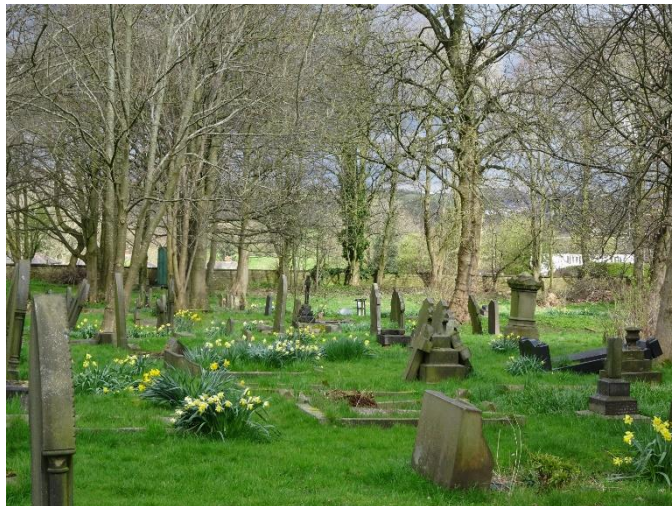


Lightcliffe Churchyard

Wildlife snapshot

Early spring 2024

Despite a soggy winter and early spring, the flowers in the churchyard have bloomed well, starting with the hardy snowdrops which always lift the spirits. These have been followed by the cheerful yellow of daffodils and primroses.



All of these flowers provide nectar for early emerging insects, including bumblebees.

In mid- March, I saw a queen buff tailed bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris*) out searching for nest sites. She was constantly on the move, close to the ground. Buff tails are one of the first bees to emerge from hibernation in early spring. They build their nests underground (hence the Latin name *terrestris*), often in former rodent burrows. Due to climate change, some buff-tailed bumblebees are now active throughout the winter. It is reported that queens sometimes establish a winter nest rather than hibernate and are able to forage for pollen and nectar in parks and gardens on plants such as Mahonia, winter flowering heather and winter honeysuckle.



Birds

The churchyard is full of birdsong now as they are establishing their breeding territories and starting to build nests. On my recent visits, I have heard: blackbird, chaffinch, goldfinch, great tit, blue tit, long tailed tit, wren, robin and nuthatch, as well as the less tuneful calls of jackdaw, crow, magpie and woodpigeon.



This beautiful male blackbird sat for a long time in a hawthorn tree, endlessly preening his feathers. A bright yellow bill and eye ring shows that this one is in full breeding plumage and he is probably an older male as they tend to be more strongly coloured than younger ones. They are not born with their yellow eye ring which develops in the spring after they fledge. The song of the blackbird is one of the most glorious sounds of spring after a long winter. It has a rich flute-like quality which sounds to be almost in a major key. Blackbirds are also very good mimics of other birds and also human objects such as whistles and alarms!



This robin was sitting at the other side of the same hawthorn tree. I loved the contrast of its red breast against the newly emerging green leaves.



Although the most easily identifiable call of a great tit is “tea-cher, tea-cher”, heard from late winter onwards as they establish their territories, great tits have a very wide repertoire of calls and songs – perhaps as many as 40! Birdwatchers often say, when trying to identify a song of an invisible bird, “ If in doubt, it’s probably a great tit!” I think this is a female as her black chest stripe tapers out, whereas on a male, the stripe widens out to form a black patch between the legs. They lay an average of 12 eggs (although it can vary between 5 – 18). Caterpillars are the favourite food fed to their young due to the high protein content. I have heard at least two males calling in the churchyard.



Chaffinches have a cheerful, energetic song, that speeds up into a fast flourish at the end. Imagine a fast bowler running up to the crease then whirling his arm round before letting go of the ball! The bird in the photo is a male showing off his beautiful plumage. Females are similar, but with more muted colours - they look as though they’ve been through a washing machine a few times! Chaffinches often feed on the ground and blend in well with leaves and soil but the white flashes on the wings give them away when they fly off. They tend not to use nest boxes, preferring to build their nests in dense foliage in trees.



I have spotted blue tits going in and out of a nest box on an ivy-covered tree in the top half of the churchyard, so it looks as if they are breeding. It's the only nest box I have seen in use so far this year.

I've seen and heard nuthatches on the mature sycamore trees near the main road but there is no sign yet of them using the nest box they have occupied in previous years.



Marjorie Middleton

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