

Thought for the month March 2019

In February the journal Biological Conservation published a paper reviewing 13 years' worth of studies from around the globe about the state of things in the insect world. The conclusions are alarming: if the current rate of species loss continues, 40% of the world's insect species will be extinct within a few decades.

Just in case we're enjoying the idea of clean and tidy homes without dead flies on the windowsill, thriving gardens with no slug damage, or holidays in the sun without pesky biting mosquitoes, let's take a rain check on this. Without insects, there is no pollination of crops, no reproduction of most trees and shrubs, no flowers in vases on that windowsill. There is no food for insectivorous animals including many species of fish, birds and small mammals. There is no natural waste management, so all the detritus and animal waste would fail to break down into soil, instead turning gradually into an ever-deepening swamp of anaerobic sludge.

Actually, it might not be as bad as all that – the report suggests that the tough little critters that we love to hate like cockroaches and houseflies could fill the resulting ecological space and continue to keep us company for the time being. Until we all starve or drown in our own waste.

Cheerful huh? It's not intended to be. So what's behind this gloomy outlook for our six-legged and slimy-bellied friends? Number one is habitat loss due to industrialisation, development and deforestation; next is the use of persistent pesticides in the landscape; then the introduction of species from one part of the world into another, where they become invasive and dominant; finally, climate change.

This is where things get scary as far as I'm concerned. The loss of so much biodiversity is unprecedented and potentially catastrophic – and at such a big scale that it seems out of any of our control. But perhaps there are things we can do as individuals and communities. How about giving back some habitat by turning over parts of our village greens to species-rich grassland instead of having them mown short through the whole summer? Or stopping using pesticides in our gardens? Yes, it's going to take more than a few bug-hotels to sort this one out but if we each start with the bits we can do something about, it adds up to a lot. And who knows, maybe we'll be part of saving one or two species from extinction.