

House Guests

Back home from a holiday, I become aware of disturbances in the attic. Mice skittering around; very noisily, but I have read that they can sound like miniature elephants. Wood mice, I suppose, spending the winter indoors, but it's early April and they should have left by now. Two weeks later there are squeaks: are they house mice after all, breeding indoors? But shouldn't baby mouse squeaks be higher-pitched?

Another three weeks away. Back home again there are still squeaks and scampering, now in various parts of the roof space. I hang a sonic mouse repeller in the attic, but the only effect is to move the noises into the eaves. Here there is no loft insulation, and on the plywood soffit panels the footwork becomes much louder. An idea strikes me, two months late. I climb into the attic to investigate, and there come face to face with a resentful pine marten. I apologise humbly and remove the sonic scarer.

Ah. Very big mice. I reckon that there are probably three young martens, endearingly called kits, with their mother; father takes no part in kit-rearing. I phone SNH, and they confirm that I can do nothing until they leave; these are seriously protected animals. Mixed thoughts: what a privilege, what a nuisance, what wonderful animals, what damage will they do, my fault for putting out peanut butter each night. And how did she get in? The answer is easily found: that small triangle of wood next to the roof corner which fell out in a gale and which I meant to replace. The gap has been enlarged by maternal claws.

I take to hole-watching from the summer house with a camera, and capture a head surveying the world. Then mother emerges at 9.30pm to hunt for food for her demanding children. I have been told that pine martens can climb harled walls, but this one squirms onto the roof and crosses it to find an easier way down at the back. I see her again as she undulates across the lawn, leaps from rock to rock across a boulder bed, runs down to the road and into next door's garden. In the morning I find pieces of loft insulation and feathers on the ground below the hole. I can't imagine how she finds enough food for her growing family, and hope that no nearby chicken owners are suffering.

I am now sleeping with earplugs. Pine martens are usually most active at night, but in their dark home the little ones seem to alternate all day and night between sleep periods and intense activity, galloping along their plywood race-track, stopping to tussle or to scratch the woodwork. I spot one of them bravely climbing out onto the roof. Then I have an unexpected encounter.

Planning a walk around the garden in the early evening, I start to open the front door, then stop: I am going out, but there is a small animal trying to come in. I edge the door shut again, careful not to pinch little feet, and go round to a window which overlooks the doorstep. Yes, a young pine marten, fluffy-haired but already wearing its coffee-and-orange bib. It must have been over-enterprising and fallen out of the hole. What now? I go out carefully to see if it is all right, and it shows me a mouthful of small teeth. It seems keen to stay near the door, and is anxious, confused, restless, hungry, squeaky; it has never seen anything like me, and the outside world of daylight must be baffling. Light rain is now falling, so I give it a small box for shelter. I watch from the window as first it plays with the box, tipping it over and climbing in and out; then curls up in it for a doze; then sets to work demolishing it. I am waiting for mum to come and fetch her wayward kit, but perhaps she is waiting for night, or perhaps she can't count up to three. The kit tries climbing the wall but is not strong enough yet. It daringly mounts several short expeditions down the steps and a short way into the garden, comes back and pushes against the door, cries loudly for its mother or for food. I give it a bigger box, with a rock in it, and it seems to settle in for the night. It's my bedtime too.

In the morning it has gone. I imagine mother finding it, telling it off severely, grabbing it by the scruff of its neck, somehow carrying it onto the roof and, by a considerable gymnastic feat, into the hole. The noisy learning by activity continues. In the evening I watch mum putting her head out to check carefully every ten minutes, and finally at 10pm emerging. When mother's away the young come out to play, and they have all now learnt how to reach the roof.

And that night, 17th June, is quiet and earplug-free! In the morning all is silent: they have left. Perhaps my little one's escapade has told mum that they are ready. I give them another day, then climb a ladder to cover over the hole, and find that they have made a second hole in their plywood floor: an emergency exit? Then I dare to venture into the attic to see what havoc they have perpetrated. None. I have been warned about the smell, but there isn't any in these hot dry conditions. The remains of at least two months' eating and excreting must be somewhere, and I imagine that the scene under the eaves is horrific, but that part of the roof is inaccessible to humans. Ah, yes, there is one bit of damage. A disconnected electric wire explains why the passage lights are

not working.

And that is that. Or is it? No. Three days later, I wake at 4am to a nightmare: a very loud scratching in the roof area. Confused thoughts: is one kit still trapped in the attic? Not possible, and it's too loud for a youngster. I go to the window and see a kit beside my car. Then the mother charges up like the cavalry, howling furiously. The scratching stops. Interpretation? My only theory is that a male, perhaps the father, was trying to get into the now disused den; mother saw this as a threat and chased him off.

I've now stopped giving peanut butter to my nightly visitor.

Oh, and there is one more thing to say: what truly beautiful and fascinating creatures they are. I have been very lucky to get to know them a little.