

Which spring flowers can you expect to see during April? When you see these, how about letting MKNHS website Sightings know where you see these come into flower. You can send photos too: sightings@mknhs.org.uk

April Spring flowers in woodlands, hedges and by paths

We have three ancient woodlands within the City: Linford Wood, Howe Park Wood and Shenley Wood and they have many of what are known as **Ancient Woodland Indicators (AWI)**. The usual March ground flora have come into flower in these woods, but it has been a slow and lingering Spring, so some plants have bided their time. For instance, **Wood Anemone *Anemone nemorosa*** (AWI). The leaves of these started emerging in early March, but only recently have they begun to flower in quantity. These plants are mainly on the sides and edges of ditches alongside paths, but also deeper into the woods. But do remember that their flowers close up in the evening and need sun on them to open up. Its flower is a star-like spread of six (or more) brilliant white petals, with a light splash of pink beneath. This plant spreads by creeping rhizomes so is in dense patches. There will be bright carpets of them in Linford and the other woods as they all come into flower.

Primrose *Primula vulgaris* (AWI)

Some Primroses *Primula vulgaris* have been flowering in the woods since the end of February, but there are more now and they are 'lasters' so we can enjoy them in their isolated clumps for many more weeks. The ancient woodlands are where to see them at their best.

Barren Strawberry *Potentilla sterilis* / Wild Strawberry *Fragaria vesca* (AWI)

If you have Strawberries *Fragaria ananassa* in your garden, it will be months before you can pick them. But in our Ancient Woodlands you can find two species of wild Strawberries, and both of them are indicators that a woodland is likely to date from before 1600. You can find them most easily in Linford Wood, beside main paths and on the edges of ditches. Neither of these are as large as garden Strawberries but they look like them. They are Barren Strawberry *Potentilla sterilis* which flowers earlier than the other, which is Wild Strawberry *Fragaria vesca*.

Later on you may see a tiny red strawberry fruit on Wild Strawberry, but Barren Strawberry lives up to its name and bears only a tiny dry fruit. Before Wild Strawberry fruits, what distinguishes these two species are that: Barren Strawberry is a smaller plant, with short runners; it has smaller flowers in which the petals tend to be well separated from each other, while the petals of Wild Strawberry overlap; there is a subtle distinction between the leaves of these species: the end tooth of a Wild Strawberry leaf sticks out, but on the Barren Strawberry it is slightly set back from the adjoining teeth; finally, the Barren Strawberry leaf is matt, not shiny, and a dull bluish-green, while the Wild Strawberry leaves have a longer stalk and look glossy green. Perhaps distinguishing the two of these would be a good test of the reliability of any App you may use?

Wild Strawberry is in the Potentilla family, which is mainly Cinquefoils. Barren Strawberry is in the *Fragaria* (Strawberry) family, together with the Hautbois Strawberry *Fragaria moschata* which was introduced to gardens from mainland Europe and has become naturalised in the wild. As far as I know the Hautbois Strawberry is not present in Milton Keynes, which is helpful as it is sometimes wrongly identified as one or other of the native species.

Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* (AWI)

Hybrid Bluebell *Hyacinthoides x massartiana*

Spanish Bluebell *Hyacinthoides hispanica*

Everyone knows what a Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* looks like, with its deep blue colour and drooping flower-head. But the thicker-stemmed Spanish Bluebell *Hyacinthoides hispanica* was brought to this country, escaped into the wild and hybridised with the native as Hybrid Bluebell *Hyacinthoides x massartiana*. So it is possible to see all three in the wild, though Hybrid Bluebell is much more common than the Spanish Bluebell. All three species have occasional variant colours of pink or white flowers.

Key points about the native Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* are: the flowers are straight-sided and do not gradually widen out; all the flowers are on the same side of the stem and droop down; their anthers are cream (but some of the hybrids' are too); the leaves are slender and their tips are hooded, a little like the prow of a slender boat.

For the next most common, the Hybrid Bluebell *Hyacinthoides x massartiana*, look out for: broader leaves; flowers spiralling around the stem; blue anthers (or cream in the white form of this flower); the tips of the petals are slightly curled back; and the stamen is fixed to the inner side of a petal half way up.

The Spanish Bluebell *Hyacinthoides hispanica* is similar to the Hybrid Bluebell, but: the stamen is fixed to the inner side of a petal low down; and the tips of the petals are not curled back.

You can find plenty of Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* in our three Ancient Woodlands, along a few hedgerows, and in few grid-road landscapes. The leaves have been emerging throughout March, ready to flower later in April and into May. Why drive all the way to the Chilterns to see Bluebells when we have fine displays in our local Ancient Woods, including Little Linford Wood?

Early Purple Orchid *Orchis mascula* (AWI)

Our Ancient woodlands will have the earliest of our common orchids coming into flower during April. Early Purple Orchids *Orchis mascula* should appear on some ditch edges, beside paths and under trees. One identifier to look for is dashes of dark blotches running up the leaves. Apparently at night they smell of tom-cats. You can download a guide to all the British orchids from the Natural History Museum website, the 'Orchid Observers Identification Guide':

<https://www.nhm.ac.uk/content/dam/nhmwww/take-part/identify-nature/orchid-observers-id-guide.pdf>

Greater Stitchwort *Stellaria holostea* (AWI)

The crisp white flowers of Greater Stitchwort *Stellaria holostea* should be emerging soon. The five petals are divided to half-way or less, and are on a slender square-shaped stem with slender pointy leaves in opposite pairs, with each pair of leaves at right-angles to the next pair up the stem. Lesser Stitchwort *Stellaria graminea* is a smaller plant and tends to flower in May, with its petals divided more than half way down.

Cow Parsley *Anthriscus sylvestris*

Soon the leaves of Cow Parsley *Anthriscus sylvestris* will be accompanied by the tall stems, crowned by umbels of creamy-white flowers, so characteristic of roadsides, edges of ditches and damp slightly shaded places. There are many other white umbellifers, so do check identification (i/d) in a good field guide. Don't confuse it with other similar species such as the deadly poison Hemlock, or Hemlock Water-dropwort or Fool's parsley. When you are sure of your i/d, it is worth searching where side-branches meet the stem. You may find quite a large round black leaf beetle *Chrysolina oricalcia* whose larvae feed on Cow Parsley. I have found the adult on Cow Parsley by the Bridlepath that runs alongside Old Farm Park and would like to hear of them in other MK locations, as they used to be known as rather scarce, but perhaps they were under-recorded because they hide rather well on Cow Parsley.

Ramsons / Wild Garlic *Allium ursinum* (AWI)

Ramsons *Allium ursinum* tend to grow on calcareous soils, such as over limestone. In MK this is largely a narrow band along our northern edge and in a few parts of the Loughton valley. They can be seen in a couple of our smaller woods and few other places in MK. If you see anyone collecting these in large quantities, please let The Parks Trust know, as I have heard from a resident that some people have been collecting them in quantity, perhaps to sell them commercially. You can just enjoy the garlic smell (if you do) as you look at their cluster of delicate white flowers on top of a long stalk, surrounded by two or three tall, straight bright green leaves.

April Spring flowers of grid-road landscapes, waysides and grasslands

The following should also come into flower in MK during April, in grasslands or beside paths and some in woodlands:

Cowslip *Primula veris*

Cuckooflower *Cardamine pratensis*

Self-heal *Prunella vulgaris*

Lords and Ladies *Arum maculatum*

Bugle *Ajuga reptans*

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