



Street, pavements and terraces of houses might seem unfavourable for biodiversity, but even our most densely populated cities are habitats for a wide variety of plants and animals. Urban areas containing parks, gardens and graveyards are particularly attractive to wildlife.



The skies over our towns and cities are home to swifts and bats – wheeling and swooping on the myriads of aerial insects there. For pigeons and peregrine falcons, city buildings are a type of cliff to which their nesting skills have easily adapted. Pigeons live off the pickings they acquire from people, while peregrines dine on the pigeons. Songbirds thrive in suburban gardens, and butterflies, moths and bumble bees are drawn by their exotic flowerbeds. Hedgehogs and shrews patrol gardens at night, feasting on the invertebrates which are abundant in hedges and compost heaps.

Urban parks act as the lungs of built-up areas. Their grasses, trees and other plants contribute to air quality in towns and cities. Parks are refuges for urban foxes. Some of the larger parks contain badger setts, likely to have been there for generations. Grey squirrels are particularly common in town parks on the eastern side of the country. They are much more easily seen than the shyer native red squirrels, which they have displaced. Houses in towns and cities are themselves homes for especially well-adapted wildlife such as house spiders, mice, silverfish and wasps, whose nests made of paper hang in disused

attic spaces. None of these are particularly wanted or welcomed by house-owners, but they persist anyway.

With all their hard surfaces, urban areas absorb more heat during the day than rural areas. They release this heat at night, like storage heaters. As a result, the temperature can be significantly higher in towns and cities than the surrounding countryside. The two-spot ladybird favours this, as do flocks of roosting birds in winter, when the difference in temperature can be enough to encourage them into town for the hours of darkness.

More than half of the population first encounter and learn about wildlife in urban areas. We can tell what season it is by the leaves on street trees, which improve vistas along our thoroughfares. We are entertained by the dawn chorus of songbirds already defending their territory – our gardens – before the roar of rush-hour traffic begins. For the well-being of town and city dwellers, urban plants, animals and birds are vital.

THREATS TO THE HABITAT

The main threat to urban habitats is destructive building development. Infill buildings in large urban gardens can remove tall trees, hedges and shrubbery, all very important for wildlife. New roads bring noise and cars, increasing road-kill. By throwing litter, people may create traps for unwary birds and small mammals. The use of weed killers and pesticides in gardens endangers animals higher up the food chain.

Air pollution caused by traffic has a detrimental effect on street trees and their associated lichens, not to speak of the animal, bird and human populations. Light pollution from street lighting and shop signs disorients birds, sometimes causing them to sing at night. Urban birds can end up breeding too early in the year because their perception of day length is distorted. Rapid growth in town size may put excess pressure on waste-water treatment plants,

causing water pollution from the discharge of inadequately treated sewage.

WHAT CAN INDIVIDUALS DO TO PROTECT THE HABITAT?

In order to protect wildlife habitats, individuals must first become aware of them. Local people in towns and cities should be encouraged to use and value their parks and open spaces. They should take part in decision-making about their area and have an input into development plans, making sure that they are adhered to by developers. This would help ensure that adequate local wildlife protection is enshrined in such documents.

Since gardens are crucial habitats for urban wildlife, gardeners should use little or no weed killer or pesticide. Bird tables and baths, and bird and bat boxes, are a great way to enliven gardens. Planting insect-attracting and berry-and-flower-producing trees and shrubs also encourages garden biodiversity.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Dublin Naturalists' Field Club: www.dnfc.net
- BirdWatch Ireland: www.birdwatchireland.ie
- An Taisce: www.antaisce.com
- Eastern Regional Fisheries Board: www.fishingireland.net
- *Wild Dublin* by Eanna Ni Lamhna (O'Brien Press)
- *Wild Belfast* by Robert Scott (Blackstaff Press)
- *Wildlife in Waterford City* by Declan McGrath (Heritage Council)