



What to look out for in May

Spring is well and truly sprung, in spite of the cold nights, and May is almost here. It is quite possibly the best time to go birdwatching in South Notts as virtually all our breeding species will be on territory, and you may be lucky to pick out a rarity: May is a good month for anything to show up! Trees and hedges will provide a beautiful green background, wildflowers of all kinds and colours will emerge, and the insect world will finally display its incredibly diverse range of shapes, sizes and colours.

BIRDS

In May, woods are alive with bird song, so do try and make the effort to visit one for a dawn chorus early in the month. All our breeding warblers should have returned by now and it is possible to see or hear up to ten species at particular sites in South Notts (Holme Pierrepont & Skylarks, for instance).

Swallows (*right*), House Martins and Sand Martins should all have returned in April but now look out for Swifts joining them in the sky. Larger than swallows or martins, swifts are brown in colour but look black in the sky, and are superb fliers; they even sleep on the wing.



Here for the summer months is the Hobby, a wonderfully agile falcon with characteristic rusty-red 'trousers'. About the size of a kestrel, with long pointed wings, it has a dashing flight and chases and feeds on large insects and small birds like swallows and martins. Try to see one take a dragonfly, which it will hold in its talons, dismember and eat, all while still flying.

Many of our winter wildfowl visitors should have gone by the end of May. The ones remaining are either breeding in the county, or non-breeders hanging around our waters. Keep an eye open for grebe families: the adults carry the stripey youngsters around on their backs! Common Terns will now be on show on any stretch of water; take the time to stop and watch one as it hunts for food, flying along then stopping to hover before plunging kestrel-like to snatch a fish from the water and carry it away to its nest. They may even be joined by their daintier cousins, the Arctic Tern, as they pass through the county heading north to breed, and you could also see a Little Gull or Black Tern as well.



May is a time to see the next generation of birds, as newly-fledged young leave the nest.





TREES AND FLOWERS

A predominant colour in the May landscape, set against the vibrant green background of newly-leaved trees and hedges, is white. May is the time that umbellifers such as Cow Parsley and Hogweed (*below left*) flower in abundance, lining roads, lanes and rides with white, and then there is the white of Hawthorn – 'May Blossom', or 'Mayflower' (*below right*).



Turning our gaze downwards to wild flowers, one to look out for in May is Germander Speedwell (*below left*), widespread in Rushcliffe, if not common. The Speedwells have a distinctive pair of "insect antenna" in the middle of the flower (in fact there is a third smaller "hair" observable with a magnifying glass) but, unlike most Speedwells which are light blue with a white segment on the lower petal, the Germander can easily be differentiated by its distinctive complete mauve/purple coloured flower. There are many versions of the "standard" Speedwell, but the most widespread is the Field Speedwell, often found along arable field edges and that has been in flower now for a couple of months, often alongside Field Pansy (*below right*).



Rough Hawkbit is one of the many dandelion-like flowers to be found in the coming months. The large flower is on a single roughly hairy stem per plant, hence the name. The leaves are all at the base and as with many of the hawkweeds/hawkbits, are often a more informative means of identifying the species than the look of the flower itself. In the case of Rough Hawkbit, the flower is quite long and shallowly lobed.



Yellow Rattle (*right*) should be appearing in late May and, not surprisingly, has a yellow flower, described as 'twin lipped' (like White Dead Nettle). It also has a single stem but with shallowly-toothed leaves running up it. Rattle is interesting because it is semi-parasitic, tapping into the roots of grasses for resources. It is noticeable that where there are patches of Yellow Rattle the grass is often stunted and it is used to as means of limiting more vigorous grasses, particularly in newly seeded areas of species-rich grassland. Because it is an annual, its effectiveness can be quiet variable as a means of controlling vigorous grasses.



INSECTS



New generations of darker-coloured overwintering butterflies, Small Tortoiseshell, Red Admiral, Comma and Peacock, will be joined by a growing number of summer species. Look out for the moth-like Skippers (Large, Small and Essex), dashing along and then sitting in their characteristic pose with fore- and hindwings held at different angles.

White butterflies will be on the wing: Large, Small and Green-veined (*left*).

Watch out for two of our blue butterflies: the Holly Blue (*below left*) and the Common Blue (*below right*). The Holly Blue has blue upper- and undersides and is often seen in gardens. The Common Blue is a grassland species, and is blue only on the upperside (but, just to confuse things, the female has much browner uppersides).





Numerous species of bee are found in Rushcliffe, including Bumblebees, Mining Bees, Mason Bees, Cuckoo Bees, Nomad Bees (*left*) and the ubiquitous Honey Bee. Most will be active in May, so it is worth keeping your eyes open to see if you can see 'something different'.

Wasps (*right*) will become more visible, as this year's Queens produce their offspring. Increasing numbers need larger nests, so watch out for wasps gathering wood (often from garden chairs and fences) which they shred and mix with saliva to make a papier mache-like material from which they use to form hexagonal cells in the nest.



Mention of bees and wasps leads inevitably to hoverflies, many of which mimic bees and wasps as a means of defence. Totally harmless, but extremely effective pollinators, hoverflies occur in many different shapes and sizes, with many different patterns, and can be seen, literally, everywhere where there is vegetation. Two to look out for in May are the 'Batman' hoverfly *Myathropa florea* (*below left*), so-named because a dark area on the thorax resembles the 'Batman' logo, and *Rhyngia campestris* (*below right*), sometimes called the 'Common Snout' hoverfly. This has an exceptionally long 'snout' (rostrum) that encloses an equally long proboscis that allows it to feed on nectar and pollen in deep flowers that other hoverflies cannot reach.



Finally, no guide to what you might see in May would be complete without mention of two eponymous insects: the 'May Bug' and the 'Mayfly'.

The 'May Bug' is actually a Cockchafer (*below left*). At 3cm long it is one of our biggest beetles, and one of the noisiest in flight (hence another name, 'Doodle Bug'). Look out – and listen out – for them on May evenings as they fly around clumsily, bumping into illuminated windows and flying into indoor lamps!



Mayflies (*below right*) are common around freshwater wetlands, from fast-flowing rivers to still lakes, where the larvae spend their lives underwater, feeding on algae and plants. In the summer, the adults hatch out - sometimes simultaneously and in their hundreds; they have very short lives (just hours in some cases), during which they display and breed. Many species do not feed as adults as their sole purpose is to reproduce, dying once they have mated. The name 'mayfly' is misleading as many mayflies can be seen all year-round, although one species does emerge in sync with the blooming of Hawthorn (or 'Mayflower').



So, as you go out and about in Rushcliffe in the coming month, keep your eyes peeled – there will be so much to see!

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