

Twitcheer in the swamp

Stamped out

One hesitates to kick a body when it is down, especially when one's village post office is threatened. All the same, the Royal Mail's issue of ten ugly and tasteless stamps about endangered insects was a wonderful own goal. Among them was a rare red ant. The Royal Mail should know all about rare red ants. One of them lives among scores of other rare insects at West Thurrock Marshes and is about to be stamped out by an industrial estate approved by one of these undemocratic Development Corporations. And who benefits? Why, none other than the Royal Mail, which intends to build a depot there on the slaughtered remains of the rare insects. I commend the alternative insect stamps issued by Buglife, on which the '1st' is replaced by '1ast'.

Surplus to requirements

In a letter to my 'Conservation news' colleague Sue Everett, a former member of the Countryside Agency defends what he describes as Natural England's 'holistic' role. Natural England, he reminds us, is up to its neck in planning, farming, forestry, recreation and 'landscape conservation' matters. Should anyone complain that its staff seem uninterested in wildlife and natural history (and they do), he or she should remember that nature is only one strand of expertise among many. The important thing, he explains, is to be 'multidisciplinary' and know a bit about everything.

Knowing a bit about everything risks not knowing much about anything. All three country wildlife agencies now find it expedient to regard nature conservation as somehow peripheral to their work. The view seems to be taking hold that nature equates to skylarks and hedgehogs, whose welfare can easily be devolved to 'specialists'. This is very strange. NE does not, in any meaningful way, grow food, or manage commercial forests, or empty rubbish bins. It does, on the other hand, look after nature reserves and SSSIs.

Nature is not an optional extra but fundamental to everything they do. Planning, forestry, picnic sites and so on

are simply means to an end, that end being a healthy and sustainable natural environment. All the multi-tasking skills in the world won't help them, or us, if they lack the most important skill of all, the one that underlines all the others: understanding something about how natural ecosystems work, and having the knowledge to put things right when they go wrong.

Nothing but words

In the past few weeks I have turned down invitations to luxuriate in the cork forests of Andalucia, explore the Queen's favourite island of Colonsay, and journey to the wilds of Kazakhstan. The reason is *Bugs Britannica*, that exercise in lonely, long-distance writing which has taken over my life. With that excuse, here are a few bug stories which I picked up but wasn't able to verify.

Appropriate pet

What do animal-lovers do when obliged to live in a tiny ninth-floor flat without even a window-box? Keeping even the smallest pet, a hamster or a newt, would result in conflict. The answer, at least in Bulgaria, is a sponge. Perhaps there is something soothing about a sponge. The world is in chaos, but inside the little tank on the window-sill a colourless blob of primitive matter is calmly drawing in water and blowing it out again. Gerald Durrell once received a letter from a teenage girl in Sofia. 'I love animals very much, and I am terribly sorry that in our house there is no room to turn,' she wrote, sadly, 'but I have a sponge. His name is Klavdy. He live in one jar and eat only sea salt. He has four-five children. Sponge, pitiful sponge...'

Lure for a big fish

For time immemorial fly-fishermen have fashioned ingenious lures that resemble mayflies or caddisflies, and called them such names as February Red, Dark Olive and the dull-sounding Small Brown. Few mention the greatest of them all, the Bosky Saddlewing, a fly for the truly ambitious angler, based on a female Goat Moth. With its cork-like body and broad cardboard wings, the Saddlewing is splashed into the water at the end of stout twine or chain, and if no fish bites, which isn't likely, there is at least a sporting chance it might be stunned. There are no angling records for the Bosky Saddlewing, but those using it have landed several Tesco shopping trolleys and a medium-sized bicycle.

Limpet wars

The clan McPiddock of Mugg was the first, and perhaps the last, to use sea-shells as body armour. The island of Mugg still sings of the small but doughty warriors who clad themselves from top to toe in limpet-mail, scallop-shell shoulder-pads and razorfish leg-armour, before rattling into battle. It seems that there are no more McPiddocks to tell us how they fared, but islanders still build little men out of sea-shells on the eve of St Brian's Day, and afterwards bash them to bits with their claymores in solemn memory.

