

Maria Himsworth's Chillenden Blog

March 2021

A Pollinating Buzz in my Rural Garden - A monthly look at how my rural garden is enjoyed by pollinating insects

My interest in Bees and other pollinators grew out of volunteering with various charities. I initially volunteered with Kent Wildlife Trust as Roadside Nature Warden I was given so much support and soon began to recognise many local wildflowers whilst carrying out surveys for the Trust. When studying wildflowers you quickly also start to appreciate the insects that pollinate them and from that I soon wanted to know more. I became involved with a project at the Bumblebee Conservation Trust called 'Buzz for the Coast' which ran for three years. I continue to volunteer for the BBCT carrying out bee walks and surveys in East Kent. Bee walks are great fun and the BBCT provide much support and training so anyone can get involved. <https://www.bumblebeeconservation.org/beewalk/>

With KWT I am still part of the Roadside nature and Bee roads scheme and I am also part of the 'Gardening for a Wilder Kent' Scheme encouraging others to help stop the loss of local biodiversity by encouraging nature into their gardens. As part of the scheme this year you will be able to visit some local wildlife-friendly gardens and see how you can get WILD in your garden too! <https://www.kentwildlifetrust.org.uk/wilder-gardens>. My garden will be open on 29th August this year, if you wish you can book a visit on their website.

When we read about making our gardens more pollinator friendly it is often suggested that we should try and provide forage for pollinators throughout the year. This is of course a win win situation for gardeners as this focus ensures year round colour in our gardens and provides nectar and pollen for a wide range of insects throughout the year.

But why is it important to pollinators?

Early spring is a time when pollinators such as Queen Bumblebees are emerging and they need forage to establish their colony, if they fail they will not establish the next generation. In late summer they need to build up resources to enable them to survive overwinter again failure means next years generation will be lost. In rural areas these are often times when there is little foraging in the countryside and therefore our gardens can be a lifeline.

March is the launch of the BBCT's new project 'Bee the Change'. You can take part here - <https://www.bumblebeeconservation.org/beethechange/pledge-to-bee-the-change/>

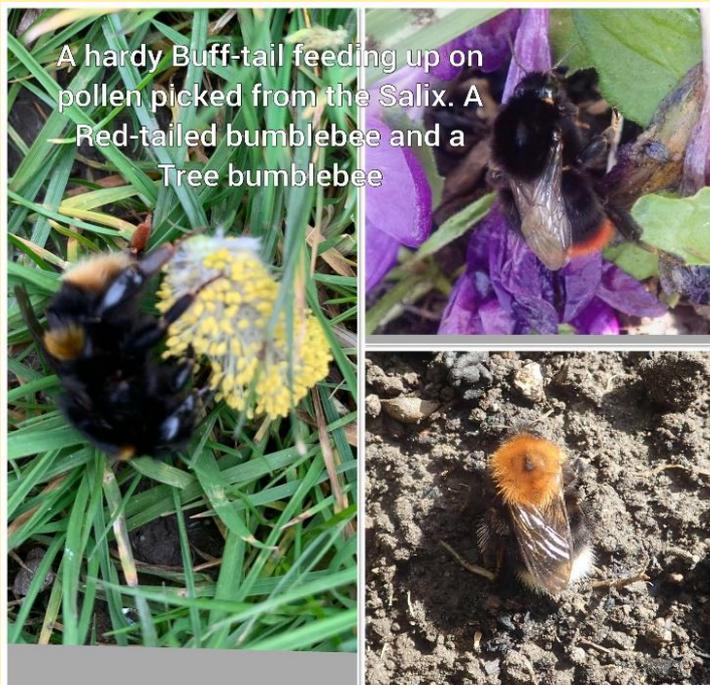
What was buzzing in March?

The weather in March is critical for nature, just a 1 degree drop in temperature can delay budburst meaning the availability of insects for wildlife is also delayed and pollen and nectar is in short supply. This year the short lived warm sunshine we had for the first few days in March soon disappeared again and the plummeting temperatures and dark days certainly seemed to delay spring in my garden.



Although disappointed not to see many pollinators in the garden during the majority of this month I know the ones that have braved the cold would have found it harder to find food. There has however not been a shortage of the hardy Buff-tailed bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris*) Queens, who are very good at withstanding the cold. Not only do they have thick hair they are also able to detach their wing muscles and use them to shiver and thus raise the temperature of their thorax, amazing! A struggling Buff-tailed Queen is more likely to be hungry than cold this March! They do spend time resting on the ground as they have been busy trying to find food and a new nest

to raise their young, but if you do find one that seems to be in trouble the best thing you can do is move them to a flower patch. I have a Weeping willow (*Salix caprea klimarnock*) and I have found myself picking off the flowering yellow catkins and placing them on the ground near to a tired looking bee and they have immediately dived in and fed on the pollen and nectar.



A hardy Buff-tail feeding up on pollen picked from the Salix. A Red-tailed bumblebee and a Tree bumblebee

Towards the end of this month I briefly spotted a Tree bumblebee (*Bombus hypnorum*) that looked like it had just crawled out of hibernation on one of the few sunny days we had. Tree bumblebees have only been in the UK since 2001 arriving here from mainland Europe. They will be looking for a nest in old tree holes, bird boxes and high up in buildings such as in roof spaces. The other Queen I saw was the Red-tailed bumblebee (*Bombus lapidaries*) common in gardens from early spring. Queens will be setting up nests underground, usually in an old vole nest or under the base of a building, you might find one under your shed. I'd hoped to see the Early Bumblebee before the end of March but was disappointed this year.

Our early native flowering trees and hedges such as Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) and Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) can provide a mass of pollen and nectar and the Blackthorn that flowers first is always a wonderful sight in spring.

We inherited a Forsythia that has just blossomed so beautifully with its striking yellow flowers but I think the pollen and nectar is not very accessible and therefore of little use to pollinators, I think I will watch it closely this April and consider whether I should replace it. I do have a Purple coral pea (*Hardenbergia violacea*), it doesn't grow in my garden but in a pot on a sunny wall. Covered in flower from March to April it is loved by the Buff-tails!



Turning your lawn into a wildflower meadow may seem a bit ambitious or not what you want your lawn to be. However, lawns can be very beneficial to wildlife especially pollinators but many lawns have been stripped of flowers and because many hours are spent cutting, raking, weeding and feeding they end up being totally out of bounds to insects! Leaving some areas uncut from spring through to summer will improve conditions for insects as it will retain moisture and allow grasses perennials and annuals to flower and set seed. Leaving long grass in areas of your garden will also provide habitat and a safe haven for insects to lay their eggs and provide food for them to nibble on. You will also notice the birds feeding there.

You do not have to have to have a large garden to have a 'meadow'! My garden is small and my 'meadow' is about 3 metres square. It has been wonderful watching it develop over the last three years. The crocus that flowered there in February have now died off and have been replaced by Cowslips, Skilla, Daisy and Dandelion and when I look closely I can see the summer flowering plants starting to show their new young leaves.

Butterflies have been non-existent in the garden for most of the month. Just a few local sightings down our country lanes. These will be those that have overwintered as adults that I mentioned in my January blog. You may have noticed the Brimstone butterfly as it is certainly about. I have spotted a few pretty Hoverflies on sunny days mainly on the *Salix* blossom and with the help of Twitter



have managed to identify them. See if you have seen any of these in your garden all three are common at this time of the year.



Hoverflies, *Eristalis tenax*, *Episyrphus balteatus* and *Meliscaeva autocollis* all common this time of year



March is a good time to start sowing some wildflower seeds. If you don't have any room in your garden you could make a wildflower pot. Wildflowers thrive in poor soil, they don't need expensive compost! They like space so the bigger the pot the better.

There is no sign of my Mason bees poking out from their bee hotel tubes yet. I look forward to watching this event anytime now and am keeping a close eye on the tubes that I have placed back in the sunshine ready for them to emerge.

I have seen my first male and female Hairy-footed flower bee, my favorite early bee to spot in the garden. If one will stay still enough to allow you to photograph it close up they truly are an amazing creature. You might find them nesting in old walls and although they are solitary they like to nest in large groups.

They are quite large for a solitary bee looking

almost like a bumblebee and when they fly they dart about very distinctively. They display sexual dimorphism so they are easy to tell apart, males are very gingery and the females black. They are certainly very characterful and it is wonderful to watch them zipping about in a patch of comfrey or pulmonaria in your garden and the males will often be territorial in their patch! I could go on about them forever, but can't finish without mentioning those hairy feet on the males! When observed in courtship you will see them using their hairy feet in a little dance around the female antennae and although it is not really known why they do this there are of course many theories! I am sure I will be taking lots of photos through April as their number increase in the garden



A male Hairy-footed flower bee (*Anthophora plumipes*)

As March draws to a close we finish the month with the warmest couple of days of sunshine since 1968!

Suddenly butterflies appear in the garden. Three Brimstone and a stunning Peacock fluttered in and out before I had time to grab the camera! I also have seen my first couple of Bee-flies (*Bombylius*) the year. These bee mimics are not bees but flies and are important pollinators. Their rather cute fluffiness is however rather deceiving as the female rather gruesomely will flick her eggs into the nests of solitary bees where they will pupate and feed on the bee larva!



Bee-flies the two most common you will see in the garden. The Dark-edged bee-fly (*Bombylius major*) and The Dotted bee-fly (*Bombylius discolor*)