Spring

In early spring when the trees are still bare, it is easy to spot the occasional tree creeper, a small bird that will move up a tree trunk in search of food, while the more colourful nuthatch is quite able to feed in a similar manner moving head up or down trees or branches. Already in February the Hazel and occasional willow will be bright with fresh green leaves.

In April and May the trees slowly unfold their new leaves and below them bluebells, wood anemones, Lady's-tongue fern, preferring a site next to a ditch or stream. Bracken is distinguished by its branched fronds and smooth green stems, whereas the other ferns have single fronds often arranged like a shuttlecock with scaly or hairy stems. Where the sunlight can penetrate the deep shadow of the tree canopy, honeysuckle opens its blooms and offers scarce pollen and nectar to insects at this time of year in the woodland floor and footpaths in October. Acorns, beech nuts and sweet chestnuts cover the woodland floor and footpaths in October.

Summer

By late May and early June the woods are clothed in their deep green foliage and birds are busy feeding their young. In hedged bordering on neighbouring gardens long-tailed tits like hiding their suspended nests. Wood pigeons construct untidy looking platform nests quite high up in the trees and might have to defend them against moulting magpies.

At the height of summer the woods are shaly and cool. Ferns are flowering, some of them like the hart's-tongue fern, resembling a shoe to most to see or smell. Bracken is distinguished by its branched fronds and smooth green stems, whereas the other ferns have single fronds often arranged like a shuttlecock with scaly or hairy stems. Where the sunlight can penetrate the deep shadow of the tree canopy, honeysuckle opens its blooms and spreads its sweet perfume. Blackberry bushes flower, offering scarce pollen and nectar to insects at this time of year in the woodland, although they rarely fruit.

In late July and the greater part of August many birds are silent. They experience a time of rest and renewal while their feathers are moulting.

Autumn

In September the robin starts singing again and his soft musical notes and the wistful, settling song of the wren can usually be heard all through the winter and into spring. Acorns, beech nuts and sweet chestnuts cover the woodland floor and footpaths in October.

Grey squirrels and jays raid each other’s collecting and burying their favourite food for winter. On rotten logs and tree stumps clumps of fungi appear and on the woodland floor the pretty red and white spotted fly agaric (poisonous), pushes through the gathering leaves.

Trees and hedgerows have their territories in the woods, but are rarely seen.

Winter

After the glorious show of autumn colour the bare trees soon stand bare and stark again. Now the evergreen holly comes into its own with its glistening spiky leaves. Few of the many bushes carry berries, probably due to a lack of sunlight or a preponderance of male trees. About 1 in 3 holly bushes is a hybrid with less spiky and shiny leaves. The ivy clings up walls and trees at the edge of the woods offers its tiny, sweet smelling flowers to hungry insects on mild days and last year’s black-blush berries are a favourite food for blackbirds and wood pigeons in winter time.

Flocks of tits (great, blue, coal and long-tailed) are on the move through the tops of alder, birch, oak and ash tree, while in the conifer goldcrests can sometimes be spotted.

The slowly brightening and lengthening days of January and the plentiful moisture suit the mosses on the woodland floor. Their cushions are glowing golden green and some are producing scores of tiny fruit capsules held on flimsy stems, ready to spread to new locations.

Soon the tight brown catkins of hazel will lengthen and turn golden to greet the spring.

Ecclesall Woods are situated in the south west of Sheffield: they cover 230 acres and are one of the largest ancient woodlands in South Yorkshire. There are many paths and bridleways which offer some wonderful walks and include an ‘Easy Going’ trail suitable for the less able bodied and wheelchair. This leaflet has been made possible with the aid of several generous funding provided by the Local Heritage Initiative.
Plants and Wildlife in Ecclesall Woods

Ecclesall Woods are classed as ancient woodlands, that is they have existed at least since the 16th century. Originally the dominant trees were birch, oak and rowan with alder along the sides of the streams. Hazel, hawthorn and holly provided an understorey of bushy growth. Many woodland plants like bluebell, wood anemone, wood sorrel and yellow archangel testify to the long history of the woods.

At least from medieval times until the mid-19th century management was under a system called ‘coppice with standards’, most trees being cut back at regular intervals to ground level to provide young, straight stems, while certain valuable hard woods like oak were left to mature (standards).

During the 19th century non-native trees like beech, Spanish chestnut, larch, sycamore and pine were planted into the woods and flourished. Coppicing declined and was eventually discontinued. The woods became what is called a ‘high forest’, that is an ageing woodland, in which trees tend to be similar in height and age with little regeneration. Renewed management in recent years includes controlled tree felling to create glades, which let in more sunlight and enhance the wood as a diverse natural environment.

During the 19th century non-native trees like beech, Spanish chestnut, larch, sycamore and pine were planted into the woods and flourished. Coppicing declined and was eventually discontinued. The woods became what is called a ‘high forest’, that is an ageing woodland, in which trees tend to be similar in height and age with little regeneration. Renewed management in recent years includes controlled tree felling to create glades, which let in more sunlight and enhance the wood as a diverse natural environment.

The map shows how Ecclesall Woods stretch in a crescent shape from Parkhead Cricket Ground in the north to Abbeydale Road in the south and Hathersage Road and Limb Lane in the west. The Limb Brook, the only named stream in the woodlands, partially forms the southern boundary of Ecclesall Woods. This historically important water course was one of the ancient boundaries between Northumbria and Mercia. The source of the brook is near Ringinglow, where it originates from a very wet area at the head of the Limb Valley. After flowing through Whirlow Park it joins Ecclesall Woods near the stone stile at the bottom of Whirlow Playing Fields. You can follow its course through the woods on well made paths until it reaches Abbeydale Road South. This path is part of the City of Sheffield Round Walk. In spring a rich carpet of lesser celandine, wood anemone, wood sorrel, greater stitchwort, yellow archangel and bluebells lines the sides of the brook.

When walking in Ecclesall Woods it is worth taking your favourite identification book on trees, wild flowers or birds with you. Binoculars are useful for bird watching or identifying butterflies, which can be seen in spring before the tree canopy becomes too dense. The woods are recognised as a Local Nature Reserve because of their high wildlife interest.

Many fungi can be seen mainly in autumn.