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NATURE RAMBLINGS (9) LATE WINTER/EARLY SPRING

Hi to everyone once again.

It was April 2020 when we produced our first nature notes for you. Did we believe then that we would still be having our activities curtailed?

In the year that has passed, Helen and I have (with this edition) produced nine sets of notes for you and, to be honest, we have enjoyed putting them together.

Of course, we have now come full circle as far as seasons are concerned. You could, if you wanted to, start over again with our first notes and you wouldn't go far wrong. The annual cycle restarts.

However, as we have said previously, we will endeavour to continue with the notes on an ad-hoc basis looking for new and different things. As always, you are welcome to contribute by sending items to us or Sue.

In this edition we have concentrated on the crossover period at the end of winter into early spring. From a quiet time for nature to the awakening of everything around you.

It is a great time of year for getting out and about and appreciating the flora and fauna and, perhaps, anticipating a better year ahead.

(Remember, you can click inside any of the photographs and 'drag' them to expand the picture).



Apricity

Like a name for the back of your knee*, we had never thought that there was a name for those lovely days that we had in February when you could feel the warmth of the sun.

Listening to a meteorologist on BBC radio, apparently the warmth of the sun in winter is called 'Apricity'.

The word was first recorded in 1623. Despite the fact that it is a delightful word for a delightful thing it never quite caught on and will not be found in any modern dictionary aside from the Oxford English Dictionary.



Ice

During a winter when the weather has changed day by day it was not unusual to witness ponds frozen over one day and defrosted the next day by warm winter sun. The problem for we walkers is what do we wear from one day to the next?



Leafless Lanes

What a contrast winter brings. Abundant foliage is replaced by skeletal looking trees.

The countryside takes on a totally different complexion and adds interest to familiar walks.



Badger Tracks

We were lucky to find these tracks. They were frozen into a muddy path near Brimstage.

The earliest traces of badgers in Britain have been dated back to three quarters to half a million years ago, meaning badgers once co-existed with wolves, brown bears, arctic foxes and wolverines, all of which once roamed Britain. We didn't see any of these latter animals however!!



Wall Rue

Wall-rue is a small fern that can be found growing on limestone rocks and in crevices in old walls throughout town and country.

It's likely that human constructions in brick and stone have extended its range because it's a species that prefers an alkaline substrate - and the mortar between bricks and rocks provides an excellent substitute for limestone.



Red dead-nettle

Red dead-nettle does not sting. It displays dense clusters of pinky-red flowers in whorls around its stem, and can be found on disturbed ground, such as roadside verges. Its crimson flowers appear from March to October.

Traditionally known as the 'bumblebee flower' in some British counties as bumblebees love it!



Long-tailed tit plus one other!

The Long-tailed tit is a tiny bird of hedgerows, woodland, parks and gardens. It builds a domed nest out of moss in a bush or the fork of a tree and camouflages it with cobwebs and lichen.

Although Long-tailed tits ordinarily have a tough time over winter and can rapidly decline in numbers, they have, as of late, been faring well due to the consistently mild UK winters



Crocus

This is one of Britain's earliest spring flowers.

Despite being part of the backdrop for spring woodlands, none of the crocus species in the UK are actually native. Depending on the specific species, they can be found growing wild across much of central and southern Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and China.

Crocuses are part of the iris family and are perennial, which literally translates as a plant that lives for two or more years.

Crocus flowers have a rich symbolism of rebirth, innocence, joy, and new-beginnings thanks to their early blooming flowers in spring.



High winds

We have certainly had quite a few instances of high winds this winter and, of course, they take their toll. You will probably have noticed the aftermath if you went for a walk the day after one of these occasions. Fallen trees and branches being frequent casualties.



Turkey Fan-tail fungus

This is a common fungus that can be found growing on logs and dead tree stumps.

It is a bracket fungus and its scientific name of *Trametes versicolor* aptly describes the variety of colours that it can be found in. These are usually in the brown, blue, green & greys forming concentric rings of contrasting colours not unlike the fan tail of a turkey. Hence its common name of Turkey Tail.



Wood Anemone

The Wood anemone is a pretty spring flower of ancient woodlands. Dibbinsdale is carpeted with them at the moment.

Its white flowers bloom between March and May, before the canopy becomes too dense, but its seeds are mostly infertile, and it spreads slowly through the growth of its roots.

It could be confused with wood sorrel at a distance. Though the plants are similar, wood sorrel has distinctive pink veins in its white petals and the leaves are different in shape, with a rounded, heart-shaped appearance compared to the deeply lobed leaves of the wood anemone.

This little perennial is referenced in many myths and legends including the anemone flower springing up where Aphrodite's tears fell as she wept over the death of her lover, Adonis.



Double Snowdrops

Double Snowdrops produce incredibly attractive ruffled white blooms with emerald-green stems. They are among the first bulbs to bloom in winter-spring and will form impressive carpets of white in areas where they are native or have been naturalized.

We saw these lovely flowers along Brimstage lane on the 26th February.



Forget Me Not

Wood forget-me-not has hairy stems and narrow, oval leaves. Clusters of five-petaled, azure-blue flowers, with white or orange centres, appear at the tops of the stems.

It can be found along woodland edges, in ancient and wet woodlands, and sometimes in hedgerows and verges as an escaped garden variety. It flowers between April and June.

Just as the name implies, forget-me-nots mean remembrance.



Cherry Blossom

Well, we certainly began to feel that spring was here when we saw this lovely example of a flowering cherry blossom tree on 22/03/2021.

Cherry blossoms are Japan's national flower. The pale blooms are a symbol of more than just spring — they stand for renewal and hope.

Picnicking beneath cherry blossom trees is a Japanese tradition. This old custom is known as "hanami," which means flower viewing. Early records hint that the tradition began with emperors and members of the Imperial Palace feasting under the trees' blooming branches.

There are approximately 400 different types of cherry trees. They mutate easily.



Grouse feeders?

We saw a few of these home-made feeders on Levers estate. This one is an oil-drum filled with feed which filters through a hole in the base to a feeding tray. Our best guess is that they are for grouse or pheasants.

Have you any idea?



Early Flowering Blackthorn

Hawthorn and blackthorn are two of the most easily confused species. Both trees have creamy-coloured flowers with five petals and flower around the same time. But there are some key differences:

Blackthorn blossoms before its leaves start to show, whereas hawthorn flowers after its leaves have emerged.

Blackthorn usually flowers first, from around March to June.

Hawthorn flowers from around April to June.



Blackthorn/Hawthorn Leaves

With quite distinct leaf shapes, the two species are easier to tell apart once the flowers have faded.

Blackthorn leaves (left) are oval with a toothed edge.

Hawthorn leaves (right) are lobed with jagged edges.



Blackthorn/Hawthorn Fruits

The fruits of these two spiny species can be seen around the same time, but there's no mistaking which is which.

Blackthorn hosts one of our better-known berries: sloes. These sour blue-black fruits measure about 1cm across and grow from around September to December. Commonly used for flavouring gin, sloes are also popular for making wine and preserves.

Hawthorn branches are adorned by deep red haw berries from around September to November.

More info on these can be found in our nature notes number 6.





Wild Primroses

The Primrose is a hardy little plant and can flower from as early as December in mild years, appearing all the way through the spring until May. It favours woodland clearings, hedgerows and grassland habitats.

The flowers provide a nectar source for pollinators like brimstone and small tortoiseshell butterflies.



Horseshoe

Thankfully, we have left the very wet spell earlier in the year. However, one of the compensations of that time was being easily able to see various tracks, footprints, hoofprints and pawprints (see the badger tracks earlier on in these notes). It is often a bit of fun trying to determine what/who they belong to.

You will probably know about the footprint found by workmen in Storeton woods in 1838 whilst quarrying sandstone. It turned out to be a fossilised dinosaur footprint.

The footprints were preserved in the drying mud and were eventually buried by sand blowing in from desert. The sands were compacted and turned to stone. Leaving the footprints to be discovered over 200 million years later by the quarrymen.

As the prints resembled human handprints the creature was named from the Greek words, 'chir' for hand, and 'therium' for beast = Chirotherium.



Bird box

Again, on the Levers estate, this custom-made bird box.

It is pleasant to think that the estate managers here are doing their bit to protect and encourage our wildlife



Blackbird

A familiar thrush, the melodious blackbird is a common sight in gardens, parks and woodlands across the UK. Blackbirds are especially fond of feeding on lawns and can be seen with their heads cocked to one side, listening for earthworms. They also feed on insects and berries - leave out a few old apples or plant berry-producing bushes in the garden to attract these delightful birds.



Mistletoe

Mistletoe is an evergreen plant with distinctive forked branches and pairs of symmetrical evergreen leaves. In winter it produces clusters of pearlescent white berries which are favourites with hungry birds such as thrushes.

The plant is 'hemiparasitic', which means it takes some of its food from another plant. It grows on the branches of trees, pulling water and nutrients from its host, while its green leaves also photosynthesise.

Although there are more than 900 species of mistletoe around the world the only species native to the UK is European mistletoe (*Viscum album*). It grows in the branches of trees such as hawthorn, poplar and lime, although in the UK the most common hosts are cultivated apple trees.

Mistletoe is easy to spot in winter when host trees have lost their leaves. We spotted these in Liverpool Road, Neston.



Woodworm

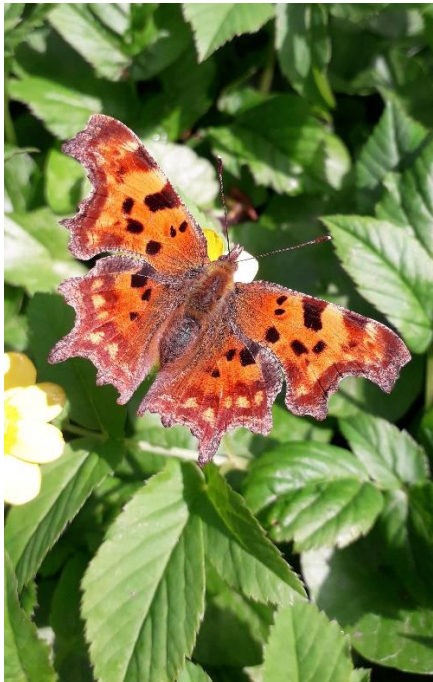
Signs of woodworm usually consist of holes in the wooden item. Adult beetles lay eggs on or just under the surface of a wooden item. The resulting grubs then feed on the wooden item causing both structural and cosmetic damage. They then pupate and hatch as beetles that then breed, lay eggs and repeat the process, causing further damage. Most grubs will prefer wooden items that contain a higher moisture content



Alexanders

Also known as horse parsley, alisanders and smyrnium. It has small flowers arranged in umbels, flowering from March to June.

It grows mainly in coastal areas and in great swathes along roadsides, cliffs, sea walls and path edges. We spotted this plant in abundance along the Wirral Way toward West Kirby.



Comma Butterfly

The comma is unmistakable: ragged, orange wings with brown spots distinguish it from similar species. Its underside has cryptic brown colouring, making it look like a dead leaf. It gets its name from the comma-shaped white spots on the underneath of its wings. It is a common and widespread butterfly of woodland edges, particularly during the spring and autumn. The caterpillars feed on common nettles, elms and willows.



Marsh Marigold

This plant of the buttercup family is also commonly known as 'Kingcup'. Its Latin name, *Caltha*, is derived from the Greek for 'goblet'. It is a widespread flower of ponds, marshes, damp meadows, ditches and wet woodland and is a conspicuous spring flower.



Congratulations again to Beryl & David Sibeon whose caption was voted the winner of the previous edition's competition with:

"Great to see Rambler walk leaders are now incorporating open water swimming into their walks. Must remember to pack the wet suit next time!"

Well done you two!



Caption Competition.

The Fickle Finger of Fate!!

Will it point at you and deliver a bottle of wine?

Please think of a caption for this photograph and send it to me or Sue by May 28th. We will let you know the winning entry next time.



As we write, we have been enjoying some lovely sunshine lately which has coincided with a relaxation in the covid restrictions. So, it has been a good time to meet up with a few friends, go for a walk and have a coffee whilst putting the world to rights!

Hopefully, further restrictions will be lifted from May 17th and larger groups will be able to walk together.

Thanks for reading these notes.

All the best,

Helen and Gordon.