



South Yorkshire Branch Newsletter Spring 2021

Editor Pauline Rutherford M.B.N.A. Issue number 34



Mating Craneflies - *Tipula vernalis* photo S. Rutherford

Signs of Spring

By David Swales

I love snowdrops; from that first sign of the leaves pushing their way through the cold winter ground to the sight of the pure white flowers hanging solitary and pendent like in an otherwise lifeless looking landscape. To me this really does lift the heart and give me hope that spring is on the way.

The snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*), is a common sight up and down the country from January to March, popping up in clumps and carpets in their favourite habitat of damp woodland, though they are also happy to grow out in the open. There is still some debate over the snowdrop, however it is generally regarded as non-native to our shores having been introduced sometime in the early medieval period by religious communities, from where it escaped and has since become widely naturalised. It has been known in the UK by many names, such as Candlemas bells, February fair-maids and snow-piercers but the common name of snowdrop was first used by English botanist John Gerard in the 1633 edition of his book *The Herball*. While we are on the subject of names, the snowdrops given scientific name *Galanthus nivalis* is a mix of Greek and Latin which combines to mean “milk flower of the snow”, which is a pretty good description really.



Photo by D. Swales

Galanthus is a small genus with around 20 species, with *nivalis* being the most common and wide spread having a native range from the Pyrenees to the Caspian Sea. The snowdrop is a bulbous perennial herbaceous plant (which means it is non-woody and survives underground as a bulb), about 150mm tall and a member of the Amaryllidaceae family along with garlic and daffodils. The grey-green leaves are linear, blunt pointed, grass-like but thicker and usually in pairs (sometimes three), while the leafless flower stalk is tipped with a joined pair of papery membranes (spathe), which split allowing the single flower to droop downwards. The flower itself consists of six free tepals (neither petals or sepals but somewhere in between) in two whorls. The three larger outer tepals splay outwards, while the three smaller inner tepals remain close together and have a small notch and light-green markings at the end. It is well worth turning the flower up so you are able to see inside where you will find lovely light-green stripes and six yellow anthers, all well-hidden deep within the flower.

Snowdrops generally propagate by forming bulb offsets, and being quite vigorous plants, they can soon spread forming clumps and drifts. They are also often spread by animals disturbing the bulbs and by water through flooding. Snowdrops can also spread by seed, though they usually lack the services of pollinating insects in their northern ranges when they are in flower.



Photo by D. Swales

The snowdrop has been studied for centuries for its medicinal properties and was recorded as being "used as an antidote against poisons", by the ancient Greek scholar Theophrastus, who not only had a fantastic name, but is also known as the father of botany and produced some of the first books which tried to bring order to the botanical world. Today we know that the active substance in snowdrops is called galantamine, which is now used to help reduce some of the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. So, there is much more to these tough little plants than meets the eye, with its long history of human enquiry, mystical properties and symbolism (it is still considered bad luck to bring the flowers into the home), it has meant many things to many generations of people. To me they are a sure sign the seasons are changing and they simply make me happy when I see them.



Galanthus nivalis: Flora von Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz, 1885

A View from a Comfy Chair

From the Chairman

The week before we can start “Rule of Six” meetings again. One hundred years from now how will people view that statement? But these writings, in our newsletters, in the British Naturalist and the Country-Side could still be available in 2121. We are continuing the tradition of the old Naturalists, trying to care for our natural world that we all depend on by collecting data and sharing knowledge that could be lost about the biodiversity in our local environment. The fact that we are learning from each other about things other than ourselves has been continuing, for us, through the zoom meetings and the Species of the Week, but now, we can start getting back to seeing, feeling and smelling the world of nature together. These shared experiences are a vital part of being human and I am sure that you have missed them as much as I have, to look closely at a bug, hear Roy speaking Latin, to find something so small that very few people would notice or see and to learn something new and exciting. We will all be able to get back out together as the situation becomes safer and visit some lovely places with friends, and I am looking forward to that.

Lockdown Lichens

By Pauline Rutherford MBNA

Over winter with insects hibernating and flowers dormant, there isn't much we can see so, I've spent some of my lockdown looking at lichens and the lack of foliage on the trees makes these species easy to find. About 200 metres from my home in South Yorkshire, across a busy road is a brownfield site which leads up the hill to agricultural fields.



Brownfield Site Photo S. Rutherford

The main trees here are Willow, Ash and Hawthorn. This article isn't about identifying the species it's about appreciating the structure and beauty of the lichens which are established in this area. However, this urban village and its lichens will never be able to compete with those found in the Highlands and Atlantic Woodlands of Scotland where the trees “drip” with lichens!

These first two photos show different species of lichen which both have black fruiting bodies. One has tiny black dots, and another is grey with black discs with a raised pale margin.



Next are two species of Ramalina – a bushy grey one with wide straps and another with narrower straps but has large round discs.



A common lichen known as the sun shield because it is bright yellow/orange was all over the trees, and if you look closely you will see the darker orange discs of fruiting bodies. Another species is grey above and black below with thin lobes



Those of you who have been to Scotland will probably remember the woodlands with trees like this, dripping with lichens!



Photo P. Rutherford

Zooming Ahead

By Pauline Rutherford MBNA

Unable to meet as we would normally do so, we continue with our “virtual” meetings. The last one was on 23ed March – a year since we started with the Coronavirus Lockdown.

Catherine had suggested the ‘Nature Table’ as a subject and several of us sent photos to Richard or shared something they had seen. The photos are taken on my phone during the meeting so aren’t the best quality!

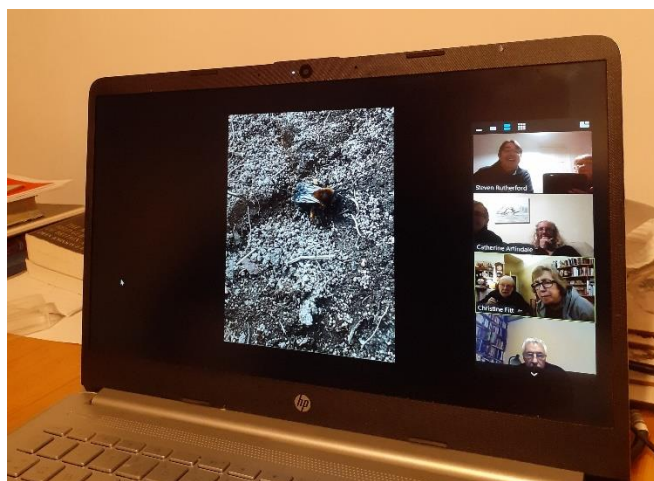


Di had a photo of beetles which had covered the surface of a bird bath in her garden; they were small but bigger than the shiny flower beetle, with clubbed antennae. Mark wondered if they were a water beetle and as they were mating could mean they were semi-aquatic. But without an actual specimen it was difficult to confirm the identification.



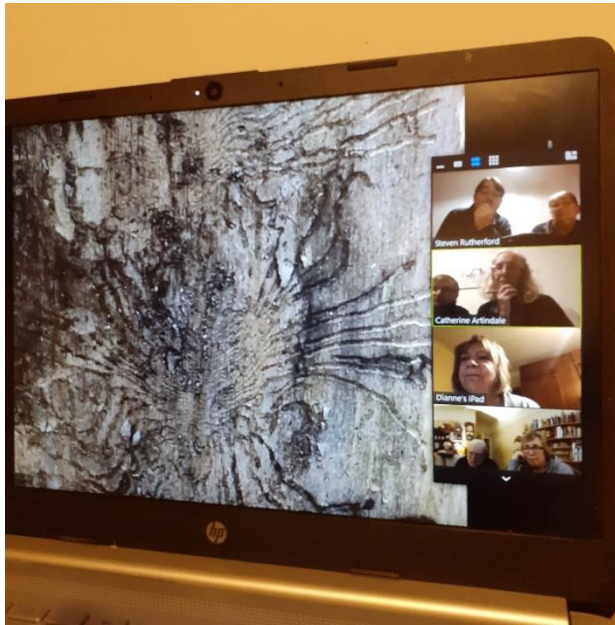
Steve did a short presentation of leucistic birds as we had seen a leucistic jackdaw that day. It reminded us of the white pheasant we saw a couple of years ago in the historic gardens at WGC. You can tell it isn't albino as the eyes are dark not red, and if you look you can see a few brown feathers.

Jean Panniker had been out walking with Anne Cameron and found this area of sandy ground with lots of holes in it, then saw a mining bee entering one of them looking for a nest.



Roy had found an unusual fungus on Sea Buckthorn in a woodland near his house; he identified it as polypore called *Fomitiporia hippophaeicola*.

He sent everyone the information about it after the meeting.



Catherine had seen these beetle tracks in the bark of a tree which make patterns as the larvae bore through the softer layer under the bark, the tree was Wych Elm.

Snippets of Information

Di Farrar – 23rd February 2021

Never one to miss an opportunity for a good photograph, Di saw the first Drone Fly of the year visiting her snowdrops in the garden. This one is one of the *Eristalis* hoverflies and is covered in pollen!



Mike Squires – March 2021

Mike found this bee in his shed trapped between the window and the sun filter and was curious about it. It had been dead a while but he managed to photograph it through the glass which was a good idea as it had disintegrated as he collected it to identify. Knowing it was a Nomad bee, he looked at it under the microscope and saw it had a bifid fork jaw. Therefore, that narrowed the options down to *Nomada ruficornis* – the fork-jawed nomad bee. Predominately a southern species but is moving north. Nevertheless, a good sighting for a Barnsley garden!



David Swales – February 2021

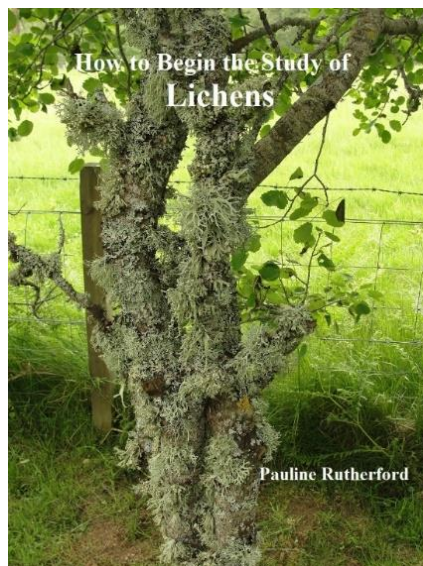
David has started writing a regular column in the “Barnsley Today” magazine, published monthly. Those of you who live in the Barnsley area should look out for this free magazine and let him know what you think of it. It’s a great opportunity to get the BNA out there! Good work David!



Some of you have already bought your copies of the two new books Steve and I have written and we thank you for your support.

They are perfect for beginners and both books have been endorsed by the British Lichen Society and the British Plant Gall Society.

They are available to buy from the website shop **£9.95 each**. If you prefer not to buy online get in touch with me and we can arrange a different method of payment.



The two specialist organizations for these subjects have done reviews and were very complimentary towards them.

“How to Begin the Study of Plant Galls” is a very useful addition to Britain’s gall literature. It will serve well as an introduction to the subject to inspire and encourage a new cohort of cecidologists. The BNA is to be congratulated on its publication.

British Plant Gall Society

‘How to Begin the Study of Lichens’ achieves what it sets out to do, fulfilling the BNA’s aim of publishing introductory books for a wide age range at a very affordable price. If it succeeds in encouraging an interest in lichens in younger as well as older readers, it will certainly have fulfilled its intention.”

British Lichen Society

Rule of Six Meetings



With the vaccine rollout and lockdown restrictions planned to be lifted in the next two months we are ever hopeful we can begin our monthly meetings soon.

Roy is now doing the programme and has put together a Rule of Six programme which you will have been sent via email. These are the same as last time – booking only and a maximum of six on each walk. This will be followed by a full programme as soon as we know it is safe to do so.

If any one has any where they think could be included in the programme, get in touch with Roy rlstewart9357@gmail.com

Remember to keep up to date with us on Social Media

(you don't need a personal account for this just enter the name in your search)

Facebook –  BNA South Yorkshire Twitter –  @syorksbn @BNAscience