

Nature note - changing diets

Did you make any New Year resolutions about diet? Still keeping to them? Take a tip from wildlife. Some species have remarkable ways of changing their diets to suit the season – and in particular to get them through the winter. As the days get darker and colder in autumn, insects become much scarcer, so blackbirds, blue tits, starlings and other insect-eaters go vegan and switch to alternative sources of energy like seeds, nuts and berries. A good example for us, if you believe all those diet books.

But other species take more extreme measures you're unlikely to want to imitate. There's a bird called a bearded tit, for example – unrelated, despite the name, to the blue tits and great tits you see on your bird-table. Bearded



Contributed

Bearded tit

tits breed in large reed-beds like those at Minsmere and Walberswick, but they range more widely in winter. I've seen them a few times at Shingle St, feeding – rather incongruously – at the roadsides. What they were doing was swallowing gravel and tiny stones to help them crush and digest the seeds they'd been harvesting from bulrush heads. Their waists and weights expand accordingly over the winter period.

Shrews go even further. They can't hibernate, but they need to feed continuously and therefore have to take drastic measures. The organ that absorbs most of their energy budget is the brain, so they re-absorb that and literally shrink their heads to reallocate resources. The scientific name of this strategy is known as Dehnel's phenomenon. As a solution to a critical problem it's a no-brainer, you might say. Come spring, if they have survived, they just grow their brains again. Don't try this at home, but *going to see the shrink* may take on a whole new meaning.

The most extreme solution of all is practised by various moths. The December Moth, with no nectar or sap to feed on, just lives off its accumulated fat ... and then dies. Adults are physically incapable of feeding, so that's it. Not much of a life, you might think. But it does at least get to mate and deposit some eggs to ensure the next generation.

I think humans tend to put on a little weight in the winter anyway – to cheer themselves up and add a little insulation, so you can always revive your resolution in the spring.

Jeremy Mynott, Shingle St