



The Hundred Parishes

An introductory article about SPRING FLOWERS

Lengthening days indicate the approach of spring with increasing numbers of birds singing, twigs bursting into leaf and flowers opening.

With what appear to be increasing occurrences of unseasonal weather, many flowers seem to bloom at the wrong time: some are stragglers from last autumn, others are spring flowers opening early.

Snowdrops (pictured on the right) are easily seen, but other early spring flowers will follow them as the days lengthen.



Yellow-flowered primroses and winter aconites (shown here) appear alongside sweet violets.



All these flowers produce pollen and nectar, vital food for early-foraging honeybees, queen bumblebees and other insects. Surveys of churchyards indicate they can be havens for wildflowers often supporting species which have become rare in the wider countryside.

Whilst neatly mown grass is appreciated by many humans, leaving vegetation uncut allows many attractive grassland plants to flower for the benefit of insects.

The Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland organises a wildflower hunt to record what is in flower at the start of the year. The aim is to record how flowers are responding to a warming climate. Enthusiasts search their local area, noting what is in flower.

More flowers will bloom as spring advances. You are encouraged to enjoy one or more of the walks or open gardens listed on www.hundredparishes.org.uk - or visit your local churchyard. If you are able, take some photos of what is in flower to share with friends or family or post them on Facebook, perhaps on The Hundred Parishes Facebook group.

Many spring flowers have yellow petals which are highly visible to passing insects but also help to lift our spirits on dull grey days! They include colt's foot, cowslips, daffodils, dandelions, lesser celandines, primroses and winter aconites. Pictured below are lesser celandines on the left and a small section of the annual spectacular display of daffodils in front of Rickling Church.



Another with yellow petals is the rare oxlip, pictured on the right. It is found only in a few localities within west Essex, south Cambridgeshire and Suffolk. This is a perennial plant with a rosette of leaves from which arise short stalks, each topped with a cluster of 10 to 30 pale yellow primrose-like flowers, all facing in the same direction.



Sadly, this rather rare woodland plant is a threatened species as deer find its flowers very tasty. However, colonies of this beautiful plant can be seen in the Hundred Parishes in two of the nature reserves managed by Essex Wildlife Trust - Shadwell Wood near Saffron Walden and West Wood near Thaxted. Coppice management provides ideal conditions for oxlips as well as many other springtime species, so these woods are well worth a visit in springtime.

Further details of these and other reserves can be found on the Essex Wildlife Trust website: www.essexwt.org.uk. If you would like to get your hands dirty, our own What's On page at www.hundredparishes.org.uk includes occasional opportunities to help in conservation work there and at other local nature reserves.

Please also see the separate articles on Bluebells, Snowdrops and Woodland.

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Any comments or suggestions for improvement may be submitted by using the Feedback form on the website. The website has many short articles on various aspects of The Hundred Parishes, as well as introductions to individual parishes and to a number of local celebrities, and an extensive What's On section. More than a hundred walk route descriptions can be freely downloaded, with each of the hundred parishes featuring in at least one walk.