, beetles, frogs and toads, the list is extensive.

On this occasion, I can merely list some of the actions we need to take in our gardens to make them more nature friendly, but Peter and I will be making use of our church website to provide more detailed information. For those of you who haven't got access to a computer just ask us and we'll tell you how to set about these tasks.

Here are just some of the actions we can take to improve our gardens.

We'll be providing information on how to:-

create a mini meadow, provide homes for wildlife, attract bees, butterflies and birds, make a pond, make a bog, provide food for wildlife, produce compost. We'll be giving advice on how to garden without chemicals.

Of course, this is a challenge for all of us. It would be good to share the interesting things we've discovered about our gardens and actions we've taken to make our gardens more nature friendly.

So, look out for tips on wildlife gardening on our church website. Well, I'm just about to set off on my daily safari and immerse myself in this priceless God given gift that has been left on my doorstep, and I wish you all good safaris.