

Maria Himsworth's Chillenden Blog

May 2021

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

In Kent where I live the council have decided to take a lead in the community by improving land for pollinators. They are putting the conservation of pollinators at the heart of land management programmes and have recently launched their Plan Bee that sets out what Kent County Council is doing. This is a massive pledge as it is not only about ensuring pollinators are taken into account but it is also about educating and encouraging local communities to do the same. Kent County Council is responsible for 5000 miles of road verges. If these were all developed to provide the right habitat for pollinators with better cutting and planting regimes, just think how this alone would benefit pollinators. This is a long term plan to get public areas buzzing and mobilise the people of Kent to take action in their own gardens for wildlife. If you live in Kent then you can read Kent's Plan Bee here.

https://www.kent.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/103905/Kents-Plan-Bee.pdf. The government launched a 'National Pollinator Strategy' in 2014, which goes some way to improve the situation but it is not enough. If you want to find out more about how you can encourage your council to do more Friends of the Earth have issued guidelines to help you persuade your council here.

<https://friendsoftheearth.uk/nature/ask-your-council-introduce-pollinator-action-plan>

What was buzzing in May



At last on the 3rd of May my first Red Mason bee (*Osmia bicornis*) emerged from my bee hotel 13 days later than last year and within days the activity around the hotel was manic. When the sun was out I sometimes saw up to 40 bees at any one time jostling for the best spots in the variety of nesting tubes I have set up for them. In my February blog I talked about constructing bee hotels for Mason bees. (Incidentally Mason bees get their name from their ability to make mortar from mud and not because they make holes in your walls by digging out the mortar they could not physically do this). They will nest in walls where mortar is soft and holes are present or in old plant stems and holes in wood. I think having a bee hotel in your garden is so rewarding, watching

these little harmless bees go about their work is encaptivating and a great way to teach children about bees. Male Mason bees are first out of hibernation and after feeding up they will hang around waiting for the females. Females will only mate once so they are pretty fussy about choosing their male. A female will store the eggs in her sperm sac and set to work building and provisioning her nest tube. Not only are Mason bees fun to watch they are also brilliant pollinators and their flight time coincides with many fruit bearing trees such as apples, cherries and plums coming into flower. Unlike bumblebees and honeybees they



have no pollen baskets but a dense pile of bristle hairs that will collect the pollen rather inefficiently for the insect but is great for flowers as the pollen is more easily spread from flower to flower and allows pollination of the fruit tree. As she provisions the nest with pollen and an egg she will seal it off with mud that she carries to the nest in her jaws.



May did not bring any new Bumblebee species to my garden and in fact I was a little worried how the heavy constant rain had impacted on the ones that were already active. Rainfall potentially can be devastating for the interaction between plant and pollinator. Although Bumblebees will tolerate some rain but they will not forage in heavy rain. I have mentioned before that spring foraging is vital for Queen Bumblebees as they need a good supply of pollen and nectar to give them sufficient energy to set up their nests and rear the first batch of workers. So when the sun finally warmed at the end of May I was worried that there was less activity from bees in my garden than before the constant heavy rain started. However I am not without hope as I have seen one or two little workers foraging in the garden on my early flowering Geraniums (*Cranesbill*) that are such a delight to see blossom in

May. In particular I love Geranium Bill Wallis (*Mountain Cranesbill*), it has lovely small dark purple flowers that continue well into the summer months. Worker bumblebees are considerably smaller than their Queens and the first brood of workers that have been solely reared by the Queen are usually very small. As the nest matures into the summer months and the number of workers grows the next generation of workers will have been raised by the first generation. As the nest matures the population of worker bumblebees is greater and varies more in size. The workers of our common Buff-tailed Bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris*) do not have the buff coloured tail of the Queen but a white tail and because of this it is not possible to determine the difference between a Buff-tailed Bumblebee worker and a White-tailed Bumblebee worker (*Bombus lucorum*).

Butterflies like bees will disappear when it rains. Butterflies also need sunshine to warm their flight muscles so it is not surprising that we have seen fewer butterflies in our gardens this month. It was therefore reassuring to see a few fluttering around on the few warmer days we had this month. I briefly saw a Painted Lady (*Vanessa crudui*) in the garden. This beautiful butterfly has an extraordinary life migrating across generations from far away deserts of countries such as North Africa it will recolonise in mainland Europe and then onwards to the UK. I also saw my first blue butterfly of the season, a female Holly Blue ((*Celastrina argiolus*). This bright blue butterfly has two generations and is usually the first blue you will spot in your garden especially if you have Holly as this is the food plant of the first



generation of caterpillar. The second generation will feed on Ivy.



May is usually the month to start looking for Leafcutter bees (*Megachile*) and the Wool Carder bee (*Anthidium manicatum*). They are the largest British solitary bee so look out for them. I have several of the Wool Carder bees favourite plants in my garden including Lamb's ear (*Stachys byzantina*), Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*), Mulleins (*Verbascum*) and Yarrows (*Achillea*) so I am hoping that next month they will turn up! They will construct the cells of their nests with the hairs of plants stems and their common name is gained from the way they carder the hairs off of the stems of hairy plants such as Lamb's ear and Mullein. The males, unusually larger than the females are very territorial and although cannot sting will fiercely defend their territory by head butting predators!

Pollinators in the garden on sunny days in early May were mainly foraging on spring flowering blossom as the weather was still cool bulbs such as Muscari, Bluebells and Camassia were still in flower. Flowers of my Crab Apple (*Malus rudolf*) were very popular with the Mason bees and the Apple blossom was also starting to attract bees. Forget me nots were certainly the flower to catch some of the smaller species of solitary bees and I noticed several of the Gooden's Nomad bee (*Nomada goodeniana*) buzzing around forget-me-nots.

It may not have been a perfect month for pollinators but I have loved that my garden has become a mini wildlife sanctuary. Through several years of gardening with wildlife in mind I am now sharing my garden with a rich diversity of animals that I certainly never saw before. This month the pond has been full of ready to emerge dragonflies and the newts are heading there to mate. Ponds also mean you can grow flowering water plants that will attract pollinators, Marsh Marigold (*Caltha palustris*) and Ragged Robin (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*) are great ones for May. I have seen two hedgehogs every night on my trail camera, hopefully they are munching up the snails as they wander round the garden. The Sparrows are nesting in most of my bird boxes, I hope they have managed to find enough caterpillars and other insects to feed their young, although I have put out some mealworms to supplement them during the wet weather. I have watched a pair of Wood Pigeons rear their young in the most precarious head height position in a climbing Clematis Montana at the side of the house and although I constantly moan about the wood pigeons they do seem to clear up all of the bird food that the smaller birds reject and throw on the floor! On one sunny afternoon a large healthy looking Fox accidentally found itself face to face with me as I happened to have camera in hand. Insects are



such an important part of the food chain as they are the food resource for so many animals and I am sure that by looking after pollinators in your garden you build a good base for other wildlife to thrive.



Most excitingly I captured a bat during the daytime flying over the pond where it appeared to be swooping to catch the mosquitos that were active that afternoon. Although bats are not pollinators in the UK across the world some plants rely entirely on bats to pollinate their flowers as the bats forage on the plants for the fruit . In the UK bats are insectivores and will devour thousands of insects every night. I have found out that the little bat I saw in the

afternoon was a Brown Long-eared bat (*Plecotus auritus*) and was probably feeding during the day as insects were more abundant than at night. The diversity of insects in the garden is therefore not only important for plant pollination but also for the predators that feed on insects. Bats like to feed on moths and moths are important pollinators. Plants that attract night flying moths are often also highly scented to attract moths for pollination, Honeysuckle (*Lonicera*), Jasmine (*Jasminum*), Nicotiana, Evening primrose (*Oenothera biennis*) and Hemp-agrimony (*Eupatorium cannabinum*) are all good choices. I have the first three in the garden so I hope that as these come into flower in my garden they will attract the moths and provide some night time food for my Brown Long-eared bats.

As May draws to a close everyone around the country who took part in 'No Mow May' the lawn flower survey run [byhttps://www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/discover-wild-plants-nature/no-mow-may](https://www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/discover-wild-plants-nature/no-mow-may) would have been out counting the open flowers that have popped up in their lawn. My lawn results for 'No Mow May' managed to reveal a personal nectar score of 80 milligrams per square metre supporting a whopping 438 bees! The diversity of flowers has certainly grown in my lawn over the years and my mini meadow is now so pretty and buzzy from late spring right into the summer and probably now one of my favourite places to be.

I also checked out my Hoverfly Lagoon that I put in place at the side of my pond earlier this year. As the container I used is glass I peered into the now murky water but I have not managed to spot any white eggs or the Hoverfly Larva with the snorkel like breathing tubes that are described in the projects website. <https://hoverflylagoons.co.uk>. I topped up the water that had evaporated with water from my pond and I will investigate further in June. This will be a fun activity to do with the grandchildren when they visit.

Maria Himsworth - Follow my sightings on Twitter @HimsworthM