

## Signs of Spring

For me, the first real sign of Spring is the sound of a Chiffchaff belting out its “Tink-tonk-tink-tonk-tunk-tink-tonk .....” from the copse across the road or from the scrub across the stream. I listen out for this sound from the 10<sup>th</sup> March onwards – this year it was the 18<sup>th</sup> March which is quite late, but that could be because I wasn't outside much as it was too cold! The date is usually somewhere around the 14<sup>th</sup>. The Chiffchaff, along with Sand Martins and Wheatears, which can be seen hopping around rocky headlands and stony fields from the first days of March, are very early migrants. How the early Chiffchaffs find enough to eat always puzzles me – I suspect a few might not make it but the reward for arriving here early and getting the best breeding territories must be worth the risk.

Chiffchaffs will continue to arrive for several weeks as we move into April, and then the bulk of our avian summer visitors arrive in the second half of April when there are some leaves on the trees and some insects to eat. These arrivals will include the Whitethroats which will quite suddenly be popping up everywhere in the hedges and Willow Warblers pouring out their descending melody from the copses along with the tuneful Blackcaps. And of course, perhaps more familiar to most, the Swallows and House Martins arrive to prospect around our houses and barns.

The first warm days in March are notable not only for Chiffchaffs but for the first flurry of insect life. The large queen Buff-tailed Bumblebees cruise around like heavy bombers looking for a suitable nest site, whilst the Early Bumblebees, which are very small, will soon be visiting spring flowers. Hibernating butterflies will be encouraged to emerge – those that have chosen to spend the winter behind your curtains will be flapping at the sitting room window wanting to get out! It always amazes me how any hibernating Small Tortoiseshells survive – they habitually go into buildings, lofts, and sheds where they are subject to predation by mice, rats and bats, they get caught in spider's webs and then when they wake up, they often cannot find their way out. But enough obviously survive to emerge in March, mate, and lay eggs on the new fresh shoots of stinging nettles.



One small and rather insignificant insect which is a true sign of Spring is the Early Mining Bee. This little bee has a shiny black abdomen and a furry ginger thorax. The male is much smaller than the female and lighter in colour - the first time I saw one I thought it was a different species. They build their nests in the ground in bare places such as gardens, playgrounds, sports fields, paths and the sides of roads so they are potentially quite easy to see if you look out for them. They regularly nest in some numbers in the rather sparse grassy bank and between the paving slabs of the path just outside our kitchen window. Like many people I suspect, I tend to associate bees with the floriferous days of summer so it seems strange to see these little fellows so early in the year – but there is actually a good supply of nectar and pollen for them provided by the plentiful spring flowers.

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