



ales from Hillside Farm

featuring Desmond & Walter
& Bird of the Month



by Suzy Sharpe
September 2020

Desmond & Walter - August & September

Back in 2019 they had fully integrated into the flock, their personalities are shining though but they are still at the bottom of the pecking order. Luna and Olga are at the top and old Spoonie and George just stay out of it all.

Of the two of them Desmond is still the bossy one and Walter is always hungry still. At this point Desmond has started to explore the walls and is often seen clambering up over them or walking along them just because he can, fortunately he seems to respect the boundaries of the Hillside Farm if not individual fields so all is fine.

Roll forward to 2020 and he is still the same but then all my sheep like to be on the walls except poor old arthritic Spoonie, who likes to sit in the middle of the field with the sun on her back watching the world go by.



Wildlife Rehabilitating

Most of the birds I had over the summer have now been released and many of them if juvenile were soft released from the farm as we are close to a large lake (roost site for the Herring Gulls) and have healthy populations of Jackdaws who had been spending time with our rehabbed juveniles for a while sitting on the top of the aviary and chattering with the captive birds.

When I opened the door for the Jackdaws I expected them to be gone in seconds but no... they were still in the aviary after 2 hours.

The next morning they were on the wires with another 2 juveniles and now 3 weeks on they come back most days, sometimes they are waiting in the morning on the aviary where I still have one juvenile with a couple of Magpies who have some feather issues to recover from. Other days they are up on the wires or on the roof, they are definitely wild and I cannot get within a 15 meters of them which is great as they were hand reared from nestlings. I feed them everyday and they are bringing their friends to the party which is fine and I am happy to continue to feed them until they no longer return. I wonder if they will continue to stay when the last one is released?

A month ago there were lots of nestlings coming to the group from collapsed and disturbed nests, now its fledglings and injured birds. I have learned a great deal from the rest of the group and my experience but most importantly that injured wildlife need to see a vet first and foremost and very young wildlife needs very specialist care, hourly feeding and specialist equipment and food, it is very unwise to try to feed them if you dont know exactly what to do as many bird come to the group who have been (often fatally) damaged by the best intentions of humans trying to feed them or give them water. .



The Odd Couple

These two birds came to me separately the House Martin first from East Cornwall where its nest had collapsed. It was a military style operation to transport the bird down to West Cornwall to be with one of our nestling specialists Sally, it stayed overnight with me before being moved again. It was not particularly young but unable to fly, we had one other at the time in the group so as they do much better when with birds of their own species it was best for it to travel.

The Swallow came to me after a nest collapse, 2 of its siblings did not make it but Sidney as the finder called it and one other came to me. The family who found it spent time caring for it keeping it warm overnight and the young girl stayed up with it all night. When I collected them the second swallow was looking quite poorly, they were transported to Sally to be with the House Martins but sadly a couple of days later the second swallow died.

A few weeks on they came back to me to learn to fly for food. The odd couple, in many ways similar but at the same time completely different. One interesting difference is that the House Martin has feathery feet and the Swallow does not, this is thought to be because they sleep on the wing and often fly at higher altitude therefore needing the insulation, Swifts also have feathery feet believed to be for this reason.

They were released together back to where Sidney came from as there was also a colony of House Martins also at the farm. The young girl who had stayed up with the swallows released them, she was genuinely delighted as was I to see the whole process have a positive outcome for the two remaining birds, everyone involved in their rescue, transport, feeding, rehabilitation and care.



Herring Gulls

I now have just 6 Herring Gulls in my care, I have 3 who are growing feathers, one small Gull who is reluctant to leave and 2 recent additions with injuries.

As part of a wider ongoing Urban Gull project with the West Cornwall Ringing Group and the BTO our Herring Gulls have been ringed. If you spot one with a number on a blue ring between W:501-560 then it maybe one of our rehab Gulls and we would love to hear about any sightings. You can also report any ringed bird via the [BTO website](#) to help with vital ongoing monitoring and research.

I soft released a number of gulls at the end of August from the Farm with the intention of supplementary feeding them for a while. However of 9 I released only one has returned. This Gull wearing the colour ring W535 returns every couple of days, it used to stay around and sit close by the still captive Gulls but in the last week it just eats and leaves... a bit like a teenager really! Herring gulls will often stay with parents for over a year, some continuing to beg from the adults (I have one of these wild gulls who visits regularly with its parent constanly calling), others will become independant very quickly, so our rehabilitated birds seem to be following the same pattern, a few across the group coming back for food but most completely independant of us.

Sadly one of our ringed gulls has turned up dead on a minor road more than 30 miles away but the majority still seem to be out in the wild living life on their own terms and as sad as this is, it is also very useful information for the ongoing reseach being done around this endangered species that we know very little about.

If you want to follow the group I volunteer with this is their website address <https://westcornwallwildlifevolunteers.wordpress.com/>





ird of the Month

September

The Magpie

Pica Pica





about Magpies

Magpies are a familiar sight not at risk in terms of conservation however they are much maligned. Intelligent birds and part of the Corvid family they tend to be blamed for a lot of things most of which they are not responsible for.

They only have one brood each year, I am lucky enough to have a nest in a beech tree in my garden which grows a little taller each year, they have 5-6 eggs with an incubation period of 20 days and fledging period of 26 - 31 days, the maximum age from ringing (BTO) was set in 1947 at 21 years 8 months and 23 days. However their typical life span is five years breeding at 2.

In cold weather they will often roost communally for the heat and community. They are gregarious birds and keep to loose flocks. They often forage in small groups and are collectively called a number of things including a conventicle, a gulp, a mischief, a tiding and a tittering. I think a mischief suits them best.

Magpies are monogamous by nature. If their partner dies, there is evidence they gather others from the surrounding loose flock and have a sort of mourning/funeral service. It is said to sound like “they are trying to talk the dead partner back to life”. Eventually they will choose a new mate.

In the spring the males performing elaborate dances with their wings to impress the females. The male and female work as a team to create a nest out of a big ball of twigs and mud, the inside is lined with roots, grasses, and hair, the entrance is often concealed. I have seen them



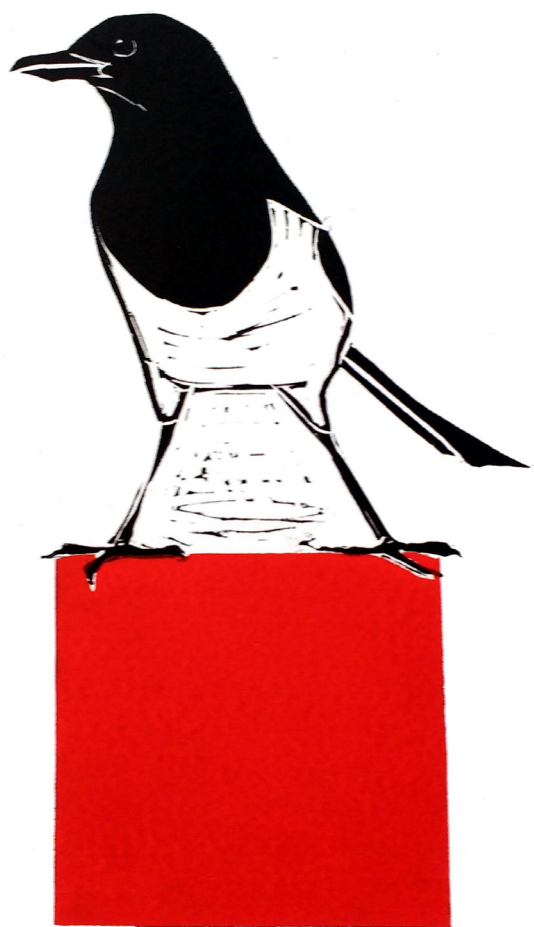
many a time picking the hair off the horses whilst sitting on their backs and occasionally off the sheep who don't seem to mind at all. To the casual observer the nests are a ball of sticks, but they are actually an beautifully engineered taking up to 40 days to create.

They breed between March and July, the male feeds the female while she is incubating and they both share the feeding after that. The young can fly in 3 to 4 weeks and feed with their parents after a few months. After that they tend to go off to join juvenile Magpie colonies elsewhere. Magpies do not migrate, they generally stick to the same areas year round. They tend to avoid dense forest or open grassland, preferring the points in between instead.

I currently have 2 magpies in my care which have had feather issues and require an extended period of captivity in order to regrow them which is definitely not ideal but I hope to be able to release them very soon.

The Mirror Test

The Eurasian magpie is the first non-mammal to have been found to pass the mirror test. In 2008, researchers applied a small red, yellow, or black sticker to the throat of five Eurasian magpies, where they could be seen by the bird only by using a mirror. The birds were then given a mirror. The feel of the sticker on their throats did not seem to alarm the magpies. However, when the birds with coloured stickers glimpsed themselves in the mirror, they scratched at their throats—a clear indication that they recognised the image in the mirror as their own. Those that received a black sticker, invisible against the black neck feathers, did not react.





Poetry



Magpies

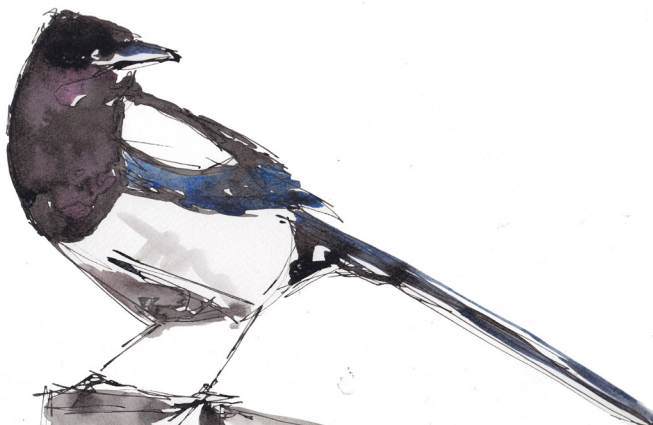
I have an orchard near my house
Where poppies spread and corn has
grown ;
It is a holy place for weeds,
Where seeds stay on and flower, till blown.
Into this orchard, wild and quiet,
The magpie comes, the owl and rook:
To see one magpie is not well,
But seeing two brings all good luck.
If magpies think the same , and say,
'Two humans bring good luck, not one' –
How they must cheer us, love, together,
And tremble when I come alone!

W. H. Davies (1871 -1940).

And Yonder by the Circling Stack

And yonder by the circling stack
Provoking any eye to smile
A pye perched on the heifers back
Pulls hair to line her nest the while
That winds upon the high oak rocks
The threat of every coming storm
Yet still it stands the rudest shocks
A sweeing cradle snug and warm

John Clare



A Fable

When the arts in their infancy were,
In a fable of old 'tis exprest,
A wise magpie constructed that rare
Little house for young birds, called a nest.

This was talked of the whole country round,
You might hear it on every bough sung,
'Now no longer upon the rough ground
Will fond mothers brood over their young.

'For the magpie with exquisite skill
Has invented a moss-covered cell,
Within which a whole family will
In the utmost security dwell.'

To her mate did each female bird say,
'Let us fly to the magpie, my dear;
If she will but teach us the way,
A nest we will build us up here.

'It's a thing that's close arched over head,
With a hole made to creep out and in;
We, my bird, might make just such a bed,
If we only knew how to begin.'

To the magpie soon every bird went,
And in modest terms made their request,
That she would be pleased to consent
To teach them to build up a nest.

She replied, 'I will show you the way,
So observe every thing that I do.
First two sticks cross each other I lay'-
'To be sure,' said the crow; 'why, I knew

'It must be begun with two sticks,
And I thought that they cross'd should be.'
Said the pie, 'Then some straw and moss mix,
In the way you now see done by me.'

'O yes, certainly,' said the jackdaw,
'That must follow of course, I have thought;
Though I never before building saw,
I guessed that without being taught.'

'More moss, straw, and feathers, I place,
In this manner,' continued the pie.
'Yes, no doubt, madam, that is the case;
Though no builder myself, even I,'

Said the starling, 'conjectured 'twas so;
It must of necessity follow:
For more moss, straw, and feathers, I know,
It requires, to be soft, round, and hollow.'

Whatever she taught them beside,
In his turn every bird of them said,
Though the nest-making art he ne'er tried,
He had just such a thought in his head.

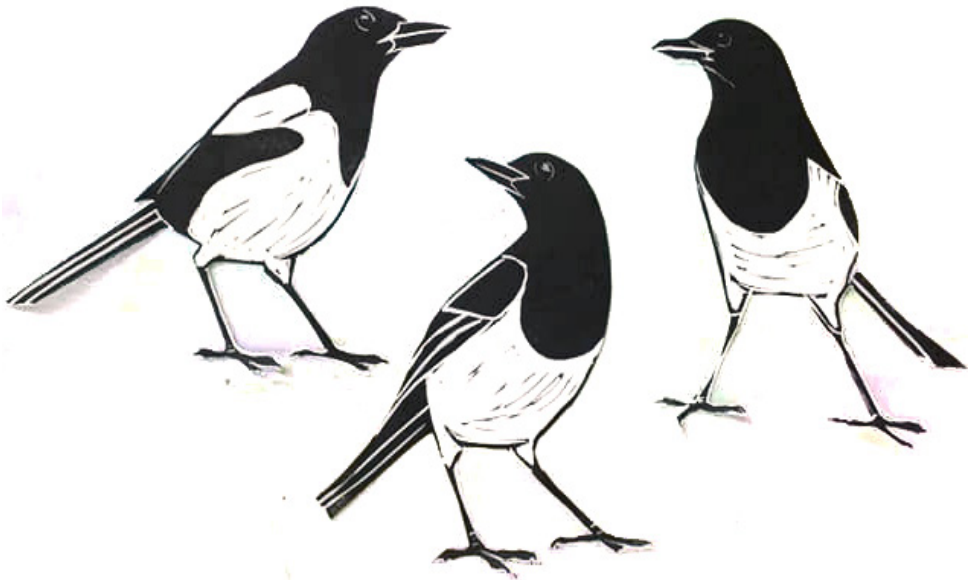
Still the pie went on showing her art,
Till a nest she had built up half way;
She no more of her skill would impart,
But in anger went fluttering away.

And this speech in their hearing she made,
As she perched o'er their heads on a tree,
'If ye all were well skilled in my trade,
Pray, why came ye to learn it of me?'

When a scholar is willing to learn,
He with silent submission should hear.
Too late they their folly discern;
The effect to this day does appear:

For whenever a pie's nest you see,
Her charming warm canopy view,
All birds' nests but hers seem to be
A magpie's nest just cut in two.

Charles Lamb (10 February 1775 – 27 December 1834)



One For Sorrow

One of the earliest versions was published, in Michael Aislabie Denham's Proverbs and Popular Saying of the Seasons (London, 1846)

One for sorrow,
Two for mirth
Three for a funeral,
Four for birth
Five for heaven
Six for hell
Seven for the devil, his own self

More common version today is

One for sorrow,
Two for joy,
Three for a girl,
Four for a boy,
Five for silver,
Six for gold,
Seven for a secret,
Never to be told.
Eight for a wish,
Nine for a kiss,
Ten for a bird,
You must not miss
Eleven is worse
Twelve for a dastardly curse.

A single magpie bringing sorrow is possibly connected with the fact that they usually mate for life so seeing a single magpie may mean it has lost its mate.



olklore

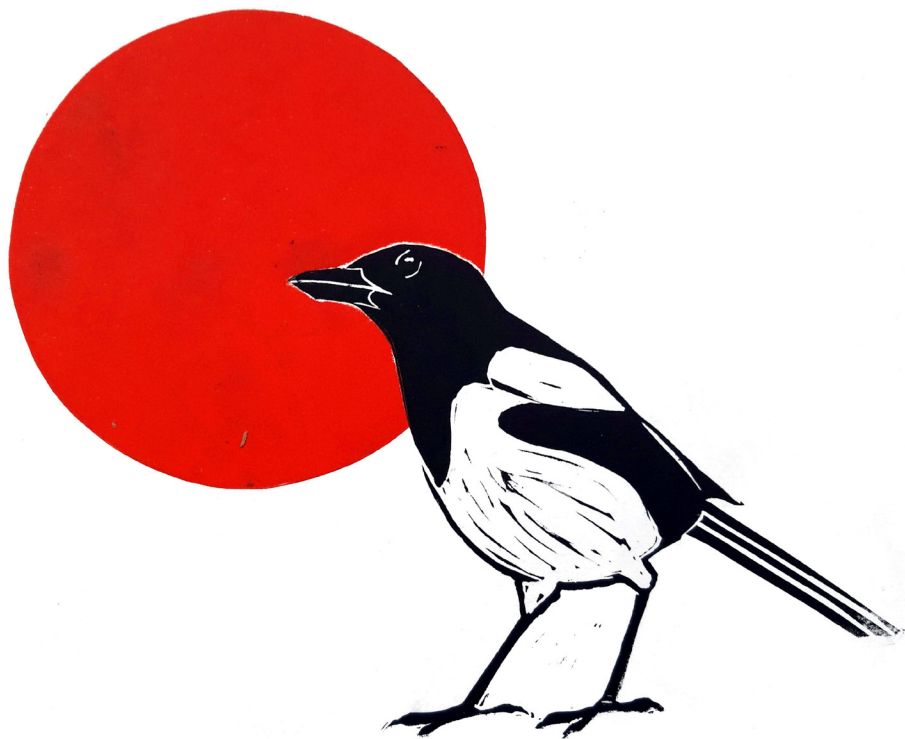
In France there is a positive view of magpies, they are honoured by tying bundles of shrubs such as laurel and heath high in a tree, to remember when chattering magpies alerted people to the presence of a wolf.

In China, they are thought to bring good fortune and killing one will bring the reverse. In the northeast they are regarded as sacred and a symbol of happiness, they are used in paintings to wish someone joy

Saluting magpies is an old English tradition and is said to ward off bad luck. Coming across a lone magpie the correct procedure is to say "Hello Mr. Magpie. How is Mrs. Magpie and all the little Magpies?" you can if you choose also spit three times over your shoulder and flap your arms like wings. In Scotland they believe that magpies had a drop of the Devil's blood under their tongues and if one was seen near a window death may be on its way. In Yorkshire they are apparently associated with witchcraft and people used to cross themselves when they saw one.

There's no credible evidence that magpies steal shiny objects. but the idea appeared in France in a play in 1815, titled *La Pie Voleuse*. It told the story of a servant facing the guillotine accused of stealing silverware from her employer. She is saved by the revelation that the actual culprit was the master's pet magpie. Gioachino Rossini liked the story so much he turned it into an opera, *La Gazza Ladra*.

Researchers tempted the birds with piles of food and shiny objects such as rings, pieces of foil, and screws. Only twice out of 64 tests did the birds go for a shiny bauble and even then, they quickly discarded it. Stephen Lea of the University of Exeter, the study's author, told the BBC "We can't say that magpies never steal shiny objects [but] we currently have no reliable evidence that magpies, more than any other bird, are attracted to shiny objects more than any other object."





ythology

In Greece, the Magpie is sacred and linked to the god Bacchus and associated with Dionysos and intoxication. Also in Greece, the 9 daughters of Peirus were turned into Magpie's for boasting that they were better singers than the muses.

Zeus made love to Mnemosyne in Pieria and became father of the Muses. Around about that time Pierus, was king of Emathia and sprung from its very soil. He had nine daughters, they were the ones who formed a choir in opposition to the Muses, and there was a musical contest in Helicon.

Whenever the daughters of Pierus began to sing, all creation went dark and no one would listen to their choral performance. But when the Muses sang, heaven, the stars, the sea and rivers stood still, while Mount Helicon, beguiled by the pleasure of it all, swelled skywards till, by the will of Poseidon, Pegasus checked it by striking the summit with his hoof. Since these mortals had taken upon themselves to compete with goddesses, the Muses changed them into nine Magpies.



A myth of a different sort.

It is widely believed that magpies are killing off songbirds. Whilst Magpies are predators and they eat the eggs and chicks of song thrushes, robins, blackbirds, and the like. University of Sheffield ecologist Tim Birkenhead says “there’s little evidence that magpie predation has any significant effect on overall songbird populations... Cats are undoubtedly a monumental threat to songbirds, but it’s magpies that incur the wrath of the average bird lover.” In fact later studies have shown that songbird populations actually increase when Magpies are in the area. This is likely due to the risk of birds of prey picking them off with the protection of a larger bird in the area.



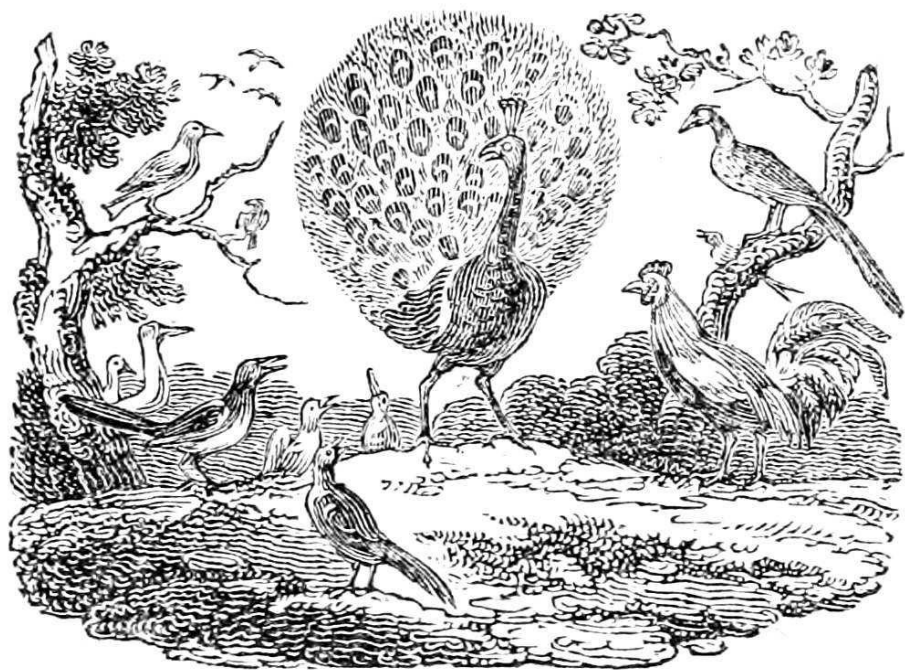


Aesop's Fable

Peacock and the Magpie

The birds met together to choose a king; among them the Peacock was a candidate. Spreading his showy tail, and stalking up and down with affected grandeur, he caught the eyes of the silly multitude by his brilliant appearance and was elected with acclamation. Just as they were going to proclaim him, the Magpie stepped forth in the midst of the assembly, and addressed himself thus to the new king: May it please your majesty elect, to permit one of your unworthy subjects to represent to you his suspicions and apprehensions, in the face of this whole congregation: we have chosen you for our king, we have put our lives and fortunes into your hands, and our whole hope and dependence is upon you: If, therefore, the Eagle, the Vulture, and the Kite, our unruly brethren, should in the future, as they have in times past, make a decent upon us, what means would you take for our defence?" This pithy unanswerable question drew the whole audience into a just reflection and opened the eyes of the birds to the weakness of their choice. They cancelled the election and have ever since regarded the Peacock as a vain pretender and considered the Magpie esteemed as eminent a speaker as any in the whole community of birds.

Moral : The eyes of the multitude are so dazzled with pomp and show, noise and ceremony, that they cannot see things really as they are: and from hence it comes to pass, that so many absurdities are committed and maintained in the world. People should examine and weigh the real weight and merit of the person, and not be imposed upon by false colours and pretences of I know not what.





estiary

Of the magpie Magpies are like poets, because they utter words, with a distinct sound, like men; hanging in the branches of trees, they chatter rudely, and even if they cannot get their tongues round words, they nevertheless imitate human speech. On this subject someone aptly said: 'The chattering magpie, firm of voice, greets you as lord. If you do not see me, you will deny that I am a bird' (Martial, Epigrams, 14: 76).





There is so much we can do for Magpies and as with the Gulls Education is the key. We all need to engage with the misinformation, reduce scaremongering with knowledgeable accurate information particularly around the songbird allegations.

1. Join conservation groups
2. Support Charities who protect habitat and wildlife
3. Encourage good practice in farming and land management
5. Sign petitions to protect Birds
6. Share your love of wildlife with friends and family
7. Sign petitions to end persecution and improve understanding
8. Dispell the harmful myths

Some links for further information:-

[British Trust for Ornithology](#)

[RSPB](#)

[Birdlife](#)

[The Wildlife Trusts](#)

[The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust](#)

[West Cornwall Wildlife Volunteers](#)



The aim of this project is to research a different bird each month, gathering poetry, songs, facts, stories and information to further understand, discover and share ways in which we can help them in the wild. Also to document the passing of time at Hillside Farm.

More of my work can be found on my [website](#) including greetings cards, prints, printmaking and original drawings and paintings.



ee you in next time...



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please visit my website www.suzysharpe.co.uk