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# SEND NATURE TRAILS

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## GARDEN LIFE IN SEND

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### RABBITS

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The village derives its name from its sandy soils, where rabbits love to burrow. Numbers fluctuate, with occasional bouts of mixomatosis killing off large numbers. If you see a rabbit which seems to be going blind, then it is probably affected. Natural predators of the rabbit, **foxes** are also common in the area, and you can often see them when driving home at night. They scavenge for food in dustbins and are one of those "love them or hate them" creatures. If you have suitable hiding places in your garden, you may find **hedgehogs** although they are rarer than they used to be. And **bats** roost in some local roofs and are protected by law from disturbance.

### MOLES

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Moles also invade our lawns from neighbouring wild land. Try leaving empty wine bottles on their side - the sound of the wind whistling in them is meant to act as a deterrent. If it doesn't work, at least you've had the pleasure of drinking the contents of the bottles!

### NETTLES AND OTHER LESS WELCOME PLANTS

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**Nettles** grow really well here. They sting by depositing an irritant under the skin and as most people know, rubbing with a dock leaf acts as an antidote. Nettles' positive attributes are that they attract **butterflies**, including small tortoiseshells and peacocks, red admiral and painted ladies - their dark spiky caterpillars feed on the nettles - plus aphids which in their turn attract ladybird and birds such as blue tits. They can also be brewed into plant fertiliser or even soup - but that's something of an acquired taste. You will also have a lot of butterflies if you let buddleia grow in your garden. Beware, like evening primrose, it can take over.

Other plants which you may not welcome are bindweed, which clings and climbs and has pretty white or pink flowers, and travellers' joy or old man's beard, another rampant creeper. Brambles are great for their autumn black berries but not so great for their thorns. If your garden is old, you will probably have ground elder, which is almost impossible to eradicate as its roots snap off easily and start off a new plant. Yarrow, the wild version of achillea, grows in lawns with the very common daisy, buttercup, clover and so on.

### MOTHS

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**Moths** are probably less well known by most people than butterflies, apart from their attraction to light bulbs. The pretty pink cinnabar moth which feeds on ragwort is most easy to identify; but you may also spot red underwings and old ladies!

## BIRDS

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Garden **birds** include house sparrows, which were becoming fairly rare but happily seem to be growing in numbers again. Don't confuse them with dunnocks, which creep in a rather mouse-like way, or the smaller wren. They all have fine bills for eating insects, and lovely songs. Magpies can be quite aggressive, and their relatives jays bury acorns in garden lawns; so if you have a mini-oak tree appear, that's probably why. Both birds help to clear up road kill as they are carnivores. Blackbirds, thrushes, various members of the tit family and pied wag tails - which do exactly as their name says - are all common, along with the gardener's friend, the robin, looking out for insects which have been disturbed. And finally, in tall trees or on rooftops, collared doves fly in and lull us with their repetitive and monotonous calls. These doves are now numerous all over Europe although they only arrived from Asia in the mid-1950s. Starlings give fantastic flocking displays in the sky in winter as they go to roost - you may have seen them on the BBC Springwatch program.

If you have water in or near your garden, you will have **frogs** and **toads**. Both are spawned as tadpoles. Toads have rougher, drier skins and hide away in holes, corners and even under the soil. You are also likely to have grass **snakes**, which are good swimmers, partial to eating frogs and like to bask in sunny spots. They have yellow neck patches and are harmless, as are slow worms which are legless lizards rather than snakes.

In the **insect** world, slugs and snails can be pests, but they are food for both thrushes and hedgehogs and if you put out slug pellets, you will also kill what eats the slugs. Spiders of endless varieties spin fantastic webs on our hedging plants. Among beetles are included ladybirds, which can be yellow rather than red. They sometimes hibernate indoors on windowsills. Leaf beetles include the handsome lily beetle which is scarlet on top but if disturbed drops to the ground showing its black underside, and is immediately camouflaged. Some larger ones, which can be frightening, are dorbeetles (a kind of dung beetle otherwise known as a cockchafer or maybug) which fly into objects, including people; and stag beetles, the males of which have antlers.