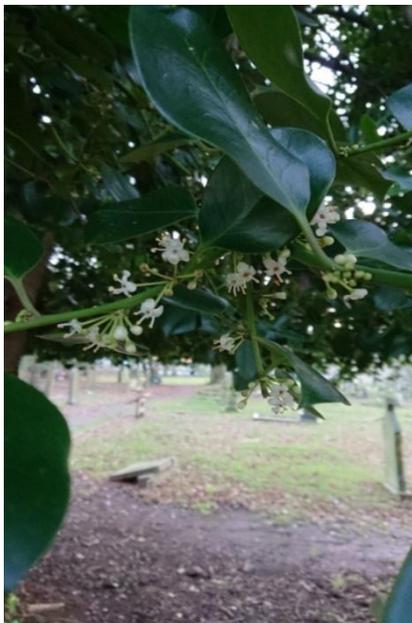


St Matthew's Churchyard, Lightcliffe

Wildlife snapshot for November – December 2020



A mild autumn meant that there were still some flowering plants brightening up the churchyard well into November and even December. This cranesbill made a welcome splash of colour amongst the brown of the fallen leaves and I also spotted ragwort, hogweed and cow parsley in flower. Hawthorn berries were abundant this year.



Buttercups and daisies were flowering on Christmas Day in the local fields, although the cold weather leading up to New Year will not be doing them any good! Unusually, a couple of the large smooth-leaved hollies in the churchyard have had white flowers on them in November and December and I have seen this elsewhere in the local area. Plants do get confused when the weather is unseasonably mild. The flowers will be providing some welcome late nectar for flying insects.



Buttercup and cow parsley in flower in the churchyard in late December.

Ghosts in the churchyard!



Winter gnats "ghosting"

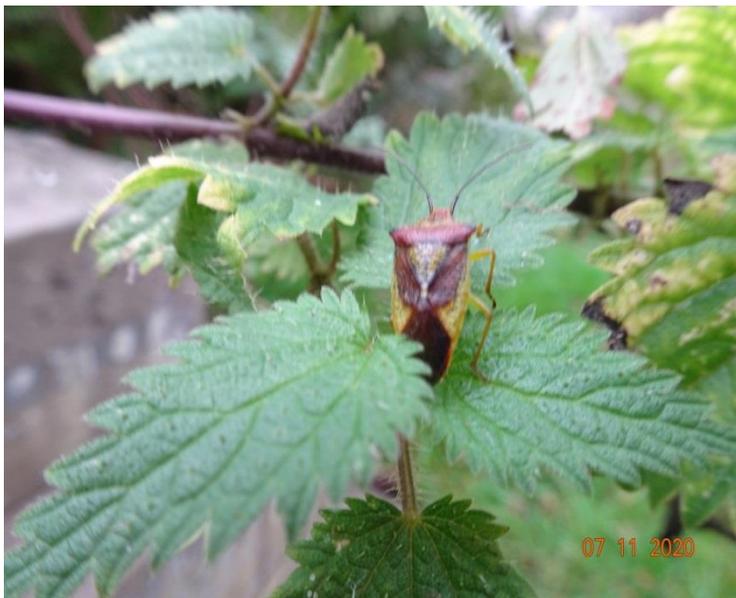
Photo FLPA Alamy



Winter gnat Trichoceridae sp

Photo Andy's Rutland Nature Spot

In the low sunshine of a late autumn day, a cloud of winter gnats danced in a shaft of sunlight between the gravestones, wings glistening. These dancing spirals are called "ghosts" and are made up mainly of males performing to impress the females. The adult insects are like miniature crane flies at 5 – 8 mm in length with long, transparent wings and six dangly legs. Once they have mated, the females lay their eggs on decaying vegetation. They have very short lives – sometimes only a few days – so the dancing males need to be good if they are to pass on their genes! Their larvae can survive cold conditions, even under snow, becoming dormant if necessary.



This handsome creature is a Hawthorn Shield Bug, seen on nettles on the 7th November. The adults hibernate over winter, emerging in Spring to start the next generation. The larvae feed on hawthorn berries, as well as rowan and whitebeam berries, whereas the adults feed on hawthorn leaves. Shield bugs are sometimes known as "Stink bugs" because they emit a foul-smelling liquid when attacked by a predator although British bugs are a lot less stinky than others in the world, apparently smelling like mouldy almonds!



Other creatures seen out in the churchyard on the 7th November included this ladybird larva and an unidentified caterpillar. It was a still, misty afternoon punctuated by muted robin song, an occasional burst of wren song, the “chacking” of jackdaws, descending whistles of starlings, two squabbling magpies and a mistle thrush rattle.

An energetic grey squirrel entertained me for a while, bounding along the wall and scampering up tree trunks where it performed much agitated tail flicking, probably in response to my presence. It did eventually rest long enough on a stone for me to take its photo.



There have been some splendid examples of fungi in the churchyard over autumn. Clockwise from above left : Velvet shank fungus, Stump puffballs, Willow bracket fungus and some marvellous Jelly Ears!



29/12/20

A cold, sunny afternoon with some lying snow.

Cow parsley in flower and one buttercup blooming above the snow. The air was filled with the constant musical twittering of a flock of goldfinches, always on the move and appearing larger than usual as they fluffed out their feathers against the cold. As I scanned the flock through binoculars, the sunlight caught the unmistakable creamy eye stripe and rusty red sides of a redwing. There was a small flock of them high up in the branches, seemingly enjoying the faint warmth of the late December sun. Jackdaws were noisy and plentiful, using the top of the tower as a vantage point. A kestrel flew swiftly down the length of the west wall at tree top height, the light catching its chestnut back. As the sun began to go down, the whistles and chattering of a flock of starlings made me look up to see them gathering in the trees opposite the Sun Inn.



Redwing. A rather indistinct photo - it was very high up!

