

White stonecrop

Sedum album

It's immediately obvious that white stonecrop is extremely well adapted to life on the dry, hot stones of the railway track ballast. When it rains, its fleshy leaves store the water it needs to survive in times of need. However, this plant has another characteristic that is less noticeable. Stonecrop has the ability to absorb carbon dioxide at night for use in photosynthesis the following day. It initially stores the compound in its cell sap. During the day, when the sun is shining, it can convert water and carbon dioxide into energy-rich sugar with the help of sunlight, without having to open its pores. This prevents unnecessary water loss.



Goldfinch

Stieglitz

Carduelis carduelis

With its bright red face, black-and-white head and yellow wing stripes, the goldfinch is one of our most colourful native birds. The goldfinch, also once known as the thistlefinch, likes to feed on the seeds of thistles and other herbs. It uses its powerful beak to skilfully harvest the seeds from the plants' fruit clusters.

The goldfinch, which is about 12 centimetres in length, finds its preferred food plants growing on areas of gravel. In contrast, it likes to build its nest in taller bushes and trees, which provide a natural hideaway as well as a good view. With their combination of trees, shrubs and thickly vegetated strips of crushed rock, disused railway lines are an ideal habitat for goldfinches.



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Onopordum acanthium

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Spanish flag

Euplagia quadripunctaria

The Spanish flag is a characteristic butterfly of gravel areas. Although this species, also known as the Jersey tiger, is a member of the moth family, it is nonetheless active during the day. The bright orange-red hindwings are noticeable even from a distance as the moths flutter around in search of nectar. When resting, however, they are well camouflaged by their blue-black forewings with their white stripes.

Several species used by the moth's caterpillars as food plants can be found growing here in the abandoned railway ballast. These include viper's bugloss, willow herb, brambles and the butterfly bush. As a mature moth, it is particularly fond of the flowers of the butterfly bush, which is common on disused railway sites.



Dark mullein

Verbascum nigrum

Dark mullein is a typical inhabitant of open gravel areas. In summer, its long spikes of densely clustered flowers attract numerous insects. The dark stamens stand out in stark contrast to the vibrant yellow of the flower petals. Its visitors, particularly bees and bumblebees, are rewarded with abundant quantities of pollen. Dark mullein produces tens of thousands of dust-like seeds from a single flower.

Thanks to a dense covering of hairs on its leaves, which reduces evaporation and prevents overheating, as well as a deep tap root, this plant is well adapted to its dry location.



Common wall lizard

Podarcis muralis

The wall lizard is a slender reptile, varying in colour from grey to brown to green and often marked with a fine lattice pattern. Its tail is twice as long as its body. It is an excellent climber, capable of swiftly ascending vertical walls and rocks.

Even more than other native lizard species, the wall lizard loves sun and heat. The crushed stone ballast used in railway tracks provides them with an ideal habitat. Here they hunt for insects and other small prey. When danger threatens, they quickly retreat into the spaces between the stones. These cavities also offer protection and a place to rest at night and during the heat of midday. The lizards lay their eggs among the stones so that they can hatch in the warmth of the sun.



Compass plant

Lactuca serriola

The compass plant derives its name from its unique capacity to adapt to dry, hot habitats. In hot weather and during periods of drought, it positions its leaves vertically and aligns them to face south and north. This means that the leaf blades are only exposed to the weaker morning and evening sunlight. The strong midday sun only hits the edges of the leaves. In this way, the compass plant prevents its leaves from overheating and avoids unnecessary water loss through evaporation. Its roots extend up to 2 metres deep into the soil. This ensures that the plant still obtains enough water to survive, even during prolonged dry periods.



Blue-winged grasshopper

Oedipoda caerulescens

Barren stone and sandy soils with sparse vegetation are the preferred habitat of the blue-winged grasshopper. There they roam around in search of food. This primeval-looking grasshopper feeds on the few plants in its environment and will occasionally eat carrion.

Blue-winged grasshoppers are perfectly camouflaged. Their bodies, forewings and legs are the same colour as the rocks on which they spend most of their time. You only see these creatures when they suddenly leap up and fly away with their characteristic flight pattern. Only then do they reveal their colourful hindwings. In the blue-winged grasshopper, these are a vivid turquoise colour.



Little robin

Geranium purpureum

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Viper's bugloss mason bee

Osmia adunca

The viper's bugloss mason bee is one of the more inconspicuous inhabitants of areas of crushed stone. This solitary wild bee, which is about one centimetre in length, has a slender, black body with very narrow yellow rings on its abdomen segments. This rare insect collects pollen exclusively from the flowers of the viper's bugloss.

To build their nests, these bees utilise pre-existing cavities in railway ballast, dead wood or hollow plant stems. They build their brood cells in these recesses, laying one egg in each and providing it with a supply of viper's bugloss pollen. The larvae overwinter in the sealed brood tube. In summer it's time for the new bees to fly off and visit some viper's bugloss for themselves.

