

# St Matthew's Churchyard Lightcliffe

## April Wildlife Snapshot

Over the course of this sunny, dry month, the colour palate in the churchyard has gradually changed from the yellows of daffodil, celandine and primrose, to blue, white and pink as bluebells, forget-me-nots, wild garlic, cow parsley and red campion come into flower against a vibrant green backdrop of new leaves.



Bare trees on the 5th April



New leaves on the trees and bluebells in flower on the 24th



At the beginning of April, the twigs around the tight, soot-black buds of Ash were swelling to burst into exuberant flower:





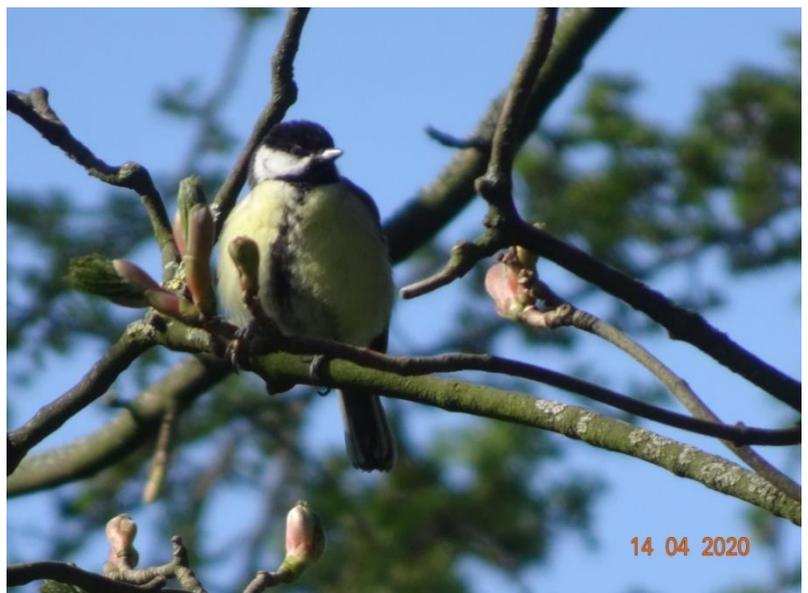
Thick ivy growth on trees and walls provides excellent habitat for wildlife. Its small yellow-green flowers appear in autumn, providing nectar late in the year for insects, followed by black, nutrient-rich berries in late winter/early spring that are enjoyed by the birds. I found a few of the last remaining berries on a tree by the west wall. Ivy also gives good cover for nesting birds such as robins, wrens and dunnocks.

## Birds

The churchyard is alive with birdsong at the moment as males proclaim their territories and sing to attract a mate. The soundscape comprises mainly wren, blue tit, dunnock, great tit, blackbird, goldfinch, chaffinch and robin, with the soothing call of the wood pigeon underpinning it all.



Our nest boxes are being put to good use, especially by blue tits and great tits. One pair of blue tits has chosen an open-fronted box, designed for robins, for its nest this year.



I watched this handsome great tit flying into a box on an ivy-covered sycamore tree, with its bill stuffed with moss for the nest. Much tapping came from within, as if it was adding wood-shavings for extra comfort!



Wildlife will quickly take over any new, suitable habitat. This dunnock is nesting in the large wood pile, in the lower part of the churchyard, that was destined for burning before the Coronavirus lockdown began. I have also observed wren, blackbird and robin foraging among the dead wood for insects and spiders. Hopefully, the bonfire can be delayed until after the nesting season is over.

Magpies get a very bad press and are often regarded as the thugs of the bird world, but I couldn't resist a photo of this one, showing off its nifty, black pantaloons! Their smart plumage shines blue, green and purple in certain lights.



This month, I have both seen and heard a great spotted woodpecker in the churchyard which is good news after seeing evidence of chiselled dead wood in March.

### Insects

The warm spring weather has been great for watching butterflies, bees, ladybirds and hoverflies in the churchyard. Peacock, small tortoiseshell and orange tip butterflies have all been spotted with pairs of speckled woods twirling around each other in the sunlight.

Cuckoo flower or Milkmaids is a food plant for the caterpillars of the orange tip butterfly.



Male orange tip photo by Chris Lythall



Female orange tip photo by Neil Freeman

Apart from the bumble bees mentioned in last month's report, new ones seen in April are the red tailed and common carder bee.



Fluffy, gingery common carder bees are a widespread species with long tongues, exploiting foxgloves, clover, vetches and thistles for nectar. They nest on the ground, often in tall open grassland – so the adjoining field is excellent for them. They are social insects with colonies containing up to 200 workers.

Common carder bee photo by Joan Chaplin



I spotted this bee soaking up the sun, early one morning. It is a type of solitary bee, of which there are over 240 species in Britain. Close up, I could see orangey-brown hairs around the edge of the abdomen suggesting it is a leafcutter bee. Unlike some other bees, they don't have pollen baskets or pollen collecting hairs on their legs, instead picking up pollen on specialist hairs under their abdomens. Gardeners may have noticed leaves with neat sections missing – this is a sign that you have leafcutter bees in your area! Females use the leaves to form cells in which they place pollen and nectar before laying a single egg and sealing them off with another leaf.

Ladybirds are also out and about now, enjoying the warmth of the sun on the gravestones and feeding on the plentiful nectar provided by the colourful dandelions.



## Mammals



Grey squirrels were particularly frisky early in the month, chasing each other round tree trunks and allowing me to get quite close. The one in the middle looks suspiciously rotund and has either just eaten a lot or could be pregnant! Squirrels have two litters of kits a year, the first litter being born February – March and the second in June – July. The gestation period is about 44 days.



Whatever the problems assailing the human population at the moment, it's business as usual in the natural world. Our churchyard provides a sanctuary of peace and beauty for all to enjoy.

**Marjorie Middleton April 2020**