



THE SUMMER MOULT

We are enduring some very hot and humid conditions at the moment, and I for one, find it rather saps my energy.... so what must it be like for all the furred and feathered, warm bloodied wildlife we share our small island with? Phew.

Nature and evolution is packed full of amazing adaptations, to enable a myriad of species to survive across diverse habitats. But climate change is affecting our whole planet, and we are having much more extreme weather to deal with. Adaptations and evolution take a hugely long time, so I feel we really need to adjust our often destructive human behaviour, so we can all continue to share this small planet, and without exploiting nature any further.

All of us pet owners will know that our cats, dogs, rabbits and chickens lose lots of their thick fur or feathers, and are adept at finding cool places and shade to rest in during the hotter weather. They will also drink more water. Garden birds rely on clean water too, both to bathe in and to keep hydrated, so please keep any birdbaths you have clean and full.

One of the annual changes that ducks, and other waterfowl employ at this time of year, is their summer moult. This summer moult is not due to heat though, but all about ridding themselves of their rather tatty plumage after the rigours of the breeding season. This ensures they have feathers in really good condition to protect them for the colder months ahead. Their new feathers also help to keep them waterproof, when coated with the oil they preen themselves with regularly.

Male mallards - drakes- are much more brightly coloured than the drab females, but at this time of year, they are all looking rather brown and ragged, as they go through their moult, which for males is called eclipse plumage. The moult means that they are less able to escape predators as their flight feathers are poor, but they can hide amongst the lush vegetation, with abundant food readily available, until the new feathers gradually replace the old ones. This can take time, up to 3 months for some species of mallard, but their striking new plumage of iridescent green is gorgeous.

Juvenile garden birds, born earlier in the year, also moult now, developing their fully adult feathers, and migrant birds acquire strong new flight feathers to help them on their extraordinary journeys of 1000's of miles.

Raptors can't afford to moult in the same way, as they need to hunt for food every day, so cannot lose power in their flight. They replace just one or two feathers at a time, so only minimal gaps are evident in their wings.

Gulls have a much longer process, where they develop different sets of wing feathers over the 4 years it takes them to be fully mature.

Some male songbirds also have a second moult, in early spring or summer, but this time it is all about sexual display, and having the best plumage possible to attract a mate.

So, when we sit in the shade, keep the curtains closed, take off some layers and have a bit of a siesta during this hot spell, we can think about how our native wildlife is coping with the heat, and hopefully put out some cool, clean water for them to enjoy too.