Report on Wild Things trip to North Cliffe Woods May 2023

This out-of-the way reserve never disappoints. Always full of birdsong, it's an unkempt acid woodland with much birch and oak, fascinating at any time of year, and fortunately today we were too early for the mozzies that can be a plague later in the year. Simon kept us busy identifying birds like Blackcap from their songs and calls, and we were all in awe of the fragrant carpets of English Bluebells and Greater Stitchwort.

Left: Bugle; right: Wood Sorrel

As we crossed the wood to the sunnier heathland side, we found dozens of Green Tiger Beetles, many of which were flying when disturbed, exposing their startling blue abdomens. These are specialists of sandy heaths, fast predators who will chase down spiders, caterpillars and ants, including the fleet Wolf Spiders, many of which we saw scuttling around. The beetle larvae are equally fierce, lurking in holes in the sand from which they will grab prey.

Above: Green Tiger Beetle

Right: mating Tiger Beetles, disturbed

Below: Wolf Spider (Pardus sp.) Right: Tawny Mining Bee nest

In the sand we found a few mini 'volcanoes' of soil around holes about a centimetre wide, giveaway signs of the burrows of Tawny Mining Bees, brightly-coloured solitary bees which lay their eggs in underground tunnels. I managed to see one just poking its nose out.

In a patch of sunny gorse, we found several Shield Bugs, mostly the specialist Gorse Shield Bugs but also some Common Green ones, along with Cucumber Spiders and 7-spot Ladybirds. There was plenty of copulation going on, which seemed appropriate for May Day.

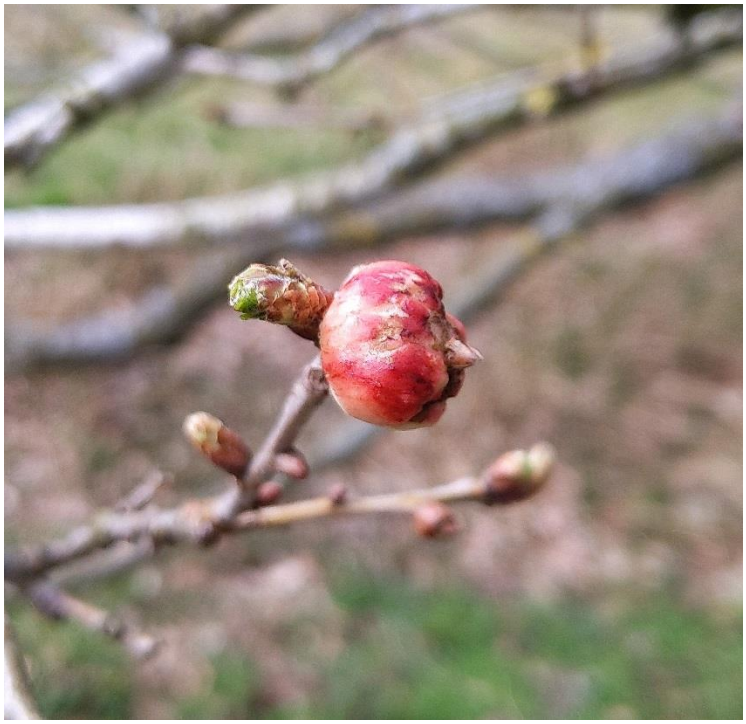
There were tiny toadstools and many mosses in the damper parts, including what I think was the 'Dwarf Bell' fungus, a tiny but very poisonous species.

Top clockwise: 7-spot Ladybirds; Green Shieldbugs; possibly Dwarf Bell; Polytrichum moss sp.; Cucumber Spider sp., Gorse Shieldbug

One of my favourite finds of the day deep in the woods was an Awl-fly, Xylophagus ater, which was ovipositing into a crevice in a Birch log. The larvae feed on Beetles and other invertebrates living in the bark. This is a large, specialist insect of ancient woodland which I hadn't found before.

Another treat for me was to find two species of Slime Mould, the False Puffball and the orange Wolf's Milk. For most people Slime Moulds have the yuck factor, but for me they have a fascinating life cycle for what are essentially single-celled protozoa which, like many tiny things, challenge our accepted ideas of intelligent life.

Ancient woodlands are always a good place to find galls: below are a nice fresh Oak Apple Gall and one of last year's empty Oak Artichoke Galls. These are both caused by different tiny wasp specialists, as is the gall on Bramble below caused by the wasp Diastrophus rubi. The Witch's Broomsticks galls on the Birch tree, however, are probably caused by a fungus called Taphrina betulina.



Another specialist insect which only uses one type of host plant is the Flag Iris Flea Beetle, overleaf. Everywhere were Hoof fungi on dead Birch, and Hoverflies, like this Tapered Hoverfly, a bee mimic on leaf litter.

I would urge all our members to start recording the wildlife they see, which is so important for conservation and policy purposes, but also great fun, especially if you use the internationally accredited free app iNaturalist. This not only helps you to easily record from your smartphone or camera, or a sound recording, but is also good at suggesting exactly what you've seen. I'm finding it a great way to learn more.

HK (pictures and text)