

# SMALL WONDERS

**One woman's passion for pin-sized wildlife has spawned a remarkable snapshot of her local woods. But there's a sting in the tail...**

**T**hese days I know what to look for – a leaf that's not whole, a petal with a pimple. My eyes have grown used to spotting where an insect might be lurking." Jennifer Gosling is bonkers about bugs, and has hunted down hundreds with her camera lens in the woods near her Hampshire home. She has never earned a penny from her images – in fact she only started snapping nature in 2012, when her daughter gave her a camera after she retired. Yet her curious woodland passion has spawned a superlative gallery of work – laid out in close-up over the following five pages.

There is a sting in the tail of this inspiring story, however – one that has given Jennifer's quest a new urgency. The irreplaceable ancient woods she loves are now at risk of serious damage from a proposal to box them in with housing estates and roads. They include Upper Barn and Crowdhill Copse, owned by the Woodland Trust and alive not just with invertebrate life, but badgers, tawny owls and rare Bechstein's bats. Jennifer is horrified – and has joined hundreds of locals backing the Trust's campaign to save them.

"I walk these woods every day, and these plans could decimate nature. Invertebrates may not be as glamorous as owls or otters, but they are vital to the woodland ecosystem, and especially vulnerable to pollution from aggressive development. This news has given my hobby a new campaigning zeal!"

Jennifer says the closer you examine this community of pin-sized fauna, the more fascinating it becomes. "It's their magnificent mandibles, the spikes on their legs – to me they're such lovely little characters. I've had some wonderful moments, like the time an enormous queen hornet strolled out of the brambles in front of me and stretched her legs. Another day I snapped a snakefly without even knowing it (see page 23): I'd seen them in books, but never thought I'd come across anything so curious. It was tiny, so it wasn't until I got the image home and blew it up on screen that I saw those unmistakable cobra-like curves. So exciting!" >>







### Nut weevil

With a nifty snout almost a centimetre long, these bugs just love hazelnuts. The female's schnozzle is as long as the rest of her body, and she uses it to bore into the soft, pliant skin of newly grown nuts, laying a single egg in each. As the shell hardens, the grub hatches, guzzling the protein-rich treat. The adult weevils have another card to play: if startled by predators, they stiffen and fall to the floor with legs in the air, playing dead. There are an astonishing 628 British and Irish species of weevil: spot them by hedges or on the wildlife-rich woodland edge, spaces equally beloved by the speckled bush-cricket (whose nymphs are pictured on page 21). Buglife's Dr Sarah Henshall says: "The mother cricket needs bark to breed, thanks to the long, sword-like ovipositor she sports on her bottom. She smites deep into a woody crevice to lay her eggs, as protection from predators."

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Two thousand British invertebrate species rely on ancient or veteran trees

Thousands of species depend on ancient woodland, and most of them are minuscule. If Eastleigh Council pushes ahead with its project – which includes cramming more than 50 hectares of open countryside between the woods with 6,000 dwellings plus a thundering new North Bishopstoke bypass – the consequences will be dire. The BBC naturalist Chris Packham spent his boyhood wandering woods in the area, birdwatching and tracking foxes. He has joined the clamour opposing the plans, branding them an example of “ill-educated planning” and “a grotesque act of eco-vandalism”.

The Trust's Jack Taylor says that while the woods won't be felled, hedges will go and the precious woodland-edge habitat that harbours most biodiversity will be menaced. “All those fields and footpaths would be concreted over, severing long-established routes for wildlife, and pressing too close to the woodland margins. The hedgehogs, foxes and deer which use the old trails risk collision on the bypass, and the road will create a corridor of artificial light, disorientating owls, moths and the especially rich community of bats there. Sadly this is just one of 723 threats to ancient woodland the Trust is now fighting nationwide, with housing schemes looming large in our caseload.”

As well as building walls between the woods, the development would bring thousands of new people and pets. “That's fine in

moderation, but no wood could withstand this influx. The creatures that inhabit ancient woods are sensitive, and don't respond well to change. The increased noise, light and air pollution would tear through their tranquillity and create chaos.”

Given 90% of life on Earth is invertebrate – there are 40,000 species in the UK alone, and fully 2,000 of them rely on ancient or veteran trees – the tiniest beasts will bear the brunt. And according to Dr Sarah Henshall of the insect charity Buglife, every other species needs them to survive: “Bugs underpin the web of life: they pollinate, they recycle nutrients by breaking down leaf litter, they feed birds, bats and reptiles. Without them at the base of the pyramid, we'd have nothing – but they are repeatedly undervalued.”

Not by Jennifer Gosling, happily, whose respect for such creatures means we get to ogle the incredible shots on these pages. If you live in Hampshire and want to help save their habitat, add your voice to the Trust's campaign by emailing [campaigning@woodlandtrust.org.uk](mailto:campaigning@woodlandtrust.org.uk). For more on protecting the world's titchier wildlife, visit [buglife.org.uk](http://buglife.org.uk). >>



### Red dock weevil

You might think you'd spot this splash of scarlet as you stride past clumps of docks on the forest fringe, but these weevils are rather shy. Less than half a centimetre long, they hang out (literally) under leaves, and quickly drop to the ground if disturbed. So this represents another brilliant feather in Jennifer's photographic cap.

### >> Green tiger beetle

Just like their namesakes, tiger beetles are ferocious, agile predators. “They love to hunt on bare ground, scooting out of holes to chase their prey,” says Jennifer. “Mining bees are a favourite snack. If surprised, they fly into long grass; I had to creep up on this one!”



### >> Meadow grasshopper

The old green grasshopper in Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach* charmed countless children, but in reality he can't have been more than a month old – that's roughly how long adult grasshoppers live. “I feel quite sorry for them,” confides Jennifer. “They are hunted by a host of predators, and often end their short lives accidentally leaping into spiderwebs or being picked off by birds.”



### >> Identity thieves

Here are three beasts that steal their names from others they resemble. Above, the scorpionfly's trademark 'tail' is only found on the male – it's actually his genitalia. Mating at night, he will often present his paramour with a placatory dead aphid, so she isn't tempted to kill him after the act. No scorpionfly stings, though – and nor does this wasp beetle (centre): it deters predators by being a master of disguise. The top picture is Jennifer's teeny snakefly (see main story).







## Nettle weevil

These blue-green beauties boss the stingers in their youth: their larvae love nettle roots, the adults munch the leaves. They don't age well, however – their shimmering metallic scales soon rub off, leaving them almost black. All the while they are safe from grazers: the armoured weevils are less than a centimetre long, and can move between nettle spines without activating the sting.



## Thick-legged flower beetle

This iridescent eye-catcher has a sweet tooth: spot it sipping nectar on bright blooms, especially thistles, though poppies, ox-eye daisies and brambles are also fair game. Adults can be clocked in the warmer half of England – they are sun-worshipping southerners – but their larvae are expertly hidden inside the dry stems of plants, which the nymphs munch on to grow.

» The new issue of our sister magazine **Wood Wise** is all about beetles: find it at [woodlandtrust.org.uk/woodwise](http://woodlandtrust.org.uk/woodwise).

## Gorse shieldbug

This large shieldbug is a bit of a chameleon: spy one in spring and it's likely to be green, meaning it is sexually mature and ready to mingle. Younger specimens sport purple-red markings instead, and like many shieldbugs, will often grow darker before settling down for the long winter sleep. As well as gorse, the larvae feast on broom, dyer's greenweed and laburnum, while plump purple clover is also on the menu. Britain has 44 species of shieldbug: some are called stink bugs, as they produce a pungent liquid from glands near their hind legs when threatened. Jennifer is pleased with this photograph: "I love getting these head-on shots," she says. "I like to see their faces – all that personality."

