

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



NEWSLETTER 114

REVIEW OF FEBRUARY 2011

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NEXT MEETING – WEDNESDAY, 27TH APRIL 2011 CHRIS LIVSEY

Conservation on the Otterburn Ranges

Chris is employed by the Ministry of Defence and works out of an office at the Otterburn camp. His talk will look at all aspects of conservation and public enjoyment on this large estate and how the needs of the military can work hand-in-hand with habitats and species.

OTTERBURN RANGES - EVENING VISIT. SATURDAY 7TH MAY 2011.

Chris Livsey will follow up his talk and kindly show us a range of habitats that can be found on the Ministry of Defence land. In the past, we have seen Black Grouse, Peregrine, Merlin, Short-eared Owl, Cuckoo, Lesser Redpoll and Crossbill. Please contact George Dodds (tel: 01665 578 645) to book. The intention is to meet in the Otterburn Mill car park at 5pm. We expect to finish between 8pm and 9pm depending on the light and the weather.

RIVER ALN WALK – 5TH MARCH 2011

A small group of mostly members met at the gates of Alnwick Castle. The aim of the walk was to have a gentle stroll along the banks of the River Aln. We proceeded to the Lion Bridge, where there were a small selection of birds including a Little Grebe, several Mallards and a couple of Teal. A large gathering of gulls could be seen gathered on either side of the river in the Pastures. Common and Black-headed Gulls were accompanied with 40 Oystercatchers and several Moorhens. Evidence of Otter was found along the sandy banks. Good views of Treecreepers were had as they picked their way up the Alders along the riverside.

The small wood on the south side of the Alnwick to Denwick road provided us with the first flowering plants; Dog's Mercury, Snowdrops and Flowering Currant. Ramsons and Gooseberry were also coming into leaf. Three Great Spotted Woodpeckers were making a lot of noise in what appeared to be a territorial dispute. The wood also produced a Nuthatch and the ripples of what was likely to be either a Brown or Sea Trout.

Where there were groups of rocks, several Dippers were seen along with two Grey Wagtails. Again Otter tracks were seen in the sandy deposits on the sides of the river. The riparian woodland was the ideal habitat for the mixed flock of tits. Long-tailed Tits were seen with Coal, Blue and Great Tits. Further Treecreepers were seen along with a small charm of Goldfinches and a flock of Siskins. Three Roe Deer were disturbed along with a male Grey Partridge and several Mistle Thrushes. Overhead a Common Buzzard spiralled upwards and a Kestrel was seen.

Eventually we made it to the Priest's Bridge, where there was a small group of Blackbirds, Song Thrushes and further Treecreepers. The walk took 2 ½ hours and was enjoyed by all.

George Dodds.

MEETING OF WEDNESDAY 23RD FEBRUARY 2011

42 members heard about a trip to Otterburn being arranged for mid-May. Details will be in the March newsletter and you will be asked to register your interest so the MoD knows how many to expect. George presented a range of specimens, starting with two members of the phylum Echinodermata – a large starfish and a sea urchin. There was a potter wasp nest and a fungus of the genus *Tremula* on gorse, which might or might not be poisonous!

Wildlife news included c.3000 pink-footed geese near Doddington and c.2000 Brent geese at the Lindisfarne NNR. Other reports were of wigeon, siskins and barn owls. A soap-opera tale of mute swans at Howick told of a new young male displacing the ten-year partner of a female. Following the inevitable fight the old male had to be rescued and taken to the swan rescue centre at Berwick. An enormous (c. 5000) jackdaw and rook flock was reported from Powburn. There were no reports yet of either frogspawn or butterflies.

The speaker was David Wood who farms at Whinny Hill near Longhorsley. His topic was “*Wildlife on a Northumberland Farm*”. He has a 300 acre arable farm and he has been improving a whole range of aspects of the farm for wildlife, taking much of his advice from George Dodds at Northumberland FWAG.

Much effort has been put into restoring and replanting hedges, both as habitat in their own right and as wildlife corridors. Layering has been used to ensure hedges do not become ‘leggy’ and hedgerow trees are mostly smaller species with good flowers and fruit. Woodland has been planted and older grazed woodland has been fenced to allow regeneration. Fields margins have been planted with ‘floristically enhanced’ seed mixes, including *Phacelia* for bees. Wild bird seed mixes include *Quinoa* and late-sown spring barley gives seeds for finches as does the leaving of as much stubble as possible.

The farm now has about eight ponds and these encourage dragonflies. There are hopes for water voles. Old dead trees are often left *in situ* and bird boxes of various sorts encourage species such as tree sparrow, redstart, barn owl and kestrel. The RSPB gets involved with bird surveys on the farm, although David has not always been impressed with the results. All in all, David has put in a great amount of time and money into his wildlife work and AWG may try to arrange a visit so we can see the effects for ourselves.

Richard Poppleton

What to look out for in April

Day by day the new signs of spring are appearing. Lambs and calves can be seen in pastures and the first of this year’s rabbits have started to emerge from their underground burrows. In hedgerows and woodlands, the catkins of willows are in full bloom. Grey Willow is often the first to flower, followed by Goat, White and Crack. On sunny, warm days the catkins often attract the first of this year’s butterflies and ‘queen’ bumblebees. Often the first to emerge is the Early Bumblebee followed by Garden, Buff-tailed, and Red-tailed. These species are relatively common and will often visit gardens.

April and early May is the best time to look for flora in ancient semi-natural woodlands. Carpets of flowering Dog’s Mercury and the leaves of Ramsons are complimented with Primroses, Wood

Anemone, Sanicle, and Wild Strawberry. By the end of April the first of the flower heads of Bluebells are starting to appear. Where there are large patches of flowering woodland plants, on south facing slopes, look out for the Bee Fly. This large squat hairy fly resembles a small bumblebee with a very long proboscis. The proboscis is used to extract nectar from Primroses, Violets and other woodland species. The larvae of this fly are an external parasite of certain species of Solitary Bee. Bee Flies are known to visit garden where there are good displays of Primula and/or Violets.

In the fields, pastures and moorland, the male Skylarks are singing high in the sky, competing with their neighbours for a territory and a mate. Skylarks can face a dilemma if they decide to nest in winter-drilled wheat or barley. By the middle of April, the cereals are about the right height to make a nest and lay eggs. Unfortunately, the crop grows very quickly, often leading to the female to desert the nest. Many successful nests are found on tramlines made by the wheels of the tractors or in areas

where the crop has failed to establish. The male skylark will continue to defend its territory but the female has moved off to find habitats that are more suitable for chick rearing. Farmers are being encouraged to create areas within winter-drilled crops that will provide suitable nesting areas for this species and others such as the Yellow Wagtail.

In my eyes, some of the highlights of the spring are watching displaying waders; male Lapwing tumbling from the sky, the male Curlew and its hanging display flight and nothing can beat a displaying male flight on a grey misty morning. These sights and sounds are part of the fabric of upland Northumberland. Yet it is surprising how few people have watched/heard a displaying male Snipe with its undulating flight and the synthetic noise that is created by wind passing through the outer tail feathers. The noise of the Snipe with that of displaying Black Grouse are so evocative that they give me goose pimples just thinking about them.

Spring is such a fantastic time of year as there is so much to see and hear. This article could have been so many times longer and I have chosen only a few species that I look forward to seeing.

Jack Daw.

SWARLAND SNAPSHOTS

The usual variety of finch species continued to be the most prominent group using the feeders again this month, although the activity was patchy at times with some days being unusually quiet more often during the second half of the month. Greenfinches and Chaffinches were both feeding heavily at times, with twenty or more of each together occasionally. Up to three Bullfinches were present almost continuously on a daily basis and at least a dozen House Sparrows added to the throng each morning, although they usually had dispersed by mid-morning to other favoured locations. A few Siskins began to appear by mid-month whilst single Goldfinches came to the feeders occasionally and single Bramblings arrived on half-a-dozen occasions.

All three of the common tit species were feeding daily, but numbers were clearly down on the previous month, with just 9 individual Coal Tits (versus 38 in January) and 13 Blue Tits (versus 23 in January) caught in four ringing sessions both months; Great Tits were even fewer with 4 and 8 respectively. Nuthatch was recorded daily until the middle of the month but only three times thereafter. Great Spotted Woodpecker was seen only once and for yet another month there were no sightings of Wren, Goldcrest or Long-tailed Tit. There has been no sign of winter thrushes, apart from Blackbirds which had settled down to the four "local" pairs by the second half of the month. First Song Thrush song was heard on 12th February, the third-latest date for the spring return in this century, for which first noted song dates here range from 27th January to 16th February.

Whilst the Sparrowhawk was seen only twice this month, a Kestrel has been a regularly seen hunter, once observed scrabbling furiously in the loose grass at the base of a hedge, presumably trying to retrieve prey it had just missed before retiring, when disturbed, to the top of a nearby telegraph pole to continue its vigil. Buzzards were seen occasionally with a pair on the 12th and three noisily kiting overhead whilst drifting with the wind towards the northeast on the 24th. Twice Pink-footed Goose were seen flying northeast, 120 on the 13th 50 on the 15th.

Having listened to a brief discussion at a local natural history group, and read recent national reports, concerning the apparent decline in Greenfinch populations and the possible association with a respiratory disease affecting this species, it seemed an opportune moment to review the history of the species here. Bird ringing began at Swarland in autumn 1969, so the results of this activity fall conveniently into roughly four easily separable decades:- the 70's; 80's; 90's and 00's. During this time 44387 birds have been ringed, 9208 (20%) being Greenfinches. From a low base in the 70's of just 100 birds (average 10 per year-2% of annual total of all birds ringed), numbers rose in the 80's to 1295 (c.130 per year-15%); through the 90's to 4664 (c. 460 per year-23%) then fell back through the 00's to 3240 (c.300 per year-23%). In both of the latter decades peaks of activity occurred during two distinct 5 year periods, during which time annual totals of Greenfinches ringed were c.650 and c.450 respectively. In the seven years between these two peaks totals fell to c.190 per annum; coincidentally in the three years since the end of the last peak average numbers ringed were also 190 per annum whilst that for the eight years before the first peak was c.200 per annum.

Whilst obviously regional fluctuations do not necessarily reflect the nationwide situation, they could be a mechanism behind apparent seasonal declines observed locally. Population peaks also might eventually lead to territorial overcrowding which in turn could lead to an increase in bacterial and viral infections within a species spreading more readily, hence more frequent reports of sick birds being seen. An increase in the incidence of moribund sick birds, such as has been remarked upon recently, also occurred in the mid 90's. Coincidence or consequence of an over-expanded population?

It may be worth observing that while Greenfinch numbers ringed in the 00's fell by 30% versus the 90's the total number of all birds ringed in those periods also fell by 30%.

Dave Makepeace.

PLANT CORNER

All flowering plants try, via their growth habit, to ensure the best conditions for growth and the maximum chance of pollination in their chosen habitat. Two important factors which affect plant growth are access to light and avoidance of excessive competition. For predominantly woodland plants like Dog's Mercury (*Mercurialis perennis*) the secret is to develop leaves and flowers early in the season before the tree canopy shades them too much. As a result Dog's Mercury is often the plant that is the first to flower in deciduous woods.

Ensuring pollination is a different matter, particularly if the plant 'wishes' to encourage cross-pollination. Dog's Mercury is dioecious, with separate male and female plants, and its early flowering in woodland ensures that the wind can easily get to the patches of male plants to carry pollen to the females.



Dog's Mercury (family *Euphorbiaceae*) grows in woods, hedgerows and other shady places. The separate sex flowers are on stringy spikes and are greenish in colour, although if you spot the male plant when the stamens are ripe you can see the yellow effect that the pollen creates. The plant is very poisonous and the name probably comes from an old use of the word 'dog' to mean 'bad'. It has vigorous rhizomes below the surface and its dense clumps shade out many competitors including some tree seedlings, so it is not universally welcomed by those who like to see good biodiversity in woodland flora or who are interested in the natural regeneration of felled or coppiced woods.



Dense patch of Dog's Mercury in a wood at Longframlington

FEBRUARY SIGHTINGS

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver	1 at Cresswell on the 20 th and 2 at Holy Island on the 26 th
Black-throated Diver	1 at Fenham Flats on the 13 th
Slavonian Grebe	1 at Stag Rock on the 8 th and 4 at Fenham Flats on the 13 th
Fulmar	7 at Stag Rock on the 8 th
Pink-footed Goose	280 at Fenham Flats on the 13 th and 3000 at West Fenton 17 th
White Fronted Goose	4 at Woodhorn on the 20 th
Brent Goose	1476 at Fenham Flats on the 13 th and 12 at Seahouses on 12 th
Shelduck	270 at Fenham Flats on the 13 th and 14 at Branton Ponds 17 th
Wigeon	90 at Fenham Flats on the 17 th and 130 at Alnmouth on 22 nd
Gadwall	1 at Branton Ponds on the 22 nd
Teal	136 at West Fenton on the 17 th
Pintail	134 all females at Fenham Flats on the 13 th
Pochard	3 at Branton Ponds on the 9 th
Long-tailed Duck	5 at Stag Rock on the 8 th and 14 at Fenham Flats on the 13 th
Common Scoter	20 at Stag Rock on the 8 th
Velvet Scoter	2 at Stag Rock on the 8 th
Goldeneye	14 at Branton Ponds on the 3 rd
Red-breasted Merganser	7 at Fenham Flats on the 13 th
Goosander	Up to 20 all month at Branton Ponds
Goshawk	1 at Harehope Hillend on the 8 th and 1 at Holystone on 27 th
Sparrowhawk	Singles at Oaky Balks on the 12 th and Swarland on the 24 th and also a pair at Harehope Hillend all month
Buzzard	2 at Swarland on the 28 th
Merlin	2 at Fenham Flats on the 13 th and 1 on Holy Island on the 26 th
Peregrine	1 at Fenham Flats on the 13 th and 1 at Oaky Balks on the 12 th
Grey Partridge	2 at Branton on the 25 th and 12 at Fenham Flats on the 13 th
Ringed Plover	89 at Fenham Flats on the 13 th
Sanderling	58 at Fenham Flats on the 13 th
Purple Sandpiper	130 at Stag Rock on the 8 th
Jack Snipe	1 at the Black Lough on the 8 th
Snipe	15 at the Post Office Pylon on the 8 th
Woodcock	Singles at Black Lough on 8 th and Hannah's Hill on the 3 rd
Black-tailed Godwit	2 at Holy Island on the 26 th
Curlew	230 at Fenham Flats on 13 th and 22 at West Fenton on the 17 th
Green Sandpiper	1 at West Fenton on the 17 th
Mediterranean Gull	9 at Newbiggin on the 20 th
Common Gull	200 at Branton Ponds on the 11 th
Razorbill	1 at Stag Rock on the 8 th
Stock Dove	2 at Pallinsburn on the 10 th
Barn Owl	2 at Beanley on the 4 th and 2 near Ellingham on the 22 nd
Tawny Owl	1 at Beanley on the 4 th and 9 th
Kingfisher	1 at Branton Ponds on the 14 th
Skylark	3 at Titlington Mount on the 26 th
Waxwing	14 at Branton Ponds on the 24 th
Dipper	2 on Wooler Water on the 9 th
Redwing	15 at the Post Office Tower on the 8 th
Marsh Tit	1 at Swarland on the 28 th
Long-tailed Tit	12 at Smeafield on the 10 th
Great Grey Shrike	1 at Holystone Common on the 27 th
Raven	3 at Hannah's Hill on the 7 th and 6 near the Chatton Mast 10 th
Starling	A murmuration at Oaky Balks all month
Tree Sparrow	14 at Townfoot Farm on the 22 nd and 20 all month at Smeafield
Goldfinch	20 all month at Smeafield
Siskin	7 on the 7 th at Swarland ,3 on the 9 th at Smeafield and 22 at Hannah's Hill on the 7 th
Linnet	45 at Pallinsburn on the 10 th
Twite	10 at Cresswell on the 29 th
Yellowhammer	27 at Townfoot on the 22 nd and 40 at Pallinsburn on the 10 th

MAMMALS

Fox	1 at Elwick on the 13 th also 1 at Harehope on the 8 th and 25 th
Weasel	1 at Titlington Mount on the 21 st
Pipistrelle Bat	At East Lilburn on the 25 th and Yearle on the 23 rd
Bat sp	At Foxton on the 23 rd
Brown Hare	Many around Ingram all month

AMPHIBIANS

Frogspawn	Titlington Mount on the 26 th and Holystone Wood on the 27 th + large amounts of jelly in the Ingram area
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INVERTEBRATES

Great Diving Beetle	1 in Branton on the 26 th
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PLANTS

Climbing Coryadalis	At Titlington Mount on the 10 th
Common Field Speedwell	At Titlington Mount on the 20 th
Hybrid Larch	At Titlington Mount on the 20 th

MARINE

Common Sun Starfish	At Bamburgh on the 3 rd
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OBSERVERS

G&R Bell, D Clark, J Clark, I&K Davison, G Dodds, M&M Hall, A Keeble, M Mayfield, NNBC, J&R Poppleton, S Reay, M&B Rolley, D Taylor, S Webster and S Wilson

Dinah Iredale (whose husband, Alec kept accurate records of Geese over and around Doddington for many years) has informed us that she is still keeping wildlife records and is recording them on a blog at: - www.naturalhistorynorthnorthumberland.blogspot.com . Do have a look!

How now! A rat!

So said Hamlet as he stabbed Polonius behind the arras. Rats are, almost, universally detested as unpleasant, highly destructive, disease-carrying vermin. I say 'almost' because there are some primitive societies that value rat as a culinary delicacy and, of course, some people who enjoy keeping captive-bred animals as pets.

Rats have been much in my thoughts recently because on the farm where we live they seem to be particularly numerous at the moment. We keep disturbing them in our back garden after dark. Then, almost next to the garden is a farm shed, part of which is used by the local pheasant shoot to store its winter grain. Three weeks ago two shooters brought terriers and in one afternoon dispatched 17 rats in the shed. Up at the main farm steading they've been digging up through thick concrete to get into the animal feed storage area – and that's even though the concrete was deliberately poured over a layer of broken glass to try to stop that very problem.



There are two species in Britain. The relationship between the Black Rat (*Rattus rattus*) and the Brown Rat (*R. norvegicus*) has similarities to the Red/Grey Squirrel competition. The Black Rat which carried the fleas that spread the Great Plague into London in 1665 is now almost extinct in the UK except for a few offshore islands like Lundy. Perhaps we should start a Rescue Our Rats organisation to rival Save Our Squirrels.

The Brown Rat is less strictly nocturnal than the Black and in addition to its other unpleasant habits is renowned for its cannibalism. Charming! Sadly poison is almost the only answer, and that is almost always just a temporary control measure. *Richard Poppleton.*

