

St Matthew's Churchyard, Lightcliffe

Wildlife snapshot February 2021

February has been a rollercoaster month in terms of the weather from very wet days, blankets of snow and ice-bound berries to the warmth of spring sunshine at the end of the month. Carpets of snowdrops emerged from the snow and by the end of February the daffodils were ready to burst into flower.



On a sunny, warm day at the end of February, several male chaffinches were singing to proclaim their territories.

Spring is here!



On a snowy, freezing day, a mistle thrush was fiercely guarding this berry-laden holly, chasing off wood pigeons and blackbirds. Despite the cold, a flock of goldfinches twittered musically from high in the branches of an oak accompanied by muted blue tit and robin song. It sounded as though they were singing with their beaks shut!

Bright orange velvet shank fungus made a vivid splash of colour against the snow.



Nuthatch. Photo by Paul Riddle

After a few weeks of nithering cold, the 16th and 17th of February felt like Spring! The churchyard was alive with birdsong, in particular chaffinch, robin, wren and goldfinch but the first bird I heard was a nuthatch - a new record. I imitated its “tuit-tuit-tuit” call to entice it nearer and then spotted it foraging high in the branches. The following day, it was still around, sounding its territorial call. Let’s hope it stays to breed. I heard its other call - a strong “pee pee pee pee” at the end of February, giving away its presence in the large beech tree. The nuthatch is the only British bird that descends a tree trunk head first. They are hard to photograph because they are constantly on the move! Their name comes from their habit of wedging a nut or seed in a crevice of tree bark and

hacking at it until they reach the kernel. In autumn and winter, they feed on acorns, beech mast, hazel nuts and seeds, and in spring and summer, they switch to insects. Since the 1970s, nuthatches have increased in numbers and are moving gradually northwards but they tend to stay close to the territories where they were born so spread is quite slow. These handsome birds are becoming more frequent visitors to bird feeders in gardens.

I also noticed a flock of about 12 redwing foraging on the ground, rootling amongst the dead leaves to find worms and insects. As these dainty thrushes flew up into a tree, a mistle thrush landed on a nearby branch accentuating the difference in size. The photo on the left shows the redwing's distinctive creamy eye-stripe. Later in the month, they were feasting on the remaining holly berries (below right). They will start to migrate back to Scandinavia and Iceland during March – April.



The birds and squirrels were feeling the signs of spring in the milder temperatures – I observed pairs of robins and mistle thrushes chasing each other amongst the gravestones and a pair of squirrels scampering up tree trunks! A blue tit was investigating a nesting box, flying in and out speculatively. The following morning was very wet but a mistle thrush was singing powerfully from the top of a large oak tree – a beautiful rich sound.



Mistle thrush photo by John Bridges

Just inside the Till Carr Lane entrance, someone is putting down food for the birds on a ledge by a gravestone. At this time of the year, food in the wild is often scarce with supplies of berries, seeds and nuts in short supply. I observed blue tits, blackbirds, great tits, chaffinches and a nuthatch coming to take food although only a great tit and blackbird stayed long enough to have their photos taken.

Although male and female great tits look alike, males have a broader black belly stripe that widens further at the base of the legs. This bird is a female, I think, with a narrow stripe and paler feathers mixed in with the black.



This female blackbird was investigating a peanut she found on the ground. Blackbirds mainly eat earthworms and other invertebrates but also take fruit in autumn and will “hoover up” seeds and nuts under bird feeders in winter. Her speckled breast shows up clearly against the bare earth. I think this may be a juvenile female as her bill lacks any yellow colouration.



Marjorie Middleton February 2021