
Nature note: Connections

You know that BBC programme, Only Connect, where brainy panellists have to guess the unlikely connections between quite different words. Well, here's a free suggestion for a tricky question: what's the connection between cows, beetles and partridges?

Starting with cows, then. Cows have been blamed for a serious contribution to global warming through their massive emissions of methane gas. That comes from both ends – belching and flatulence. Apparently, a cow can produce some 50 gallons of methane a day, and since methane is over twenty times as powerful as the carbon emissions we hear so much about, and there are some 16 million cows in Britain, you can see (and often hear) the scale of the problem. In New Zealand, which has much more livestock than we do, there was even talk of a 'flatulence tax' to help save the planet. But I recently read a scientific article with the splendid title, 'In praise of cowpats', which makes a rather different point. Cowpats feed a host of insects. Masses of flies and beetles arrive within minutes of a fresh, glistening cowpat hitting the ground; these are followed by legions of others as the pat matures, decays and is eventually pulled underground by worms and dung beetles, so contributing to new plant growth. Each pat in open pasture produces this way some 1,000 developing insects – so with an average output of six pats a day that's 6,000 insects a day or over 2 million a year.

And we now know how crucial insects are to the whole chain of animal and plant life. They pollinate plants, provide food for birds and mammals, and are crucial to human agriculture and food supplies. It's been estimated that if all the world's insects were to disappear humanity would only last a few months and the earth would eventually become a vast compost heap, supporting only a gigantic blooming of fungi. We also know that insects are under great threat, largely from the pesticides with which we drench the land, which in turn explains why farmland birds have declined so sharply.

Which brings me to the third element in my quiz question: the grey partridge, whose numbers in Britain have declined by a staggering 90% in a single generation.



The grey partridge

Contributed

They were common in Shingle Street when we first arrived, but wholly absent now. Now – I'm getting to it – the scientific name of the grey partridge is *perdix*, so called because the whirring sound of a covey of partridge taking flight was thought similar to the natural human process described by the ancient Greek verb *perdomai* meaning 'to break wind'. So, there you have it. Not many people know that.

Jeremy Mynott
Shingle Street

Heritage Garden

The Heritage Garden is not full of spring flowers, though we can now boast five different varieties of snowdrop, all with tiny variations.

One delightful bulb that we do have is a grape hyacinth called 'Baby's Breath'. It has neat leaves and pale blue flowers, about 4cm in height.

Like the snowdrops, we must remove all the seed heads in case the insects have been busy and cross pollinated it.



Miggie Wylie

Grape hyacinth 'Baby's Breath'



Miggie Wylie

Dahlia 'David Howard' sized

We shall be checking our dahlia tubers in their boxes of compost, though they probably won't go out till late April. The ones under straw will stay tucked up until they show signs of life.

I am hoping to obtain funding to pay a part-time gardener to replace me.

Miggie Wylie