

Alnwick Wildlife Group



Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna

www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

Email: redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

NEWSLETTER 179 AUGUST 2016

Review of July 2016

MEETINGS:

WEDNESDAY 28TH SEPT

SAVE OUR MAGNIFICENT MEADOWS.

SPEAKER: NAOMI WAITE

THIS MEETING WILL BE PRECEDED BY A SHORT AGM

Naomi is Conservation Officer with Northumberland Wildlife Trust. She has been taking the lead in the major project which helps and encourages upland farmers to manage parts of their land in traditional fashion as Hay Meadows. Hay meadows help to conserve many plant species that have become increasingly rare and threatened across much of our farmed landscapes and helping the plants also helps the animal species that depend on them.



Please send sightings reports for August, no later than 6th September 2016 to: Ian & Keith Davison, The Bungalow, Branton, Powburn, NE66 4LW or Tel: 01665 578 357 or email to redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk Copies of the monthly Newsletter and sightings will be made available on the web site one month after the paper publication.

AWG welcomes contributions for the newsletter and items for inclusion should be submitted by the 12th of the month to redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

JULY 2016:

Work has continued with Barn Owls this month and as further proof that this is a very late (and not especially good) breeding year; at the end of the month we discovered four pairs that have laid eggs within the last few weeks. Three of these are breeding for the first time this year, while the fourth is a replacement brood (three pulli that were hatched in June having died in the first week of July). Given the extended time it takes for Barn Owls to raise their young it will be the weather in September that determines the success or otherwise of these late breeders.

Retrapping adults continues to produce some interesting results with a female nesting near Howick having been ringed as an owlet at Rock in 2009 (7 yrs old) but successfully raising young herself (in the same box) every year since 2011. Another female (one still with eggs mentioned above as a late breeder this year) is our Control (immigrant) from Dumfries ringed as a pulli in 2011 at 'Bucht Rig' but taking up residence near Craster in 2012.

I have now calculated the occupancy rates for the small nest boxes that I monitored earlier in the year. These boxes and sites are dominated by Great Tits and Blue Tits but also include other species such as Redstarts and Tree Sparrows. A particularly interesting comparison is between the occupancy at Ingram which was only 18% (compared with 30% in 2014); while at the Breamish Caravan Site occupancy was only down to 38% compared with 40% in 2014.



I opened up the Howick Ringing Station for the 'autumn' season on the 14th and we had an excellent start catching 26 new birds including Swallows (see pic. of two juveniles and an adult), Blackcaps and eight Chiffchaffs (see pic. of a very young juvenile). There were also 4 retraps; three were from 2015 while the fourth, a Bullfinch, was ringed back in 2014. Since then we have been able to ring on three more occasions with a particularly successful session on the 23rd when 59 birds were captured. The proximity of the cricket pitch (where swallows love to hunt for insects) has enabled the catching of quite a number of swallows; including 10 on the 30th (all but one being juveniles of the year). While working with trainees at the Howick Ringing Station on the 31st it was gratifying to see (and most of all hear) three noisy young Kestrels careering in circles around the car park. These were ringed in their box in the arboretum back on the 1st July. I will continue to ring most Friday and/or Saturday mornings at Howick into October. If you want to come along and learn something or just take pictures you are very welcome; just look for us on the edge of the car park (before 12:00 noon) or get in touch to check days/dates. If it's windy or wet it will not go ahead.

Phil Hanmer

A Ringer & Trainer

Natural History Society of Northumbria Ringing Group

(Hancock Museum)

E-mail: tytoalbas@btinternet.com



PLANT CORNER

Last week I did a wild flower talk at the Bailiffgate Museum as part of their “Wild” exhibition. While I was showing some plants with characteristic flowers of particular plant families it struck me just how much variation there is in many of the main families and in some cases even in the same genus.

Down by the River Breamish there are some big old **White Willows** (*Salix alba*). These are the characteristic trees that many people will think of when they see the word ‘willow’ – or at least these and Weeping Willows (which might be either of two common *Salix* hybrids).



White Willow

In late July I made a pilgrimage to Ben Lawers in Perthshire. I say pilgrimage because Ben Lawers is widely regarded as a botanist’s paradise. Its higher slopes have many unusual arctic and alpine plants. Amongst those that I saw was a willow growing on a rough cliff ledge at about 1100m. I managed to get close enough to see that it was **Net-leaved Willow** (*Salix reticulata*) and at the risk of losing my footing I got a photo of the plant in flower. You can see from



Net-leaved Willow

the bits of moss just what a very small prostrate plant this is. It’s really quite difficult to imagine two willows that exist at such totally different size scales.

As I was taking the Net-leaved Willow photo I heard a strange bird call just above me. It was a bit like a very soft raven call, but when I looked up, about 10m higher up was a covey of four **Ptarmigan** quietly ‘talking’ to each other. They didn’t really seem to be bothered about this idiot scrambling about near them and seeing my first ptarmigan was almost as good as seeing the willow!

And I got a photo – not in brilliant focus, but I was pleased that I’d caught the moving bird at all.



Ptarmigan on Ben Lawers

Next we have the family that used to be called the Umbelliferae because the flower heads are in more or less flat-topped ‘umbels’ – a word that comes from the same Latin origin as the word umbrella. Sadly the family name has more recently been changed to Apiaceae. The biggest of these plants, which can be found in wet areas, particularly by the River Tweed, is **Giant Hogweed** (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*).

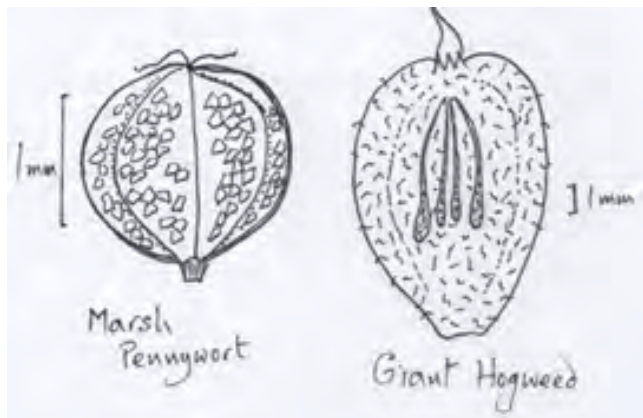


Giant Hogweed

So how, you might wonder, can **Marsh Pennywort** (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*) possibly also be an umbellifer? You find in very wet ground down among the marshy vegetation, usually no more than about 10cm tall. It was present in the boggy ground at Ford Moss when we did the surveys and is reasonably common in the right habitat. The clue, I suppose, lies in the fruits. They are both a similar shape and strongly flattened, front to back. Admittedly those of the hogweed are more oval and are 11mm long, while the pennywort ones are rounder and tiny – only about 2mm wide by 1.5mm long, but both have winged areas at the sides.



Marsh Pennywort



My third example is of two species from the rose family, Rosaceae. As wild roses in Britain are concerned, by far the most frequent is the **Common Dog Rose** (*Rosa canina*). It has all the characteristics you would expect of something from this family; simple, open 'rose' flowers; woody, spiny stems and simple darkish green leaves. But then you have the . Our garden species is *Alchemilla mollis* which only really occurs in the wild as a garden escape. The one I've illustrated is *Alchemilla glabra* which, unusually, is virtually hairless. Neither of them looks remotely like a rose, either in its growth habit or its leaves or, particularly, in its flowers.



Common Dog Rose



A Lady's Mantle - *Alchemilla glabra*

Richard Poppleton

MICRO-MOTHS – TORTRICIDAE - ARCHIPINI

One of the main Tortricidae tribes is the Archipini; a group that tend to rest their wings almost flat against the surface they are resting on. They nearly all have broken patterns on their wings as camouflage although some can be quite variable. 32 different species have been recorded in Northumberland most of which are on the wing in summer and autumn. The larvae are mostly polyphagous on the leaves of trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants. An example of this is *Pandemis cerasana* (pictured below), which although described as a “Fruit-tree Tortrix”, I have found feeding underneath Oak leaves in a silken web, but also between leaves and flowers formed into a tight spinning on Yellow Loosestrife. Most fly in the evenings with many coming to light traps.



Barred Fruit-tree Tortrix
Pandemis cerasana (Wingspan 16-22 mm)
Very common: June – September



Large Fruit-tree Tortrix
Archips podana (Wingspan 18-25 mm)
Fairly common: May – August



Light Brown Apple Moth (form)
Epiphyas postvittana (Wingspan 14-20 mm)
Very common in South Northumberland and
spreading north: June – October



Light Brown Apple Moth (form)



Light Brown Apple Moth (form)



Pseudargyrotoza conwagana
(Wingspan 11-15 mm)
Very common May - August

STEWCHAT...

July has largely continued as we left off in June, beginning wetter than usual and not particularly warm though this changed mid-month with an increase in temperature and even an odd day where it didn't rain!

Early in the month, our village **Starling** roost began to increase. Most years we get up to 500 birds in a neighbours three conifers from late June to November when numbers decline. This year for some unknown reason the flock built up to 3,000 or even 4,000+ . It was with mixed emotions watching the birds come in at dusk where they would chatter and squawk right through the night. On damp nights the smell was quite, er, pungent shall we say. Then, one night, late on, I was coming back from the last dog walk when I saw a **Barn Owl** emerge from one of the roosting conifers and flop, moth-like, on top of a nearby shrub. I lit it in my head torch beam and it flew off without prey.

A few hours later our dog decided she would wake me and ask to be out again, at 3am. This is unusual for her, but in a groggy state we strolled off. It was now that I noticed the thronging shrubs were absolutely still and silent. The Starlings had gone. Every one of them. All I can think is that the owl came back to finish what it started and spooked the whole mass of birds into flight and away, never to return. Since then a few have come back, only a handful, leaving our gardens strangely quiet. Despite the racket, mess and smell, we kind of miss them.



Figure 1: Our Starling roost.

July is one of the best months for garden moth trapping and despite the weather at first, numbers and variety continued to build throughout. I was particularly pleased with a new species or two for the garden, even after seven years trapping its amazing to see that new things can still be found. One such species was *Cryptoblabes bistriga*, only the 8th Northumberland record, closely followed by *Epinotia tedella*, commoner, but new for me.

On the 17th a nice walk around Warkworth Dunes produced lots of lovely flowers including **Maiden Pink**, **Harebells**, **Ladies Bedstraw**, **Wild Thyme** plus many more. We were over the moon to find 3 or 4 **Dark Green Fritillaries** on the wing here, a new butterfly for the site for us despite watching here regularly for many years.

As the month came to a close, at Howick, small groups of **Swifts** could be seen heading south, for them the summer was over, plus the odd **Yellow Wagtail** moving along the coast path. Soon it will be time to dust the binoculars off in earnest in time for the autumn migration where birding will no doubt return to centre stage...

Stewart Sexton, Howick.



Figure 2: *Cryptoblabes bistriga*

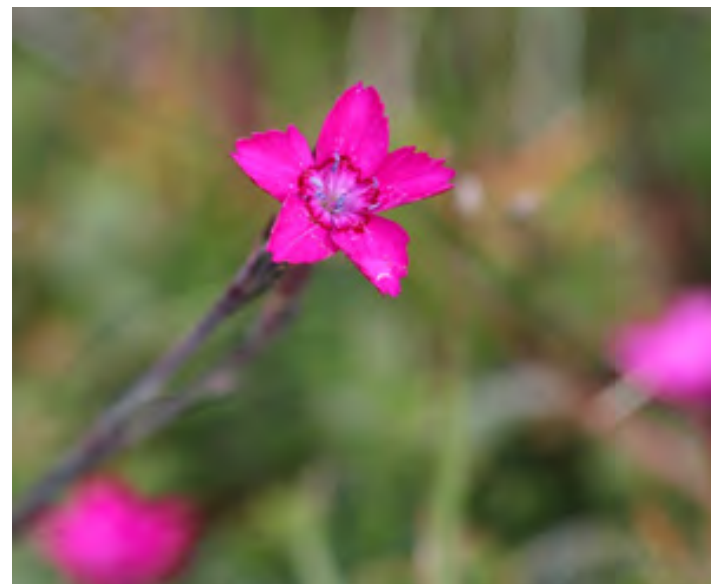


Figure 3: Maiden Pink

AN ALNWICK RAMBLE

On 6th August four of us joined David Turnbull on a beautiful summer's morning for an exploration of some less-well-known parts of Alnwick.

We started in the Cemetery on South Road where David showed us some of the magnificent trees – including two very tall Monkey Puzzles and several multi-stemmed Cedars (see photo below). As we walked round this well-kept multi-denominational graveyard David gave us some details of its history. There were few birds or butterflies around so much of our concentration was on plants.



We eventually emerged behind the Leisure Centre where there were many occupied House Martin nests under the overhang of the high curved roof. These birds began their nesting colony almost as soon as the centre was built and the colony size has continued to increase.

We crossed Willowburn Avenue and meandered down the access road to the new High School. There are many wet-ground species growing here where the burn used to be before it was diverted into its current channel.

We followed several short back paths by the rugby ground before emerging on Weavers Way. Walking past the cricket club we found ourselves beside a very

ancient hedge. It is a long time since the Council has done any trimming of this hedge so it has now become a tall and dense growth of various trees, including sessile oak, wild cherry and others.

Up onto Blakelaw Road and up the lonnen beside the old Thomas Percy School site. After the Thomas Percy woodland where AWG did its surveys last year we then turned right on to the upper part of Hope House Lane. The verges of the lonnen and the lane had a range of interesting plants including the two small ferns, Maidenhair Spleenwort and Wall Rue, plus the very pretty little Ivy-leaved Toadflax.

As we continued down the longest straight street in Alnwick – Swansfield Park Road – we noticed a plant of the St John's-wort species called Tutsan in fruit. Earlier by the rugby ground we'd seen one in flower.

Straight on down Bridge Street some of us were surprised to find that a new set of steps will take you straight down into the Lidl car park. Just before we reached this point we passed an area where Lidl had planted a range of species when their store was built,

designed to create a wild area. But now apparently extensions to the store will result in this wild area being lost. It's not that you could actually get into the wild area but it has some butterfly-attractive plants such as Buddleia.

As we walked back along South Road to our starting point, David took us down to the small area behind Aldi where a mound of soil had been left after the store was built. It is now being colonised by some typical bare-ground plants such as Mayweeds and Black Medic, but what its fate will be isn't clear.

Altogether this was an enjoyable Saturday morning walk with a range of points of interest. Many thanks to David for organising and leading it.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN SEPTEMBER.

Despite what we naturalist say, for most the true beginning of autumn is in September. It can be a month of great contrasts, often with nice fine calm days but it can have a nasty bite, with storms and heavy rain too.

As the damp dewy mornings still have some warmth this provide ideal conditions for the emergence of many species of fungi and what can be more indicative of early autumn than a nice show of Fly Agaric in a beech woodland or a scatter of Shaggy Ink Caps in the village green. One to look out for in pine woods such as Thrunton or Harwood is the Sickener *Russula emetica* a common fungi under pines at this time. Look and wonder but beware because it is poisonous.



Above – The Sickener (left) and Shaggy Ink Cap (right).

One warm days some of our nicest butterflies are on the wing such as Small tortoiseshell, Peacock and Comma but the month really belongs to the boldest of all, the Red Admiral. This is a migrant species only recently found to winter this far north. Watch out for all of these insects around Ivy or in gardens with Sedums or Michelmas Daisy.

September is one of the best months for birding over the whole year. As summer species prepare to move, winter wildfowl return and passage migrants or vagrants add spice to a day on the coast. From around the 22nd an increasingly common 'rarity' can be found, coming all the way from Siberia, the Yellow browed Warbler is always a joy to find. This tiny bird, scarcely bigger than a Goldcrest, arrives in sallows and sycamores on all of our coastal headlands. Check out Holy Island, Low Newton or Bamburgh Castle Woods on a calm day with a very light SE or E breeze and listen for the coal tit-like call, a sharp 'tisswissp'. Never still, you should soon see it flickering out from under leaves, a mass of green and yellow stripes. Take a minute to think that this tiny scrap of feathers has flown 2000+ miles to get here.



Yellow browed Warbler

And finally, another group of insects out in numbers this month are the Dragonflies. In places like Corby Craggs woods, many Common and Black Darters and Common Hawkers can be found patrolling sunny wood edges looking for their insect prey.

CONTINUED AT BOTTOM OF NEXT PAGE...

PROJECTS – PLUS A NEW ONE FOR 2017

Members will know that over recent years AWG has undertaken a range of projects for local landowners.

- We have our ongoing **bird surveys on seven different sites** for Northumberland Estates, a project that is now in its tenth year. If you haven't been involved but think you might like to, do contact Jim Clark who organises it all (jandec1@tiscali.co.uk or 01668 217004).

- We have carried out detailed surveys at **Ford Moss** for Lord James Joicey at Ford & Etal Estates in 2003, 2008, and 2015. In theory, if the Estate requests it, we should be due for the next one in 2020.

- In 2014, also for Ford & Etal, we did quite a bit of work at **Slainsfield Moor** and produced a detailed report for Lord Joicey (who, incidentally, is a long-term member of AWG).

- In 2015 we responded to a request from Alnwick Town Council to do some baseline surveys at the **Thomas Percy Woodland** in the town and at **Cawledge Dene**. The Town Council's idea was that these two sites should be adopted as Local Wildlife Sites. It seems that this idea has got rather bogged down in bureaucracy and politics associated with the Alnwick Local Plan and it is not clear whether anything will happen.

- This year we have been concentrating on the **Branton Ponds Nature Reserve** for John Car-Ellison at the Hedgeley Estates. Our report on this work should emerge in the autumn.

Busy, busy, busy! So, "what about 2017?" I hear you ask.

Well, Lord Joicey has recently taken on a long-abandoned whinstone quarry at Kyloe and he has asked if we would be willing to subject it to the AWG survey treatment. We quickly said yes and four of us went with James Joicey for a brief exploratory visit in late July. The quarry is a fascinating place; big enough to present a survey challenge but nothing like as large as Ford Moss. As well as the quarry itself the site includes some very interesting wet broad-leaved woodland that will bear close inspection at different times of year for plants, birds and butterflies.

The only problem with our surveys is that it is often the same core of members who get involved. We know that survey work is not everyone's cup of tea, but if you think you might like to give it a try, even in a minor way, watch this space later in the year for details of the **Kyloe Quarry Project**.

Richard



Common Darter.

Stewchat standing in for Jack Daw....

SIGHTINGS JULY 2016

BIRDS	
Great-crested Grebe	Adults with 1 young at Branton Ponds on 23rd
Heron	Juvenile near Lesbury on 10th
Gadwall	1 female with 8 young at Branton Ponds on 3rd
Goshawk	1 at Smeafield on 20th
Peregrine	2 in College Valley on 8th
Common Buzzard	2 near Lesbury on 10th 4 at Smeafield on 7th
Water Rail	2 at Branton Ponds on 31st
Golden Plover	1 on Cheviot summit on 14th
Knot	1 at Coquet Estuary on 17th
Whimbrel	1 at Newton Point on 28th
Greenshank	1 at Low Newton Scrape on 28th
Green Sandpiper	2 on River Glen on 14th 1 at Charlton Mires Flash on 17th
Common Sandpiper	6+ on River Glen on 14th 5 at Coquet Estuary on 17th
Little Gull	1 at Branton Ponds on 3rd
Mediterranean Gull	1 at Low Newton Scrape on 28th
Barn Owl	1 seen between High Buston and Shilbottle on 29th
Nightjar	2 at Beanley Woods on 6th
Kingfisher	1 near Lesbury on 10th 1 on River Glen on 14th 1 at Branton Ponds on 19th
Yellow Wagtail	4 at Low Newton Scrape on 28th
Redstart	1 at Branton on 27th 3+ juveniles in Branton on 31st
Whinchat	2 at East Hill (near Branton) on 1st 1 in College Valley on 8th
Stonechat	A pair at Rothbury on 27th
Ring Ouzel	1 in College Valley on 8th
Mistle Thrush	4 near Lesbury on 10th
Chiffchaff	Singing near Lesbury on 10th
Blackcap	Singing near Lesbury on 10th
Spotted Flycatcher	1 feeding young near Lesbury on 10th 1 juvenile in Branton on 30th
Lesser Redpoll	4+ near River Glen on 14th
Crossbill	1 at Langleyford Hope on 14th
AMPHIBIANS	
Toad	Several in Branton on 1st
REPTILES	
Adder	3 at Branton Ponds on 3rd
Slow Worm	1 at Branton Ponds on 3rd
INVERTEBRATES	
Speckled Wood	1 at Branton Ponds on 3rd several near River Glen on 14th
Dark-green Fritillary	4 in Warkworth Dunes on 17th
Common Blue	6 at Branton Ponds on 7th
Small Heath	3 in Warkworth Dunes on 17th
Ringlet	12+ at Branton Ponds on 7th 10+ at Warkworth Dunes on 17th
Large Skipper	1 at Whittingham on 6th
Small Skipper	25+ in Warkworth Dunes on 17th 20+ at Branton Ponds on 23rd
Dingy Skipper	1 at Smeafield on 18th

Meadow Brown	Several at Branton Ponds on 3rd 50+ at Elwick on 13th
Small Tortoiseshell	1 at Smeafield on 22nd and 9 on 29th
6-spot Burnet moth	Large numbers on Holy Island on 9th
Latticed Heath	In Warkworth Dunes on 17th 1 at Branton on 23rd and 24th
Nemophora degeerella	1 at Branton Ponds on 3rd 1 at Whittingham on 6th
Coronet	1 at Branton Ponds on 2nd (5th for vice county) 1 at Branton on 7th
Garden Tiger	1 at Branton Ponds on 2nd 2 on Holy Island on 9th
Figure of Eighty	1 at Branton Ponds on 2nd
Poplar Hawkmoth	10 at Branton Ponds on 2nd
Elephant Hawkmoth	3 at Branton Ponds on 2nd 1 at Branton on 6th
Light Emerald	17 at Branton Ponds on 2nd
Old Lady	1 at Branton on 24th
Purple Clay	10 at Branton Ponds on 2nd
Double Dart	4 at Branton Ponds on 2nd
Green Pug	1 at Branton on 2nd
Buff Arches	1 at Branton on 5th and 7th
Pyraustra purpuralis	1 at Branton on 22nd
Common Darter	3 at Hedgeley Lakes on 23rd
Southern Hawker	1 on River Glen on 14th
Large Red Damselfly	1 on River Glen on 14th
Emerald Damselfly	1 at Branton Ponds on 23rd
MAMMALS	
Red Squirrel	1 at Branton on 5th 1-2 daily at Newton Lowsteads
Soprano Pipistrelle	3 at Branton Ponds on 14th
Common Pipistrelle	Many around Branton on 14th
PLANTS	
Common Twayblade	Numerous on Holy Island on 9th
Pyramidal Orchid	Numerous on Holy Island on 9th
Marsh Helleborine	Many on Holy Island on 9th
Starry Saxifrage	In College Valley on 10th
Mossy Saxifrage	In College Valley on 10th
Parsley Fern	In College Valley on 10th
Maiden Pink	In Warkworth Dunes on 17th
Restharrow	In Warkworth Dunes on 17th
Vipers Bugloss	In Warkworth Dunes on 17th
Sea Aster	At Buston Links on 29th
Hairbell	At Buston Links on 29th
Centaury	At Buston Links on 29th
Thyme	At Buston Links on 29th
FISH	
Sea Trout	Several in River Glen on 14th
Grayling	In River Glen on 14th
RAINFALL	89mm
OBSERVERS	V&P Boulton, I&K Davison, G Dodds, P Jobson, S Reay, J Rutter, S Sexton.