

RAMBLES WITH NATURE STUDENTS.

By Mrs. BRIGHTWEN, Author of "Wild Nature Won by Kindness."

MARCH.

WHITLOW GRASS (*Draba Verna*).

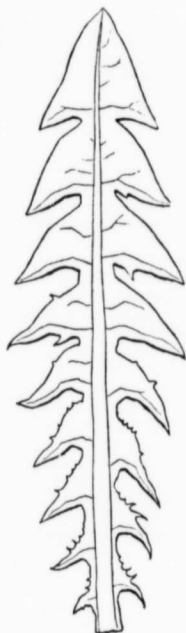
EARLY in this month I found, on an old wall, the pretty rosettes of one of our very early spring flowers, the whitlow grass, which is not a grass at all, but a miniature plant seldom more than three inches high, and



WHITLOW GRASS.



RUE-LEAVED SAXIFRAGE



DANDELION LEAF.

The plant takes its name of dent-de-lion from the form of the leaves, which are so deeply cut as to resemble teeth; more especially perhaps in the spring is this the case, as later on in the summer they become less sharply indented.

These pretty birds abound in my old garden, and in the course of years they have become so extremely tame, that they will almost take nuts out of our hands.

An old oak tree on the lawn near by is much used by these birds; they ram the barcelonas into crevices in the rugged bark, and, whilst they hang head downward to gain the greater force, I hear the birds' loud hammering going on, and afterwards find the empty nutshells from which the kernels have been extracted still remaining in the interstices of the tree bark.

The loud call-note of this bird is one of the early signs of coming spring. It is hard to believe that the small feathered creature that we see creeping up a tree-stem like a grey mouse can be filling the woods with so much sound.

Its mating call-note is a clear sharp cry, several times repeated, at short intervals, and maintained throughout the early spring months.

One ancient lime-tree near this house has frequently been the nesting home of four species of birds. In the highest hole some starlings established themselves. Just below, a smaller cavity was taken by a pair of nuthatches. Some jackdaws appropriated another opening in the stem, and lower down a neat round hole was bored by a green woodpecker.

These various lodgers all appeared to live harmoniously together, and they allowed me to watch them as they flitted in and out on family cares intent. The green woodpecker was the most wary, and would seldom allow me more than a hasty glimpse of his bonnie crimson head and golden green plumage.

The nuthatch has a curious habit of closing the entrance to its nest with layers of mud until only a very small hole remains. The illustration shows a case in point. The bird had made its nest about twelve inches down a hollow tree trunk, and then, with infinite labour, it brought yellow clay sufficient to close up the tree stem, leaving but a small hole for ingress and egress.

It is said that the male bird keeps its mate

sometimes so small that it only occupies a space that might be covered by a shilling.

On a tiny central stalk it bears a few white flowers which droop gracefully when the air is moist, the petals quickly fall away, and then small oval seed vessels appear; these, when mature, shed off two outer husks, leaving a white membrane which divides the seed vessel, just as one sees it in the seed vessel of the common honesty.

During February and March the whitlow grass may sometimes be seen growing in such profusion on old ruined walls as to give the effect of a slight fall of snow.

Another charming little annual which haunts old walls is the rue-leaved saxifrage (*Saxifraga tridactylites*). It rarely exceeds three inches in height; a dainty little plant with white flowers, three-lobed leaves thickly covered with viscid hairs, upon which small insects may often be found entangled.

When the flowers are over, the stem and leaves become of a rich red tint, which seems frequently to be the case with plants exposed to full sunlight as they are when growing upon rocks or walls. We may prove this by trying the experiment of keeping two specimens of this plant in pots and placing one of them in a sunny spot and the other in shade. We shall find that the latter will continue to be green and fail to attain its natural crimson colour.

THE DANDELION.

Dandelion flowers are now making such a bright glow of colour by the roadside that we will choose them for our subject of study to-day.

The flower-bud rises from the centre of the plant to nearly a foot in height, then it opens and becomes fertilised by insects. As soon as this process has been completed, the flower closes up and the dead petals and calyx leaves remain like a pointed roof defending the seed from rain. Now the stalk bends down until it lies flat upon the ground, where it remains about twelve days. By that time the seeds are matured, and the stalk again rises to an upright position. The calyx leaves now turn back until they are parallel with the stem, and the beautiful downy globe is formed and expands until it is a fluffy ball of seeds hanging so loosely that the lightest breeze can waft them into the air.

The seed itself is worth examination. When after a longer or shorter flight a seed touches the ground and falls into some crevice, it might still be dragged out by the wind and carried away, but this is guarded against by some spiny projections on the upper part of the seed which tend to hold it securely in its place.

THE NUTHATCH (*Sitta Europaea*).

The nuts we throw out at the windows for the squirrels are frequently shared by the nuthatches.



NUTHATCH AND NEST.