

21<sup>st</sup> March

Weeks 49½ to 52½ – hurtling round the sun

We've made it! Tilting first towards the light, and then away, we've now completed our circuit of the sun. The equinox was yesterday at 09:36 GMT, marking one of two moments each year when the duration of daylight and darkness is (more or less) the same. Not only that, but this equality of light and dark is shared across the whole globe, meaning that, for a day or two at least, we're all (more or less) in the same boat—despite the fact that half the planet's launching into spring just as the other half's lurching into autumn. It's odd to think that for the last twelve months we've spun and hurtled our way around the sun, yet have still managed to end up almost exactly where we started. In a world with so much uncertainty—and so much change—I find this a strangely consoling thought. Almost miraculous, really... Such a lot of what we're inclined to take for granted (such as the seasons) relies upon gravity and the earth's tilt! And so here we go again, at the start of our next lap around the sun.

On the non-botanical front, there is now an abundance of Flower Bees, of both sexes, and Vicki and I have discovered that the buff-coloured males have a slightly more frantic, higher-pitched buzz than the black females. So it turns out you can determine the sex of a Flower Bee with your eyes shut. Our first singing Skylarks were on 5<sup>th</sup> March at Winter Well (near Staple Fitzpaine), since the start of the month we've been noticing Rooks busily repairing and rebuilding their nests, and we heard our first Chiffchaffs on the 16<sup>th</sup>—now, suddenly, like the Flower Bees, they're everywhere!

Perched on the equinox we're about to embark on a period of rapid *greening*. Which isn't to say budburst and first leafing haven't already begun in some species: Elder, *Sambucus nigra*, tends to be the first, with unexpanded leaves showing as early as January in some places, followed this year by Hawthorn, *Crataegus monogyna*, and Hazel, *Corylus avellana*, from about the third week of February. This month, so far, I have seen leaves unfurling on Horse-chestnut, *Aesculus hippocastanum*, on the 16<sup>th</sup> (Ash Priors), Field Maple, *Acer campestre*, on the 17<sup>th</sup> (Obridge), Alder, *Alnus glutinosa*, on the 19<sup>th</sup> (Longrun Meadow and Firepool Weir), and Sycamore, *Acer pseudoplatanus*, on the 20<sup>th</sup> (Sherford Stream). A few of the earliest-flowering Blackthorns, *Prunus spinosa*, also have leaves starting to show amongst the old blossom. Some tree species flower before they come into leaf, others leaf before they flower, and in the latest issue of *Niche* (published by the British Ecological Society) there's an interesting piece reporting on research which shows that for several European trees the gap between dates of first *leafing* and first *flowering* is getting wider, with the date of the first of these events

(whichever that is) advancing more than the second in response to climate change. It would be nice to compare changes in leafing and flowering dates of tree species locally... (Another project, perhaps?)

So, anyway, what of first flowerings? Like last time, this is bound to be a fairly haphazard and incomplete record, based on a few lists, my own sightings, plus various emails and messages posted on the SRPG WhatsApp Group. But to give it some sort of coherence we'll tackle them in (very roughly) alphabetical order, with 'target species', i.e. those listed on the spread-sheet circulated at the start of the year, shown in **bold**.

We've located four of our target 'A's, even though Lords-and-Ladies, ***Arum maculatum***, is yet to show itself—maybe next week? I'd been keeping a close watch on Moschatel, ***Adoxa moschatellina***, for a while, but 'town hall clocks' around Taunton were still tightly shut when Gill (Truddoxhill) announced on WhatsApp that it had started flowering on the 3<sup>rd</sup> in her neck of the woods (the same day as her first sightings of Colt's-foot, ***Tussilago farfara***, and Toothwort, *Lathraea squamaria*). The next *Adoxa*, and possibly the first in VC5, was Ro's (Lilstock) on the 6<sup>th</sup> during her 'first week hunt' for the Wild Flower Society. This was followed a week later by Linda's (near Fyne Court) on the 13<sup>th</sup>, Steve's (Kings Cliff woods) on the 14<sup>th</sup>, Georgina's (Velvet Bottom) and Chris L.'s (Langford Heathfield) both on the 15<sup>th</sup>, and finally mine and Vicki's (at Otterhead Lakes) on the 17<sup>th</sup> – a full fortnight after Gill's northern trail-blazer. Evidently some 'clocks', town hall or otherwise, run more slowly than others...

Another of our target 'A's was Wood Anemone, ***Anemone nemorosa***, which was seen by Georgina on the 8<sup>th</sup>, then Gill on the 9<sup>th</sup>, Linda on the 14<sup>th</sup> (near Wivvy), Margaret on the 15<sup>th</sup> (Redding Pits), Helena on the 17<sup>th</sup> (Cam Valley) and me, bringing up the rear again, on the 18<sup>th</sup> (Kingston St Mary). But, as if to get my own back, I managed to register first flowers of Ramsons, ***Allium ursinum***, yesterday, bang on the equinox, by the Sherford Stream on the southern outskirts of Taunton—in the same place as I first recorded it last year. Is this especially early? Well, compared with its 2008-17 decadal average it's about eight days early, and this is the fifth earliest FFD for Ramsons in the fourteen springs since the start of 2008. Mind you, it's nine days *later* than last year, which goes to emphasise how exceptionally early last year really was. Garlic Mustard, ***Alliaria petiolata***, has also started flowering, being seen by Andrew on the 14<sup>th</sup> (Sandford Batch) and by me on the 16<sup>th</sup> (Ash Priors). And lastly, this morning, between Obridge and Creech Castle, I had flowers just beginning to open on yet-to-expand panicles of Field Maple, ***Acer campestre***.

‘C.’ Only one report, so far, of Cuckooflower, *Cardamine pratensis*, and that was from Helena via WhatsApp on the 19<sup>th</sup>. And just a single record of Marsh Marigold, *Caltha palustris*, too, which was seen by Maureen and me flowering in Roughmoor Pond on the 6<sup>th</sup>. Also, surprisingly, there have been next to no records of Opposite-leaved Golden-saxifrage, *Chrysosplenium oppositifolium*, apart from Linda’s on 28<sup>th</sup> February, and Helena’s on 9<sup>th</sup> March – easily overlooked I suspect, or maybe it tends to grow in out-of-the-way places that have been difficult for us to access during lockdown. Hawthorn, *Crataegus monogyna*, was seen in North Petherton by Steve on the 18<sup>th</sup>, and by me this morning—in the same strip of woodland as the newly-flowering Field Maple. There’s one Hawthorn at Obridge that always blossoms in the middle of winter, but today’s was a ‘normal’ spring-flowering tree.

On our (essential) journeys, many of us have started to appreciate the hordes of roadside Danish Scurvy-grass, *Cochlearia danica*. An amazing sight, the masses of white or pale lilac flowers like narrow drifts of hail stones heaped up along the verges; something our botanical forebears would never have witnessed, since the earliest records of inland roadside Danish Scurvy-grass in Britain weren’t until the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> David H., though, spotted *Common Scurvy-grass*, *C. officinalis*, flowering on the coast at Portishead on the 15<sup>th</sup>. Ivy-leaved Toadflax, *Cymbalaria muralis*, one of several species badly affected by Storm Darcy in the second week of February, has begun flowering again: I saw it in Taunton on the 14<sup>th</sup>, while Liz had it in Wedmore on the 19<sup>th</sup>. Herb Robert, *Geranium robertianum*, Red Valerian, *Centranthus ruber*, and Oxford Ragwort, *Senecio squalidus*, are three other ‘all-year-round’ species now making a comeback in Taunton after having succumbed to February’s icy blast.

‘E’ to ‘H’. As if to emphasise that today is the opening day of astronomical spring, this afternoon’s walk in Orchard Wood produced first-flowering Wood Spurge, *Euphorbia amygdaloides*, and Bluebells, *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*. On WhatsApp, it turns out that Helena, too, has had her first Bluebells today. There have been two sightings, so far, of flowering Ash, *Fraxinus excelsior*. Amazingly, Ro recorded it on the 6<sup>th</sup> during her ‘first week hunt’, and then Steve had it in North Petherton on the 20<sup>th</sup>. I saw my first Ground-ivy, *Glechoma hederacea*, at Obridge on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, as did Andrew at Sandford; and then the next day Helena had it on a wall in Paulton. We were all pretty pleased with ourselves, until we learnt that Linda had already seen it, on 28<sup>th</sup> February, at Castle Neroche. (Typical!)

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<sup>1</sup> There’s even a poem about Danish Scurvy-grass: see ‘COCHLEARIA DANICA’ in a little collection entitled *Stear Point & other poems* (2009) by the Somerset poet Anthony Watts. Here is an extract: ‘COCHLEARIA DANICA / ... is coming in like the tide, filling / the central reservations, sending out / slivers of silvery star-glister -- / a froth of surf along the kerbs -- / as it sea-sidles amongst the sparse grass / of saline verges. / Shore-dweller, it makes itself at home / wherever roads have been salted -- / itself a salty deposit, a sweat-stain / fringing the green sleeves of motorways...’

Jumping to 'L', the most remarkable record so far this month came from another 'L', Linda, who spotted first-flowering Yellow Archangel, *Lamiastrum galeobdolon*, on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. An extraordinary date for a plant that usually starts to flower in early April, which made me wonder whether it could have been subsp. *argentatum*, the 'alien' subspecies grown in gardens. But looking back at my own FFDs for subsp. *montanum* I see they span a full two months, the latest being 30<sup>th</sup> April but, significantly, the earliest being 28<sup>th</sup> February. So Linda's record, while admittedly very early, is certainly 'within range'.

While on 'L', White Dead-nettle, *Lamium album*, is—in Taunton at least—a year-round flowerer; indeed, I've recorded it already blooming in the first week of January in twelve of the last fourteen years. Only in the bitterly cold winter and spring of 2009-10 did it behave differently: the coldest December for 50 years was followed by the eighth-coldest January since 1914, and White Dead-nettle kept its head down, so to speak, with first flowers not being recorded until 22<sup>nd</sup> April. It seems, from the work of Richard Fitter and others, that all-year-round flowering of White Dead-nettle is a relatively recent phenomenon, and that its change in behaviour is probably a phenological response to climate warming. However, unsurprisingly, it's also something that tends to happen much more obviously (and frequently) in urban areas. As has been the case this year: while I've been noting it blooming nicely in Taunton right through the winter, hardly any has been seen in the surrounding countryside. It wasn't until 5<sup>th</sup> March that Margaret reported it from Winford: "my first of the year!"

We've had lots of flowering wood-rushes in the last two weeks, including my own Southern Woodrush, *Luzula forsteri*, at Thurlbear on the 12<sup>th</sup>, and Linda's Hairy Wood-rush, *L. pilosa*, on the 14<sup>th</sup>, followed by Margaret's on the 15<sup>th</sup>. Meanwhile, records for Field Wood-rush, *L. campestris*, have been trickling in too: Andrew saw it on the 6<sup>th</sup> at Ellenborough Park, Weston-super-Mare, while Margaret had it on her lawn in Winford on the 15<sup>th</sup> (six days earlier than last year). Linda's first, in Wellington, was on the 19<sup>th</sup>. Frustratingly, like last year, this one continues to elude me...

'P'. Cowslips, *Primula veris*, seem to have begun flowering at least as early as they did last year. My own first date at Thurlbear this year was the 12<sup>th</sup>, eight days sooner than in 2020. David Re.'s first, in his garden in Alford, was on the 10<sup>th</sup>, while Helena and Linda both spotted theirs on the 16<sup>th</sup> – Linda at The Quants, Helena in her garden. Andrew got his first on the 17<sup>th</sup>, on Purn Hill. Our first Cherry Laurel, *Prunus laurocerasus*, was on the 8<sup>th</sup>, at West Monkton, while Blackthorn, *P. spinosa*, has now been seen by most of us – although there's always room for debate about whether some of the earliest Blackthorn is 'pure' *spinosa* or maybe some sort of hybrid.

'S' and 'T.' I was pleased to find my first Greater Stitchwort, *Stellaria holostea*, in Trull on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Common Sallow/Grey Willow, *Salix cinerea*, started flowering in Longrun Meadow on the 6<sup>th</sup>, with Goat Willow, *S. caprea*, two days later. My 'S' of the month, though, was Rue-leaved Saxifrage, *Saxifraga tridactylites*, on the 18<sup>th</sup> in the long-stay car park at Taunton railway station. More records for Colt's-foot, *Tussilago farfara*, too, including Gill's on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, already mentioned, David H.'s "Colt's-foot galaxies in the evening sun" on the 7<sup>th</sup>, and Margaret's at Redding Pits on the 15<sup>th</sup>.

'V.' Early Dog-violet, *Viola reichenbachiana*, has been living up to its name, with most of us now having seen it, along with various colour forms/varieties of Sweet Violet, *V. odorata*. Only the one record of Common Dog-violet, *V. riviniana*, so far, from Linda's garden in Wellington on the 17<sup>th</sup>. And one record, too, for Hairy Violet, *V. hirta*, which had begun flowering on Thurlbear Quarrylands by the 12<sup>th</sup>.

A few other odds and sods could be listed, such as Helena's Butterbur, *Petasites hybridus*, Andrew's or Graham's Early Forget-me-not, *Myosotis ramosissima*, Ro's Spotted Medick, *Medicago arabica*, or my own Thyme-leaved Speedwell, *Veronica serpyllifolia*. But I've strayed way beyond my word limit, and to be honest I've run out of steam.

This isn't a good time to feel weary, though, just as the new season begins to gather pace. The clocks are about to roll forward an hour, and the old 'rule of six' is set to return. There is so much to look forward to, and the challenge, as ever at this time of year, is keeping up with it all. A year ago we were entering the first lockdown; this time around we're about to be released, slowly, from our third. I wonder, will that make this year's spring-watching easier or harder?

Ted Hughes had a way with words, and he certainly captured this pivotal moment in the year rather well: 'When the swallow snips the string that holds the world in / And the ring-dove claps and nearly loops the loop / You just can't count everything that follows in a tumble / Like a whole circus tumbling through a hoop'.<sup>2</sup> And yet, I think for me the bird that 'snips the string' would have to be the Chiffchaff rather than the Swallow; not least because, as it busily flits through the still-leafless trees, it can't stop yelling about it: "Listen! Listen! It was ME! And this is how I did it... *snip-snip, snip-snip, snip-snip, snip-snip, snip-snip...* [ad infinitum]"

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<sup>2</sup> 'April Birthday', by Ted Hughes, published in *Season Songs* (Faber & Faber, 1976).