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Gardening for birds: human-nature interactions in private domestic gardens

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Abstract

Private, domestic gardens are important both as sites for leisure and as sites of conservation interest. Birdwatching is an important leisure activity yet there appear to be no previous studies that combine these two themes of importance to the understanding of managed garden spaces. Semi structured interviews were held with birdwatchers as part of a larger study of the interactions between local places and birdwatching. Respondents revealed a wide and disparate spectrum of responses to their gardens and to how they made use of their gardens in their normal birdwatching activities. The study raises questions about the extent to which gardens are viewed as sites for interactions with nature and raises challenges about the use of gardens as areas of conservation action.

Introduction

The twenty million or so private domestic gardens in Britain are important sites of both leisure activity and conservation interest. They occupy more than ten times the area of protected nature reserves (Loram *et al* 2005; Bhatti and Church 2001; Bhatti and Church 2000) and they are important sites for several species of conservation concern such as Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*) and House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) (Gaston *et al* 2005; Bland *et al* 2004). Moreover, birdwatching is an important leisure pursuit in Britain: around ten percent of the population engage in birdwatching on an occasional or regular basis and approximately 50 percent provide food for birds (Bargheer 2008; Rotherham *et al* 2004). However, despite the importance of gardens as sites of environmental interest and birdwatching as a leisure activity with connections to environmental conservation, there have been relatively few studies linking leisure activities and environmental management to domestic locations (Rotherham *et al* 2004).

Indeed, as sites of conservation interest, gardens can be seen as key locales for debates about nature and wider environmental issues as they link 'nature, everyday social worlds and micro-geographies' (Bhatti and Church 2001, 366; Head and Muir 2006; Askew and McGuirk 2004). Such debates need to consider the spatial element of different human activities and how activities influence the transformation of nature and

spaces (King 2003). Smith (2002) writes that the transformations of social space central to Bourdieu's *habitus* (a 'coping-mechanism' that enables us to respond immediately and appropriately to the circumstances of everyday life) are fostered by particular social practices and the adoption of particular dispositions towards one's surrounding environment, including the relationship between humans and the natural world. However, many empirical analyses of nature and everyday life tend to focus on non-domestic spaces, largely ignoring everyday spaces such as domestic gardens, which are important because of their tenure and ownership and their connections to home and identity. Gardens are interfaces between domestic, private uses of space and the social and cultural expectations of conformity regarding that space (Head and Muir 2006; Askew and McGuirk 2004). Gardens also reflect a tension between '*natural*' and '*artifactual*' (Doolittle 2004; Brook 2003) and provide the opportunity to investigate human-nature connections within an everyday context (Head and Muir 2006; Power 2005). However, in order to understand the practices and values of the construction and transformation of nature it is necessary to analyse the everyday practices of people in their familiar places (Castree 2004; Bhatti and Church 2001; Macnaughton and Urry 1998).

Despite the number and importance of gardens, there have been relatively few studies of the relationships between human activity and human/animal relations in garden environments (Head and Muir 2006; Power 2005; Palmer 2003; Whatmore and Hinchcliffe 2003, King 2003). Further, many studies adopt a 'control of nature' perspective that obscures the non-human presence by envisaging gardens to be merely created, manipulated spaces that couple ideals of a 'stylized wild' with a desire to soften human dominated environments. In such a view, passive non-humans simply provide a backdrop the needs and understandings of humans (Power 2005; Gaston *et al* 2005). The view of non-humans as a backdrop needs to be challenged because whilst many authors envisage the garden as a stage upon which nature is a scenic background to human action, Power (2005) sees neither human nor non-human agents as being central to gardens. Clearly, gardeners control and manipulate 'nature', but there are also 'relations of collaboration, negotiation, competition and challenge' influencing both humans and non-humans.

This situated study explores how a popular leisure activity (birdwatching) occurs in an everyday locality (gardens) as a way of illustrating how relationships between human activity and non-human presence combine to modify and shape environments. The human alteration of environments is a contentious issue and even apparently benign

environmental modification practices, such as supplementary feeding, will have impacts that are open to criticism: it may alter the behaviour of wildlife such that they are no longer perceived to behave as wild animals (Green and Higginbottom 2000); population numbers may either increase or decrease (depending upon the nutritional quality of the supplementary diet); habituated animals may become nuisances and supplementary feeding may compromise the population ecology (Clout *et al* 2002), and ultimately the ecological balance, for specific species and certain areas (Cortez-Avizanda *et al* 2010; Orams 2002; Green and Higginbottom 2000).

It is important also to note that the concept of 'nature' is contested. 'Nature' is an ambiguous term with a variety of social constructions open to challenge from conflicting theoretical perspectives (Ginn and Demeritt 2009) and this study does not engage directly with wider debates about the 'meaning of nature' but instead seeks to explore how human activity in familiar everyday locations relates to the use of those locations to engage with an aspect of 'nature'.

Methods

Thirty-two self-identified birdwatchers in North Lancashire and South Cumbria were interviewed following advertisements placed in the newsletters of two local birdwatching societies. A number of these respondents were already known to the first author through bird watching activities. A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was used for the study, which successfully captured the complex variety of interactions and relationships between humans, birds and gardens. Data were analysed using the grounded theory constant comparison method, where each item is compared with the rest of the data to establish and refine analytical categories (Pope *et al* 2000). Recurring themes across transcripts were taken to reflect shared understandings of the participants (Smith and Marshall 2007) and the findings section is structured according to these recurring themes.

Emergent themes included how the garden was used for birdwatching; how the garden was modified for birds and birdwatching; the extent of providing food and other resources for birds; and attitudes to issues of 'attachment' and 'responsibility' for their gardens and its birds. Almost all interviews were conducted in the homes of respondents, often in rooms overlooking the garden: this was an advantage as many interviewees were drawn into discussion and illustrative examples by referring to their gardens. The respondents comprised a spectrum of birdwatchers ranging from expert to beginner; from those for whom birdwatching is a daily, fundamental part of life to

those with a more sporadic interest; from enthusiastic members of societies to those with little social engagement with other birdwatchers. The gardens ranged in size from small to large gardens with adjacent land that was managed for nature conservation purposes. Two respondents lived in apartments with no garden. Thirty out of the 32 participants were aged over 40 and there were more males (19) than females (13). All respondents have been given pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

Findings

The interviews suggested that gardens are important and frequently used, albeit often subconscious, locations for birdwatching and the potential of a garden for birdwatching had formed little part of the residential selection process, even for those who had considerable income at their disposal. Some respondents were reluctant to recognise the importance of their gardens to their birdwatching: Pandora, for example, initially denied the importance of her garden yet she had deliberately arranged the furniture in her room in order to see the garden and during part of the interview she was absorbed in watching birds using feeders that had been carefully placed so as to be seen from where she sat. In a similar manner, Victor initially overlooked mentioning his garden yet clearly took considerable pleasure from watching birds there even though his garden birdwatching was a 'daily ritual; a duty almost both to the birds and to myself'. On the other hand, neither Charlie nor Jeanette regarded their garden as being important to their birdwatching, probably because the thrill of seeing new birds meant that the garden offered nothing of value to this style of birdwatching. Responses such as these suggested that the potential of gardens as places for birdwatching was not consciously recognised by most birdwatchers.

Prior to conducting the interviews it had been anticipated that environmental alteration in the form of 'Gardening for birds' would be important for many respondents, yet conscious alteration of the garden for wildlife purposes was discussed much less frequently than had been expected. Interestingly, some respondents did not initially consider the degree to which they had altered their gardens for bird watching. For example, Ross had made considerable changes to his garden yet denied this was linked to bird watching and only later did he recognise that 'a big element of (my) gardening is to catch¹ birds there'. Similarly, Beatrice at first denied that she had gardened for birds before admitting that she had completely redesigned the garden: she'd chopped down certain trees and a hedge and planted other shrubs and bushes

¹ This respondent was licensed to catch and ring birds under the British Trust for Ornithology Ringing Scheme

for food and cover for the birds, trained ivy up walls and fences and put up nest boxes. 55% of the respondents had manipulated their gardens for birds: many had made considerable and wide ranging efforts to do so and were able to identify and explain such actions, though social constraints and other users and uses of the gardens were also apparent.

In addition to altering the layout or composition of their gardens, almost all participants reported that they provided food for birds with many also providing water, nest boxes and some providing other resources, including nesting materials. For many respondents, 'providing for the birds' in these ways was an integral part of their birdwatching activity. Gordon did not identify himself as a birdwatcher though he talked enthusiastically about watching birds in his garden: 'Oh yes, I look at the birds in my garden and I put food out for them; crusts and peanuts, you know and seeds sometimes. Oh and I like the Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*) that comes and it eats and hops about and it looks so nice. I like that, I like the Robin, but I can't put a name to most of them, but I like them.' For a few interviewees, a feeling of responsibility, even duty, to birds was a key motivator but for most respondents the key motivation for this type of human intervention in the garden was to observe birds better, more often and in greater numbers.

Many respondents felt a close attachment to the birds in their gardens; some personalised the birds, whilst others claimed to be able to identify "our birds" from distinguishing features in plumage or behaviour. Most felt pride in the birds that visited their gardens and Roger even had a friendly competition with a near neighbour complete with mild teasing when one garden was visited by a bird that hadn't been seen in the other garden. Some even confessed to feelings of jealousy when a particular bird was seen in the garden of a neighbour rather than in their own garden but there were few expressions of personal possession or exclusive ownership of the birds and a number of respondents firmly resisted the notion of ownership of birds.

Although Beatrice spoke of 'our birds' she was amused rather than irritated when she saw those birds in the gardens of neighbours and whilst Doreen initially claimed: 'They are MY Blackbirds (*Turdus merula*)' she immediately corrected herself: 'No, they actually own the garden'. Ernie clarified the nature of mutual belonging between garden and bird by stating that although the birds in the garden were "our own birds" they were not 'owned' by him; rather he was a 'steward' who managed the garden for the benefit of seeing and enjoying birds and other wildlife in return. Many interviewees recognised

a similar form of mutual benefit where the number and diversity of birds in their garden was seen as an acknowledgement of the care and effort that had been put into gardening in a wildlife friendly manner.

David Allen, writing about Gilbert White (one of the most celebrated bird watchers and ecologists of all time) and his connection to place (Selborne) describes Selborne as 'the secret, private parish inside each one of us' (White, 1977). Gardens can function on a similar level, and respondents typically viewed their gardens as personal, private spaces with the owners as arbiters of access, though almost all were keen to share the birds in their gardens. For Lottie, the garden is a private, personal space where she could influence the environment and where the presence of birds is a personal reward: 'If there are birds here it means it is favourable for birds. It's a private place and I would like to see birds in the garden; for example, Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*) - there were a hundred by the river and it was a thrill to see them, but ONE in the garden: that WOULD be a thrill.' But despite using the garden for birdwatching, all respondents saw the garden in the context of other people and other leisure activities and although gardens were clearly personal spaces, there was often a stated willingness to share birds with others, including the intrusions of complete strangers. In this way gardens were also regarded as hybrid spaces where the social and cultural meanings of those spaces and interactions with other individuals and other activities mediate the desires of birdwatchers to experience nature in the garden.

As well as being a personal, private place where the owner can alter the environment, the garden also offered some birdwatchers an immediacy and security of observation. Garry professed the garden to be his favourite place for birdwatching, partly because he liked to see the birds feeding but also because he can recognise the birds that occur there. It appeared as if those who most valued garden birdwatching were those most likely to engage in the conscious environmental alteration of their gardens and that such action was influenced less by extraneous factors such as space, finance and time than by the type of birdwatching undertaken.

Most respondents valued the 'wildness' and 'independence' of the birds in their garden. Doreen may have been disappointed that the Blue Tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) that collected hair from her garden used it for nesting in a different garden but she recognised and appreciated the independence of the birds in her garden. It was evident that the unpredictability of birds is part of their fascination and appeal for many respondents.

Discussion

The findings from this case study suggest that the degree of importance that a birdwatcher places on their garden for birdwatching does not appear to be related to the size and 'value' of that garden for birds; rather it relates to the type of birdwatching that is undertaken. Thus the attributes of the garden are less relevant for how that location is used than the nature of the activity that the individual participates in. Those who valued their gardens most as birdwatching locations appeared to fall into two loose groups: those who enjoyed watching the behaviour of birds and those interested in keeping records of the birds using their gardens. Thus, an interest in birds is not likely to be a good predictor of an interest in 'gardening for birds'.

Whilst some respondents manipulated the environments in their gardens by 'gardening for birds', few initially recognised that this was the case. It often required a relatively deep understanding of the individual respondent to elicit information about the link between location and activity. This clearly has implications for research into similar location-based leisure activities, and researchers need to be aware of the potential for some locations and activities to be 'taken for granted' and thus overlooked and undervalued by both participants and researchers (see also Daniels and Kirkpatrick 2006). Environmental manipulation and alteration ranged from doing nothing, through providing food, water and other resources, planting (or removing) plants and positioning furniture to maximise viewing potential, to deliberate and comprehensive redesign of houses and gardens. Whilst extraneous factors such as space, finance and time influence such actions, the actuality of environmental action appears to be influenced more by the type of birdwatching activity of the respondent: thus those who recognise and value the garden for birdwatching are those most likely to engage in gardening for birds.

'Gardening for birds' may be expected to be an altruistically motivated activity but it appears that whilst for some respondents there existed a feeling of environmental responsibility, a much more powerful motivation for 'providing for the birds' was to be able to observe birds better, more often and in greater numbers and diversity. It seems clear that for most of the respondents, there was an unspoken 'contract' between them and the birds: 'I'll provide the food; you come to get it where I can see you.'

The appeal of attracting birds into the garden appeared to have little to do with 'taming' wildlife; rather the 'wildness' and unpredictability of birds were powerful components of

the appeal of seeing birds in a garden. Whilst most respondents expressed some form of territoriality with respect to their garden (often strongly so) and most felt a close attachment to the birds in their gardens, there were few expressions of personal possession or exclusive ownership of the birds despite occasional friendly competition with neighbours.

The findings from this study lead to a number of conclusions about the relationship between humans and non-humans in gardens. Gardens provide humans with contact with those elements of nature that are tolerant of, or oblivious to, human influence (Head and Muir 2006; Gaston *et al* 2005). As first-hand contact with nature can be a powerful stimulus to the development of environmental attitudes and relationships (Brook, 2003; Green and Higginbottom 2000) it might be expected that garden birds provide an appeal to, and engagement with, nature that is immediate, familiar and frequent and, by thus engaging the interest of garden owners, stimulate their actions in the same ways as have been demonstrated for plants (Power 2005; Hitchings 2003). However, the extent of 'gardening for wildlife' practices amongst birdwatchers appeared to be surprisingly low with little evidence that respondents were using their interest to do much more than to provide food, water and nest sites for birds.

The view of gardens as sites of human control and ownership with gardeners taking central stage in a monologue produced by the all-powerful gardener (Power 2005; Anderson 1997) is open to challenge because gardens can also be seen as locations of overt bird activity with (generally) passive human observation and (some) human intervention. Rather than humans being central to gardens and gardening, it can be suggested that the non-human activity and the place can assume centrality as the stimulus for, and location of, human activity. Power (2005) has shown how plants can be understood as structuring the actions of gardeners by 'drawing' people into caring for them. By recognising that plants are 'enrolled' into the garden rather than being coerced, and have as much to 'gain' as the gardeners, it can be seen that gardens are less human centred than they at first appear (Power 2005; Hitchings 2003). Similarly, it is possible both that birds are enrolled into the garden and that humans are enrolled into providing care for birds in a way that is beneficial to both birds and humans.

These findings, drawn from the views of some respondents in this study, challenge the view of nature as a passive 'other' that is used and exploited by humans. In particular, the view of gardens as sites of domestication where non-humans are expected to acquiesce to human-directed terms and conditions (Anderson 1997) seems

unsupportable in this study as it appears it is humans who have to agree to the 'terms and conditions' of birds if they want to attract them into their garden. The reality is that different species (and individuals) of birds respond in different ways to the different gardens and the different ways of managing gardens. Further, different people respond to these birds in different ways. Gardens can therefore be viewed as locations of collaborative interaction between humans and birds, though it is unlikely that birds are consciously reciprocating what humans may see as a mutually beneficial process. Birds can clearly stimulate some humans to 'garden for wildlife' and by so doing modify garden environments to some extent.

For some garden owners, 'gardening for wildlife' is a reflective process intertwining 'nature' and gardening involving ecological dilemmas, ambiguities and opportunities for human-nature relations operating within social conditions and norms of garden design and practice (Bhatti and Church 2001). Hence environmental ethics should demonstrate a concern for the domesticated environment as well as the wild environment (King 2003) and it might be expected that those, such as birdwatchers, with an interest in aspects of the wild environment might demonstrate overt interest in adopting 'wildlife-friendly' gardening practices.

Surprisingly, the results from this study suggest that birdwatchers have not responded to calls for the adoption of 'gardening for wildlife' practices (for example, Toms *et al* 2008) for two reasons. Firstly, the key motivating for modifying the environment in gardens would appear to be in order to see birds better, in larger numbers and in greater diversity yet there appears to be a recognition and acceptance of the difficulties of controlling or even influencing bird behaviour and secondly, and surprisingly, few respondents admitted to even trying to adopt 'gardening for wildlife' actions in the first place. This reluctance may be explained by a desire by garden owners to mediate their desire to experience nature by the interaction with other individuals and activities.

Conclusion

This study supports the argument that the relationship between humans and landscape needs to be understood as experiential, involving the subjectivities of people (Lee 2007). Gardens thus become hybrid places: private retreats; settings for creativity and individuality; places for social interaction; displays of conformity and cultural conditioning; and locations for encountering natural worlds (Smith 2002; Bhatti and Church 2001). Gardens and gardening practice clearly vary considerably between individuals (Brook 2003) and it is likely that competing inside-outside, private-public

views of domestic space combine with a variety of social meanings associated with gardens to interact with constructions of gardens as locales for engagement with nature to a far greater extent than the consideration of birdwatching as a leisure activity would suggest. Not only are there differing views of how gardens should operate, there are different views even within an apparently homogenous leisure group such as birdwatchers as to how gardens and environmental management within gardens relate to a specific leisure activity.

This study supports Power's (2005) rejection of gardens as sites for the 'control of nature' leading to a 'stylized wild' because it finds a collaborative relationship between birds and humans founded on an appreciation of the wildness and unpredictability of birds. Clearly, human activities in gardens are framed by distinct understandings of 'nature', place and activity yet how non-gardening practices impact on the construction and transformation of nature in gardens are far less well understood. It can be suggested therefore that further analysis of everyday practices of people in their gardens would be useful in uncovering how familiar places are viewed and transformed.

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