

Lightcliffe Churchyard

Wildlife snapshot

May 2024

Early morning encounter with foxes

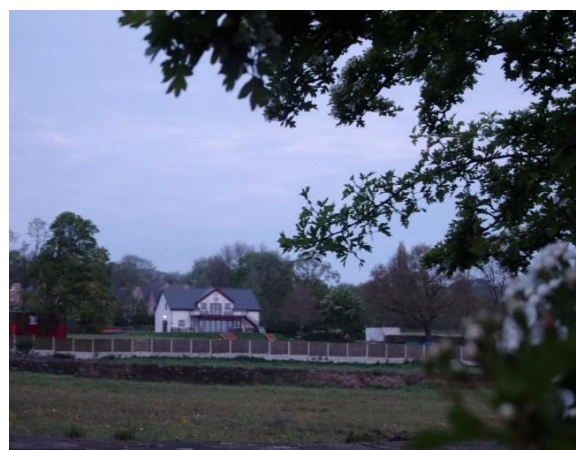
I arrived just before dawn on the 6th May to listen to the spring birdsong. In the perfectly still air, a lone blackbird was singing an accompaniment to the first grey light of dawn but stopped as soon as I switched on my recorder, to be replaced by an enthusiastic wren and a vixen calling from the adjacent field. The duet lasted several minutes and seemed to stun the blackbird into silence!



As I watched the vixen making its way northwards across the field, I sensed a movement to my right: another fox was sauntering up one of the mown paths in the churchyard towards me. Suddenly, it spotted me and held my gaze for a few seconds before it turned tail. There was no time to take a photograph so this one is by David Gould from the NatureSpot website.

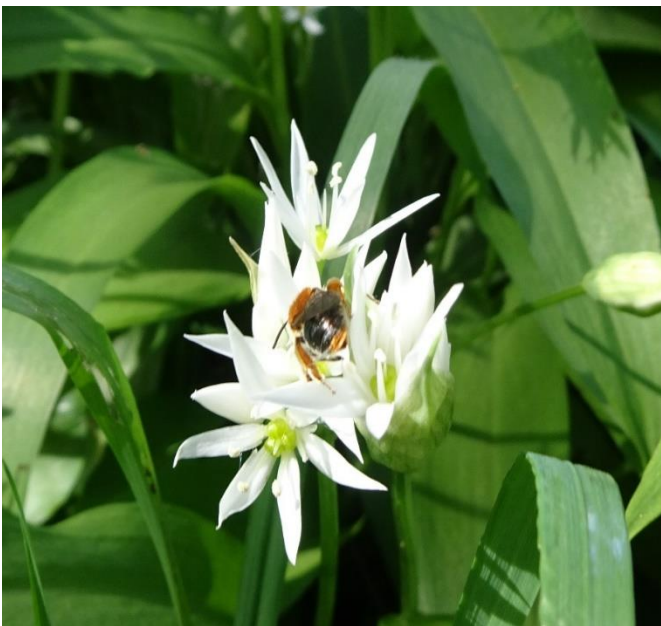
Birds sing before dawn because it is not yet light enough to search for food and also the air is often very still at that time and sound carries much further so the males can make sure everyone knows which is their territory. Females will choose males with the best quality songs as this indicates a fit and healthy bird that will be a good father!

The dawn chorus happens in a certain order with blackbirds, thrushes, robins and wrens starting it off pre-dawn, followed by great tit, blue tit and woodpigeon then the seed eaters such as goldfinch, chaffinch, and sparrow join in when it is light enough for them to see.





I spotted a new hoverfly for our records one sunny afternoon. It's *Epistrophe eligans*. Frustratingly, it refused to land anywhere, doing what it does best - hovering and zipping around - so I only managed a blurred photo! The photo on the right is by **Graham Calow** (NatureSpot website) and shows the beautiful colouring of this stunning insect. Both photos are of females which have brighter yellow bands. Males and females both have the brassy-looking thorax. They are a spring species with peak numbers of adults coinciding with the flowering of hawthorn, on which they feed. Their larvae feed on aphids so they are definitely insects to welcome into your garden.



The pungent scent of swathes of wild garlic has been filling the churchyard recently. An **Early Mining Bee** (*Andrena haemorrhae*) was feeding on the flowers one day. The photo on the left shows its bright orangey-yellow tip to its abdomen and orange hind legs, and the one on the right shows its foxy thorax. I think this is a female as males are lighter coloured and smaller. As their name suggests, they are an early spring species.



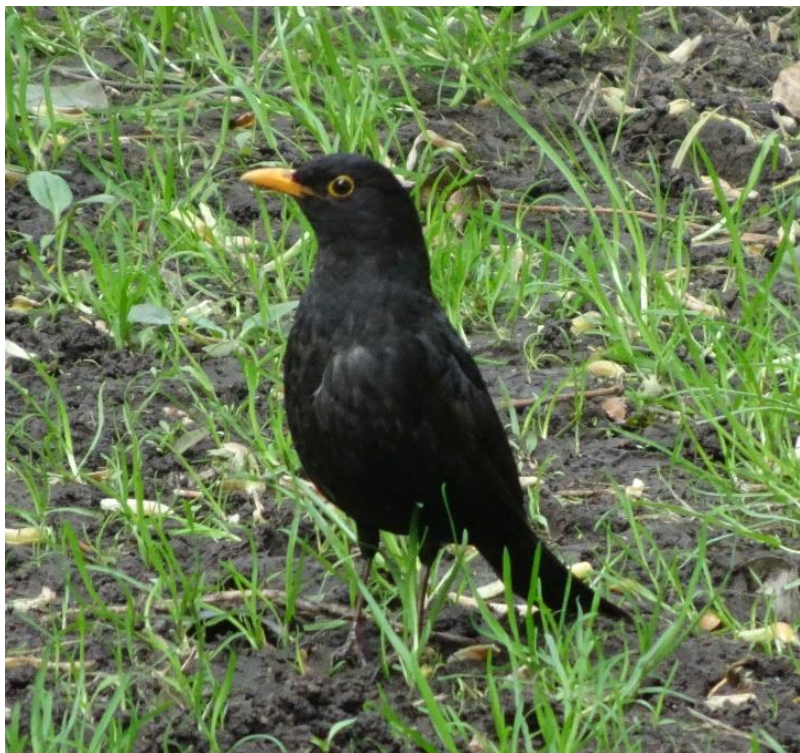
The flowers in the churchyard have been very pretty in May with swathes of forget-me-not, and bluebells contrasting with red campion, buttercups, frothy white cow parsley and a pop of orange from the Welsh poppies.

Another wild plant in the churchyard with a pretty pink flower is **Herb Robert** (*Geranium robertianum*) which many people regard as an invasive weed.



Herb Robert, a type of Crane's-bill, has many other names, including "Stinking Bob" because its leaves give off a pungent odour when crushed, which some say smells like burning tyres, although I quite like it! Even slugs, snails and caterpillars give the plant a wide berth! You can rub the leaves over your skin as an insect repellent to ward off hungry midges and mosquitos. There are various theories about how it got its name, including linking it to a French

abbot and herbalist, Robert de Molesme who founded the Cistercian order of monks. Culpepper, the herbalist, used it to treat internal and external bleeding. It was also thought to cure stomach aches and headaches, and was used as an antiseptic to heal wounds. It contains vitamins A, B and C as well as a long list of minerals and you can use the leaves in salads or make tea with them. The flowers provide nectar for bees and hoverflies. Herb Robert will quickly colonise your garden if not controlled but is easy to pull up, and with all those uses and medieval connections, I think it deserves a small corner in my garden!



The wet weather in May created muddy conditions underfoot in the churchyard, but it was good news for ground-feeding birds such as blackbirds, robins and thrushes. Wet weather brings worms to the surface so they are an easy meal. I watched this blackbird making repeat visits to this muddy patch, successfully extracting wriggling morsels. When it rains, vibrations are made on the ground, causing worms to rise up out of their burrows. Some birds have even learnt to drum their feet on the soil surface to mimic rain and encourage the worms to appear. Watch for worm-charming blackbirds in your garden!

Blackbirds have two weapons for finding worms: sharp eyesight for spotting the tip of a worm sticking out of the soil, and acute hearing which allows them to detect worms moving about under the surface of the soil. You can sometimes see blackbirds washing earthworms in a puddle or dragging them over soil to remove slime and grit before they feed them to their chicks.



Magpies (*Pica pica*) get a very bad press, but they are striking birds to look at. Although they are a black and white bird, the feathers on the wings and tail have an attractive iridescent blue-green sheen as the light catches them. The Latin name *Pica* means "pointed", perhaps referring to the bill and tail. It became anglicized as "pie" and became a common way to describe any black and white creatures. Before the 16th century, magpies were simply known as "Pies". However, Mag is a shortened form of the name Margaret and in the 16th century, women who did a lot of chattering were nicknamed Margaret or Mag. The link with the noisy chattering of a Pie was made and the birds were thereafter known as Magpies! Hopefully, next time you hear the annoying chatter of a magpie, it will make you laugh!

Marjorie Middleton, May 2024