

Nature Notes from Somerset

April 2020

Version 1, 2nd May 2020

Mike Ashworth

This is the second monthly Nature Notes, from a base near Yeovil in south-eastern Somerset. For well-known reasons all this month's observations were made in our garden, admittedly quite a large garden so affording a variety of flowers, shrubs, trees and micro-habitats. The garden is bordered on two sides by agricultural land used for grazing cattle. April was mostly warm and sunny bringing lots of wildlife to the attention of the keen observer. The month was "significantly warmer than average for most of the country and the fifth warmest April on record" (UK Met Office), with around 50% more hours of sunshine than average.

Highlight of the Month

A sunny, sheltered area of the garden is particularly well stocked with holly, from small and medium-sized bushes to trees 10-20 feet high, I counted nine plants in a small area. A male Holly Blue Butterfly was first seen on 9th April. The males pupate first and then seek out suitable breeding sites

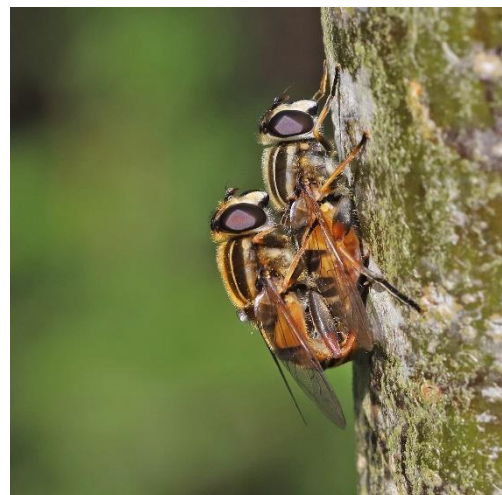


waiting for the females to appear. They must be territorial to some extent as when another male turns up there is a brief skirmish, until one is chased off. The females are less often seen, last year I only saw a female once, and I have yet to see one so far this year.

They have two generations, in spring they lay their eggs on holly, then the autumn generation uses ivy or one of a number of other common or garden plants, including bramble – we have plenty of that for them!

The Joys of Spring

Sunshine, warm weather and lengthening days turns a little insect's mind to thoughts of breeding and reproduction and there was plenty of that in evidence this month. This mating pair (left) are hoverflies *Helophilus pendulus*. I used to think that *Helophilus* meant sun-loving but it comes not from the Greek "helios" for sun but from "helos" meaning marsh, referring to the requirement of the larvae for wet places.





Further mating pairs included the Common Green Shieldbug, *Palomena prasina* (left). In one wander around the garden I saw no fewer than four such pairs. A couple of other species of shieldbug showed up this month, the Hawthorn Shieldbug, *Acanthosoma haemorrhoidale* (below left) with its large pointed “shoulders” and the unmistakable Sloe Bug, *Dolycoris baccarum* (below right). Both species overwinter as adults and are common and widespread in many habitats.



Back to the theme of mating, this pair of small Flesh Flies (right), family Sarcophagidae, caught my attention. It’s useful having six legs, the male can stand on one pair, hold onto his partner with the middle pair and caress her head with the front pair! These are I believe *Amobia signata*, which is reasonably frequent across southern Britain. They are cleptoparasites, laying their eggs in the nests of solitary bees and wasps, whereupon their larvae eat the food that has been stored for the nest owner’s own young.



St Mark’s Flies, *Bibio marci*, (left) are so called because the adults appear in large numbers around St Mark’s Day, 25th April. In our garden they arrived on 23rd April, so pretty close! The males gather in swarms around trees, in our case a silver birch. They have a highly characteristic dancing flight with their long hind legs dangling. Within the swarm males compete for the opportunity to mate with females. I read that males have “milky-white” wings and hadn’t fully appreciated that until I saw this photo – the male

is on the left. The adults only live for a week or so, the flies spend most of their life as larvae eating the roots of grasses. I saw a large St Mark’s Fly, so very likely a female, flying around some coarse

grass at the base of an apple tree, possibly looking for somewhere suitable to lay her eggs. Despite living for such a short time, St Mark's Flies may be significant pollinators, simply through their vast numbers at an important time of year for pollination. This one (right) provided another important "service", as food for a male Yellow Dung Fly, *Scathophaga stercoraria*. These flies are voracious predators and breed in cow pats. They must surely have a claim to be the most common fly in the country.



Surprisingly Beautiful

In April the farmer let his cows out into the fields which border the garden for the first time for this year, and the garden was suddenly full of large numbers of Yellow Dung Flies and Face Flies, *Musca autumnalis*, both of which are associated with cattle dung. The Yellow Dung Flies are surprisingly beautiful, at least to my eyes, the male (below left) has a furry body, bright yellow-orange in colour like a little teddy bear. The female (below right) is less hirsute having a greenish hue.



The black antennae can differentiate the Yellow Dung Fly from other members of the family Scathophagidae. This one (right) is *Scathophaga furcata*, which has paler antennae and a grey patch on the front femur. It also breeds in dung, more often in sheep dung, so tends to replace the Yellow Dung Fly in upland areas.



You may not agree with me about the dung fly, but this little beauty can not be denied! A Ruby-tailed Wasp (left), one of many similar species in the family Chrysididae. They are cuckoo wasps and parasitise the nests of other solitary bees and wasps. Quite tricky to photograph as they run around hardly ever keeping still!

Return of some Old Favourites

As well as the arrival of the St Mark's Fly, there are other favourites, the appearance of which make me feel that summer is definitely on the way. One of these is the Batman Hoverfly, *Myathropa florea*, (right) so called because the dark mark on the thorax looks like the Batman logo. This male (the eyes are touching) took up residence on a short section of hedge, presumably waiting for females to turn up, and I could be sure of finding him or one of his mates on a sunny day at the same place; one is tempted to say "At the same Bat-time"!



Another favourite of mine is the Noon Day Fly, *Mesembrina meridiana*, which is absolutely unmistakable with its bright golden face and wing bases. They are often found basking in the sunshine at the hottest part of the day on gates and fence posts. This one is "bubbling", a behaviour in which they repeatedly extrude a droplet and then draw it back in again. It is thought that they do this in order to increase the concentration of nutrients in their gut contents by evaporation of excess water. Many flies do it.

This beautiful hoverfly (right) is *Epistrophe eligans*, and elegant she certainly is. They have been abundant in our garden this year and quite unmistakable, the white face with a human-like profile and the dark shining dorsum and yellow scutellum. The amount of black on the abdomen is highly variable, so that characteristic is less useful for identification. For many insect species the needs of the larvae determine their distribution. This species is widely distributed, as its larvae feed on aphids on a wide range of shrubs and trees.



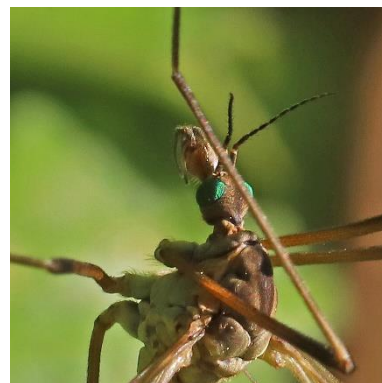
This hoverfly, *Rhingia campestris* (left), I call the Pinocchio Fly. It is an obvious name, but I don't know whether it is official. The "snout" or rostrum contains an articulated proboscis which it uses to reach into deep-throated flowers. If you can catch it feeding you might see this amazing apparatus. I always take lots of "Pinocchio" photos each year partly because it just looks so great and partly in case it turns out to be its rarer cousin, *R. rostrata*, which is paler and lacks the black line along the side of the abdomen. I haven't found one yet!

And Finally

There don't seem to have been so many bees around after the flurry of early season species in March, but a nice one which appeared at the beginning of April is this male Ashy Mining Bee, *Andrena cineraria* (right). This species is listed as a possible host for parasitism by the Dotted Bee-fly, *Bombylius discolor*, which I reported last month, and which continued to be sighted in the garden into early April.



This crane-fly (below left) could also be under the heading "surprisingly beautiful". In close-up (below right) the eyes are revealed as shining green jewels. It's a male, the female's ovipositor gives their abdomen a pointed shape, and the species is *Tipula paludosa*. *T. paludosa* is separated from the equally common *T. oleracea* by having 14 rather than 13 segments to the antennae and by the greater separation of the eyes. Both features are visible in the close-up photograph.



And finally, finally ... I often tend to dismiss *Eristalis* hoverflies, thinking, oh that's boring, just another Drone Fly, but there are several species and it is well worth getting to know them. The classic Drone Fly is *Eristalis tenax*, but every *Eristalis* I have looked at closely in the garden so far has been *Eristalis pertinax* (left). *E. pertinax* has a narrower black vertical line on the face and, crucially, yellow front and middle tarsi. Both features are visible in this front-on shot. It makes identification much easier if you can get a photograph from the front, so you can see the face.

Stay safe and enjoy nature wherever and whenever you can!

Mike Ashworth, 2nd May 2020