

## St Matthew's Churchyard, Lightcliffe

### March Wildlife Snapshot

March has seen the transition from Winter into Spring with some beautifully mild days towards the end of the month (although it's snowing as I write this!) Hawthorn buds, like tight fists at the beginning of March, have now unfurled their fresh new leaves. Oblivious to the current emergencies in the human world, animals and plants are springing into life, irresistibly drawn by the lengthening daylight and warmer temperatures.



### Birds



During the last half of March, the churchyard has been full of spring birdsong with males establishing their breeding territories. Hearing the liquid gold notes of the first blackbird song of the year never fails to lift my spirits. I photographed this male early one morning with frost sparkling on the grass behind him.

The winter flocks of long-tailed tits have now dispersed with the birds pairing up ready for nesting. I watched a pair flitting about amongst the hawthorn trees, hanging upside down whilst picking off insects from the branches.

Frenetic wren song is everywhere in the churchyard and I've heard chiffchaffs calling from across the fields.

**Chiffchaffs** are summer visitors to Britain and are one of the first migrants to arrive back here in the spring. Although they are not easy to spot due to their brownish-green colouring, their "chiffchaff" song is unmistakable.

Chiffchaff by Rod Baker



Another species to add to the list of birds in the churchyard is the shy **dunnock**. I noticed two doing lots of characteristic tail and wing flicking along an ivy-covered wall - probably two rival males competing for a territory. In Birders' code, they are one of the species known as "little brown jobs", which seems a bit unfair! On closer inspection, they have beautifully streaked, oak-coloured plumage with a grey head and breast and a fine bill, designed for catching insects.

Dunnock by Chris Lythall





Mistle thrush



Great tit

Our resident mistle thrushes are very active at the moment, their rich song and rattling alarm calls echoing around the churchyard. They are often among the first birds to produce chicks in the spring and I photographed this alert-looking one near a large holly tree where I suspect they are nesting. The “teacher teacher” call of the great tit is also ringing out now - I spotted this one foraging for insects on the vertical face of a wall.



I think I heard one burst of woodpecker drumming early one morning, but there was no repeat. I’m fairly sure the dead branch on the willow featured in last month’s report is being used by a woodpecker – there are plenty more fresh wood chippings around – but I’d welcome any reports of sightings or drumming, please.

## Insects

Warmer temperatures have seen the emergence of bumblebees and butterflies from hibernation. I spent an absorbing 15 minutes tracking a queen buff tailed bumblebee around the churchyard as she flew close to the ground, searching for an underground nest site. She flew incessantly, only stopping to disappear for a few moments under a leaf, so taking a photograph was nearly impossible but I managed just one as she emerged from a hole.

A better photograph by David Nicholls





Tree bumblebee by HA Peacock

There are several peacock butterflies flying now, their intricately coloured wings a delight to see on a spring day. They have spent the winter as adults, tucked away out of the weather and now their main job is to find a mate to start the next generation.



These zig-zag patterns are made by the larvae of the **Bramble leaf miner moth**. The moth lays its eggs inside the leaf and after the larva hatches, it munches its way through the leaf, forming maze-like tunnels. Frosty weather turns these tunnels white, making them more obvious in early spring. The adult moths are tiny with a wingspan of only 6mm.



## Plants and fungi



I found a cluster of these fungi around the base of the old willow tree. This one has grown around a stick! It's a **Willow Bracket Fungus** (*Phellinus ignarius*) – “*phell*” = cork, suffix “*inus*” = the most and “*ignarius*” = relating to fire. So a translation would be: a very tough cork-like fungus that looks as though it's been on fire!

We have several **wych elm** trees growing in the churchyard and at this time of year, before the leaves come out, they produce their delicate, purple-tinged flowers that are pollinated by the wind. Wych elm leaves are food for various caterpillars including those of the peppered, common quaker and light emerald moths – something to look out for later in the spring.



The churchyard has been full of flowers throughout March with snowdrops, crocuses, daffodils, primroses, dandelions, daisies, forget-me-nots, and a carpet of glossy celandines shining yellow in the sun. Here's a selection of photos:



Finally, a photo of a chilly- looking mistle thrush, feathers fluffed out against the cold weather at the beginning of the month.

**Marjorie Middleton March 2020**