

# Maria Himsworth's Chillenden Blog

December 2021

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

As I write my final blog of the year I have been reflecting on the year and thinking about which months of the year I enjoyed the most. I would probably choose the early months as I always enjoy spotting my first queen bumblebee or the month that I am totally transfixed by Mason Bees toing and froing from my bee hotels. I love an early morning walk around the garden and these are always best in early spring when you notice bulbs popping up here and there that you had forgotten you had planted or when you see the first growth of a perennial plant and delight in the fact that it has survived the winter. I can strongly recommend a daily early morning walk around the garden no matter how small your garden is it awakens the soul and as you walk you note what has changed and developed overnight and it gives you the opportunity to make a mental note of things that need attention around the garden.

## What was buzzing in December

If you have ever wondered how what you eat at Christmas is reliant on pollinators then you will enjoy reading this blog,

<https://explorekent.org/blog/2021/12/20/what-have-pollinating-insects-ever-done-for-christmas/>. It is inconceivable to imagine how bland our diet would be without the humble bee.



Most pollinators are now overwintering away from the colder temperatures and will stay that way until spring awakens them next year. Generally, insects have adapted and evolved to survive our cold months in their various stages of life and will use a variety of micro-habitats in our gardens to spend these months, hopefully undisturbed. In rotten wood piles, burrowed into the soil, in deep fallen leaf piles and long grasses which are all good places to spend winter. Sometimes the eggs laid by last season's adults remain as eggs over winter whilst some will stay as immature larvae, some even produce antifreeze in their bodies to keep

them from freezing deep down in the leaf litter or soil. In your ponds insect nymphs may not be as noticeable as they stay deeper in the water away from the cold but often these nymphs are still active, eating and growing ready to emerge in spring.

There are pollinators that overwinter as adults including our queen bumblebees that hibernate alone buried in long grass or into soft soil. Although as climate is warming and gardens provide flowering plants in winter you may spot the buff-tailed bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris*) in more urban gardens

as they are now known to have some active nests throughout the year. This December I did notice a queen bumblebee nest searching amongst the leaf litter under the hedge and I managed to film her burrowing herself into the litter. If you look closely at the picture, you can just about make out her colours. You can see the video of this on my Twitter account.



Honeybees remain somewhat active during winter, and they will keep warm by huddling together in their nests and vibrating their flight muscles to keep each other warm. They will use their stored honey and emerge on days when the weather is warmer to top up their resources. Solitary bees spend winter in various stages depending on when they are due to take flight the following year. Many early solitary bees will be in their adult stage snuggled up in a cocoon whilst later emergences will be still in their larvae stage over winter. The dry hollow stems of plants are an essential habitat for these types of bees and in your garden leaving stems uncut overwinter will really help these beneficial pollinators to survive in your garden. However, not all solitary bees are the same and different species have different overwintering habitat including in soil, clay, sand, wood and mortar. Similar to our solitary bees wasps have various ways of surviving winter and our common wasp, (*Vespula vulgaris*), will only leave the solitary queen to

hibernate over winter emerging in spring to start a new nest.

Of the 59 of our resident butterfly species only 5 will overwinter as adults and on warm winter days they are lured out of this diapause by warm sunshine. It is always a delight to see maybe your last Butterfly of the year in December and then you're first the following month. You may spot the Brimstone butterfly near bramble or Ivy. The Peacocks, Red Admirals and the tortoiseshells are the ones you may find indoors as they like a dry dark place to hide. Central heating will rouse a sleepy butterfly so if you find them fluttering around as I have in the house then placing them in a shed or garage in a safe box until spring is a good idea, but don't forget to release them! You may also spot the male Winter moth in a bright light on your doorstep but are unlikely to see the flightless females that will be hiding in trees and shrubs such as Oak or Birch. Also, the aptly named December moth whose caterpillars are so important to our Great Tits and Blue Tits.

On sunny days this December I did spot a few hoverflies but sadly not many in the garden. A walkway across from my house has hogweed and this is usually a good place to spot hoverflies and other flies when they have disappeared from my garden due to lack of flowers. I still have so much to learn about hoverflies like other insects they overwinter in many forms and a few hardy species can be seen throughout the years such as *Eristalis tenax* and the Marmalade hoverfly (*Episyrphus balteatus*). Easy to spot and identify. Many will be hibernating as adults in places like old trees that have plenty of nooks and crannies. They are then ready to lay their eggs early in spring on aphid loving plants where they will hatch into larvae and gobble up the leaf munching aphids. Others hide in the soil as fully-grown larvae or even migrate to warmer places. Hoverflies that have larvae that require an aquatic stage will overwinter in Lagoons in places such as old tree stumps that can capture stagnant water.





Ladybirds like other beetles will go into diapause emerging in spring to mate and lay eggs. Some rest individually and some such as the Harlequin ladybirds (*Harmonia axyridis*) an invasive species that only arrived on our shores in 2004, will huddle together in large clusters and often choose a warm corner in your house! They have become a regular visitor to my house over winter now and as long as they leave in spring and lay their eggs where their offspring can gobble up my aphids, I will tolerate them.

December had some sunny days early on when a few queen bumblebees passed through but overall, there seemed to be little sunshine and few pollinators and I am sure my winter flowering plants are later than usual and there were no signs of bulbs poking out of the soil before the end of the month. Lots of buds have formed on my scented winter flowers such as Mahonia, Hamamelis, Daphne bholua and Edgworthia chrysantha along with plentiful Hellebores. So, there will hopefully be flowers in the garden in January. The 21st of December was winter solstice, the shortest day and although it marks the beginning of the Astronomical winter season ahead of us it is also tells us that days will very slowly start to get lighter and the nights shorter.



Whilst our pollinators survive winter best when temperatures are stable as our weather becomes more unpredictable, we often find unusual behaviour more common as it can push insect life cycles out of sync and this has worrying consequences for nature. Our input into recording sightings of wildlife is so important to research on this subject. If you like to watch and record first sightings in Natures Calendar then you can help by recording what you see for the Woodland Trust at, <https://naturescalendar.woodlandtrust.org.uk>.



So, whilst our gardens are sleeping and you may not feel it is very alive, there is much lying-in wait for spring to appear!

December the 5th was World Soil Day a campaign to highlight the importance of keeping soil alive and to protect soil biodiversity. If you are already making your own compost and have stopped using chemicals in your garden, then you are already contributing towards better soil diversity. There are some very interesting facts about soil on the campaign website <https://www.fao.org/world-soil-day/en/> Did you know that just 1 gram of healthy soil has more organisms than there are people on Earth!

This year like last we spent more time in December at home where we felt safe and because of this we have enjoyed decorating our homes to brighten up our lives over this period and I have certainly

noticed more gardens illuminated with bright colourful Christmas cheer. Lighting in your garden can however disrupt natural behaviour especially for nocturnal wildlife such as moths and bats that navigate by using natural light sources. The RHS have online advice about how to reduce light pollution with a few simple changes you might consider for next year that are better for nature and might also save you some energy costs too. <https://www.rhs.org.uk/wildlife/garden-lighting-effects-on-wildlife>

I hope you have enjoyed reading my blogs through the year and you can continue to follow my sightings on Twitter at @HimsworthM

Maria Himsworth - Follow my sightings on Twitter @HimsworthM