

Sharing your Place with Bugs, Birds & Funny Creatures



How many times have you returned to a holiday home only to find annoying mounds of dust here and there on the floors, beds and furniture? Yes, those little critters have been at it again, happily drilling through your precious beams and joists. Owning a house in the Tuscan countryside is like invading the natural habitat of many creatures, so somehow we have to learn to cope with mutual co-existence. Here is my top ten list of friends and annoyances with whom you may have to share your place in Tuscany:

1. Woodworm or *Tarli* – Show me an old Tuscan farmhouse without some traces of woodworm! The beetle in question is commonly known as the death-watch beetle (*Xestobium rufivillosum*), which makes a characteristic ticking noise in July or August. The boring activity is limited to the outer layer of chestnut wood and is very common in old properties. The boring activity in the pine beams can be more concerning. This should be treated and monitored on a regular basis.

2. Dormouse or *Ghiri* – Many customers have sent me photos of these little animals, wondering what on earth they are! They have squirrel-like bodies with small ears and short legs and a long bushy tail, and they are quite common in Southern Europe. They are nocturnal animals that like to cuddle up in an insulated attic, but can sometimes become a pest when they start gnawing into beams or wiring!

3. Wild Boar or *Cinghiali* – The other evening I was hitting the bed when I heard some strange noises outside my window. A follow-up investigation armed with a torch revealed a family of wild boars happily ploughing up my lawn as they snorted around the place.... They observed me for about three seconds and eventually ran off into the darkness with a stampede-like sound. Wild boars are becoming a tremendous nuisance, with a recent proliferation that has seen their numbers skyrocketing. This is why you see fencing everywhere, with builder's steel mesh at the base, to prevent them from entering into a property.

4. Porcupines or *Istrici* – These nocturnal animals are normally passive solitary creatures generally minding their own business. They love ripe fruit that falls to the ground, and roots, which makes vineyards and fruit trees a prime target. Owners of

vegetable plots will certainly notice their presence and should defend the area with perimeter fencing buried to about 30 cm deep as a remedy to keep them out.

5. Snakes or *Serpenti* – Tuscany hosts about eight different species of snakes, with the infamous viper taking centre stage due to its poisonous venom. This anxiety is amplified by urban myths and the inability to distinguish one snake from another. In reality, there are statistically more chances of a fatality from bees and wasps than from a viper. The other seven snake species are totally harmless.

6. Scorpions or *Scorpioni* – Without a doubt scorpions can have an enormous psychological impact when we spot their distinguished bodies, curled-up stinger tails and claws, with resulting melodramatic movie images of instant paralysis followed by slow death. When they make it inside the Tuscan dream home, I hear of people contemplating putting the house back on the market! In reality, these small black arachnids are harmless and if they do manage to attack you (or defend themselves), the effects are no worse than a bee's sting.

7. Hornets or *Calabroni / Bofonchi* – These are my number one concern as I stick my head through an attic hatch to inspect the underside of roof structures. Their magnificent nests can be amazing works of art, but if disturbed they will get aggressive and you could be up for some nasty stings.

8. Bats or *Pippistrelli* – A harmless creature that resides in old barns, attics or outhouses, the bat happily feeds on mosquitoes, which may contribute to limiting the annoyance.

9. Swallows or *Rondini* – Swallows return to the same old villages, barns and outhouses year after year and busily catch thousands of insects in the air during their magnificent acrobatic sweeps and dives. In addition to this spectacle, they do us a great service by eliminating flies and mosquitoes.

10. Mosquitoes or *Zanzare* – The world malaria comes from the Italian expression “bad air”. Yes, this strange illness was associated with the unhealthy air found on the plains and marshes. When I got to Tuscany over twenty years ago, we only had to contend with the night-time mosquitoes. About fifteen years ago, the daytime cousin made its debut and has practically changed the whole concept of outdoor activities, from the playground to *al fresco* dining. Besides spraying yourself with a mix of poisons, the best remedy is eliminate any source of stagnating water where they will thrive.

There are certainly many other creatures that can be added to the list ... some good and some bad, but mainly pretty harmless! In one sense, I'm kind of glad that animals can't write, as I don't think that they'd have many nice things to say about us humans!

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