

St Matthew's Churchyard, Lightcliffe

May 2021 Wildlife snapshot

Nuthatches

Our resident nuthatches are now very busy feeding their chicks. They usually lay between 6 – 8 eggs, so there will be plenty of hungry mouths to feed! As you can see from the photographs, most of the mud that had taken them the best part of April to plaster around the hole, has fallen off in all the rain! Fortunately, this setback did not deter them from continuing to use the box.



When I zoomed in on this photo, I could see that the nuthatch's bill was stuffed with winged insects. I have watched them collecting food from crevices in the surrounding walls as well as branches and leaves of trees. Both parents are constantly bringing insects to the nest and seem un-phased by human onlookers!

With all the flowers blooming in the churchyard and the fields beyond at the moment, the air is full of flying insects. This photo shows lots of aphids on the underside of a sycamore leaf. Sycamores often get a bad press due to their invasive nature, but the aphids they attract provide a fast food outlet for many other creatures.



I inadvertently managed to capture the somewhat inelegant moment when a parent nuthatch disappeared into the box, its legs trailing behind it – a tight squeeze!



Robin



This robin spent several minutes feeding on one of our mown paths, collecting worms and other invertebrates for its young, although I have not located its nest. The large quantity of rain we have had in May will have softened the soil and brought worms near the surface, making feeding easier for ground feeders like robins, blackbirds and thrushes.

Wasps and tree bumblebees



This wasp was exhibiting behaviour that some of you might have observed in your own gardens: it was audibly scraping wood from one of the benches which it will chew up into a pulp to make its nest. If you look at the QR posts and benches in the churchyard, you will see many scrape marks made by these industrious insects. Wasps form nests made up of hexagonal cells into which they lay their eggs.





Tree bumblebee by David Nicholls

On the 28th May, I spotted about a dozen **Tree bumblebees** flying near the base of this gnarled old willow in the lower part of the churchyard. They were constantly in flight and very nippy so blurred photos were all I could achieve! It is likely that their nest is hidden amongst the crevices of the trunk. This behaviour is called “lekking” or “nest surveillance”. Lekking occurs between May – July and consists of males, which don’t sting, patrolling the flight path to a nest, on the lookout for new queens to mate with. Warm, sunny weather increases the number of lekking males , whereas in rainy, cool weather there may only be one or two hardy males about.

Plants

The wild garlic has been splendid during May with a vast carpet spreading under the Wych elm and near the east wall, its pungent aroma pervading the air. The white, star-like flowers have contrasted beautifully with the bluebells and red campion. Elsewhere, there are stands of yellow buttercups and the frothy flower heads of cow parsley, all attracting insects.



Wild garlic



Red campion



In the churchyard as well as the local area, oak trees were quite a long way in advance of the ash this spring. The photos show the ash to the left and oak on the right on the 19th May. If the old saying is correct, we will be in for “just a splash” this summer! However, in reality, oak responds more quickly than ash to warmer temperatures. The end of February and parts of March were relatively warm so the oak would get off to a flying start despite a very cold April!



Ash trees flower before their leaves come out. On the photo, you can see the sooty black leaf buds are still tightly closed on the 13th May with the small purple flowers on the same twigs and a few of last year's ash key stalks still hanging on.

Marjorie Middleton May 2021