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Tracks: Gill Steiner points out woodlice activity near Highgate Wood. They come in an array of colours. Photos Mike Coles.

Have you met the neighbours?

By Mike Coles

Around 18,000 people live in the four square miles that is East Finchley. We think of this as our own little patch with homes, shops and schools, but it's also home to a much bigger population, one we rarely see: woodlice.



Tell-tale signs: Woodlice leave trails where they have cleaned

Despite their rather 'lousy' name these are not in any way related to the parasitic insects that live off blood in our kids' hair. They are not even insects at all but crustaceans, close relatives to lobsters and crabs, that came ashore at some point in history and decided to live on land.

So, what has brought them to our attention? Our story begins a while ago when local resident and nature lover Gill Steiner spotted some strange trails on

her porch roof when looking out of a first-floor window.

"I suddenly noticed that there were minuscule trails across some of the clay tiles leaving cleaned areas and when I looked very closely it looked like something had been guzzling the dirt, which I found astonishing, particularly as it was on the first floor, not at ground level," she said.

Gill has a terrace in her back garden. A while later, when re-potting some plants,

she noticed these trails again. "When the pots were removed, I noticed the terrace was cleaner underneath." Now thoroughly intrigued she decided to do some research and it turned out that the answer was woodlice.

Nature's cleaners

These friendly creatures are part of an animal group called isopods. They can be found sheltering under rocks or flowerpots in the garden or hiding in compost heaps, where they avoid drying out in hot weather.


Common woodlice are important for their ability to feed off dead plants and creatures, recycling vital nutrients.

They play a vital role in the natural carbon dioxide cycle.


As Gill says: "It's humbling to realise that every night woodlice go about cleaning up the mess around them, and there's no shortage of atmospheric pollution, algae and dirt for them to tackle. Woodlice remind us of something which we human beings ignore: under our feet are creatures and organisms which break down plants and rotting wood and help keep the earth clean and free of debris. They return the basic vital nutrients back to the soil and to the ecosystems that rely on them."

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT WOODLICE




1. There are around 30 species of woodlouse in the UK. They are about 1 cm to 1.5 cm long.
2. The most common woodlouse has smooth, shiny, grey 'armour' (an exoskeleton made up of segments or 'plates'), with yellow patches and lighter grey edges, but they also come in an array of colours from brown to pink
3. The woodlouse is a herbivore and therefore only eats organic plant matter. They rarely eat live plants but do feed on the decaying leaves and rotting wood found in compost heaps, gardens and forest floors.
4. Being crustaceans, and still not totally adapted to living on land, they need damp environments to live in, but not too damp. In very wet conditions they might climb a wall or wander into your house to find some shelter.
5. They are only active in the cool of night, when they munch their way through any rotting vegetation leaving random clean trails behind if this happens to be on a hard surface.
6. Mother woodlice carry their brood around in a brood pouch on their stomachs, kangaroo-like.
7. Woodlice are harmless, don't carry any disease and are popular with gardeners. They even make good pets and are easy to keep in margarine containers as they are not able to climb up the sides. They just need some damp soil on the bottom and some house-hold vegetable scraps added occasionally.
8. Woodlice have endeared themselves to many people's hearts in the past and there are numerous common names for them, such as Bibble bugs, Coffin-cutters, Roly Polys, Slaters, Chiggy Wigs, Wood Shrimps and Tiggyhogs.




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