

# Maria Himsworth's Chillenden Blog

April 2021

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

If you spent time in lockdown out walking in your local countryside like me then you may have felt that lockdown would have been harder to bear without nature. It may also have inspired you to try and improve your relationship with nature even just a little. If this is the case it might be a good time to rethink how you manage the vital green space which is your lawn and invite in some wildlife to share it with you.

Next month Plantlife will again launch its 'No Mow May' campaign and it is a great way to see how your lawn supports pollinators. So, at the end of this month on Bank Holiday Monday if the sun is shining, then take out a deck chair not a lawn mower and sit back and watch how many bees your lawn can feed. Sign up here:

<https://www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/discover-wild-plants-nature/nomowmay>

You may also discover that with a little planning a lawn can become a collection of wonderful wildflowers ideal for attracting beautiful butterflies and many bees. Just decide what part of your garden you will leave to grow and mow the rest! If your garden is larger you can create a maze of meadows and paths with different cutting regimes that will explode into different colours at various times of the year. I have come to love my mini meadow more than any other area of the garden from crocus and cowslips to Daisies and Dandelions followed by trefoils, clovers, knapweeds, wild carrot and yellow rattle to name a few. From February to September there is always something to see! There are many ways you can create a meadow, from just leaving the grass to grow long or by creating a new wildflower area from scratch and using an appropriate seed mix. At Kent Wildlife Trust Penny and Peter Brook describe how they made their Mini-Meadow



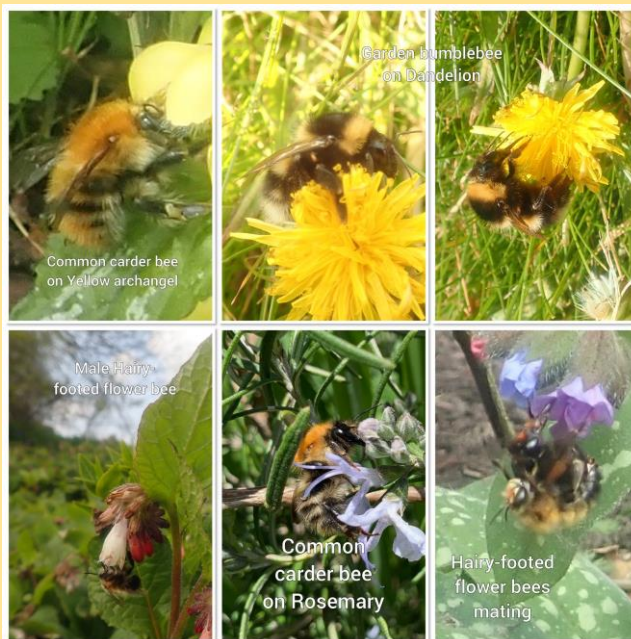
<https://www.kentwildlifetrust.org.uk/blog/penny-and-peter-brook/making-mini-meadow>

When spotting wildlife in my garden I always try and record first sightings of different species in the year and rarer species throughout the year. I use a site called **Irecord** that can be used to manage and share any wildlife records. It is good fun and the information you input is invaluable to support research and decision making at local and national levels. There is also an app you can use in conjunction with the website for easy recording. Available here <https://www.brc.ac.uk/irecord/>

## What was Buzzing in April

April is usually a time when everything seems to come to life in the garden as spring gets warmer and everything starts to recover from its winter sleep. Budburst and everything else that goes along with it, birds nesting, caterpillars munching up the new leaves and insects awaking from a long sleep is certainly struggling to get going this year in my garden. It's been cold, so cold and who can blame my mason bees for not yet emerging from my bee hotels? On the few warm days we've had I have managed to see a little burst of buzz in the garden and found myself frantically chasing the bees around trying to identify the species and take photos

The hairy footed flower bees have certainly been grateful for the Small Comfrey (*Symphytum*) and Common lungwort (*Pulmonaria*) that is always in flower in April and not affected by any of the many frosts and cold weather we have been challenged with lately. I even managed to catch on camera the mating of one pair after noticing a male frantically darting around trying to impress his female! They also like the Muscari that is in flower everywhere in my garden at the moment, I love them! Muscari is later flowering than the Crocus and Winter Aconites that were feeding the bees last month and last well into May here in East Kent.



Another bee that you start to spot in April is the Nomad bee, there are 32 species of this solitary bee in the UK and often are mistaken for wasps with their similar appearance. They are Cleptoparasites, which means they lay their eggs in the nests of other bees and their larvae will feed on the provisions provided by the host bee. Quite clever really! So look out for them and if you see one then its host will probably be somewhere around too!

Of course there is also the fearful social wasps starting to emerge at this time of the year and you will probably have noticed the huge queens that have come out of hibernation, pregnant and looking for a nest. These will be the most common social wasp the dreaded Yellowjacket (*Vespa vulgaris*). It is difficult to want to share your garden with these insects that become rather a nuisance in large quantities later in the summer and quite frankly their

sting hurts! However, spare a thought for their role in the ecosystem of your garden as yes they are pollinators and also predators of some of the most abundant pests like aphids in your garden that they will feed to their larvae. It has also been suggested that social wasps inspired humans to produce paper when over 2000 years ago they were seen building a paper like nest from wood pulp!

There are many wild flowers flowering this month that you should consider allowing in your garden, I find their added colour is a delight in April when garden flowers are a little sparse. Dandelions (*Taraxacums*) are gorgeous so big and ludicrously yellow, their pollen and nectar is particularly

attractive to solitary bees that can forage easily on the flat surface that offers over 100 individual florets on one flower. White dead nettle (*Lamium album*) is great, don't be put off by its nettle leaves as once it flowers the dense clusters of white flowers are really pretty and great for the longer tongued bumblebees as they emerge from hibernation low on energy, a good patch of these can be a life saver. Yellow archangel (*Lamium galeobdolon*) a yellow version of White dead nettle is just as tempting for the bumblebees! Lesser Celandine, in the buttercup family (*Ranunculaceae*) sometimes appears in my grass and borders, is great for bees and in particular the smaller solitary bees love it. My tiny grass mini meadow is also featuring lots of Daisy (*Bellis perennis*) and Cowslips (*Primula veris*) and Common violet (*Viola riviniana*) all good for pollinators.

New bumblebees in the garden this month have been the Garden bumblebee (*Bombus hortorum*) and the Common carder bee (*Bombus pascuorum*). The Garden bumblebee is easily recognised by its long face and it has a really long tongue which means that it can reach deep into bell shaped flowers that have pollen and nectar that is more tricky to get to. This also makes it a good pollinator of flowers of the pea family including beans and clover, which is an important fodder crop for cattle. I love the Common carder bee it is so pretty and I always get excited seeing the first queens of the year in my garden, they look stunning and take a great photo, if they will stay still long enough. They are one of the ginger bees with a lovely ginger thorax and ginger tail with black hairs. We have all the ginger carder bees in Kent, the others, Brown-banded (*Bombus humilis*), Moss (*Bombus muscorum*) and the Shril ( *Bombus sylvarum*) are all rare, so if you see an unusual looking one do try and get a picture for identification.



I live near fields of Oilseed rape that is in flower in April and very popular with many pollinators including honeybees. This of course is a welcome source of pollen and nectar on mass and does benefit our pollinators especially now the use of neonicotinoids in pesticides has been recognised as harmful for bees and no longer used on

oilseed rape. Although beneficial the sudden lack of available flowers once it has finished flowering can be a problem and whilst pollinating oilseed rape on mass the pollinators are not using the more diverse wildflowers available at the same time and of course staying out of my garden!

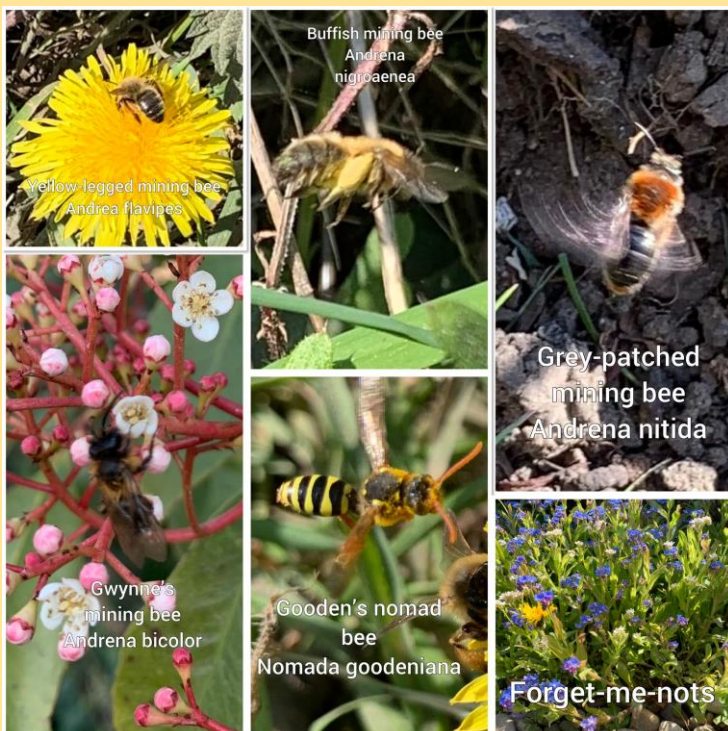


I think the cold wind has delayed the butterflies arriving in my East Kent garden. I have briefly spotted some of the species that overwinter as adults but the only new generation I have seen so far has been the male Orange Tip (*Anthocharis cardamines*). I managed to get a rather bad picture. The males are very easy to spot with their orange tipped wings and green veined underwing, sometimes it is easy to mistake a female for a small white as they have no orange tip and in flight you can't easily see

the green veined underwing which is the same as in the male. The caterpillars feed mainly on crucifers and there are plenty of these on road verges in the countryside such as Garlic mustard. It

will lay its eggs on Honesty leaves (*Lunaria annua*) and I certainly have plenty of this lovely late spring flowering plant self seeding in my garden. I also have seen a few whites flying about I think they were the Large white but didn't really stop long enough to positively identify.

Although my garden may not have many butterflies yet flying about I am sure it is alive with an army of leaf eating caterpillars and insect larvae. Start looking out for nibbled leaves around your garden and you can have fun trying to find the culprit and identifying it. Most caterpillars will be from moths but hopefully you will find butterfly caterpillars too. Nibbled leaves are the sign of a healthy ecosystem in your garden as the culprits eating them are also a food source for birds, hedgehogs and other wildlife. Most butterfly species of caterpillar won't start appearing until May onwards but The Comma and Large White are sometimes earlier but I haven't seen any yet this year. Any caterpillars seen in April are likely to be that of Moths some of which are hairy and overwinter as caterpillars.



My Victoria plum (*Prunus domestica victoria*) is bringing an early blessing of blossom for the solitary bees and hoverflies along with *Viburnum burkwoodii*, *Exochorda Niagra* and *Berberis julianae* all looking glorious and seemingly not bothered by the the cold. The cold weather and no rain has also given us a flush of blossom for longer this year. Whilst some spring flowers have been a little late this year I have noticed how lovely and bold, bright and handsome the

Euphorbias (*spurge*) have been, all three species I have are in bloom and in particular the Euphorbia black pearl has been a magnet for solitary bees. Around the pond April is the month that the Marsh Marigold sparkle with the bright yellow flowers to attract pollinators.

In readiness for summer flowers my seedlings are growing well with loads of Sunflowers, Cosmos and Nicotiana flowers all growing nicely and taking up rather too much room by my patio doors! Bring on the warmer days of summer.

As the month draws to an end it is a little warmer and whether it is because I have stayed out for longer or that the solitary bees are buzzing more there appears to have been an increase in diversity in the last few days so I have added a few pictures of my late April sightings in the garden.

[Maria Himsworth - Follow my sightings on Twitter @HimsworthM](#)