

## wild about APRIL

Guillemots and razorbills return to their cliff colonies



Bluebells and wild garlic carpet woodlands



### TINY & WILD ROSS PIPER

## Oil beetles

Get to know these alluring beetles as they reappear in spring...

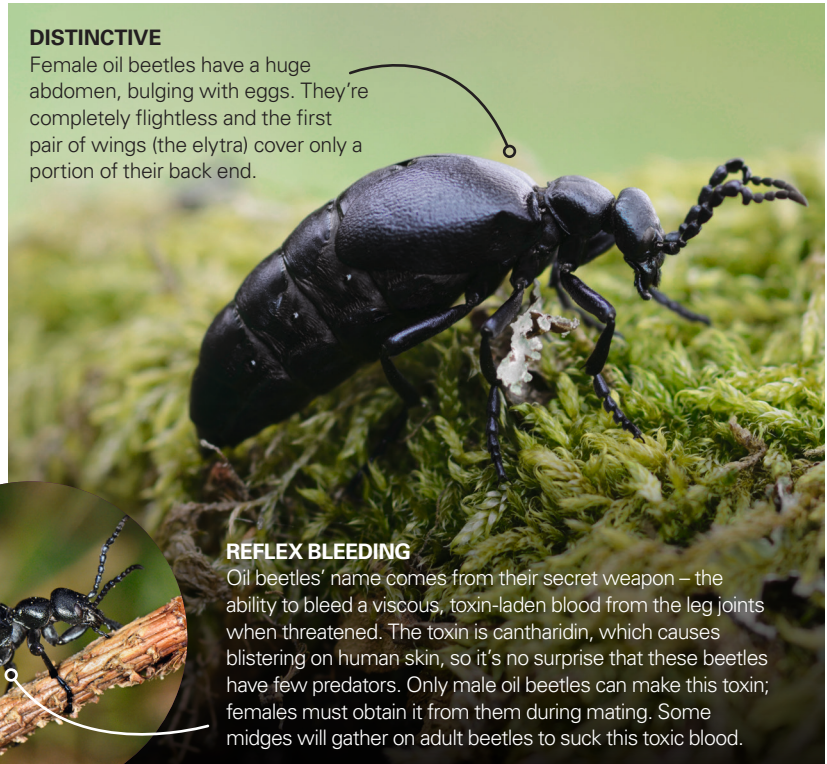
A glossy black beast with a bloated back-end trundles out from a grassy tussock and scuttles across your path into the foliage.

In spring, if you're lucky, this might be your run-in with one of our strangest insects – oil beetles. Everything about these beetles is peculiar, from their appearance to their complex life cycle. The female's bloated abdomen is loaded with up to 40,000 eggs, which she deposits in short burrows. They hatch into tiny, very mobile larvae called triungulins, dig their way to the surface and scamper up plant stems into flowers, where they await their hosts – solitary bees. A lucky few manage to clamber aboard bees as they sip nectar and will be ferried back to the nests of their hosts, where their life takes a bit of a ghoulish turn to reveal their parasitic nature. Inside the bee's subterranean nest, the triungulin invades one of the bee's brood cells, eats its egg and tucks into the pollen the mother bee left for her offspring. Several grub-like metamorphoses ensue until all the pollen has been eaten and pupation and adulthood beckon.

This sequence of development, from egg to triungulin to larva to pupa to adult is very unusual, and is known as hypermetamorphosis. The huge number of eggs produced by the female underlines the lottery of this life cycle. Not only does the triungulin have a short window to hitch a lift on a suitable bee,

#### DISTINCTIVE

Female oil beetles have a huge abdomen, bulging with eggs. They're completely flightless and the first pair of wings (the elytra) cover only a portion of their back end.



#### REFLEX BLEEDING

Oil beetles' name comes from their secret weapon – the ability to bleed a viscous, toxin-laden blood from the leg joints when threatened. The toxin is cantharidin, which causes blistering on human skin, so it's no surprise that these beetles have few predators. Only male oil beetles can make this toxin; females must obtain it from them during mating. Some midges will gather on adult beetles to suck this toxic blood.



development in the host's nest is hazardous.

The UK has five oil beetle species, two of which are extremely rare and all of which have declined – and three more that are long extinct. The best time to look for the most common species is March to July. They're typically found in grassy habitats with plenty of bare ground: meadows, dunes, downland, coastal grassland, heaths and open woodland, especially around footpaths.



**Dr Ross Piper** is an entomologist, zoologist and explorer. His book, *Animal Earth*, is a cutting-edge introduction to animal diversity. Find out more at [rosspiper.net](http://rosspiper.net)

### EXPLORE NEW PLACES NATURE MINI-BREAK

This spring, treat yourself to an "Inspired by Nature" mini-break on the South Downs, where you can indulge your love of nature, learn some creative skills and enjoy fantastic food and drink surrounded by the natural beauty of West Sussex.

The weekend will include a "behind-the-scenes" night-time safari at RSPB Pulborough Brooks; either a full-day macro-photography or wildlife drawing workshop; plus a birdsong masterclass. With a maximum 14 guests this will be a great chance for a "rural recharge", just an hour from London by train.

The weekend will run from 27 to 29 April 2018 priced at £175 for RSPB members and £200 for non members (ex accom). For more information and to book, visit [bit.ly/2BkbUM8](http://bit.ly/2BkbUM8)



### WHAT'S ON APRIL

#### Live lambing at Lake Vyrnwy Weekends and bank holidays

Get hands on welcoming new arrivals at RSPB Lake Vyrnwy's working organic farm. Book via [vyrnwy@rspb.org.uk](mailto:vyrnwy@rspb.org.uk) or 01691 870 278.

#### Bat and moth walk Saturday 28 April

Join an evening walk around Newport Wetlands to identify its night fliers with a bat detector and various moth lures, then toast marshmallows on a bonfire. BYO torch! £6.50 (non-members £8); book via [newport-wetlands@rspb.org.uk](mailto:newport-wetlands@rspb.org.uk)

#### Dorset Discovery Spring Tour 23–25 April

Join our three-day tour, in partnership with Birds of Poole Harbour ([birdsofpooleharbour.co.uk](http://birdsofpooleharbour.co.uk)), enjoying areas of RSPB reserves not open to the public, demonstrations and more. £375pp ex accom, all profits to conservation.