St Matthew's Churchyard Lightcliffe

June 2021 Wildlife Snapshot

June has seen the churchyard full of colourful wildflowers. I took this shot of red clover, buttercup and grasses near the tower before everything was cut back.

Birds

I assume the nuthatch youngsters fledged in the first few days of June. By the 5th, there was no activity at all near the nest box. As viewers of Springwatch will know, catching the moment of fledging is a matter of luck! Hopefully, all fledged successfully and are still in the vicinity.

Nuthatch fledgling. Photo by Colin Price

Father Blackbird "Crêche"!

Later in June, I watched a gaggle of male blackbirds on babysitting duties in the shade of the large Wych Elm. They were rooting about in the dead leaves finding tasty morsels for their chicks which looked easily as big as their dads! The brown, speckled youngsters were very well camouflaged and hard to spot. Once the chicks have fledged from the nest, it is the responsibility of the father to feed them as the mother bird prepares a nest for her next brood. The chicks are fed for about two and a half weeks by the males and then it's time to fend for themselves!

Butterflies

There are lots of **Speckled Wood** butterflies in the churchyard at the moment, flying in areas of dappled sunlight. This one has a chunk missing from its right hind wing – possibly the result of a bird attack or being battered by bad weather. I watched it fly away and it didn't seem to be affected by the damage. Speckled Wood caterpillars feed on grasses such as Yorkshire Fog and Couch grass – we have lots of those! The adults drink honeydew made by aphids feeding on leaves. Females are very choosy when it comes to selecting a male as they only mate once in their lifespan so must choose the best! Males fiercely defend their territories and will fight off any intruders in a spiralling duel until the strongest wins.

The Red Admiral prefers the sunniest spots in the churchyard. These beautiful butterflies migrate here from Southern Europe and North Africa arriving from late March, although as a result of warmer winters, some are now overwintering in Britain. Red Admirals search out our juicy nettles on which to lay their eggs. The caterpillars make themselves a tent by folding over a nettle leaf, fastening it with silk. As they grow, they form new, larger tents. I noticed several nettles with a series of these tents so hopefully by mid-July, we should have a new generation of these colourful butterflies.

Red Admiral caterpillar tent on nettle.

Nutritious nettles!

Besides Red Admirals and Tortoiseshell butterflies, many other insects seek out nettles for food. Clockwise from top left below: a rather fat ladybird larva that looks as though it's in the last stage before forming a pupa; an adult 16 spot ladybird hunting for aphids; a long legged fly that looks as if it's on stilts! This will also be looking for aphids, frog hoppers and small caterpillars etc; cuckoo spit containing a froghopper nymph. This will be sucking the juicy sap from the nettle.

Nettles are fantastic plants for wildlife!

At first, I thought this was some kind of pupa but apparently, it's an orange rust fungus that is particular to nettles - *Puccinia urticata.*

Garden Bumble bee

Garden bumblebee on bramble flower.

These bees have rather a scruffy looking appearance due to their long fur. When I magnified one of my photos of this bee, I could see its very long tongue (the longest in the world!) reaching down into the flower. They often feed on foxglove flowers.

Plants

Earlier in June, the hawthorn blossom was magnificent as well as the meadow foxtail grass, pink flowered sorrel, and a new species for our records – a salad burnet (the leaves have a cucumber-like flavour!).

Salad burnet

Marjorie Middleton June 2021