

Introducing a new wildlife correspondent this month:

Peninsula predators - who preys on whom?

When I pulled a piece of wind blown material out of my garden pond there was a leech attached. This isn't surprising as leeches used to be collected from Marloes Mere for medicinal use. Women would roll up their skirts, wade into the muddy water and wait for leeches to attach to their legs for which they were paid a penny per leech. They could ill afford the blood loss.

There are lots of toads in my garden, and more grass snakes of all sizes than I've seen anywhere else, but no frogs. Grass snakes do eat toads, as do herons and crows, all unaffected by toad toxin, while otters and other small carnivores don't eat the toad's skin where the toxin is released. Grass snakes also release an evil-smelling fluid to deter predators, which include herons, hedgehogs and weasels – and my hens.

When I first saw my hens eating toadlets I assumed the toxin developed when they were older, but no, toad tadpoles are poisonous to fish so out-compete frog tadpoles which aren't. My hens also eat adult toads. I've seen them digging and only realised they were targeting a toad when one runs off with it in her beak, pursued by the others. They don't need to hunt, but they're rare breeds and haven't lost their natural instincts; they scuttle for cover when they hear blackbird alarm calls.

Dragonflies were busy last summer laying eggs in the pond only made in 2016. Dragonfly nymphs are ferocious predators; their prey includes insect larvae, crustaceans, worms, snails, leeches, frog, toad and newt tadpoles and small fish. Dragonflies are amazing predators with a 95% success rate. They ambush insect prey and are able to reach speeds of 50 km/h, dive, fly backward, upside down, and pivot 360 degrees. They in turn are predated by wagtails, hobbies and amphibians.

Yes, nature is red in tooth and claw. Predators prey on smaller predators and herbivores, shaping the structure and diversity of the wider ecosystem, keeping it in balance. We shouldn't discriminate between 'good' predators, e.g. thrushes and 'bad' predators e.g. magpies; that's how nature functions. I reluctantly put the leech back.

Rosamund Aubrey

PS There is no need to panic when finding a leech in your pond – these are not the large medicinal leeches which can grow up to 90mm long, but one of a number of smaller leech species, growing up to about an inch long. Medicinal leeches, which used to be harvested from Marloes Mere, are now thought to be extinct there. Ed.