

## St Matthew's Churchyard, Lightcliffe

### Wildlife Snapshot December 2019 – January 2020

#### Birds

One of the advantages of leafless trees, apart from the beauty of the tracery of twigs and branches against a winter sky, is that it's a lot easier to spot the birds. Throughout December and January, there have been mixed flocks of tits in the trees, including **coal tits** which are a new species for our list.



Coal tits are the smallest members of the tit family and are less colourful than blue and great tits with a distinctive white patch at the back of their heads. In the churchyard at the moment, they are feeding high up, busily searching the branches for insects and grubs. They have a “pee-chew” call that is similar to a great tit but higher pitched and faster.

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#### Magical redwings

On an unusually mild and sunny January afternoon, I found the churchyard alive with thrushes. A flock of between 20 – 30 **redwing** was feeding down in the lower part of the churchyard on the ground – a wonderful sight as the sun lit up their characteristic red underwing patches and creamy eye stripes. Now that the berries have been stripped from the trees, these dainty thrushes forage for insects and worms at ground level. The leaf litter in this part of the churchyard was clearly providing rich pickings – a reminder that it's important not to be too tidy!





This photo shows how well the streaky pattern of their plumage camouflages them against the leaves. The leaf litter is so deep in places that the thrushes were half submerged!

The much larger **mistle thrushes** were also about, seemingly seeking out the highest branches to catch the rays of the sun.

On milder days, the birds have been singing, especially **blue tits**, **great tits** and **robins**. Robins are unusual in that they sing all year round, except for a short period in mid – late summer when they are moulting. However, their autumn/winter song is different from their spring song. In autumn and winter, they continue to sing to maintain feeding territories and the song is muted and wistful.



Mistle thrushes



Robin photographed in the churchyard in October

Here's a link to an audio recording for their winter song:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQS9WAXRGZw>

In spring, they are singing to attract a mate and their song becomes more powerful and upbeat:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIQxYhANMeg>

Several people have told me that they frequently hear owls in the churchyard but for me they have been frustratingly elusive until one clear, frosty December night when I finally heard a male **tawny owl** hooting from a tree close to the Till Carr Lane entrance. It would be great to find some pellets.



Photo by Elliott Neep



In early January, something was chiselling away at a dead branch of this old willow. Fresh woodchips can be seen in a crevice at the bottom of the trunk below the dead branch which is riddled with holes. It could have been a **great spotted woodpecker** excavating for beetles and larvae although I have never heard their loud "tchick" call or any drumming in the churchyard. Another possibility would be a **treecreeper** excavating a roosting hole in the soft willow bark for protection on cold winter nights.



Great spotted  
woodpecker.  
[GardenBird.co.uk](http://GardenBird.co.uk)



Treecreeper  
[Norfolk Wildlife Trust](http://NorfolkWildlifeTrust.org)

## Plants and fungi

I found several clusters of **Velvet Shank fungus** at the base of trees in early January. This fungus is also known as the "Winter mushroom" as its golden orange caps brighten up the dark, winter months.



Velvet Shank fungus



A pretty, unidentified fungus  
found on one of our oak trees

Other colourful plants in the churchyard at the moment are the **Primrose**, which was flowering in a sheltered spot in December and the **Snowdrops**, which are just starting to bloom.



I found this beautiful leaf skeleton underneath one of our large smooth-leaved holly trees. Waxy leaves often make the best preserved skeletons. I laid it on some bright green moss to highlight its delicate structure.



Lichens also brighten up dark winter days



This tree looks as if it's fed up of winter!

**Marjorie Middleton January 2020**