St Matthew's Churchyard, Lightcliffe

August wildlife snapshot

Blackberries ripening on the west wall

It has been a quieter month for flora and fauna in the churchyard. In the stillness of hot August afternoons, it has seemed as if nature is holding her breath. Birds are largely silent, hiding away amongst the dense foliage. Only the marmalade-coloured hoverflies darting frenetically in shafts of sunlight and an occasional pair of speckled wood butterflies fluttering around each other in the dappled shade seem to have the energy for movement.

I found some animals resting on the shady side of tombstones next to very apt inscriptions:

Common White Wave Moth

The snail that climbed the tree is a **White lipped snail** – so-called because it has a white band around the opening of its shell. White lipped snails come in a variety of colours and like eating nettles, hogweed and ragwort.

The **Hogweed** in the churchyard is proving to be a magnet for wildlife. In the early part of the month, when it was still in flower, it was popular with **Soldier beetles**. We have about 40 species of these in the UK. They are all slender and straight, often with red and black colouring that may remind you of regimental uniforms. They sit on the plate-like flower head, feeding on nectar whilst waiting for other insects to land, which they then eat!

Later in August, after the flowers have gone to seed, the plant does not look so pretty to human eyes, but I spotted different species of **Ladybirds** in three stages of their lifecycle using the stems, leaves and seed heads of the hogweed:

A Ladybird larva

Ladybird pupae

Ladybird larvae are voracious feeders and will shed their skin three or four times as they grow. The larva stage lasts about a month before the skin splits for a last time, revealing the pupa case underneath. Inside, the body dissolves into a kind of soup before reforming into an adult ladybird. This transformation takes about a week. When it emerges from the pupa, the new beetle is yellow without any spots. Over the following few hours, the wing cases harden and the familiar colouring and pattern appear.

Adult ladybird next to a pupa

This **Red legged Shield Bug** is another insect caught having a rest on a tombstone.

This photo shows a second flush of leaves on one of our oak trees. New growth at this time of the year is called "**Lammas Growth**" after Lammas Day meaning "loaf mass", which falls on August 1st. It celebrates the first harvest of the season and dates back to Anglo Saxon times. Traditionally, farmers would have baked a loaf with their first wheat crop, had it blessed in church, then broken it into four pieces which were placed in each corner of the barn to protect the newly harvested grain.

It is thought that trees might produce new growth at this time of the year to compensate for any damage caused by insects and caterpillars during the spring. Other trees showing Lammas growth include Sycamore, Ash, Beech, Yew and Hawthorn. It is most frequent in young trees.

This **Wild Carrot** plant is flowering at the moment on a grave in the churchyard. It is distinguished by the single red flower in the middle of the flower head. It is thought that the red flower helps to attract insects to aid pollination.

Wild carrots are ancestors of our garden carrot and have been used for various remedies over the years. The herbalist, Culpepper, believed they were beneficial to would-be mothers, stating that they "helpeth conception" when boiled in wine and drunk!

Rabbits have created a warren in the large habitat pile to the right of the side entrance. I haven't managed to capture one on camera yet, but I spotted rabbits running back into their holes on one early morning visit.

Marjorie Middleton

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