

St Matthew's Churchyard, Lightcliffe

November wildlife snapshot

November has been another largely wet month, although there were some cold, sunny days towards the beginning, showing off the beautiful autumn colours in the churchyard. I liked the way the golden beech leaves were intertwined with the shiny green holly leaves at the Till Carr Lane entrance.

Birds

Scanning through binoculars, I was excited to spot a small flock of **redwings** feeding on hawthorn and holly berries. These beautiful thrushes, which migrate from Iceland, the Faroes and Scandinavia in late October/early November, see the UK as a warm winter destination with an abundant stock of berries to keep them going through the colder months. They are slightly smaller than a song thrush and have russet red patches under their wings and on their flanks. Another distinguishing feature is a striking, creamy white stripe above the eye. During very cold spells, they will visit gardens to feed on fallen apples.



The low afternoon sun lit up this redwing for me as it feasted on the hawthorn berries by the west wall.



Redwing *Turdus iliacus* Photo courtesy of Wildliftrusts.org

These delightful **goldfinches** were drinking water that had collected in the “fixing hole” of a memorial base. Their exotic colouring and bandit face masks make them look as if they should belong in a distant land! The name *Carduelis carduelis* is derived from the Latin for thistle “*Carduus*,” as thistle seed is their favourite food. Their long, fine bills allow them to extract the seed without getting damaged by the spikes. Males have longer bills than females which means they can feed on the even spikier teasel! The red mask extends slightly further beyond the eye on the male bird. Goldfinches sometimes appear in medieval paintings of the Madonna and Child as a symbol of fertility and resurrection.

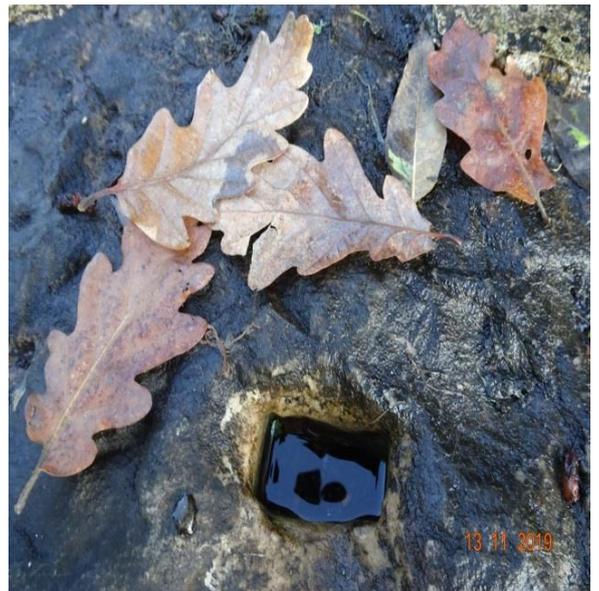


Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

A male **blackbird** was also seen taking advantage of the same water source. The brownish wing feathers and underdeveloped bill colour suggest that this may be a juvenile born earlier this year



Blackbird *Turdus merula*



The miniature “pond”

Grey Squirrel *Sciurus carolinensis*



Although grey squirrels tend to be public enemy number one, they are intelligent animals that are fascinating to watch. Their genus name "*Sciurus*" is derived from two Greek words: "skia" meaning shadow and "oura" meaning tail. So, the squirrel is an animal that "sits in the shadow of its tail"! I photographed this one enjoying a beech nut in a patch of sunlight. The multi-function bushy tail is used for balance and as a rudder during long jumps, it also keeps the animal warm and is used as an important tool for communication, hence all the flicking! Not many mammals can descend a tree headfirst, but a squirrel manages it because it can turn its hind feet backwards so that its claws can grip the bark more effectively.

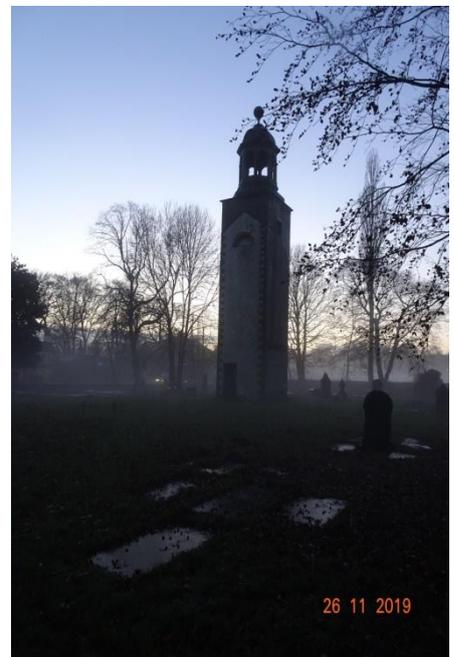


If you have battles with squirrels that steal bird food in your gardens, you will know that they are crafty! Apparently, if they feel that they are being watched whilst "caching" nuts, they will try to deceive the other animal by digging a hole, pretending to drop in a nut, then covering it up. Another strategy is to hide behind vegetation whilst burying food.

Their dreys are fairly compact structures, built high up in a fork against a large trunk. This nest in a tree in the newer part of the churchyard could be a squirrel's drey.

November moods in the churchyard





I visited the churchyard one still afternoon, late in the month, during a brief window of fine weather between showers. A party of long tailed tits called to each other as they flitted among the trees and two wood pigeons were silhouetted against the sky as they fed on hawthorn berries before nightfall. Both hollies and hawthorns contained a few redwings. Robin song was everywhere, and jackdaws and crows cawed noisily from the treetops. As the light faded, I watched as long wisps of mist crept over the west wall from the fields beyond, weaving its way between the gravestones and enveloping the place in an eerie calm.



Marjorie Middleton November 2019 (The next wildlife snapshot will be a combined Dec/Jan one)