

Brent Island Trust

Newsletter, April 2021



Wildlife on The Island



Small Tortoiseshell butterfly

Insects are active throughout the year - after all, there are species called Winter and December Moths - and a warm, sunny January day may bring a Small Tortoiseshell butterfly out of hibernation and set a Buff-tailed Bumblebee off to find a new nesting site. However, it's the longer, milder days of March and April which really bring about a change in the urgency of insect activity.

Flowers are opening (see later) to provide nectar and pollen while emergent leaves on trees provide food for caterpillars which, in turn, are nutrition for nesting birds. It's estimated that a Blue Tit chick can eat 100 caterpillars every day and there may be eight chicks in the nest. They take around 20 days to fledge and so the one nest may need 16,000 caterpillars for its survival.

Most insects are part of a, sometimes bizarre, cycle of life. Large, black oil beetles are starting to move around The Island meadow now. The female has a hugely swollen abdomen to carry hundreds of eggs which she'll lay in the ground. When the larvae hatch, they find a convenient flower – see the photo of larvae on a dandelion by the linhay – where they'll latch onto a solitary mining bee to be taken back to its nest where they eat the bee's pollen and nectar store as well as its eggs.



Adult oil beetle and its larvae just visible as small black dots



The first butterflies to appear in numbers during daytime on The Island are Brimstones, Speckled Woods and Orange-tips where the males, true to their name, have bright orange flashes on the tips of their wings. At night there are huge numbers of flies and moths which encourage bats to leave their winter roosts to take part in the feeding frenzy. A survey carried out in 2016 recorded 10 species of bat over three nights – see more details on our website.

Not all insects are on land or in the air and the River Avon provides a rich habitat for several species of aquatic insect including larvae of caddis flies of which many spend their underwater lives in cases made from vegetation or sand. A survey by students from King Edward VI Community College in Totnes recorded both cased and uncased caddis flies as well as stonefly and midge larvae. They provide food for fish in the water as well as Dippers, birds frequently seen around the Island.



Stonefly larva

The diversity of insect life on The Island is immense and we have recorded only a fraction of the species living out their lives there. Insects are pollinators, provide food for other species and help to control pests of crops. There over 27,000 insect species in the UK – a tiny fraction of more than 1 million globally. However, their abundance is in decline – butterfly numbers are down 50% since 1976 – because of habitat loss/fragmentation, global warming and use of chemicals. We hope that we're doing a little to provide space for their survival on The Island.

"If all mankind were to disappear, the world would regenerate back to the rich state of equilibrium that existed ten thousand years ago. If insects were to vanish, the environment would collapse into chaos." E. O. Wilson, biologist, naturalist, and writer.

Phil Dean

Membership Renewal

This month marks the start of our new financial year, and April is also the time when membership subscriptions fall due. With this newsletter you will receive a letter explaining what action you need to take, if any. If you are a Life or Honorary Member or pay annually by Standing Order you need do nothing. If you pay by cash or cheque you will need to forward your remittance to our Membership Secretary, Graham Royle, whose details are on the letter. We do appreciate your continued support for our work in caring for The Island.

Spring Flowers on The island - Photos taken on The Island by Laurette Guest in late March this year



Lesser Celandine



Primrose



Turkish Squill

Working Party

After our item in the last newsletter about delaying the working party until rules allow, a member clarified for us that volunteer work is still permitted. At the time of writing it does appear that a relaxation to allow up to six people to meet outdoors is imminent. If that does happen we'll organise a working party fairly promptly. Clearly, if there's any safety-related work to be done we'll address that immediately.

Other Island Work

We have three more energetic tasks for this year:

- Replacing the decrepit barbed-wire fence by the lane down to the gate. We aim to do this in April.
 - Spreading more aggregate on the path between the gate and the bridge. It's getting very muddy but we'll wait until it dries out before tackling it. We'll also look at providing some drainage for the wettest parts.
 - The channel underneath the lane by the gate is becoming blocked with many years' vegetation. We're looking at the best way to clear it and are talking to Castleford Engineering who did the original repairs to the weir and leat and more recently refaced the leat to prevent a leak.
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Dog Fouling

We've had reports of dogs fouling in the lane on the way down to the The Island. While the Trust does not own the lane, or have any responsibility for it, we'd like to point out that there are poo bags and a bin just inside the gate and ask that people use them responsibly to the benefit of local residents and other people using the lane.

Brief Notes

- The format and date for our 2021 AGM are still under review pending the outcome of lock-down relaxation. We'll let you know when we make any progress but would welcome any thoughts you have on your preferences. Comments can be made through our website or directly to the Secretary - contact details at the end of this newsletter.
 - As previously noted the usual date for our Easter Egg Trail is too early to avoid lockdown restrictions and so has been cancelled for 2021.
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