

St Matthew's Churchyard, Lightcliffe

April 2021 Wildlife Snapshot

At the beginning of April, the churchyard was full of cheerful, yellow daffodils. As these faded, forget-me-nots, dandelions, daisies, lesser celandine, bluebells and cow parsley have come into flower whilst budburst on the sycamores has provided vibrant greens and delicate pink.



Birds

The battle between the robin and the nuthatch for the beech tree nest box has been won by the **nuthatch!** On the 3rd April, I noticed that some mud had appeared at the bottom of the hole which made me suspect that the nuthatches had laid claim to it, as plastering the outside of the hole to make it smaller, is a trademark of this bird. Sure enough, over the course of the month, I have watched a pair of nuthatches undertake a major construction project beginning with packing the intersection of the front and the roof with mud then gradually extending the mud down towards the hole and then around it. Apparently, their habit of plastering mud around the entrance hole can often be taken to extremes, resulting in the adults struggling to get into their own nest! Nicknames for the nuthatch include "mud dabbler" and "mud stopper". I have also watched the birds bringing nesting material into the box. The series of photos below, in date order, show the progress of the birds over the whole month:





Nuthatch bringing nesting material to the box. The nest tends to be a simple collection of dead leaves and bits of bark in the bottom of the hole or box.

As nesting gets underway, nuthatches become much quieter so after a couple of months of being one of the noisiest birds in the churchyard, you have to listen hard to catch the occasional call now – hardly surprising with their beaks full of mud! They can lay up to 8 eggs which are white with reddish specks. Incubation takes 2 – 3 weeks then the chicks will fledge 3 – 4 weeks later.



Nuthatch with mud in its beak. April has been so dry that there are virtually no muddy parts in the churchyard or the adjoining field and playground so they must have had to fly to the farm or valley to collect enough for their project. This photo also shows the bird's long, powerful claw on its backward-pointing toe to help it grip onto tree trunks as it descends head first – a bit like crampons!



Between the 12th and 24th April, the birds made a lot of progress, with the mud now extending round the bottom of the hole.



By the end of April, I only saw one bird around so I hope that means that the female is sitting on eggs and is being fed by the male. Watch this space!



Mistle thrushes and wood pigeons were seen feeding from ripened black ivy berries on the 7th April. Ivy berries have a high fat content which is very nutritious for the birds. According to the RSPB, ivy berries contain nearly as many calories as a Mars Bar, gram for gram! After such a dry month, the ground is hard, making it more difficult for birds like thrushes and blackbirds to extract worms so ivy berries provide a welcome source of food to fill a hunger gap.

Insects



The warm, sunny weather has encouraged many insects to emerge and dandelions seem particularly attractive to a variety of species. A new bee for our records is the **Tawny Mining Bee** (*Andrena Fulva*). The female is a very pretty bee covered in bright, tawny fur. Above left is a female and above right, a male which only has the tawny fur on its thorax. They mate in Spring, after which the males die and the females start to mine their burrows in the ground, leaving a volcano-like mound of earth around the entrance. I found three such burrows within 3 metres of each other adjacent to one of the paths in the churchyard. Mining bees don't sting!

Butterflies seen on the wing this month were **male orange tips**, **small tortoiseshells** and **peacocks**.



Male orange tip Photo by Chris Lythall



Small tortoiseshell Photo by Kate Nightingale



Peacock Photo by Graham Calow



I noticed several species of hoverfly on celandines and dandelions including many **Common Banded hoverflies** (*Syrphus ribesii*), above left and **Drone flies** (*Eristalis tenax*), above right. They are called drone flies because they mimic male honey bees (drones) but they only have one pair of wings and do not sting. They do make quite a loud buzzing sound when hovering and seem curious about humans, often coming disconcertingly close to one's head before zooming off!



Marjorie Middleton

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