



BEESTON WILDLIFE GROUP

Signs of Spring

As we get warmer days, flowers, insects and birds appear before us and reassure us that the shorter daylight hours are disappearing and we can look forward to longer walks in the open and the promise of more wildlife delights. Here are some examples to look for and enjoy. Strangely, all the flowers we mention - all close at night can anyone tell us why?

Dandelion: The name comes from the French; Dent du Lion (Lion's tooth). It refers to the pointed lobes on the leaves. It can be a nuisance in gardens unless you own a Rabbit or Guinea Pig - they love the leaves. We can eat them too; they are full of vitamin A and C. Although common, when they are in flower en-mass they are a gorgeous spectacle.

Coltsfoot: is found on rough ground. The flowers appear before the leaves, giving rise to an old name; 'son before father'. The leaves are shaped like a horse's hoof. The Latin name Tussilago goes back to when juice from crushed leaves were used as a cough medicine. The flowers are frequently used by Queen Bees that have just emerged.

Lesser Celandine: is related to Buttercups and flowers before them on woodland edges with their 'star-like' appearance and heart-shaped leaves. Wordsworth waxed lyrical about this plant. On his grave stone in Grasmere, there is a carving of Celandine, unfortunately, it is of Greater Celandine a completely different plant related to Poppies. (oops!)

Daisy: the name comes from 'Day's-eye' reflecting what I said about closing at night. A very common plant often found on lawns, but don't take it for granted - look closely, they are stunning. Chaucer said 'They soften my sorrows'. Shelly called them 'Earth-bound stars'. The Latin name Bellis means beautiful - they are well worth a close look.

Dark-edged Bee-fly: does what it says on the tin! It looks like a small Bee, but it's a fly with a dark leading edge on its wings. It has a frightening looking lance sticking out in front of its head. This is a harmless proboscis for taking nectar from flowers. They can be seen hovering around ground-nesting Bee's nests. They flick their eggs around the entrance, the hatching larvae crawl into the nest and feast on the Bee's larvae.

Tawny mining Bee: If you have a lawn, look out for this small bright ginger - coloured bee hovering over it. This bee is responsible for the small soil 'volcanoes' that appear in the Spring. The bee burrows under the turf, laying its eggs in the excavated tunnel that can be a foot long. You can walk over your grass oblivious what is below your feet. The bees pollinate your flowers and their larvae hatch from under your lawn in May.

Blackthorn and **Hawthorn** are thorny shrubs used in hedging. They are all over Attenborough and the countryside. The star-like flowers of Blackthorn burst before the leaves on black stems - the contrast is stunning. At the same time, Hawthorn leaves are opening, their scented flowers don't appear until later. Hawthorn is also called May Blossom, but the flowers open at the end of April, but are in full bloom in May. *Prunus spinosa* means spiny plumb, this is the fruit - the Sloe of the Blackthorn. The Hawthorn fruit is a red Haw. Hawthorn has a related species - the **Midland Hawthorn**. This shrub is difficult to tell from its cousin, but has rounder leaves which are less indented, the Haw has two seeds inside, whereas the common Hawthorn only has one seed.

Sand Martin's arrive back from Africa at the end of March. The first arrivals are not usually 'our' birds but ones that are moving through and may be heading towards Norway, Finland, Sweden or Russia. We may think these are *only* Sand Martins and not very exciting because they are common. But these 5 inch bundles of feathers weigh only 15g (two fifty pence pieces), but will have travelled across Africa, south of the Sahara to fly over your head. They perform what is known as Loop Migration. That is, they continually travel on migration, not stopping to over-winter. In autumn, they leave our shores and head south through France, then the east coast of Spain to Gibraltar. There they take the short crossing over the Mediterranean into Morocco, then south west into Mauritania, south to Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso then east into Niger, Nigeria, Chad, then north into Algeria, Libya and cross the Mediterranean again into Italy and then through Europe - into Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Belgium and Holland before nipping over the Channel and back to our green and pleasant land to find the same nest hole they left the previous September. So, when you see your first Sand Martin, give it a wave, it has crossed the Sahara and seen sights that you can barely imagine. All our migrant birds have similar tales to tell, Sand Martin's are the front runners, they are nowhere near the furthest travellers. Birds are amazing; enjoy them as they arrive back this Spring.

The next two pages contain images of all of the above to help you identify them.



Dandelion



Coltsfoot



Lesser Celandine



Daisy



Tawny Mining Bee



Tawny Mining Bee 'volcano'



Dark-edged Bee-fly



Sand Martin



Blackthorn



Hawthorn