

Predators. Prey, Parasites and Symbiosis



A few weeks ago I found these creatures firmly stuck to a glove on the floor of the shed. I had no idea what they were but they were identified by a Wildlife Gardening friend as the caterpillars of a bee wax moth. The adult moth lays up to 100 eggs in a bumble bee nest which all made sense as we had a bumble bee nest under that corner of the shed. The moth larvae tunnel through the nest, destroying it, while

feeding on eggs, larvae, pupae and pollen. The larvae, 2 to 3 cm long, spin silk around themselves for protection which you can see in the photo. Finding these larvae made me think about all the other feeding relationships going on in a garden where nature is left to control itself without the intervention of pesticides.



Many people are familiar with the relationship between aphids (blackfly and greenfly) and ladybirds. Both the adult ladybirds (right) and the larvae (left) are carnivorous and munch happily on infestations of aphids. We are also very familiar with spiders (below) predated insects.



Less familiar are the leopard slugs (opposite) which lurk just under the lid of our water butt. We encourage them because they are omnivores, eating dead plants and animals (detritus) and other slugs. They can chase other slugs at 15 cm per minute.



My favourite predators are dragonflies and damselflies which are equipped to be very successful. The nymphs, which live in the pond for up to 4 years, have mouth parts "like a mouthful of knives and forks" designed to munch the prey. These mouth parts can be shot out on a "stalk" to catch the prey and the insect is rocket propelled by shooting air out of its rear end. There is really no chance for the prey. The adults catch prey on the wing and hold the poor insect in a basket made by the legs while eating it.

We found the strange creatures opposite on a rose bush during the summer. We eventually managed to identify them as Aphid Mummies. Female wasps parasitise the aphids by inserting eggs into them. The eggs hatch to form larvae which feed on the aphid and in about 10 days change the aphid into the mummy shown opposite. The adult wasp emerges by cutting a circular hole in the skin, we were able to see this with a lens.



The photo opposite shows an aphid farm being managed by ants. The ants get the very sweet honeydew secreted by the aphids. In return the ants protect the aphids from predators even carrying them into their nests at night and in winter. This is an example of symbiosis.

Photos Julian Fountain and Helen Knell