



Spring 2022 News

Welcome

At the time of writing in February it almost feels as though spring has sprung. We've had some sun-filled mild days and the birds have started to sing. Winter may yet have cold weather to throw at us but we've been enjoying the sunshine while it's lasted.

During winter we've enjoyed some of the great online talks that the Trust team at Lower Smite Farm have organised, hosted by different local groups each time. There are two more left of the current season so do book your place, make a cuppa and enjoy an entertaining hour :

Thur 17th March: The Lives of Dormice

Thur 21st April: Sandy Badlands: wasteground, highwaymen and wildlife

Book now www.worcswildlifetrust.co.uk/whats-on

We hope that it won't be too long until we can see you all in person - more information in your summer newsletter. Until then, from all of us on your local group committee, enjoy the arrival of spring and immerse yourself in birdsong.

The Redditch Apple

I remember walking back from town on Saturday afternoons as a kid, I would be tempted to drop into the local chippy and provision myself with a greasy paper full of scratchin's. These were days-worth of fried and re-fried batter and chip remains, dripping with oil cleared from the bottom of the chip vats, a feast indeed. Across the road from the chippy was a little grocery store and if I was lucky, for a few pence, I could buy a bag of apples. But these were no ordinary apples, they were small green and sweet. These were Doddins, an early ripening apple that was barely two-bites big (even when I was somewhat smaller). As the years went by I didn't give these little apples another thought until quite recently when I planted a couple of Doddin trees. It appears that this variety of apple nearly became extinct but was brought back from the brink and now its numbers are increasing. The Doddin even has its own appreciation society, but the thing that makes this variety really special is amongst the thousands of apple varieties found worldwide, this is the only variety to have started life in Redditch!

These small, slow growing trees will tolerate wet, heavy clay; an excellent trait for something growing in this part of the county (as any Redditch gardener will tell you). They form more of a bush rather than a typical apple tree and so are ideal for planting in a small garden. So why not plant one? Not only will you be helping to save a unique variety of apple, they are also great for wildlife. Once established their blossom attracts bees, hoverflies and beetles in spring and the fruit (if you leave any) provides a welcome snack for thrushes and blackcaps in the autumn. And the best thing about these little trees, is when I look at a Doddin I can still taste grease-soaked scratchin's, lovely!

Gary Farmer

The bee-whisperer

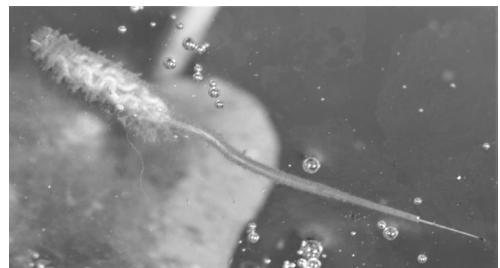
A sunny, but chilly day in February will mark the start of hoverfly season. One particular species named the Dronefly, or *Eristalis tenax*, takes advantage of the early season sunshine to set out looking for somewhere to lay her eggs. I can say "her" with some confidence because at the end of last autumn this species mated and the females will have hibernated in garden sheds, cold rooms, barns and even bird boxes all over the country. It's now her time to find soggy, rotting, sludge in which to lay her eggs.



They will sit on a leaf basking in the late winter sun or are attracted to the colour yellow, including jackets, where they will happily settle in the sunshine. These wonderful flies are able to sit around with little fear because they are masters (or mistresses) of disguise. Their name dronefly comes from the fact that they look identical to honeybees and so predators are fooled by them and are generally hesitant to try to catch them. It's not just predators that are fooled, I've lost count of how many times TV programmes and magazines mention bees and illustrate it with a shot of an *Eristalis* sitting on a flower. I also remember entertaining a group of schoolchildren with an

obedient dronefly on one occasion, when one was attracted to my hi-vis waistcoat and settled on me. I allowed the fly to crawl onto my finger, I held my hand out and gently blew the hoverfly which flew off. I was pretty sure my yellow jacket and warm location would be too tempting for "Bertie" (the name she was given), so I called its name and sure enough it returned and settled on me again. I repeated this three or four times. I knew it was a harmless hoverfly but for those children I was the "bee whisperer".

Very soon, all around Redditch, the hedges, dual carriageways and planted shrub-beds will be coming alive, white blossom will be bursting open. This is cherry plum *Prunus cerasifera*, which looks very much like blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* but it flowers a little earlier. Look on this and you will almost certainly find droneflies making the most of this early year bounty. These hoverflies will continue pollinating our garden flowers and fruit trees through the year. It is also worth looking for their extraordinary larvae, especially in the muddy margins of garden ponds. These are known as rat-tailed maggots because of their long extendable 'tail', which is actually a breathing tube that allows them to penetrate the surface of the low oxygen habitat in which they live and take in air.



Gary Farmer

What have you spotted?

If you've spotted a box tree moth or think you might have seen the latest newcomer, why not send a photo and submit a few details of what you saw, when and where

www.worcswildlifetrust.co.uk/wildlife-sightings