

A dream midsummer night vision

How to discover the nocturnal world of our garden visitors

The fox, hedgehog and mouse. Charming images
– but a rotten pub name!

By Dave Hipperson, Park Street Camera Club

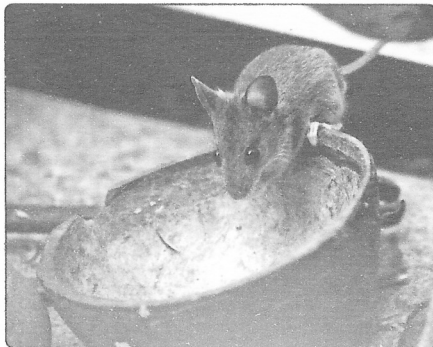
We have all watched those wonderful TV moments caught on hidden cameras of rare snow leopards or white tigers stealthily prowling the foot hills of the Himalayas.

But don't think you have to travel anywhere near as far to get a similar high. All this is happening, if only on a smaller scale, right outside your back door in your garden.

Just the discovery of unknown animal activity is exciting enough as such revelations help create a more complete picture of their nocturnal lives. It quickly becomes addictive.

Ever since the ludicrously long lockdown we, and probably you, have been taking more interest in the bird life in our garden.

Then we became interested in the other animals when my (indoor) cats spotted a wood mouse walking brazenly up to our patio windows in broad daylight and taking no notice of their presence. We wondered that, if they were like this during the day, what might be happening at night. So for Christmas 2020 I bought my wife an outdoor Trial Camera. A forerunner of the model recommended here.



Mice are small subjects. Fortunately animals' eyes, unlike humans, reflect light even with the limited amounts of infra-red which these cameras use. Therefore, it was easy to spot the mouse activity on the little videos we took as bright spots shone back like

headlights. We were astonished to discover a veritable family of the creatures scurrying around on the patio.

It made us think what else might be going on. So I bought another camera and took a longer shot of the patio from some way up the lawn. Yes, cats for sure but also hedgehogs. Or at least 'a' hedgehog. We had had them visit before – in 1994 a family was bred – but didn't think they had returned. You wouldn't know unless you watched your garden all night and who does? This one was soon joined by a friend, slightly smaller.



It was early spring 2021 and as it warmed up hedgehog activity grew. We were now feeding mice and hedgehogs. (Special hedgehog food by the way not milk and bread). Like the birds please give them what is best



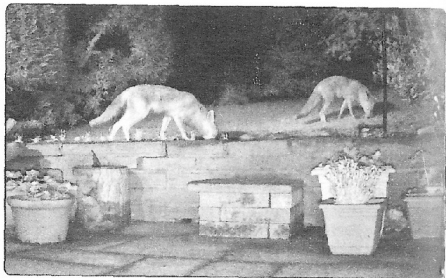
for them otherwise don't feed them at all. They will thank you for it. Keep stores of food in sealed containers and sweep up regularly otherwise it is possible you could get what we refer to as the BIGGER mice. If rats do appear simply stop the food supply for a day or two and then reintroduce it carefully. At all times keep everywhere as clean and tidy as possible.

All this went on into the summer of 2021 when one night we heard an enormous scrabbling sound, like an animal climbing a fence. This was because it was. Cats do this but they are really quiet. Hedgehogs do it too. Yes they climb fences though I had made a small semi-circular hole in the bottom of our back gate so they wouldn't need to. In the morning we had pictures of a fox interested in the hedgehog food. My wife was sure he would prefer proper dog food. So guess what else we were buying on the weekly Tesco visits?

He came from time to time until late autumn. I cut the hole under the gate larger to accommodate him as well and we developed a technique to ensure he got the food we put out and the cats did not. Dog food sprinkled with nuts and pieces of apple on a shallow dish covered with a paper plate held down with empty coconut shells. We tried silver foil at first but he didn't like that although he was quite capable of removing it. The paper plate on the other hand he loved. One flick of his head and it was usually sent spinning Frisbee-like up the garden.

So we were now feeding a hedgehog, occasionally two, and a fox. It turned out to be a vixen as we noticed the tell-tale protuberances underneath her after a few months visiting. I immediately cut the semi-circle hole in the back gate even larger not wishing to think she could get stuck coming through it. Just before Christmas she stopped coming. The hedgehogs had ceased too as presumably they had hibernated.

But in early 2022 she was back. Since when there hasn't been a single night when we have not been visited by a fox. No we didn't have fox cubs running around in the spring but she did bring her brothers. Arrow and Dot (names derived from markings as it is just possible to tell them apart.) Sometimes all three. Sometimes just two. Quite often two hedgehogs as well.



These visitations have continued unbroken. The most hedgehogs we have had were three at once. We know there is a fourth as, like the foxes, with care you can spot the slight differences.

The camera picks up the occasional confrontation between hog and fox usually when a fox disturbs a hedgehog and immediately thinks better of it and backs off. On one occasion one of them adopting its defensive posture – a tight ball of spikes – rolled down the lawn only to collide with another hedgehog peacefully eating at the fox's plate.

By the summer we were using three cameras – the latest and best being the model here. They were recording up to five foxes, at least two of which were young but pretty well grown cubs. And always a hedgehog or two. Often three.

The AYTARR 2.7K Digital Trail Camera (PH 800G) and its two predecessors are what we use. Essentially this is a camera with fixed focus super wide angle lens and motion detection to trigger the shutter. It can be set to take stills or videos of any length up to a minute and with any time gap between exposures.

Infra-red light is switched on at the same time like a floodlight, not a flash. That part of the light spectrum is invisible to animal and human eye alike so they are not put off by it coming on and off.

The downside is that, however high tech the electronic gubbins is, it is still an infra-red image which confuses any appreciation of colour. Not just black and white but excessively white recreation on anything green and different tones for animal fur and feather and so forth.

Fast moving subjects also tend to blur a bit too as the shutter opening can't be especially short with such limited light available. Before dark, and in the early morning, if there is enough natural light then the system will dispense with the infra-red function and take a colour picture in the conventional way. Hence, the occasional colour shots of the foxes. Such units would be available at your favourite camera shop although I have bought all of mine online as, by camera standards, they are very cheap kit at around £55 a unit.

The cameras are attended to every morning, the SD card removed and downloaded onto a computer hard drive and then wiped for the following day. Videos are very hungry of computer memory so cards of 64 GB have to be used. We still quite often fill cards on a busy night. These files also fill computer memories rather quickly too so it is advised that you invest in a separate larger capacity (4TB) hard drive if you plan to store them. The cameras run on AA batteries but, for economy, it is wise to invest in a small transformer (six volts). This incidentally also tends to improve sensitivity slightly. A set of batteries will last a week and longer if you are only taking stills but the transformers save a lot of money. Of course they require a mains supply. None of this back-up equipment is particularly costly when compared to average camera equipment.



The cameras will stamp the time on the images which is very useful for cross referencing with the other cameras. We now mostly set the main unit, mounted on the back wall of the house for videos and the other two to take stills. We position these on other corners of the patio and garden which might not be quite so well covered by the main unit. All cameras are screwed to a large piece of wood if not the wall as foxes can remove quite heavy objects if they put their minds to it.



The next step was to sit out on a long summer evening to see if she, as it was usually a she that came first, would risk sharing the garden with us. The first time she did was a wonderful surprise. I think on balance it is the face to face contact that truly make these encounters so precious.

Which brings me to the debate about photography in the first place. We use these so called remote camera 'traps' as a way of recording. But the real thrill is to see these creatures live. I can understand better now why so many bird watchers simply view and don't photograph. In the next issue, if Graham will let me, I am going to examine whether, as a nation, we are taking too many pictures as I am uncomfortable with some of the directions photography is going.

Come along to the Park Street Camera Club and give it a try. We are happy to welcome new members of all ages and abilities. We are meeting again at St Stephen Parish Centre in Station Road, Bricket Wood, just south of the junction of Station Road and Smug Oak Lane. There is ample parking to the rear of the building. Meetings are on Thursday nights, 7.45pm for 8pm and run till 10pm.

We are currently in session pretty much every Thursday night until Christmas
All those interested please contact either me
- Dave Hipperson davehip@btinternet.com
- or ring Chris Gilbert on 01923 856284