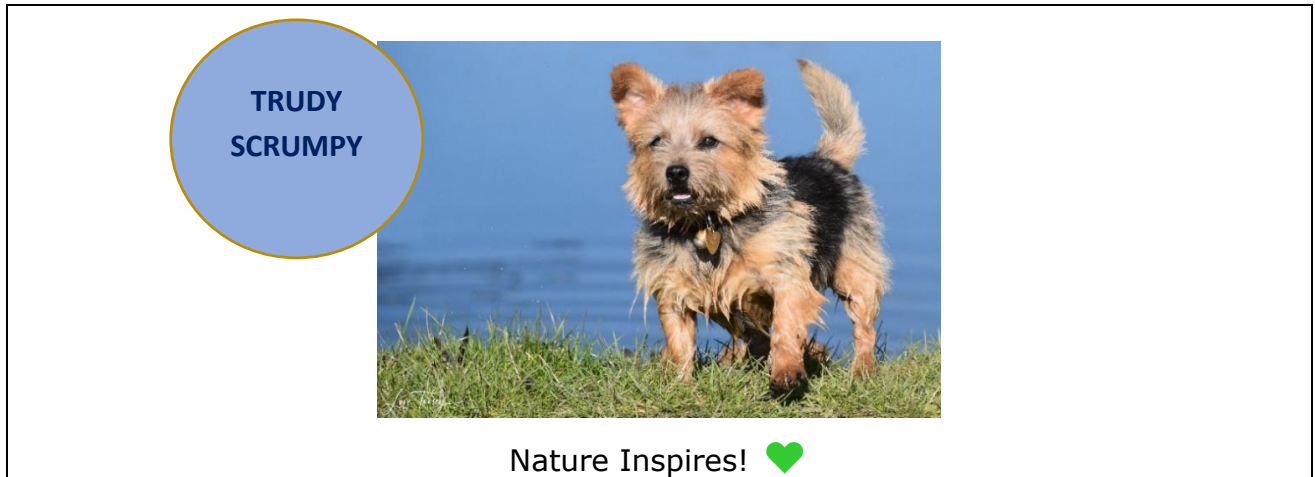


## Toosey Tails No. 8

### Nature spotting with Trudy

(How the weather affects Winners & Losers)

Hello girls & boys, your nature spotting friend is here to set you some inspiring summer holiday challenges, so let's get ready, go outside and start spotting!



Your first summer holiday challenge is deciding who the winners and the losers are in my *Nature Spotting Spring Diary* which I have written specially for you.

Zippy explained to you last week about the most unusual weather we are experiencing this Springtime, well on my nature watch I can see this weather not only affects the farmers and the land but it also affects the birds, bees and other creatures living out there in the countryside, with some faring better than others. I call these the winners and the losers and I would like you during your summer holiday to help me decide who were the 'winners' and who were the 'losers' this springtime. Would you like to help?

Your second challenge is helping to create the *Nature Spotting Summer Diary* and with your holidays about to start I thought you might enjoy being my assistant reporters.

Each week during your summer holiday you can report back on the interesting things you spot. It could be a flower in a park, an unusual insect creeping in your garden, a bird resting in a tree or anything else you spot out in the countryside. Write notes about what you spot each week and please draw a picture too so I can include all of these in the next *Nature Spotting Summer Diary*. This is going to be great fun!

# Trudy Scrumpy's Nature Spotting **Spring** Diary!



Cuckoo versus the Dunnock & The Meadow Pippin - The Cuckoo arrived much earlier than normal here in Tooseyland for I first heard one calling 'Cuckoo' back in March as he flew from tree to tree. Interestingly Cuckoos are normally summer visitors to Britain, flying all the way over from Africa just to breed here but with our much milder winter and warmer springtime it made its journey far earlier this year, enabling it to rest awhile, build up its strength, before starting to breed in April.



Cuckoo – the size of a pigeon



Dunnock – the size of a sparrow

The male cuckoo does all the calling so if you hear 'cuckoo' you know it is the male. He likes to sit high in a tree calling to let everyone knows he has arrived. The female makes more of a chuckling noise and spends her time flitting from hedge to hedge looking for

suitable nests to lay her eggs for she is a naughty, lazy bird and does not look after her own young.

Instead the female cuckoo lays her eggs in some poor unsuspecting, much smaller, bird's nests with the intention of letting them do all the work looking after her young cuckoos.

This behaviour makes the cuckoo a 'brood parasite'. Her favourite place to lay her eggs are either the Dunnock's nest, a small bird that looks much like a sparrow or in the nest of a Meadow Pipit, another small bird, easily confused with a skylark for both make their nests hidden on the ground amongst long grasses or in crop fields. Dunnocks tend to build nests hidden in the hedgerows but clearly not so hidden for the Cuckoo soon finds them!

The cuckoo lays a single egg alongside the other bird's eggs so the unsuspecting host can incubate and rear her chick. When the cuckoo hatches it either eats the other chicks, or if they have not yet hatched, it throws the eggs out of the nest where they then fall and break. This way the cuckoo ensures it gets all the attention and all of the food.

The amazing photo below is of a Cuckoo being fed by a Meadow Pipit in Ireland. This was taken by the photographer Nigel Moore but I have included it here for you to see the incredible size difference between the cuckoo and its unsuspecting adoptive mother.



So, girls and boys, who do you think is the winner and who is the loser and why?

Barred Grass Snake versus the frog - There are only three snakes native to the UK and they are all protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act making it illegal to injure or kill them.

The one I occasionally come across is the Barred Grass Snake, the other two snakes are the Smooth Snake and the Adder, which is our only venomous snake and luckily, I have never seen an Adder in Tooseyland. That does not mean they do not exist but if they are here, they keep safely hidden out of sight. Have you ever seen a snake?

I doubt you would see the Barred Grass Snake for it is normally only found in lowland regions in the south of England, like here in Tooseyland. Did you know that the Barred Grass Snake is Britain's largest native terrestrial reptile?

Yes, snakes are classified as **reptiles**, for like lizards and crocodiles, they hatch from eggs on land and only breathe air through their lungs, unlike frogs and newts who are **amphibians** for they can live in water and breathe through their skin as well as their lungs.





Young Barred Grass Snake



Frog

Barred Grass Snakes can grow up to 180 cms and live for up to 25 years so this little youngster has lots of growing up to do. It was in the month of May that I first spotted him sliding along the large stones amongst the ferns in the woodland garden. This is an excellent location for a snake to go hunting for his dinner, it is cool, damp, with lots of insects, the perfect residence for frogs to hangout and this particular snake sure loves eating frogs!

I am guessing this little fellow hatched last Autumn and had just come out of hibernation, for they are normally extremely timid, moving off quickly when disturbed but this one was clearly hungry and out hunting for food.



If you look closely you can see this Barred Grass Snake's forked tongue slipping in and out, he was tasting the air to see if there were any frogs about, for frogs are his favourite dinner.

With no venom, he has to rely on the element of surprise to catch his prey. As soon as he spots a frog he will strike out and grab it, swallowing it whole!

This snake had spotted a frog to eat which in turn had spotted a snail to eat!

Who do you think got gobbled up first?



Frogs love eating juicy snails so this snail was attempting to crawl high up the marsh plant to escape.



Laid in calm waters along the pond edge, a frog's life starts as frogspawn, hidden safely amongst weeds and reeds. Here the frogspawn remarkably transforms, first into wriggling black tadpoles and then a few weeks later into tiny frogs, at which point they leave the water.

But not this year, for the winter floods, which prevented Zippy from doing her farm work, meant the lake flooded over and all the tadpoles had nowhere safe to hide.



This is Dolly Dot swimming amongst the lilies and frogspawn. She is being watched by an adult frog sitting on a lily pad.

Frogs come down to our lily lake during late February or early March when there is normally plenty of cover to hide their spawn and lots of algae for the little tadpoles to eat.

Now for some very interesting information...what I find quite incredible is, if the conditions are not quite right in their pond or lake, the tadpole can make the decision to speed up or delay its transformation into a frog. It could even decide to remain in the water for a year!

So, if the pond or lake has too many greedy fish, or if there is not enough water or enough algae for the tadpoles to munch on, the tadpole can speed things up by growing its legs and lungs in super quick time, in order to get out of the lake to escape onto the land.

However, if there are fewer fish in the lake to gobble up the tadpoles, or if there are more weeds and reeds to hide in and providing there is also a plentiful supply of algae to eat, the tadpoles may decide to stay in the lake for a while and have some fun. How amazing is this!

Our mild winter weather and early spring flash floods resulted this year in the death of many of the early hatching tadpoles for they were flooded out of their safe hiding places before they had time to grow legs to turn into young frogs.

Meanwhile the adult frogs had left the lake and returned to our woodland garden in search of a cool, damp and quiet place to live out the summer months. With its natural underground spring and ample cover, our woodland garden provides this and more, for there are many insects, slugs, worms and snails living there too and as you know frogs love snails to eat.

So, do you think our woodland garden is a frog paradise?

I guess it could be if it were not for the grass snakes who, finding there were no young frogs to eat down by the lakeside, decided they would also travel up to our woodland garden.

Can you decide who the winner and loser are, the barred grass snake or the frog?

**Brown Hares versus the Marsh Harrier** – With no rain during this springtime, the crops in Zippy's fields are very slow to grow. This means the hares that live in those fields have fewer places to hide their young making them far more vulnerable to predators.

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So many adult Brown Hares seen in Zippy's field

It is the end of May and hares would normally by now have had their first litter of the year, giving birth to three or four babies, which are called leverets.

Unlike rabbits who give birth in burrows underground, brown hares give birth to their young in small depressions, known as scrapes, which they make on top of the fields. The brown hare therefore relies on the crops to grow high enough to safely hide her young from predators, like foxes and birds of prey, including the mighty Marsh Harrier.

The adult hare can rely on its acute senses to hear and see any predator, enabling it to run away at speeds of up to 45 miles per hour, that is far faster than I can run for sure. However, the leverets, who are born fully furred with their eyes open, cannot run so fast and are therefore totally reliant on the crops to hide them.

Leverets are only fed once a day, at sunset, when they gather together in the field to be fed by their mother. This will happen every day, for just four weeks, and apart from this contact the leverets receive no other parental care. In other words, they are out there on their own.

This is deliberate so not to attract any predators to the whereabouts of the young leverets, however as you know, this springtime there has been little rain here in



Tooseyland so Zippy's crops have been very delayed in growing and this in turn means the young hares have been much more exposed to the dangers lurking above them...the Brown Buzzards and Marsh Harriers have all been on the lookout for a tasty meal or two and without the crop cover to hide in, the leverets have provided that meal.



A magnificent Marsh Harrier flying high in search of food over Zippy's field

I have never seen a Marsh Harrier before but this year I have seen them flying above the fields a lot and the reason why is because there are easy pickings for them with so many young hares exposed out in the fields.

Marsh harriers are a rare sight indeed and are a Schedule 1 listed bird on The Wildlife and Countryside Act, meaning they are a most protected bird. They are sometimes seen over reedbeds and marshes, which is their preferred hunting ground but this year they obviously have found that Tooseyland is a good place to visit to catch the food they need to take back to feed their young.

This impressive bird of prey is one of Britain's largest birds. It has a distinctive way of carrying its wings raised in a prominent and characteristic 'V' shape as you can see in my photograph. I initially thought it was a Brown Buzzard, then it came closer and I could see its wings. Wow I could hardly believe my eyes and could not wait to tell the other Tooseys that I had seen a Marsh Harrier.

Like the Brown Hare, Marsh Harriers nest on the ground in long vegetation and have three or four young. Historically, they have always nested in reed beds just like our frogs,

so they too have something in common but it is thought they might now choose to nest in fields.

The courtship of the marsh harrier is so exciting for they wheel and tumble through the sky, male and female together locking talons in mid-air. What a sight this must be!

It was not so long ago, during the late 19th Century, that Marsh Harriers became extinct in Britain through habitat loss and persecution, so it is great to see them back here now flourishing in Tooseyland. No doubt the reason is the lack of rainfall. This prevented Zippy's crops from growing enabling the Marsh Harriers to easily spot the abundance of a new food source, young brown hares and leverets.



But all is not lost, for if it rains during June, hopefully Zippy's crops will grow tall, providing more cover for the wildlife. The brown hares can mate again and have another litter or two during the summer months when it will be safer for the leverets, for by then the young Marsh Harriers will have grown and flown the nest.

This brings me to my final Spring Spotting question. Do you think the Brown Hare was the winner or was it the Marsh Harrier and what are the reasons for your decision?

## Your Nature Spotting **Summer** Diary!

Don't forget, your second challenge is being my assistant reporter and helping to create the next exciting **Nature Spotting Summer** Diary.

Each week during your summer holiday, when you go outside, take your pad and pen with you so you can report back on all the interesting things you spot.



It could be a flower you spotted and watched, bursting from bud into a pretty flower.

or an unusual insect you spotted crawling in your garden.



Keeping your eyes wide open you might even spot a different bird in a tree or a wild animal, like this deer out in the countryside.

Just like a reporter, write notes about what you spot each week and include a drawing too so I can put all of these in the next **Nature Spotting Summer Diary**.

Let's all go Nature Spotting this summer!

Love from your friend Trudy Scrumptious 

*Let Love be our kindness to everyone while we learn, play & grow together!*