

## St Matthew's Churchyard Lightcliffe

### July Wildlife Snapshot

#### Insects and spiders

July has been an exciting time for spotting insects and an interesting spider in the churchyard. The abundance of bramble flowers on the sunny west wall has proved a magnet for hoverflies, bees and butterflies. There are several species of butterfly now gracing the churchyard with their beautiful colours: **large skipper**, **small white**, **small tortoiseshell** and **meadow brown**, as well as the **speckled wood** and **red admiral** noted previously.



The **large skipper** I saw was a female and flitted backwards and forwards from the adjoining field, coming to feed on the bramble flowers. These colourful butterflies favour areas of long grass and the caterpillar food plant is mostly cock's foot grass which we have in the churchyard and which is abundant in the field.

**Female Large skipper** *Photo by Allan Drewitt*



**Male meadow brown**

*Photo by Tim Melling*



**Female meadow brown**

*Photo by Pete Withers*

**Meadow brown** butterflies also favour long grasses on which to lay their eggs. The male and female look slightly different with the female having larger orangey patches on a lighter brown background whereas the male is a soft dark brown. Both sexes have the black and white eye spot ringed with orange.



**Small white**

*Photo by wildlifeinsight.com*



**Small tortoiseshell**

*Photo by Iain Leach*

Amongst the hoverflies and bees attracted to the bramble flowers, I noticed this **Great Pied Hoverfly** or **Pellucid Hoverfly**, to give it its posh title. It is one of the biggest flies in Britain and has a distinctive ivory-white band round its middle with



dark spots on its wings. It aims to imitate bumblebees and lays its eggs in the nests of social wasps and bumblebees. The hoverfly larvae eat waste products and the wasp/bee larvae (good news for any wasp haters out there!)



*Photo by Kate Nightingale*

**Bumblebees** already spotted in the churchyard include **White tailed, Buff tailed, Red tailed** and **Tree** but this



*Southern cuckoo bee*

*Photo by Peter Gravett*

month I noticed another species called a **Southern Cuckoo Bee**. Despite its name, it is expanding its range northwards and can be found even in deepest West Yorkshire though they are scarce further north. There are six species of cuckoo bee in Britain which are named after the bird. Just like the cuckoo bird, cuckoo bees choose a host to raise their offspring for them. The queen cuckoo bee either kills or kicks out the host bumblebee queen from her nest before laying her own eggs. Cuckoo bees only produce females and males – they don't need workers as they get others to do their

work for them and because they only need to feed themselves, they spend a lot of time just lazing around! The Southern Cuckoo Bee chooses the Buff tailed bumblebee as its host

and aims to look like one although the cuckoo bee lacks the yellow abdominal band followed by black hairs found on a buff tail. The cuckoo bee has a thin line of yellow hairs just above its pure white tail.



*Buff tailed bumblebee.*

*Photo by Bill Temples*

### **Nursery web spider**

Anyone suffering from arachnophobia should skip this bit! Amongst the ferns in the churchyard, I noticed some leaves whose tips had been bent over and fastened together with silk to form a sort of tent. On further research, I found that this was the work of a **Nursery web spider**. This spider does not use its silk to spin webs to trap its prey; instead, it is an active hunter, lying in wait for something tasty then doing a quick sprint to catch it. Silk is used by the female to construct a protective tent amongst strong leaves for her eggs/young. She will guard these fiercely until her spiderlings are old enough to leave the nest.



I tapped the tent (cautiously!) to see if the female was around and was lucky enough to spot her before she had laid her eggs. The photo shows her carrying her large white egg-sac, probably containing a few hundred eggs, in her fangs. Nursery web spiders are apparently a common species in grassland and can be seen sunbathing amongst nettles and brambles.

Males can be eaten by the females when trying to mate so they have to be crafty: they bring a food gift to the female and then lie still, pretending to be dead. Whilst the female is busy eating the food, the male seizes his opportunity, darting forward to mate with her!

## Plants

The **Lime trees** have been in full flower in July. They are one of our latest trees to flower but they are worth waiting for: the strong, sweet scent is similar to honeysuckle and irresistible to bees and hoverflies. Standing underneath the canopy, I could see many insects busily drinking nectar. On warm July days, the beautiful scent has been drifting through the churchyard on the breeze.

**Ox-eye daisies** were stunning in the first half of this month along with **orange hawkweed** (also known as “fox and cubs”), and the **meadow vetchling** is now flowering.



**Ox-eye daisy**



**Orange hawkweed**



**Meadow vetchling**



**Hogweed**

We also have plenty of stately **Hogweeds** in the churchyard. These striking umbellifers have broad flat flower heads, full of nectar, which make easy landing pads for beneficial insects such as hoverflies (including our great pied one mentioned earlier), lacewings, soldier beetles and ladybirds. In autumn, birds are attracted to the seeds, so they are great wildlife-friendly plants.

**Greater Plantain**

Another common but much less showy plant in the churchyard is the **Greater Plantain** – sometimes known as the rat-tail plantain for obvious reasons! This low-growing plant is very nutritious, being high in vitamins A, C, K and calcium. You can eat the tender, young leaves raw in salads. The plant is used throughout the world as a medicinal crop (anti-microbial, tissue regeneration, pain reduction and coagulant amongst many other uses) – it’s amazing what valuable plants we trample on without a second thought! Native Americans called it “White man’s foot” as it spread from the villages of English settlers along tracks into the wider area. Its Latin name is *Plantago major* – *planta* is Latin for sole of the foot.





This pretty, pink-spired plant, in flower during the first half of the month, is **Hedge woundwort** and is another medicinal plant. Since the days of the ancient Greeks, woundworts have been used to treat wounds and stem bleeding.

Other plants noted this month include **Self heal, Yarrow, Convolvulus, Privet** and **Montbretia**.



**Convolvulus**



**Self heal**

**Mistle thrush star.**

One of our Mistle thrushes posed fleetingly for a photo on the west wall. I only had one chance at a photo so it's not a sharp image but I've included it because just visible are the white outer tail feathers which help to distinguish it from the song thrush.



**Marjorie Middleton**

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