

# Urban Countryman Monthly Field Notes

*May 2022*

With the coming of May come thoughts of summer and the countryside's most productive season, supported by the festivals celebrating May Day.

It has been said that when a naturalist dies and goes to heaven it is in the hope that they will find a place where it is permanently May.

With the lambing season all but over, fields are alive with bleating youngsters gambolling playfully or quietly asleep in the sunshine. In the woods the short-lived but stunning display of bluebells is now on the wane as the flowers put all their energies into setting seed before the canopy closes over, denying them light and warmth for another year. Their brilliance has been replaced by that of wild garlic, carpets of millions of white stars, a woodland galaxy. This is the time for the meadow wildflowers to start to take centre stage. As a result, the meadows are increasingly alive with butterflies, bees and myriad insects. Migrant birds have returned. Blossom decorates our trees and hedgerows, the snowy white of hawthorn and the fresh lemony fragrance of elderflower. Crops are appearing in the fields. Daylight has continued to increase as the sun rises higher. There is a welcome warmth. The landscape is increasingly full and green. All is right with the world.

Some old beliefs associated with May are less than encouraging, as according to old sayings, you should not buy a broom, wash blankets ("Wash a blanket in May, wash a dear one away") or get married ("Marry in May and you'll rue the day").

Oak Apple Day (May 29) was once a big celebration, when people would wear oak apples (a gall that grows on oak trees) or oak leaves to remember the day that King Charles II returned to England after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. Until the middle of the 1900s anyone caught not wearing a leaf could be abused.

On Cooper's Hill in Gloucestershire one of the strangest events takes place, involving a group of people, seemingly with scant regard for their own safety, careering down the steepest of hillsides in pursuit of a speeding circular Double Gloucester cheese. Meanwhile, in Devon people are participating worm-charming, in Dorset knob throwing is all the rage, across the land festivals involve masses of people dancing through the streets and in Essex people in fancy dress are competing in the annual mud race! – Only in England!

However, this can still be a month of sharp contrasts across the country, as gardens burst into life, while frosts, especially in the north, are not uncommon.

### **May 1 – May Day**

The garden birds are joining in with **International Dawn Chorus Day** – Blackbirds, Robins, Bluetits, Great Tits and even the Great Spotted Woodpecker with its repeated sharp single note.

There is a constant stream of birds – Great Tits, Bluetits, Robins, Coal Tits, Dunnocks, House Sparrows, Goldfinches, Jays, Magpies, Jackdaws and Nuthatches – between the trees, shrubs and hedges and the feeders.

Having shown only an initial interest in the new bird box the Great Tits are once again checking it out.

A female Blackbird is tucking into a chunk of dropped suet block, while the male is perches nearby, keeping lookout, most probably for the neighbour's cat, which is an absolute nuisance.

Meanwhile, the Long-tailed Tits, for so long regular visitors, seem to have disappeared off the scene. I hope they return soon as they have the ability to brighten any day.

A grey, drizzly day brings some welcome rain, but nowhere near enough to do more than just dampen the surface that is crying out for a good downpour.

### **May 3**

#### **Bench Replacement in Happy Valley, Coulsdon**

Following on from the installation of new benches last month on the Sanderstead to Whyteleafe Countryside Area, today sees new benches being installed at Coulsdon's Happy Valley (another part of the South London Downs National Nature Reserve). This time, as opposed to the 8 benches previously installed, there are only 4 benches to be replaced, spread out along the length of the valley – although there are plenty more that could be replaced.



*Coulsdon's Happy Valley, looking towards Farthing Downs*

The ground is very dry and mostly flint free – a welcome change when digging into local chalk.

The biggest problem is having the benches spread fairly far apart, necessitating the transfer of tools between digging teams, which is leading to quite a bit of wasted time. Still, we have all day and it's a great opportunity to enjoy the view, listen to the birds and watch the world go by.

As the last bench is at the top of the 'ski slope' (right) at the far end of Happy Valley it is a great opportunity to walk back through Devilsden Wood, capturing the display of bluebells (below).

It is noticeable that the short-lived display is already on the wane – it seems that no sooner has it reached its height than it's on the way out. The colours are very varied – purple, dark blue, mauve, light blue, white, pink, white with pale blue stripes and pale blue with dark blue stripes.



Other woodland flowers include – Greater Stitchwort, Yellow Archangel, Wood Sorrel, Red Campion and Cow Parsley.

## May 4

### Step Replacement in Happy Valley

Woken at 4:30am by the sound of noisy fox cubs playing in the garden. There are some things I don't mind being woken up early for.

With all the benches replaced yesterday, today's task is to start on the replacement of 2 short flights of steps joining a pair of paths running along the top of one of the woodland slopes on Happy Valley. The existing steps are completely rotten, with some missing altogether where they have rotted away.



*Before*

The first flight to be replaced consists of just 8 steps, each dug into a shallow trench and held in place by a couple of short wooden stobs. Each is so rotten that they are levered out with very little effort.

Replacing them consists of digging a deeper trench to take the new, wider, board, which is positioned using a spirit-level to ensure it is the correctly located in relation to the step below it.



*After*

Each board is positioned tilted slightly backwards, so that people continually stepping on them over a period of time don't push them over, and held in place by an angle-iron driven in at each end – a few blows from a sledgehammer doing the job. Fortunately, I have quite reasonable hand-eye co-ordination. The only problem is when the iron hits a flint and twists out of alignment, necessitating it being taken out and repositioned – with the worst of the flints having to be dug out. However, with 2 teams working, the first set of steps is quickly completed and the second set started.

The hillside is alive with birdsong.

St Mark's Flies, with their long dangly legs, hang in the air.

Cowslips cover the chalk grassland hillside, with Bulbous Buttercups and a few Goldilocks Buttercups, masses of Daisies and the first eye-catching candy-stripe pink of Sainfoin (the name of which comes from the French for 'wholesome hay' as it was once highly regarded as a fodder crop).

There are plenty of Dandelions, although mostly in the shape of seed clocks (called 'clocks' after the habit of seeing how many puffs it took to blow all the seeds off – the number of puffs supposedly equating to the time of day).

Masses of deep blue Germander Speedwell dot the open grassland, while amongst the trees are clusters of lovely pale lilac Wood Speedwell.

Salad Burnet has suddenly come into flower, seemingly a favourite of Froghopper nymphs if the cuckoo-spit created by these tiny creatures is any indication. The froth is caused by the nymph extracting the plant's sap from the stem and expelling it from their rear end as the froth we see. This serves 2 purposes – it hides the nymph from predators and it keeps it hydrated in dry weather.

A brief spell of evening rain has done only just enough to dampen the surface. The following lovely pink sky across the valley predicts another sunny day to come.

## May 5

### Step Replacement in Happy Valley (cont.)

Yesterday evening's pink sky was spot on – a lovely warm, sunny day with a temperature in the region of 20C, perfect for sitting on the grassland slope at lunchtime, with its wonderful views along and across the valley. And perfect for working in the shade of the trees.



We complete the second set of steps, (before – left, after – right) adding a new curving section to avoid the adjacent badger sett.



Find of the day is a cluster of Early Purple Orchids – the first I have ever seen in Happy Valley. These are so secluded amongst a stand of scrubby trees that they could have been here for many years, undiscovered and undisturbed. And, given some people's liking for digging up orchids, I won't be revealing their location. Frustratingly, some people mistakenly believe that they can transplant wild orchids into their garden, despite it being illegal! and a waste of time. Orchids have a close relationship with fungi, without which they cannot survive, so digging up the flowers is a totally wasted exercise. For obvious reasons, I've yet to be asked by anyone why their illegally acquired orchids fail to survive in their garden.



## May 6

A glorious spring morning, perfect for an early morning walk in one of the local woods renowned for its carpets of Wild Garlic (Ramsons). The display does not disappoint – millions of white stars carpet the woodland floor like a celestial galaxy, washing in waves up against the base of the trees. And the smell... instantly pungent and earthy, even more so when treading on the leaves that emerge along the centre of the paths. Waning Bluebells add contrast to the sea of white.



Follow this by spending a warm sunny afternoon on and around nearby Caterham Viewpoint (right) on the local section of the North Downs.

Despite being in their last days the Bluebells are still putting on a fine display (below).



Meanwhile, the restored chalk grassland slope below the Viewpoint is starting to burst into life, with many of the flowers appearing in large numbers.



- Bugle – mostly blue but with a few pink varieties.
- Bird's-foot Trefoil – also commonly known as 'eggs and bacon' from the rich yellow flowers and red buds.
- Sun Spurge and Wood Spurge.
- Wild Strawberry (June is a great time to find the tiny red taste bombs) and Barren Strawberry (which don't produce fruit).
- Milkwort – both blue and pink varieties.
- Violets.
- Bluebells – mostly gone to seed.
- Salad Burnet.
- Primroses.
- Deep blue Germander Speedwell and paler blue Green Field Speedwell.
- Bulbous Buttercup.
- Cowslips – now mostly gone to seed.
- Red Clover.
- Daisies – with the larger, bolder Ox-eye Daisies on the verge of opening.
- Dandelion.
- Ribwort Plantain and Greater Plantain.
- Greater Yellow Rattle – known as the 'Meadow Maker', this is a parasitic plant that keeps down the out-competing grasses by tapping into their roots to extract nutrients.

Around 15 years ago this flower-rich wildflower meadow was another site close to being lost beneath trees and scrub (other restored sites such as Woldingham's Long Hill and The Knoll on Chipstead Downs also come immediately to mind as conservation successes). The only visible grass was a couple of small patches at either end of the slope. The slope between was densely covered in trees and scrub, beneath which was just bare ground. Over a number of years the trees – ash, holly, yew, whitebeam and hawthorn – were gradually cleared to encourage the these patches of grass to slowly spread. However the middle third remained largely bare, so we gave it a helping hand by spreading out hay bales (containing thousands of seeds from a known source) to speed things along. Today, what was once a lost chalk grassland site is a flower-rich meadow, full of plants, many chalk grassland specialists, bees, butterflies, crickets, spiders (including the colourful Wasp Spider) and myriad invertebrates. The resulting log piles are also home to many forms of wildlife, including lizards.

## The Importance of Chalk Grassland

Chalk grassland is a rare environment, mostly confined to the NW of continental Europe and SE England, of which less than 2% remains. Environmentally it is our equivalent of a tropical rainforest. This loss coincides with the loss over the past 50 years of 97% of England's lowland wildflower meadows, a loss that has had a major detrimental impact upon our wildlife (60% of UK wildlife species are said to be decline according to the 2015 State of Nature UK report).

In the south-east, chalk makes up the North and South Downs, 2 long ridges that are all that remains of what was once a vast dome of chalk, estimated to have been up to 1 mile high! Over thousands of years, the dome and central section were eroded to leave the lowland Weald between the 2 remaining chalk ridges.

Chalk grassland is exceptionally rich in plants (including many orchids – bee, man, fly, common spotted, pyramidal, early purple, fragrant and common twayblade) that have adapted to thrive on nutrient-poor soil - and insects, many of which have evolved to take advantage of the wide variety of specialist plants. The nutrient-poor soil makes it difficult for any single plant species to dominate, making for a very diverse habitat – one of the richest in Western Europe. Up to 50 different plant species, including many that are found exclusively on chalk grassland, can be found in a square metre of good quality chalk grassland. The species-rich grassland also supports invertebrates and wildlife that are either mostly or completely confined to chalk. Chalk grassland also contains rare species of liverworts, mosses and lichens.

Another advantage of chalk is its ability to naturally filter water that subsequently requires minimal treatment, making it far cheaper for the water companies to extract and supply.

### May 7

A Great Tit going in and out of the new nest box, as though it can't decide whether or not to take up residence. The interest increases throughout the morning, with the initial bird being joined by its mate.

Pair of Goldfinches at the sunflower hearts. A third arrives to pick at the seedheads of dandelions.

Numerous Bluetits are flying back and forth to the suet feeder.

The male Great Spotted Woodpecker swoops down from the Scots pines into the lilac, calling its single sharp note as it goes.

The first Song Thrush I've seen in the garden for quite a few years is busy attacking a snail by rather violently bashing it on the paving slabs. It's great to see these birds are still around.





## May 8

Manor Park is splendid in the warm sunshine – not a wisp of cloud to mar the blue. Early May days don't come much better than this.



All around is fresh green, as the canopies are bursting into leaf.

Flowers are burgeoning across the site, both on the open grassland and in the woods. I wonder if the grassland will benefit from last year's late cut – having managed to negotiate a delay in cutting from the scheduled start of July (which would have destroyed hundreds of Pyramidal Orchids) to the end of July, I watched with great joy as the worsening weather meant that it was to be another month before the meadow could be cut, giving many more plants a chance to set seed and providing another month's nectar for the myriad invertebrates that unsurprisingly were gone the day after the annual cut.

- Masses of Cow Parsley (below) frothing beneath the trees.



- Bluebells.
- Green Alkanet.
- Dandelions in various stages.

- Common Nettle.
- Ground Ivy.
- Cowslips – now on the wane.
- Bugle – the vast majority blue, but a few pink.
- Red Campion.
- Black Medick.
- Cuckooflower.
- Greater Stitchwort.

In the woodland areas are the additional plants:

- Lesser Celandine.
- Wood Speedwell.
- Dog's Mercury.
- Common Toothwort.

- Scattered clusters of Daisies.
- Garlic Mustard.
- Meadow Buttercup and Bulbous Buttercup.
- Ribwort Plantain and Greater Plantain.
- Bush Vetch and Common Vetch.
- Common Mouse-ear.
- Germander Speedwell.

- Goldilocks Buttercup.
- Wood Anemones.
- Lords and Ladies.
- White Dead-nettle.
- Wild Garlic.
- Red Clover.
- Herb Bennet (Wood Avens).
- Common Sorrel.

Hawthorn blossom (right), Queen of the May, is starting to come out, with some bushes covered in white, while other lag way behind.



Horse chestnut trees are decorated with the candles of white, dark pink, salmon pink and yellow blossom.



Surprisingly, and possibly worryingly, despite the glorious weather, there are few bees about and not many butterflies –

- Holly Blue.
- Peacock.
- Large White.
- Comma.
- Brimstone.
- Small Copper.
- Speckled Wood.

## Queen of the May

At this time of year hedgerows are splashed with brilliant snowy-white hawthorn blossom, which has a special place in English history and folklore. In pre-Christian times this stunning display was believed to herald the coming of summer and the season of abundance. Due to its impenetrability, robustness and adaptability to almost any condition, even the poorest, it was the hedging plant of choice used in thousands of miles of hedgerows planted following the Enclosure Acts of the 1700s, linked to the prosperity of the wool trade. As a result, it is arguable that no other tree has done more to change the face of the English countryside than the humble hawthorn. Indeed, there are many hedges still in existence that stand as a mark of where villagers were turned off common land. It is strange to think that something we take to epitomise the English countryside had its beginnings in land grabbing and an abuse of commoners' rights.

The hawthorn is also etched into folklore and the faerie world and fairies are said to live beneath solitary hawthorn trees that were believed to be the entrances to the Celtic Underworld. Indeed, few trees are as deeply enshrined in rural tradition as the hawthorn, which has become enriched with tales of magic and mystery. It was burned in the wheat field to protect the future crop from evil spirits and disease. Also known as 'May' because of the time of the year it comes into blossom, branches were used to decorate houses on May Day and its old country name is Queen of the May. Meanwhile, tales of pots of gold buried beneath hawthorns are widespread. However, it is rarely in blossom in time for our current celebrations and the crowning of the May Queen (which owes more to the mid-eighteenth century change of calendar, which would otherwise have seen the celebrations taking place nearer the middle of the month). A branch would be set in the ground beside a door to bring good luck and to ward off witches. However, in direct contradiction, the blossom was widely dreaded - it was thought to retain the stench of the Great Plague, possibly because it contains a chemical produced in the early stages of decaying flesh, giving it its sickly-sweet fragrance - and it was believed that bringing it indoors would result in bad luck and would even lead to a death in the family.

However, the nectar-laden flowers provide a valuable source of food for bees, flies, beetles and moths that are active at this time.

When Richard III, the last of the Plantagenet kings, was killed at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485, his crown was said to have been found hidden in a hawthorn bush. The crown was subsequently presented to the victor, Henry, who claimed the throne. A crown on a flowering hawthorn was adopted as a Tudor emblem. According to legend, after the crucifixion of Christ, Joseph of Arimathea sailed to Britain and landed at Glastonbury where he thrust his hawthorn staff into the ground, where it immediately took root as a tree. The tree is said to be unique amongst hawthorns, flowering twice in a year to mark Jesus' birth and resurrection in winter and spring. More likely is that this species of hawthorn was brought back from Palestine by Crusaders.

It isn't just insects that are attracted to this food source - another common name is 'Bread and Cheese' and children would at one time nibble on the young leaves which are said to have a slightly nutty flavour. Meanwhile the haw berries can be pulped to make a sharp jelly.

Of one thing I am certain, our countryside would be much the poorer without hawthorn's brilliant spring display. As H E Bates wrote in *The Green Hedges*: "Hawthorn bloom rose on the four sides of every field, making the air over-faint with scent. Nothing else could have created so happily the first rich drowsy feeling of summer."

## May 10

Female Chaffinch at the garden seed feeder – as with the song thrush, this is the first chaffinch, once a regular visitor, I've seen in years in the garden. A great way to start the day!



A dull start gives way to sunshine and a walk through the beech trees on Tillingdown, where the explosion into leaf marks the start of the period where spring transitions into summer.



One of my favourite local views of the town is of the tower of St John's church against the backdrop of the wooded valley and the distant ridge of the North Downs from the footpath above Timber Hill (right).



## Richard Kearton's Field Notes - May 10 1903

Saw a number of Great Tits, Blue Tits and Marsh Tits mobbing a female Red-backed Shrike in Birchwood [on the slope of Tillingdown Valley – now in private ownership].

## May 10 1906

At Caterham Song thrushes mimic French Partridges. Bearded Tit terribly persecuted during last 3 years and certainly decreasing.

**May 10 1909**

Exposed my first Autochrome [an early colour process, invented in 1907] plates this evening but they (2 in number) turned out a failure.

**May 11**

Much needed rain at last.

**May 13**

Beneath the large oak tree beside the playground on Tillingdown an adult Starling is feeding a fledgeling.

**May 14**

Joy in the simplest things – the morning sun is at the perfect angle to hit part of an orange Welsh Poppy in the garden, turning one of the petals a fiery orange, like a heated iron bar that has just been extracted from a furnace by a blacksmith.



**Richard Kearton's Field Notes – May 15 1909**

Saw a Nightjar in Birchwood [in Tillingdown Valley].

## May 16

The confusion of wispy clouds over the valley in the early evening is really eye-catching, like a mass of random criss-crossing brushstrokes across a canvas. My immediate thought is to capture the scene in black and white to add dramatic effect. Also venture into using a square photo format for the first time to capture the central detail, without the distraction of the wider picture.

Tonight's full moon is known as the Flower (or Hare) Moon after the sudden explosion of flowers for which the month is known.

## Richard Kearton's Field Notes – May 16 1908

Found a Skylark just building in Armstrong's [Tillingdown Farm] chalk pit field.



## May 17

Making the most of a glorious morning – with the temperature pushing well into the 20sC (the top temperature is eventually recorded as 27.5C) – for a walk to nearby Woldingham, taking in the old chalk road to cut cross-country, the towering brick viaduct, Long Hill (including the restored chalk grassland site referred to earlier in these notes, with its stunning view back towards home), St Paul's church (at the top of Long Hill) and Halliloo Valley (home to Woldingham Golf Club).



*Above: Old chalk road  
Below: St Paul's Church*



*Above: Woldingham Viaduct  
Below: Halliloo Valley*



The chalk grassland and path verges on Long Hill are bursting into floral life, with a rich display of spring green interspersed with a variety of colours – the yellow of Herb Bennett (Wood Avens) and Yellow Archangel, the pale blue of Forget-me-nots and Green Field Speedwell, the white of Cow Parsley, Garlic Mustard, Daisies, Sanicle, Cleavers and Three-cornered Leek, the pink of Herb Robert, Red Campion and Cut-leaved Cranesbill.

On the restored chalk grassland slope, with its stunning view (another site that was close to being lost beneath dense scrubby woodland) –



yellow is the predominant colour at this time of year, with Tutsan, Dandelion, Meadow Buttercup, Bulbous Buttercup, Rough Hawkbit, Greater Yellow Rattle, Bird's-foot Trefoil, Kidney Vetch, Perennial Sowthistle and Hawkweed Ox-tongue, the deep blue of Germander Speedwell and Green Alkanet, the white of Wild Strawberry and Ox-eye Daisy, the red and green of Salad Burnet, the pink stripes of Sainfoin, the purple of Bush Vetch and Ground Ivy, and the green and white of Ribwort Plantain.

However, whilst there is an increasing selection of flowers along the restored slope, when you take the time to look closely you realise that all is not as encouraging as it should be and that challenges exist on 3 main fronts.

- The major issue is the continued spread of invasive Hemp Agrimony, which over the past few years has spread to colonise ever-larger areas of the grassland slope. It has now entirely swamped one end of the open slope and is rapidly spreading along the edges of both the upper and lower paths, from where it has also spread onto the most recently cleared area of grassland below the lower path. With each passing year, thousands upon thousands of feathery seeds are being produced to continue its march across the slope, smothering everything in its path.
- The second issue is the increasing spread of Dogwood, which is now covering considerable areas and, although not yet the scale of problem presented by hemp agrimony, it still adds to the problem.
- Completing the trio of challenges is the spread of young hawthorn across the grazed area. Again, whilst by no means out of control, this seems to be becoming more of a problem with each passing year.

After nearly 15 years of restoration and maintenance work it would be a shame to see what is one of my favourite sites taking a backward step.

Despite the warm sunshine it is again noticeable how few butterflies are about – just a small number of Brimstones, a couple of Whites, a single Common Blue and a single Speckled Wood. All of which makes me question where all the caterpillars will come from to meet the demands of this year's ever-hungry chicks.

### **May 18**

Not quite as warm as yesterday, but still a lovely spring day for a second walk over to nearby Woldingham, this time via Tillingdown (accompanied by the song of a number of Skylarks) and Woldingham School.

Crossing the valley at Tillingdown (below – Note: this is the valley referred to in Richard Kearton's Field Notes as the Rifle Range) I spot my first Painted Lady butterfly (bottom) of the year.



*Painted Lady*



After climbing out of the valley and dropping down through the trees I cross the valley that leads to Woldingham School (below left) – stopping to watch a Kestrel hunting over one of the fields – before picking up the bridleway running parallel to the road through the valley (below right) to loop around behind the school.



Make the time to stop off at my favourite tree (right) – a lovely beech, with its perfect shape, fullness and the clipped canopy bottom where the cattle have grazed the lower branches into an almost straight edge.

Everyone should have a favourite tree, one where they always stop to say hello, this one is mine.



From the school I climb up through the woodland, with its carpet of Wild Garlic (right), now sadly on the wane, but still eye-catching, especially where patches of it are highlighted by the sun bursting through gaps in the canopy.



Emerge from the trees and overgrown hedgerow to cross along the top of the rolling farmland, with its views back along the valley (left) and away to the south - the distant expanse of the lowland Weald gradually disappearing into the misty sunlight - and across to Marden Park Wood.

Head across the open pasture of Tillingdown, where a herd of cattle and their calves have again been encouraged to congregate across the footpath by the placing of the feeding station right beside the row of scrubby hawthorn. Thankfully, they have no interest in me, although it is quite probable that people less used to crossing fields of cattle might chose to avoid using the footpath altogether – which might very well be the aim of the landowner. However, despite the cattle being quite docile, the addition of their calves brings a whole new dimension, as cattle can become unpredictable and quite aggressive if they feel their calves are threatened. For this reason, the most common advice is never, ever get between a cow and her calf – it’s always safer to give them as wide a berth as possible, even if this means straying well off the designated path. At one point a group of calves scatter at my approach, but their mothers seem unconcerned, which is good news.



*Red-headed Common Cardinal Beetle*



*Brown Lipped Banded Snail*

The first patches of Scarlet Pimpernel (the flower that gave its name to the fictional English dandy who went around saving the French aristocracy from the guillotine) add to the burgeoning array of late spring colours. Also known as the Poor Man’s Weatherglass, as the flowers close in dull or rainy conditions. From this one you can see it is a sunny day.



11:20pm - Thunder and lightning and much-needed rain. At 1 mile for each second gap between the lightning and thunder I calculate the storm to be just 3 miles away.

11:30 – The lightning is gathering in frequency and intensity, lighting up the whole night sky.

11:45 – The gap is down to 2 seconds and the rain is getting heavier. Not an evening to be walking home!

Midnight – Lightning now less frequent as the storm moves away, although the rain is still heavy.

### **May 19**

After last night’s spectacular storm and this morning’s grey, the afternoon is mostly sunny, with large expanses of blue sky. Another good day for a walk, this time along Happy Valley (where we recently installed the new benches and steps) and Farthing Downs, where the wildflowers are emerging all over the chalk downland, with thousands of Buttercups to the fore.

*Happy Valley (right).  
Farthing Downs (below).*



Greater Yellow Rattle and Kidney Vetch appear in the secluded meadow (right) that is my favourite part of the entire site. There are dense clusters of pink candy-stripe Sainfoin.

The first clusters of Wild Mignonette.

Common Vetch and Bush Vetch.

The strange flower head of Salad Burnet.

Cow Parsley is at its height right now.

Pink and white Dog Rose.



Plenty of low-lying yellow Silverweed (which gets its name from the leaves that are covered in white hairs that shine silver in the sunshine) almost hiding among the buttercups. The leaves are incredibly soft, to the point where Roman soldiers are believed to have lined their boots with them when marching.

Masses of Common Milkwort in both blue and pink.

Lots of Common Twayblade emerging – one of our under-rated orchids (not even called an orchid).

A patch of deep red-purple Columbine (Aquilegia) – also known as Granny's Bonnets.

Bird's-foot Trefoil, a favourite of bumblebees, is appearing in ever-greater numbers.



*Salad Burnet*



*Sainfoin*



*Greater Yellow Rattle*



*Kidney Vetch*



*Silverweed*

*Common Vetch*



*Milkwort*

*Bush Vetch*



*Columbine*



*Wild Mignonette*



*Common Twayblade*



*Common Twayblade*



*Bird's-foot Trefoil*



*Dog Rose*



*Looking along Happy Valley from Farthing Downs*

## Richard Kearton's Field Notes – May 19 1911

Got up at 2.30 and went out on Rifle range [Tillingdown Valley] to watch foxes and badgers. Dull dark morning. First Skylark began to sing at 2.50, Thrush 3.05, Blackbird 3.07, Partridges commenced to call at 3.08 but only kept on for a very short time. Cuckoo began to cry at 3.10, Garden Warbler to sing at 3.11 and shortly afterwards I heard a Nighthjar. At 3.30 first caw from a moving Rook.

## May 20

### World Bee Day

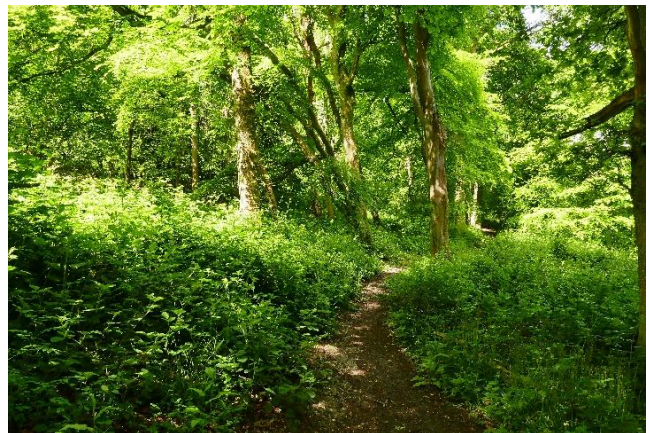
The UK is home to 276 species of bee – 24/25 species of bumblebee, 250 solitary bees and just the 1 species of honey bee.

On a very wet morning I don't expect too many bees are out celebrating the fact that we have to have a special day to appreciate these amazing creatures and vital pollinators.

## May 21

Wandering through the increasingly devastated Old Park Wood that continues to shrink under the mass clearance of dead and diseased ash trees.

The massive beech trees, the largest trees in the woods, are in full leaf, their upper structures obscured by their green cloaks. Where there was light is now mostly shade. Woodland flowers are now increasingly restricted to the open glades and the edges of wide tracks, as the closure of the overhead canopy is almost complete, although there are many gaps where dead and leafless ash trees have yet to be removed.



Where openings have suddenly appeared. brambles are already moving in, their prickly stems reaching out to snag my clothes. They have formed a forbidding partnership with the sudden explosion of nettles.

Flitting along the edges of the sunlit woodland rides is a handful of Speckled Wood butterflies (right), with their brown wings with buff splodges. They may not have the bright colouring of other butterflies, but they are far from being dull. They are quite a feisty characters and pairs can often be seen taking to air, spiraling around each other in a territorial battle.



The last of the Bluebells are hanging on, with the vast majority either gone or going to seed, their yellowing leaves lying flat and limp on the ground.

The waning Wild Garlic is not far behind in turning to seed, with few still in flower.

Also noticeable is what is not present – the glossy yellow flowers of Lesser Celandine, recently so prevalent, have disappeared altogether.

My favourite find was a number of clusters of tall Fringe Cups (right) at the edge of a number of paths – more than I have ever seen before in these woods.

Masses of Wood Spurge, densely packed in the areas of coppicing and tree clearance.

Yellow Archangel also forms dense patches in the woodland openings.

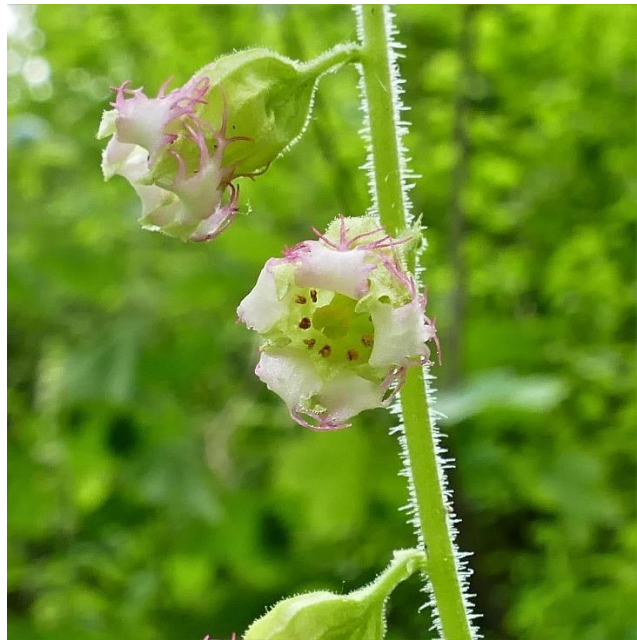
Blue Bugle is noticeably taller and 'leggier' in the woods than out on the open grassland.

Clusters of Sanicle, with their spikey flowerheads.

The yellow of Herb Bennett (Wood Avens) and pink of Herb Robert line the paths.

Germander Speedwell colour the woodland floor blue.

Low-lying patches of white Wild Strawberry.



*Yellow Archangel*



*Sweet Woodruff*



*Wood Spurge*



*Sanicle*



*Herb Robert*



*Herb Bennett*

The last few of the Early Dog Violets hang on here and there, almost hidden from view.

The tiny white crosses of Sweet Woodruff also appear in dense clusters, alongside the larger white crosses of Garlic Mustard. A fly drinks from the flower, another valuable source of food for these spring insects.



Bright orange Chicken of the Woods (above), with its yellow rim, is most eye-catching against the dark trunk of a fallen tree.

Carpets of Dog's Mercury (below), looking best when the sunlight casts patterns of light and shade across them.



Ferns (above) are everywhere, adding to the sea of green, their unfurled fronds catching the sunlight and adding to the shade.

As the shade and darkness increases, so the mosses (such as this Bank Haircap – below), so prominent in winter and early spring, start to fade into the background.



The hawthorn bushes, especially those in woodland openings, are splashed with brilliant white blossom, while fallen blossom petals lay on the ground like a light smattering of snow. Elsewhere, those deeper in the shade of the wood are largely devoid of blossom; only at the very edge of the path, where the tips are exposed to the sunlight do small spots of white appear.

The tree shadows are shortening as we approach the start of summer, with the Longest Day only a month away – and yet again it will be here before we are ready for it!

During the spring months the changes within the wood are almost constant and walking here regularly is to be continually presented with new signs of burgeoning life. Now, after the explosion of spring, there is the feeling of the wood slowing down and taking a deep breath after its exertions.

A young spindly oak with bright green leaves, catches my eye amongst the leaf litter. Many generations will pass before it reaches maturity, and I wonder who will watch it grow and who will shelter from the wind and rain and sun beneath its branches.

### **Richard Kearton's Field Notes – May 21 1908**

Saw the following birds or heard them –

1 – Rook, 2 – Starling, 3 – Blackbird, 4 – Thrush, 5 – Jay, 6 – Wheatear, 7 – Lark, 8 – Robin, 9 – Linnet, 10 – Gt Tit, 11 – Blue Tit, 12 – Swift, 13 – House Martin, 14 – Hawfinch, 15 – Hedge Sparrow [now identified as a Dunnock], 16 – House Sparrow, 17 – Chaffinch, 18 – Tree Pipet, 19 – Skylark, 20 – Willow Wren [Willow Warbler], 21 – Common Wren, 22 – Wood Pigeon, 23 – Cuckoo, 24 – Turtle Dove, 25 – Nightingale

### **Richard Kearton's Field Notes – May 21 1919**

Went to London to lecture wounded soldiers [a reminder of the time he lived in].

#### **May 22**

With a lovely warm, sunny late spring afternoon in the offing it's a great opportunity to take another walk along the local section of the North Downs at Chaldon to see how it has changed with the progress of the season, from a time when the trees were still bare to a time now when they are in full leaf.

The dusty track up to the ridge of the Downs is bordered on one side by a thick green hedgerow and on the other by a field of rippling grass, spreading out in silvery waves ahead of a gentle breeze. Along the ridge towering trees hold court over the hedgerow. Above, the clear blue sky is devoid of even the merest smudge of cloud.

Sparrows, dunnocks, robins, bluetits, great tits blackbirds, starlings and chaffinches noisily appear and disappear along the hedge where some may be raising young deep within the dark thorny interior. My approach causes a sudden eruption from the hedge and a mass of birds make a hurried migration from one side of the track to the other.

Waves of nodding Cow Parsley (right) flow along the hedge line and path edges, a tall froth of white flowers that no late spring hedgerow, verge or tree line would be complete without.

Brilliant white Stitchwort form clusters of delicate but unmissable flowers, surrounded by vivid low-lying patches of Germander Speedwell and pale Forget-me-nots that add a mixed tinge of blues to the base of the hedgerow.

Once bare branches are now covered in green and the stems are lost behind a mass of tall grasses and wildflowers.



Amongst the green of the coarse grasses, nettles and sticky cleavers (goose grass) hide the almost illusive Yellow Archangel.

Buttercups add a brilliant yellow sheen, as do the brash Dandelion flowers, mixed amongst the wonderful puff ball clocks.

Red Campion adds splashes of deep vivid pink amongst the delicate crimson flowers of Common Vetch.



Garlic Mustard appears in its favourite place, giving lie to why it is commonly known as Jack-by-the-Hedge.

Tiny yellow flowers of Herb Bennett appear on stalks that seem far too big for them.

Meanwhile, tendrils of Wild Clematis (also known as Old Man's Beard and Travellers Joy) climb and twist their way through the hawthorn and hazel that mostly make up the hedge and spiky brambles reach along the base.

It is only in taking the time to stop and look that I realise just how many plants exist in the hedgerow and there are probably many others that I have missed. If only I knew all the various grasses I could easily double the list of plants I can see in just one small section. Taking into consideration the insects, bees, birds and butterflies – orange tips, brimstones, whites and common blues that flutter and flit from flower to flower – and who knows what else, I realise just what an amazing array of life exists within a simple hedge, not that I would ever refer to a hedge as being simple.

The horses are still here, although they no longer wear their shaggy winter coats. This time they do not wander over as they have plenty of fresh grass to keep them occupied. They watch me pass with a look of complete disinterest.

Passing the site of the illusive Victorian dewpond (which, despite the initial claims of the amateur archaeologists in the group, turned out to be a rubbish pit – see last month's notes) which still brings a smile to my face, I drop down the slight bank beside the path and through a kissing gate into a meadow where the grass has been cropped by a trio of Sussex cattle.

Buttercups and Germander Speedwell provide patches of yellow and blue amongst the green, while early Red Clover are visible when I look closely. Dense patches of Crosswort seem of little gastronomic interest to the grazing beasts.

Again, swathes of Cow Parsley grow thick and tall around the very edge of the tree line and around a copse in the middle of the field.

The hawthorn blossom stands out against the backdrop of larger trees, mostly white but some tinged with pink.



Walking through a line of hawthorn I make my way to the edge of the ridge of the great natural bowl (left) where I sit down to rest and enjoy the uninterrupted view across the flat Sussex Weald and away towards the South Downs in the far distance, the landscape a mosaic of greens from fields, hedgerows, woods and copses, the trees no longer naked but plump and round and full, no longer individually discernible but merging so that it is impossible to tell where one ends and the next one begins.

Whereas before there were occasional patches of brown to indicate where fields had been ploughed and harrowed, they are now green with crops. Windows and greenhouses glint in the sunshine. It is a hugely impressive sight and one that I never tire of.

How unbelievably different to the May-day a few years ago when we combed these same fields, clearing ragwort as the mist and rain came in from the south, when the grass was so wet that I had

to keep stopping to ring out my socks, when we sat in the Land Rover wondering whether the mist was on the inside or outside of the windows only to discover that it was both. On that day the Weald had been lost entirely from view. Maybe it's these changes in weather that are a part of spring's charm. Or maybe this is only something that I can truly contemplate with a smile on a warm sunny day when that day has already become a distant memory – I certainly don't remember doing a lot of smiling at the time, few things make a working day more miserable than cold feet and a permanently damp pair of socks.

Not far down the slope I notice a brown rabbit lazily munching the grass. Luckily for it the vixen I watched on my last visit is nowhere to be seen. If it is aware of my presence, it shows no alarm. So, we both sit there in the warm sunshine, with the birdsong, the buzz of insects and the gentle breeze wafting the subtle fragrance of the hawthorn blossom.

Further along the North Downs Way are fields of young wheat, barley and beans, each a different shade of green, adding to the greens of hedgerows, trees, grasses and vegetation.



I love the way the farm fields here are surrounded and divided by hedgerows and trees, so unlike the vast monoculture arable fields of some parts of the country that are wildlife deserts devoid of life, insects and vital pollinators deprived of food and habitat.

And in the hedgerows that act as field boundaries, white, lemony fresh plates of Elderflower add to the late spring scene, all beneath a clear blue sky.



Pass through a field of wheat, through a hedgerow into fields divided by another hedgerow, with wheat to one side, barley to the other, then descend the sun-drenched south-facing slope to a copse (right) in the middle of the field before entering woodland that eventually emerges at the side of Shepherds Hill.



A busy cut-through with no verge, this is not the best part of the walk and involves continually stepping up onto the uneven grass bank to avoid the next stream of speeding cars along the edge of Alderstead Farm, with its iconic oak tree (right) standing in the middle of the field.



On the walk it's unusual to see not a single field of deep yellow rapeseed.

Once I get to Alderstead Heath I can leave the road behind and head into the woodland (below). I remember once being berated by one woman emerging from Banstead Woods because we were doing nothing about the surfacing the muddy woodland paths. She would love these woods that are crossed with concrete paths. These, date from the last war when the woods were prepared to act as a secret storage site for provisions and equipment in the event of invasion. The paths would have acted as roads for the transport vehicles. Either side of the paths the woods are a deep green.



Exit the woods into the corner of another field of wheat, passing along the edge before re-joining the North Downs Way and a return back to the start of the walk.

### **Richard Kearton's Field Notes – May 22 1907**

Watched a Cuckoo feeding in grass. He hopped along in an awkward shuffling kind of manner for a few feet and then sat – or rather lay – down for a few moments as if to rest, watch and listen. Found two Bullfinches' nests with eggs in on Great Dene or rather on the Rifle Range [The valley at Tillingdown was once a 1,000 yd rifle range] and a Wood Pigeon's and Robin's in Birchwood [part of the valley at Tillingdown].

### **Richard Kearton's Field Notes – May 23 1909**

Took some moving pictures of Marsh Tit [bear in mind how ground-breaking this would have been for the time].

### **May 25**

Lovely to see a fledgling Starling at the garden bird feeders being fed by the adults. The youngsters have a mostly dull grey plumage - they will not take on their more colourful, speckled plumage until their first moult at the end of summer.

If they follow the pattern of previous years they will soon disappear until next year's nesting season.

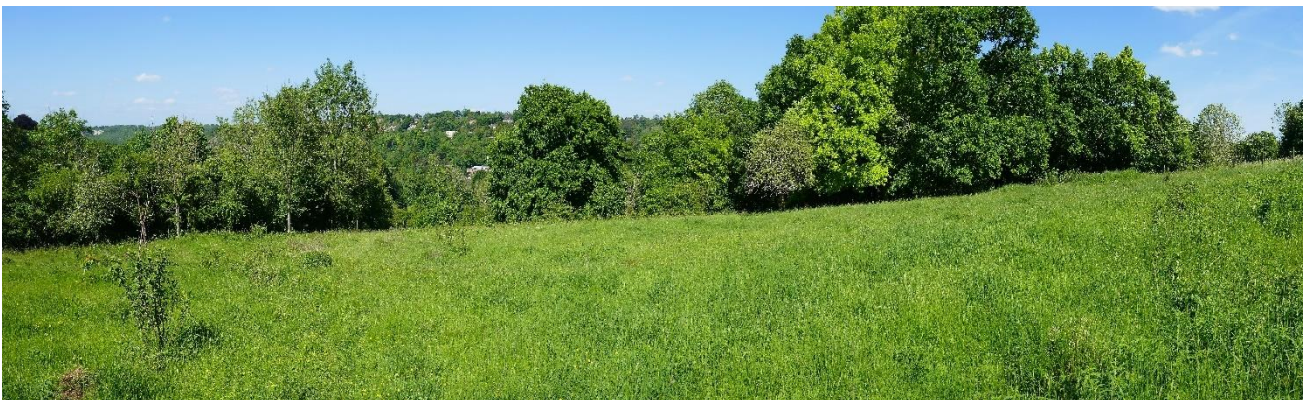
Meanwhile, the past few days has seen a change in the weather to something far less settled.

### **Richard Kearton's Field Notes – May 25 1908**

Got about 50ft of nice film of Hedge Sparrow [Dunnock] feeding young.

### **May 27**

Manor Park looks fantastic in the warm late-May sunshine, so green and full and lush. The recent rain has definitely brought things to life and fullness.



Flowers are blooming all across the meadows –

- Red Clover & White Clover
- Meadow Buttercup
- Bulbous Buttercup
- Hawkweed Oxtongue
- Greater Yellow Rattle (known as the Meadow Maker after the way this parasitic plant suppresses grass growth)
- Ribwort Plantain
- Greater Plantain
- Field Forget-me-not
- Common Vetch
- Bush Vetch
- Bugle
- Garlic Mustard
- Cleavers (also known as Goose Grass)
- Ox-eye Daisy (although not in the vast swathes of previous years)
- Daisies
- Wood Speedwell
- Ground Ivy (no longer in the abundance it was a short time ago)
- Cuckooflower (only the final few still in flower)
- Cow Parsley
- Bird-s-foot Trefoil (also known as Eggs and Bacon after the deep yellow flowers and red buds)
- Herb Bennett (Wood Avens)
- Herb Robert
- Dandelion
- Goat's Beard (also known as Jack Goes to Bed at Noon after is characteristic of the flower closing as the sun reaches its height)
- Green Alkanet
- Columbine (Aquilegia, also known as Granny's Bonnets)
- Dove's-foot Cranesbill
- Cut-leaved Cranesbill
- Common Mouse-ear
- Germander Speedwell
- Black Medick
- Common Nettle
- Common Sorrel

The worrying aspect however has to be the dearth of butterflies – even on this warm, sunny day there are so few of them about.

### May 28

This morning there is a trio of Starling fledglings at the garden feeders. I always know the starlings have arrived without having to look out the window from the noise they make, always loudly squabbling.



The Great Tit is still visiting the nest box on the side of the shed, which is becoming more camouflaged from any predators (mostly the Great Spotted Woodpeckers that have raided previous boxes) as the vegetation starts to creep up.

As much as I would love to leave the small patch of lawn uncut for the few flowers that have so far emerged – mostly Buttercups, Wild Strawberries and Bugle, following the Primroses of earlier in the year – the neighbour's cat has been using the long grass to hide in and stalk the ground feeding birds, so scything it (the grass, not the cat, although the temptation...) has removed that threat. Domestic cats are the largest killers of garden wildlife, especially young birds! It's time they all wore bells.

Checking up on the bee nest boxes I put up a few weeks ago I notice that there has been no interest at all in the pair of shop-bought ones. However, my rough and ready homemade one is far more encouraging, with the plugged holes indicating that some solitary bees have found it acceptable for egg-laying.



### **May 29 - Oak Apple Day**

Today is Oak Apple Day (also known as Royal Oak Day) and celebrates the restoration of the English monarchy in 1660.

The oak apple was chosen as the symbol of the restoration in remembrance of King Charles II who, 9 years earlier, had escaped a pursuing Parliamentarian army by hiding in an oak tree at the grounds of Boscobel House.



The oak apple (such as this one photographed on Tillingdown) is a gall caused by the oak apple gall wasp, which lays its eggs in a leaf bud. These galls can commonly be found between May and June. Inside the gall there are a number of chambers, each housing a wasp larva which eats its way out. Adults emerge in June and July.

A fourth fledgling Starling has joined the 3 from yesterday, along with 4 adults, all noisily squabbling over who will get first access to the suet logs and who will be relegated to the suet pellets.

In turn they all squabble with the colourful Jay (right) – surely the prettiest member of our family of Corvids (that includes crows, rooks, jackdaws, ravens) that just wants to get at the peanuts.

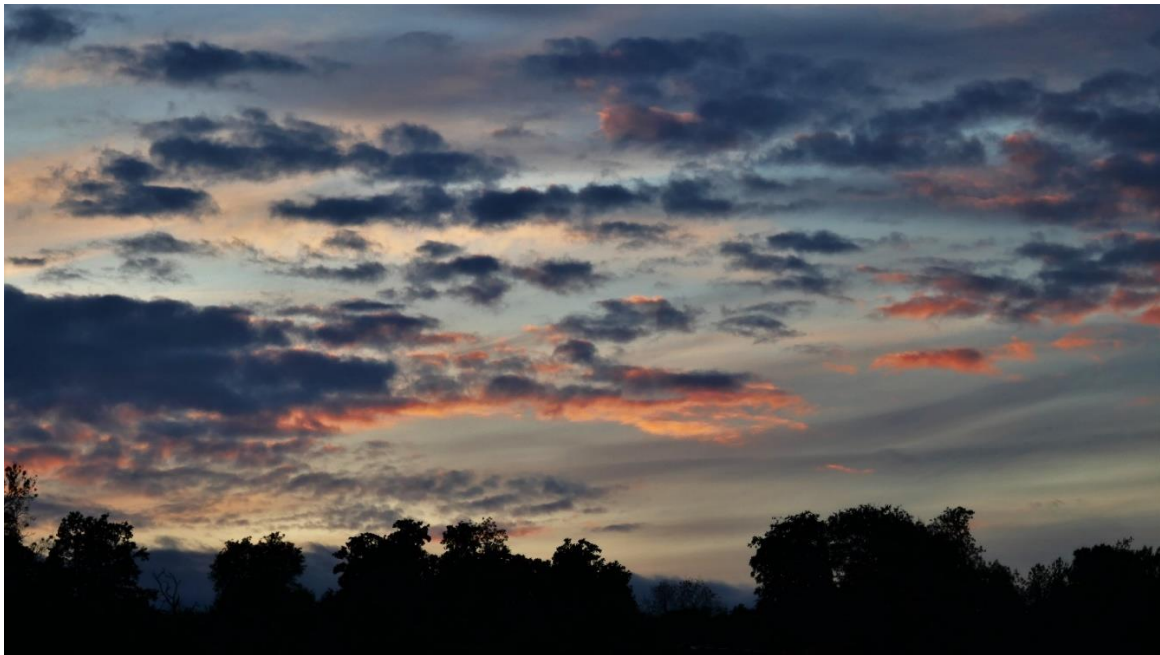


### May 30

Find an exhausted bee (from the yellow markings and white tail, a Garden Bumblebee – one of the 6 most commonly seen) trapped in the porch (not sure how long it had been there), so give her a good drink of sugar water (never give a bee honey because, honey from a hive other than its own can contain bacteria harmful to the bee) and carefully remove her to a clump of Red Valerian in the garden, where she is tucking in and looking none the worse for its ordeal.



The trio of juvenile Starlings are the feeders seem to have worked out how to feed themselves, as the adults are not in attendance.  
Great Tit still going into the nest box.



*Evening sky over the valley, with the sinking sun illuminating the underside of the clouds*

### May 31

The last day of meteorological spring, ahead of tomorrow's start of summer (astronomical summer doesn't begin until the Summer Solstice on June 21). However, the sudden turn to colder, wetter, greyer weather makes it feel that spring is shying away from handing over its baton and has taken a step backwards.

So, goodbye to spring 2022, I will carry the memories throughout the rest of the year. And, if as they say, when a naturalist dies and goes to heaven it is in the hope that they will find a place where it is permanently May, I won't be complaining.

