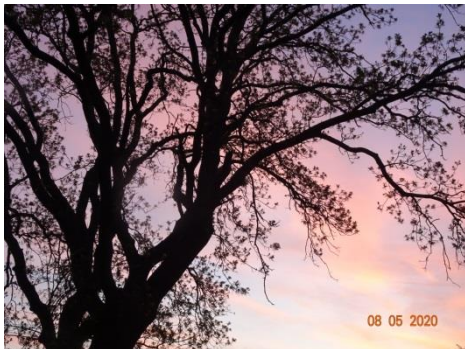
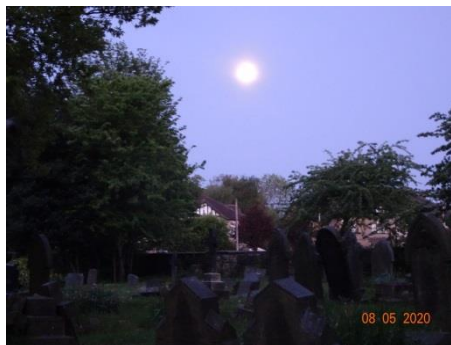


St Matthew's Churchyard, Lightcliffe

May 2020 Wildlife Snapshot

My first visit of the month was on the 8th May at 4.45am. A full moon was hanging in the southern sky and the silhouettes of several bats, still out foraging for insects, flitted amongst the trees in the pale light. The air was filled with a symphony of birdsong including wren, robin, goldfinch, chaffinch, mistle thrush, blackbird, wood pigeon and blue tit. I caught the wren's silhouette as it sang from a nearby ash tree. A fellow early riser walked through the churchyard and together we shared the magic and peace of this beautiful dawn.



Birds



I have been keeping an eye on the birds seen using our nest boxes last month. The blue tits have continued to nest in the box designed for robins and the great tits are now busy feeding their young in the box on the ivy-covered sycamore by the west wall. The parent bird on the left obligingly held this pose for several seconds allowing me enough time to take its photograph. Notice how it is using its tail as a prop against the box. I have also seen robins flying with their bills full of tasty morsels but so far, I've been unable to locate their nest site.

On each one of my visits during May, I have heard the rich, fluty song of a male blackcap which suggests that we have a breeding pair in the churchyard. Due to our milder winters, increasing numbers of these warblers are overwintering in the UK rather than flying south to North Africa. The male has the black cap that gives the species its name whereas the female's cap is chestnut brown. The blackcap's beautiful song has led to it being referred to as the northern nightingale.

Male and female black caps.

Photos by Nick Stacey.



Busy wrens



One morning, I spotted the whirring flight of a wren going backwards and forwards from the same ivy-cloaked sycamore that contains the great tit's nest. The chestnut brown of his plumage was lit by the morning sun, his tail cocked characteristically when he alighted on a gravestone. In the photos, his white supercilium is clearly visible – a detail that is hard to spot when the bird is in flight. He returned constantly to the same gravestone, collecting beakfuls of the moss that covered the stone then flying onto the west wall – a sort of staging post - before entering the thick ivy on the tree. I knew it was a male bird because between moss-gathering expeditions, he would fly up onto a branch and deliver his frenetic song. Male wrens build several nests and the female then inspects each of them before choosing the most suitable. However, on subsequent visits throughout the month, I saw no further evidence of wrens flying into the nest so I assume the female felt that this particular one was not up to scratch!



We have several pairs of wrens in the churchyard and for me, their exuberant, ever present song epitomizes the joy of spring. One day, I stood still for a few minutes to listen to a duet between a wren on my left and a chaffinch on my right. Both of these birds have high energy songs, the wren's being higher pitched than the chaffinch's. After a few moments, a woodpigeon joined in at a lower pitch with its measured, soothing call, providing a beautiful three-layered soundscape.

Trees and plants

Our hawthorns have been covered in glorious white flower during May, providing nectar and pollen for visiting insects which in turn become food for the bats and birds. As the insects pollinate the flowers, they turn from white to pink (not to be confused with the red flowering hawthorn, which is a different variety). The photo below on the left was taken on the 8th May and the one on the right on the 25th – you can see the insects have been busy! The dense habit of the hawthorn's leaves and branches gives plenty of nesting opportunities for birds such as goldfinches which often build their delicate nests, decorated with lichens, on the flexible outer branches of a tree.



The wild garlic is providing a pungent white carpet near the west wall in the shade of the wych elms and the frothy white flower heads of cow parsley are mingling with red campion, buttercups and meadow foxtail grass amongst the gravestones. The two photos of the foxtail grass below show how it looks at different stages in its flowering, the one on the right demonstrating how it got its name!



Clockwise from above left: welsh poppy, jack-by-the-hedge with red campion, herb robert, rhododendron and camellia.



Insects and spiders



The large Rhododendron shrub seems to be a magnet for bees. After some research, I think this one is a Forest Cuckoo Bee. Last year, I recorded a Southern Cuckoo bee in the churchyard and talked about the cuckoo bee's behaviour being similar to that of the cuckoo bird in the sense that it takes over the nest of its host species. Cuckoo bees do not produce worker bees because they get their host's workers to provide for them! The Forest Cuckoo bee is a widespread species, using the Early Bumblebee as its host. It emerges from March onwards as its host nests early in the year. Forest Cuckoos have short tongues and feed on flowers such as dandelions, thistles and brambles - as well as rhododendrons!

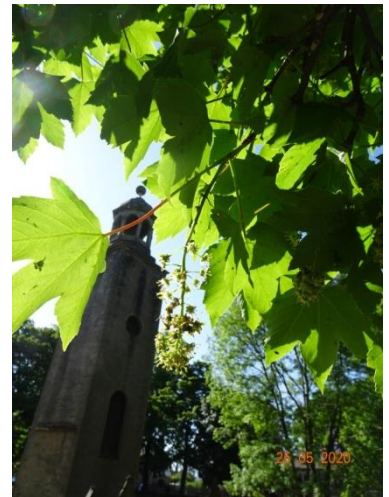


Tree bumble bee on bramble and nettle leaves

Our sycamore trees are now flowering and although their green, pendulous flowers look insignificant to us, they produce copious amounts of nectar and pollen and you only have to go and stand under a mature tree to hear the hum of insects appreciating the feast! Sycamore Aphids which are abundant in May, excrete a sugary substance called honeydew – you can see it shining on lower leaves and often (annoyingly!) on your car windscreen if you park underneath a sycamore. This honeydew is very attractive to insects such as bees, wasps, hoverflies and ants.



I found this little green spider on one of the lower leaves of a wych elm. I think it's a Green orb weaver spider, sometimes known as the Cucumber spider (*Araniella cucurbita*). I had a closer look by enlarging the photo to confirm the identification – there is a reddish mark on the end of the abdomen. It's a very common spider, spending most of its time in low bushes and leaf litter. It catches flies in its web which is notable for a missing "V" section at the top.



Marjorie Middleton

May 2020