



NATIVE HAZEL TREE

February can be a rather drab month, best known for being thankfully short, as we move towards the end of the winter season.

Amongst the stark, bare branches of most of our trees, one real delight of February is seeing catkins, particularly evident on hazel, birch and alder trees. Catkins are the male flowers of these trees, which bloom early, designed to be pollinated by wind not insects. They are sometimes called lambs tails, and contain masses of microscopic pollen within their scales.

The earliest catkins are on hazel trees, dangling down in small clusters, flowers with no petals as such, but laden with pollen that is released in yellow puffs when the wind blows through the branches. These are easier to see than the tiny female flowers, called styles, which are bright red and sticky. This helps catch the pollen in the air, which then travels down the tube in the centre of the flower to fertilise the ova inside, from which new hazel nuts develop. Clever.

Dangling catkins are always wind pollinated, but there are also upright catkins which appear a little later, such as on various willow trees – salix - and these are pollinated by early bees, flies and also blue tits, who enjoy feeding on the nectar produced; pollinating by default as they forage on the fluffy catkins surrounded by pollen.

So, the next time you venture safely out for a late winter walk, look up and see how many catkins you can spot, as well as the discreet red female flowers on hazel trees. A sign of spring arriving soon.