

The first insects in spring



Checking all sorts of underground sites for hibernating bats, this winter I have found two Bloxworth Snouts. This is a rare migrant and partial resident moth with perhaps ten records in Sussex. There are a few insects that are active through the winter, but my bat sites also provide the hibernation site for a range of other insects such as peacock butterflies and the common drone fly (a hoverfly) – the peacock butterflies sometimes open their wings and squeak at us. Such insects will be among the first insects seen in spring.

Actually, the earliest butterfly is often the bright yellow brimstone, which hibernates in dense evergreen vegetation and emerges with the first warm and sunny spring days.

Clusterflies, which can descend in vast numbers to hibernate in the houses of a chosen few, are also out early, and these and the drone flies, as well as some bumblebees and queen wasps (and sometimes honeybees) are important pollinators of a range of early flowers, but probably most obvious on willows' catkins. Another hibernator is the seven-spot ladybird, which can appear, perhaps looking a little dazed, in early March.

Some insects overwinter as pupae (the quiescent chrysalis stage), but can quickly emerge when the days lengthen and it gets generally warmer. One such insect that you might see in the garden in March is the common bee fly – a ball of orange fluff with a very long nose that hovers close to the ground. It's called a bee fly partly because it looks a bit like a small bumble bee, but also because its larvae are parasitic on solitary bees. Particularly up on the Downs, dung beetles can be seen waddling around in the spring sunshine, as well as the bloody-nosed beetle, so-named because if disturbed it oozes a bright red fluid from its mouth (and other joints in its body); this fluid is extremely distasteful and saves the beetle from becoming a delicious meal for many predators.

Not one of the first flush of insects but another harbinger of spring, in my book, is one of the so-called long-horned moths, which over-winter as larvae. The adults are a glossy green-black and have extraordinarily long antennae with striking white tips and can be seen in small swarms dancing up and

down in the sunlight by trees. By then I am watching for the orange-tip butterfly, which particularly likes the delicate pink flowers of ladies smock or cuckoo flower, but this is not until April (although it is steadily getting earlier).

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