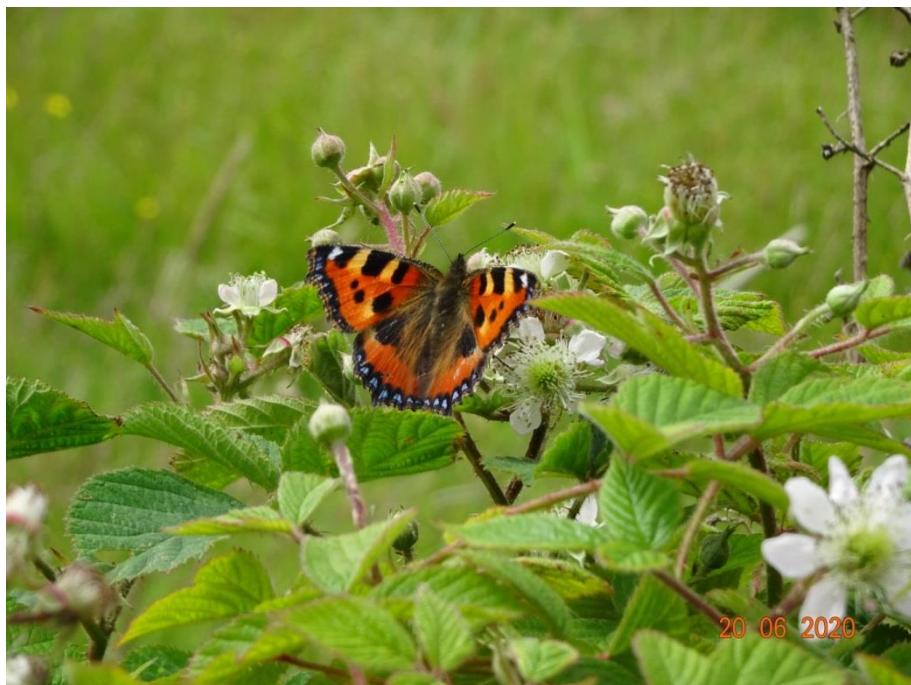


St Matthew's Churchyard Lightcliffe

June 2020 Wildlife Snapshot

After a cool, wet start, the second half of June has been warm and sunny, bringing out many colourful insects to feast on the beautiful flowers in the churchyard. In particular, bramble, hogweed, oxeye daisy, geranium and foxglove seem to be the most popular plants for butterflies, hoverflies, honeybees and bumblebees.



Small tortoiseshell

The photo I took on the right shows a **large skipper** with its wings closed on bramble flowers. It isn't until they open their wings that the beautiful burnt orange colour of their upper wings is revealed – see below.



Large skipper

Photo by Neil Hulme

Photo on the right: a **speckled wood** alights for a moment on a warm gravestone. If you stand and watch for a while, you will see speckled woods twirling around each other in shafts of sunlight. These are the males battling in aerial duels for territorial rights.



One particularly hot afternoon, I spotted 6 species of butterfly: **small tortoiseshell**, **large skipper**, **red admiral**, **small white**, **speckled wood** and **meadow brown**. The majority of them are flying onto the bramble on the west wall from the flower-rich meadow, although the speckled woods favour the sunny glades amongst the trees of the churchyard.



Bees



A **Common carder bee** (*Bombus pascuorum*) on a geranium flower. At first sight, I thought this was a tree bumblebee because the ginger thorax was so vivid but it had no white tail – instead, there are a few ginger hairs on its tail. According to the Bumblebee conservation Trust, Common carder bees can be very variable in their colour patterns.

Other bees seen this month include the **Southern cuckoo bee, tree, white and buff tailed bees**, and the **honey bee**, seen below on hogweed, with its pollen baskets bulging.

Garden bumblebees (*Bombus hortorum*), pictured left, are



Male

enjoying the many foxglove flowers in the churchyard at the moment. This is a large, fluffy bumblebee with 3 yellow bands and a white tail. It has the longest tongue of any of our bumblebees – about 2 cm, which is as long as its body. With a tongue like that, foxglove flowers present no problem!



Foxgloves have evolved to entice large pollinating insects to their flowers: their purple colour is attractive to bumblebees and the spots on the inside of the flower show the bees the way to the nectar at the end of the tube. The tube itself is just about wide enough for a bee to squeeze in, meaning that it has to brush against the pollen to reach the nectar. The pollen then gets transferred to the next flower that the bee visits. Smaller insects could reach the nectar without collecting any pollen so the plant has an interest in deterring them! There are fine guard hairs on the landing pad at the lip of the flower that smaller insects find difficult to negotiate – a clever ploy!

A stunning **marmalade hoverfly** (*Episyrphus balteatus*) investigating a foxglove flower – I watched and it didn't go any further inside than this!



Hoverflies

Hoverflies have been a joy to watch in the hot weather, their wings and bodies glistening in the sunshine. In Britain, we have about 270 different species and identifying them can be tricky as some of them look very similar.



Clockwise from top left: *Myathropa florea*, *Syrphus* species, Great pied hoverfly (*Volucella pellucens*) and *Eristalis* species. The marmalade hoverfly and great pied hoverfly are among the few that have common names – for the rest, you have to grapple with the Latin names!

Hoverflies are beneficial insects as their larvae feast on aphids and other crop or garden pests and the adults are excellent pollinators. They have evolved to look like something dangerous or foul-tasting to deter predators, with their warning colours of black and yellow but they are in fact harmless and cannot sting. Their astonishing ability to hover and then zoom off at lightning speed in unpredictable directions makes them mesmerising to watch. When hovering, their heads remain absolutely still (in the same way as a kestrel's) and they can go from 0 – 40km/hour in a fraction of a second! The length of time these insects can spend hovering in the air is thought to be an important factor in attracting a mate. As adults, they only live for a few weeks at most so feeding and mating are urgent priorities!

Other insects



Greenbottle fly
(*Lucilia sericata*) on oxeye daisy



I have seen many **ladybirds**, larvae and pupae in the churchyard this month. Pictured left is a 7 spot with two pupae on a gravestone. When the ladybird first emerges, it is a yellowish colour and it takes several hours for the spots and background colour to appear.



The **hogweeds** are a splendid sight at the moment in the churchyard – the shot on the left is taken from beneath one of the umbellifer flower heads. They are a magnet for hoverflies, bees and ladybirds as well as soldier beetles which will be around from July. Apart from their architectural beauty, they are a fantastic plant for wildlife. The nectar-rich flower heads are shaped like a flat landing pad – a perfect pit stop for any passing insect.

I found this magnificent bracket fungus growing out of an old tree stump. There have been several of these in the churchyard this spring but this is the largest and most intact. It measured 30cm across! It's a **Dryad's Saddle** fungus (*Polyporus squamosus*) and appears from April onwards – one of the earliest bracket fungi. Dryads are mythical wood nymphs and one can imagine that the fungus would make an excellent seat for such a creature! The pores underneath look like a honeycomb.

Marjorie Middleton June 2020

