

Whitchurch Nature Notes

Signs of Spring - Part 1



Spring flowers

One of the earliest signs of spring are the charming snowdrops that grace our semi-shady places around the village, but their flowers are now over and turning to seed.

They are now replaced by pretty primroses which can be seen in abundance, on sunny banks and under hedges. Most will be the true wild variety with pale yellow flowers but sometimes you will see pink or

pinky-yellow flowers instead.

These are the result of cross-pollination by insects which have visited the red and pink hybrids of Primula or Polyanthus garden plants, before visiting wild primroses. Surprisingly, they can occur a long way from any gardens.



At the Maze, the blackthorn is in full blossom, providing a lovely white backdrop to this quiet green space. Unless there are any late, hard frosts, there should be a good crop of sloes – essential of course for making that favourite winter warmer, sloe gin.

This photo also shows one of the two elm trees which were planted at the Maze by Butterfly Conservation (BC) in 2018. It is a variety which is resistant to the Dutch Elm disease. BC are running a project in our area to increase the number of elms, which are the essential foodplant for the caterpillar of the rare White-Letter Hairstreak butterfly.

Also in flower here are green alkanet (pictured), wood anemones and the ubiquitous sycamore – all of these provide good sources of nectar for the early insects, including bumblebees.



Bumblebees

The large bumblebees that you will see on the spring flowers are the queens, needing energy after the winter spent hibernating alone underground. After feeding, they will begin to search for a suitable nest site, which are often holes in the ground, tussocky grass or bird boxes. When she has chosen her nest site, each queen will begin to collect pollen from flowers, to bring back to the nest. She forms a mound of pollen and wax (which she secretes from her body) and lays her first brood of eggs.

(Note: this photo shows a queen bumblebee on a grape hyacinth, another pretty spring flower in our garden)

Look out for Part 2 of my Spring Nature Notes and future contributions from other local enthusiasts