

Letter from Scotland



A bad week for wasps

A pest control expert appeared at my front door earlier this week and said he'd come to "deal with the wasps' byke." Apparently they'd built a nest in a vent in my bathroom. I didn't even know it was there, though I had ushered a few sleepy wasps out of the window in the previous few days. My downstairs neighbour had called the operative out and here he was with a long pole ready to exterminate, exterminate, exterminate.

The extraordinary thing was that 15 seconds after he injected a white powder into the vent, a whole army of wasps appeared from the garden determined to defend their nest. The expert explained that the queen wasp had sent out a distress message, in the form of a scent, and this had been picked up by all the wasps in the garden. They came charging in, ready to exterminate, exterminate, exterminate whoever was attacking their queen. Unfortunately, as soon as they entered the vent, it was they who were exterminated by our cruel white powder. I felt guilty that I had had a hand in killing such remarkable

creatures.

I have since learned that wasps perform several useful functions – pollinating certain fruit trees and flowers, keeping aphids and whitefly under control and providing food for creatures further up the food chain. In this case, they performed the useful function of reminding me of the power of nature to defend itself and go on the attack.

Scotland was certainly under attack this week by Storm Ali, the first big storm of the season. It came sweeping in from the Atlantic on Wednesday with winds of 60 to 100mph, taking down trees, closing roads, disrupting train and ferry services and soaking us all with heavy rain. At the height of the storm, 70,000 homes lost their electric supply, mainly in the South-West. A bus carrying the Dundee University football team was struck by a falling tree at Kincaple in Fife, and a cruise ship in the Clyde had to be rescued by tugs when it broke free from its moorings.

There were stormy scenes in parliament that day too, with the SNP government suffering a rare defeat. MSPs voted by 63 to 61 against one of the centre-pieces of the party's education reforms, national tests for pupils in the first year of primary school. The education secretary John Swinney tried to argue that the tests were purely diagnostic, to identify struggling pupils at an early stage so that they can be given more help. But opposition MSPs said teachers were perfectly capable of identifying such pupils without the need for intimidating and time-consuming national tests. Although Mr Swinney lost the vote, he advised schools to continue using the tests. But surely he can't defy the prevailing wind in parliament for much longer.

I promised to keep you up to date with the "scallop wars", the alternative version of the Brexit negotiations. There has been a scrappy compromise between the French and British governments which bans the larger trawlers from both countries

from dredging for scallops in the Baie de Seine before the end of October but boats of less than 15 metres in length are free to dredge all they like from now till next May.

The whole deal, and the clashes at sea involving Scottish boats as well as English and French, ignores the overall issue of whether there should be any dredging for scallops at all. Just as the Brexit negotiations ignore the overall issue of what is good for the economies and wellbeing of all 28 countries involved.

Another dredging issue surfaced this week and it's over the protection of the valuable "kelp beds" off the west coast. A firm from Ayrshire wants to "mechanically harvest" 30,000 tonnes of seaweed each year for use as "alginate", a natural polymer used in the food, pharmaceutical and textile industries to thicken and gel other material. It says it's a sustainable use of one of Scotland's natural resources.

But "Help the Kelp" campaigners say to rake kelp out by its roots is plundering our natural resources. They maintain that the kelp beds protect the coastline from erosion and are an important habitat for sea creatures and help to tackle climate change by absorbing carbon dioxide. Eventually, parliament will have to decide the issue.

Finally, we all have to decide which is this year's favourite tree, a competition organised by the Woodland Trust and the People's Postcode Lottery. It's the ultimate post-code lottery with communities vying with each other for the £1,000 prize. The finalists always throw up more or less enchanting stories.

This year the choice is between the 180 year old Camperdown Elm in Dundee, the Filo Pastry Tree in Stranraer, the Flodden Tree in the Borders, the Malloch Oak in Strathallan, Napoleon's Tree in Ecclefechan, and Netty's Tree one of the very few trees on the island of Eriskay. Voting closes on 8th

October.

I'll be voting for whichever tree has a wasp's byke. It will be a penance for "dealing" my absent friends in the bathroom.