

# Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



## REVIEW OF MARCH 2011

www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

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### **NEXT MEETING – WEDNESDAY, 25TH MAY 2011**

#### **The Till Wetlands Projects - floods, droughts and wildlife - Alastair Laverty -**

Alastair has worked for the Environment Agency for the last 15 years. Over the past four years, Alastair has been the Project Officer for the Till Wetlands Restoration Project. The Project has been responsible for removing flood defence banks, creating wetlands as well as other habitats such as wet woodland and ponds. The project has benefited species such as wintering Teal and Wigeon as well as breeding Lapwing, Redshank and Snipe. Alastair will provide a thorough resume of the achievements of the Project and it should be an entertaining evening.

*George Dodds.*

### **NEXT FIELD TRIP -SATURDAY 7TH MAY 2011**

**Otterburn Ranges - evening visit.** Chris Livsey will follow up his talk and kindly shows 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. Places are still available! We expect to finish between 8 and 9pm depending on the light and the weather.

### **WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR IN MAY**

May is the month of flowers and scent. The hedgerows are full of flowering hawthorn, which is highlighted by fringing cow parsley, red campion, and herb bennet. In the unimproved pastures the first of the flowers will start to appear. Species such as common sorrel, germander speedwell, lady's smock and pignut can create a swathe of colour. Pignut is an interesting plant. It is a member of the carrot with an umbrella of white flower and has an underground growth that can be eaten. The growth tastes somewhere between a hazelnut and raw potato. The flowers of pignut attract a specialist moth that is relatively easy to identify. This is the chimney sweeper moth, which is a day flying macro moth and is best seen in full sunshine. It is a very attractive species and one of my favourites.

On the sea cliffs, the breeding season is in full flow. All of our nesting seabirds will have eggs and by the end of the month many will have chicks. Guillemots, razorbills, puffins and fulmars, all lay one egg. The most remarkable has to be the guillemot, which nest on rocky ledges and the eggs is laid directly onto the rock. The pointed shape of the egg prevents it from rolling off the most precarious ledges. The guillemot's relative, the razorbill also lays directly onto the rock but occasionally, small items are used to create what can be described loosely as a nest. One pair on the Farne Islands was attracted to a 'Bic' razor, which was seen regularly until the egg had hatched.

By the end of the month the first of the years badgers cubs will start to emerge from their setts. Cubs were born in February and their eyes open about 5 weeks later. After three months, worms and other invertebrates are regurgitated for the cubs to move them onto solids. The cubs start to forage for their own food after about four months. They are dependant on their mother for six to eight months. An adults diet can be extremely varied from bulbs, seeds, berries worms and other invertebrates to birds eggs, small mammals and amphibians.

May is an enjoyable month with plenty to see. Hopefully you get the opportunity to enjoy it!

*Jack Daw*

## **LIFE ON THE INTERTIDAL ROCKY SHORE**

The rocky reefs of Berwickshire and Northumberland provide some of the most diverse habitats in the North Sea. They are made up of permanent bedrock, boulders and small rocks and provide an inviting foundation for marine life to colonise. The intertidal rocky shore is a remarkable environment, full of plants and animals that are pushed to the extreme of their physical tolerance due to the harsh environmental conditions. The majority of species found on the shore are marine species and life is easiest when surrounded by sea water. Yet, twice daily they are thrust into an alien environment when the tide recedes and they are left in terrestrial conditions. Plants and animals are faced with desiccation – or drying out – during the low tide period, predation by shore birds as they are exposed, changes in temperature and altered salinity levels due to rain water dilution or evaporation from the sun. As the tide returns, crashing waves and swirling currents create stormy conditions for marine life. Once covered beneath the secure blanket of the high tide, animals must take the opportunity to feed before seeking refuge again as the tide recedes for a second time within 24 hours. Life is tough! Areas at the top of the shore are exposed for much longer periods compared to areas of the lower shore and the different shore heights support different assemblages of marine species. At the very top of the shore we encounter terrestrial encrusting lichens, blue-green algae and small littorinid snails. Moving down the shore, we find barnacles and mussels clinging to the rocks. Both animals are able to close their shells to the drying conditions of the terrestrial atmosphere until the tide returns. This ability allows them to survive desiccation for much longer periods than other marine creatures and allows them to live higher on the shore where there is less competition for food. Limpets, periwinkles and dog whelks are also able to shut themselves off from the outside world and are also found throughout the upper shore and middle shore. In the middle shore we can find a number of the brown seaweeds such as channel wrack, which can survive uncovered by the tide for days or weeks. Further into the middle shore we encounter spiral wrack, which gives way to bladder wrack and knotted wrack as we move further still. Many animals take shelter beneath the cool blanket provided by the seaweeds, including shore crabs and squat lobsters. As we move to the lower shore, this area is uncovered only during the lowest tides – known as spring tides – and this is where the true underwater world begins. Food and nutrients are in plentiful supply and rock surfaces are abundant with life. Many animals can be found living among the dense seaweed beds, such as starfish, anemones, crabs, lobsters, as well as many invertebrates including sponges, sea squirts, sea slugs, and bryzoans. The colourful rock pools provide a natural aquarium of true marine life including fish such as the goby and blenny. Into the shallow sea, the coast is fringed by dense kelp forests which provide important nursery grounds for a wide range of fish and invertebrates who shelter beneath the swaying marine canopy. Further offshore, and as the light becomes weaker, the kelp forests give way to a colourful carpet of marine life, including brittlestar beds, soft corals - such as the dead man's finger coral – and an array of sea squirts, sea slugs, anemones and sponges.

The rocky reefs are only one of the internationally important habitats along this stretch of coast and they are designated as part of the Berwickshire & North Northumberland Coast European Marine Site (EMS). The site is designated for its outstanding examples of rocky reef, sea caves, sand and mud flats, inlets and bays, and supports internationally important populations of grey seal and coastal birds. To find out more about the spectacular site please visit the website [www.xbordercurrents.co.uk](http://www.xbordercurrents.co.uk) The website also has advice and support tools to help you explore the rocky shore, as well as information about guided seashore safaris lead by the EMS officer.

Claire Carey  
Berwickshire & North Northumberland Coast EMS Officer



*Common Sunstar, Seahouses*



*Dahlia anemone*



*Limpets, Beadnell*



*Seaweeds and Breadcrumb Sponge, Seahouses*

### **MEETING OF WEDNESDAY 30<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2011**

A good audience of 43 was present, first to see George's specimens.

A bottle of toad spawn from Newton-on-the-Moor enabled people to see the clear distinction from frog spawn.



Two well-preserved skulls – of Black Guillemot and Puffin – were followed by an impressively large gall from Beech.

Amongst sightings mentioned were quite late Bramblings on garden feeders; Stoats still in full and partial ermine; Peacock and Comma butterflies; Yellow Star-of-Bethlehem in a wood near Morpeth; good moth catches at Howick despite the earliness of the year; a Little Owl at Glanton.

The speaker was Chris Metherell on the topic of A New Flora for Northumberland. Chris is the BSBI recorder for North Northumberland (VC 68). Floras, no matter how good, tend to have a useful shelf life of 25 to 30 years and Professor Swan's excellent work is already 20 years old. Since it was published there has been much upgraded plant distributional data based on 2km<sup>2</sup> tetrads rather than the 5km<sup>2</sup> mapping used by Swan. All sorts of national databases have been developed and vast numbers of digital images are available. Many journals and books are now freely available on-line and there have been many changes of plant nomenclature. Any new Flora, which will by definition be enormous in size, can only realistically be an on-line resource and be free to use. Hence the project to create an on-line Flora which will be continuously updated as new data become available. People who wish to contact Chris will find his details elsewhere in this newsletter in the "Recording ... Recording ... Recording" item. The probability is that the first access to this developing Flora will be in winter 2011. We'll give website details as they become available.

## PLANT CORNER

One consequence of the very warm early spring is that it's played havoc with my plans for this newsletter article. I was going to choose to write about **Town Hall Clock** or **Moschatel** (*Adoxa moschatellina*) which happens to be the very first plant I drew and wrote about in Newsletter 2 in April 2000. Unfortunately my recent observations are that Moschatel may well be over by the time you get this Newsletter 115.

Oh blow it! I'm going to write about it anyway.

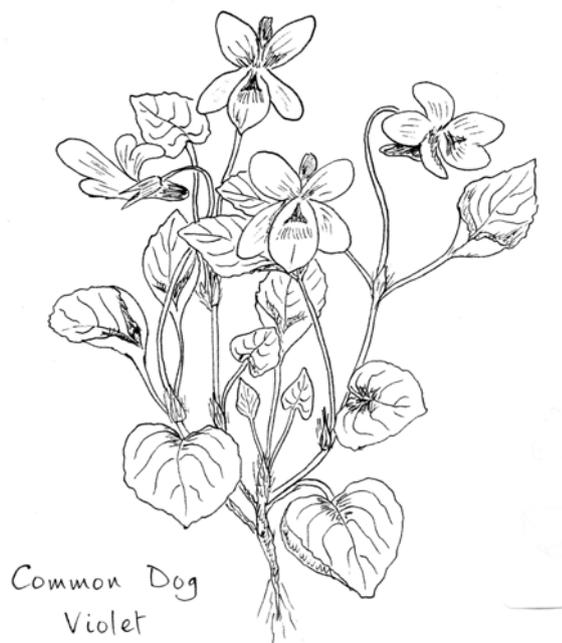


*Adoxa moschatellina* is a small perennial growing to only about 10cm high. It forms reasonably dense patches in favourable conditions and flowers in April and May. It has a wide range of suitable habitat, from woods, coppice, lane sides and hedge banks and can also occur on mountain rocks to altitudes of over 1000 m. It doesn't like very dry or very acid conditions. The flowers are small, greenish and quite inconspicuous, although a close look reveals a ring of delicate yellow stamens.

The fascination of the plant lies in the arrangement of the flowers on the top of the flowering stems. Each stem has five flowers arranged with one each facing north, south, east and west with the fifth on top facing upwards. Hence the name 'Town-hall Clock'. It isn't too hard to find. I've seen it recently on the banks of the Till at Etal, on the farm at Titlington Mount where I live and in a wood at Longframlington.

Just in case you fail to find Moschatel, I'll add in a second plant this month which you can't fail to find in any moorland, woodland or rural roadside habitat. It provides little splashes of blue/violet low down before the grasses grow up to hide it. Common Dog Violet (*Viola riviniana*) is so named because the word 'dog' apparently refers to its lack of scent, in contrast with the Sweet Violet (*V. odorata*). So don't bother lining your sock drawer with them. One of the quickest ways to check that the plant you are looking at is *V. riviniana* is to check the petal spur at the back of the flower. In this species it is pale or even creamy and often has a notch at its closed end.

*Richard Poppleton*



## SCARCE SPRING BUTTERFLIES IN NORTH NORTHUMBERLAND

Heeding the offer from the editors in the January Newsletter, I have put together a short note on some of the scarce butterflies that might be around in the north of the county over the next couple of months. As the county recorder for Butterfly Conservation, this is not a disinterested effort! as we are short of records from the north of the county and without knowing what species are around, it is impossible to take any action to conserve them.

There are three scarce spring species that I would be very keen for members to look out for and to receive reports about them. Probably the first on the wing will be Green Hairstreak, *Callophrys rubi*. As the name suggests, this is a small green butterfly, which has Bilberry, *Vaccinium myrtillus* as it's a favoured food plant, although many other plants can be used.

Not surprisingly, it can be extremely hard to spot when perched on green bilberry leaves! and may best be spotted when in flight, when it can easily be dismissed as a small brownish moth. We only have a dozen or more records from the Cheviots and points east and these are not very recent, eg 10-15 years old, and we would love to have more up-to-date records. Numbers tend to peak in late April and early May and the season is effectively over by the end of May. (Green Hairstreak photo courtesy of Mike Coates).



The second species to be out and about is probably Holly Blue, *Celastrina argiolus*. This is on the edge of its range in Northumberland and appeared to be expanding northwards with a record 284 individuals counted in the north-east in 2007. However, only 159 were seen in 2008 and, due perhaps to bad weather for the second generation in the August of that year, or possibly parasitism, numbers crashed and only 7 records came in for the whole of 2009, (with one from a garden in Alnwick). With 70 records in 2010, but none north of Newcastle and Tynemouth, it may now be on its way back. Look for a smallish silvery blue butterfly around Holly trees, *Ilex aquifolium*, in parks, cemeteries and gardens in late April through May. The second generation will not emerge till late July.

The last species, which is a bit hopeful on my part, is Dingy Skipper, *Erynnis tages*. This is a species of coastal cliffs and brownfield sites in County Durham and of brownfield sites in the southern half of Northumberland. As a declining butterfly it is important to know its true range. Last year was a very good year for it and it may well have spread to new locations. We have old records from one or two of the quarries east of Alnwick, in the Longhoughton area and these, or similar sites, may yield records if searched. Its favoured food plant for the caterpillars is Bird's-foot Trefoil, *Lotus corniculatus*, and bare ground is favoured for basking. It will be flying from mid-May till late June but numbers tend to peak at the end of May. Like the other species, warm, sunny days are best times to be out.

If you come across any of these butterflies, or indeed of any others, please let me know, noting the grid reference, to six figures preferably, and how many were seen. I can be reached on 0191 285 8314 or at [roger@norman784.plus.com](mailto:roger@norman784.plus.com).

A spreadsheet for sightings can also be downloaded from our website at [www.northeast-butterflies.org.uk](http://www.northeast-butterflies.org.uk)  
Roger Norman

## THE BULLFIELD - A NEW COMMUNITY ORCHARD FOR ALNWICK IN ASSOCIATION WITH ALNWICK AREA FRIENDS OF THE EARTH

A group within Alnwick Area Friends of the Earth have recently secured a 99 year lease to oversee a small community orchard situated between Willowburn Avenue and Blakelaw Road. It is hoped to create a place where the local community can come together for relaxation and education, to develop and pass on skills and to promote locally grown food. It is also our wish to encourage more wildlife into the new orchard and would very much welcome some expert advice. If any member(s) from the Alnwick Wildlife Group who would be willing to share their knowledge with us then please get in touch by contacting Rachael Roberts on 01665 605812 or emailing [rachaelroberts@phonecoop.coop](mailto:rachaelroberts@phonecoop.coop).

Leaflets giving more information and also a map will be on display at the next Wildlife Group meeting.

## RECORDING ..... RECORDING ..... RECORDING!

### What is a wildlife record?

Quite simply, it is a documented occurrence of an animal or plant, at a specific location and date by a named person. Four key pieces of information need to be in place to ensure that the record is valid:

**What did you see? When did you see it? Where did you see it? Who saw it?**

Do you keep records of the wildlife you see? Many of us do, but comparatively few of us then try to make those records available to others. I've been guilty for years of hoarding my personal records and not sharing them – just as I did as a child with my stamp collection! If you simply keep your records for your own use then no-one else can use them to help keep local and national databases up to date with the most thorough information. These databases are absolutely invaluable to researchers and to those who produce printed information about what's to be found where.

One way to share records is to let Ian and Keith Davison have your monthly sightings so they can publish them in this newsletter and forward them to the relevant county recorders. But did you notice the third of the four key pieces of information in the list above? Not everyone is totally happy with Map References, but now if you use the internet there is an amazing new website set up by the “webmaster” of the Berkshire Natural History Society. It works rather like Google Maps, but as you move around the map a panel in the top right gives the grid reference (4-figure, 6-figure and 8-figure) of where the map cursor is. It's a magic site at <http://www.bnhs.co.uk/focuson/grabagridref/html/index.htm>.

### Could I therefore please encourage as many as possible of our members to:

- Keep a record of your monthly sightings, with at least a 4-figure map reference for each one.
- Send sightings to Ian & Keith by email to [k.davison@btinternet.com](mailto:k.davison@btinternet.com) or by post to The Bungalow, Branton, Powburn, Alnwick NE66 4LW as soon as possible after the end of each month

# North Northumberland Recording Week

28<sup>th</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup> May  
2011

The object of this meeting is to record a number of ferns around the Wooler area of Northumberland. This is the first of what is hoped will become an annual series of recording weeks, leading to the publication of a new web-based Flora of North Northumberland. It is also hoped to increase populations of some of the rarer species in the area. Visits will be made to a wide diversity of habitats and some surprise finds can almost be guaranteed. In addition to field work it is expected that one or two evening workshops will be arranged with visiting experts to discuss identification and recording techniques for more difficult groups of species. Whether you can create for all or part of the event, are an expert or a beginner, you will be welcome.

#### Contact

Chris Metherell, 34 Springfield, Ovington, Northumberland, NE42 6EH  
07505-134070, [chris@metherell.org.uk](mailto:chris@metherell.org.uk)



Finally, if you are or would like to be involved with plants, you might like to consider coming to one or more of the recording sessions at the end of May in the Wooler area as advertised on the left.

You may need glasses or a magnifier to read the small print (the original was rather larger than I've got room for here), but this is a follow-up to the talk that Chris Metherell gave to AWG at the end of March.

I'll be there – perhaps you will be as well. To get full information from Chris closer to the event you'll need to contact him at the address, or phone or email given in the advert.

*Richard Poppleton*

## SIGHTINGS MARCH 2011

### BIRDS

Red-throated Diver	2 off Ross Back Sands (20th) and 1 at Stag Rock (24th)
Great Crested Grebe	2 at Big Waters (15th), 2 at Branton Ponds (19th) and 1 at East Chevington (19th)
Red-necked Grebe	3 at Ross Back Sands (20th)
Slavonian Grebe	6 at Ross Back Sands (20th) and 3 at Stag Rock (24th)
Black-necked Grebe	1 at Beadnell dunes (3rd)
Whooper Swan	60 at Ross Back Sands (6th), 35 at Branton Ponds (8th), 37 at Linton Lane (11th) and 1 at River Breamish (4th)
Ross's Goose	1 at Doddington 31st
Pinkfoot Goose	50 at Cresswell (27th)
American Wigeon	1 at Cresswell Pond (27th)
Pintail	3 at Druridge Pools (27th)
Pochard	1 at Hedgeley Ponds (4th)
Wigeon	150 at Beadnell dunes (3rd)
Shoveler	2 at Branton Ponds (31st)
Long-tailed Duck	5 at Stag Rock (24th)
Common Scoter	70 at Holy Island (13th), 150 (20th) and 100 (24th) at Stag Rock
Goldeneye	55 at Holy Island (13th)
Red-breasted Merganser	2 at Druridge (1st)
Peregrine	1 at Branton Ponds (1st), 1 at Cresswell (21st) and 1 at Harehope (21st)
Bittern	1 at Cresswell (5th)
Ring Plover	2 at Hedgeley Ponds (22nd) and 24 at Beadnell (3rd)
Golden Plover	40 at Swarland (24th)
Woodcock	1 at Widdrington Station (27th)
Curlew	200 at Long Nanny (3rd)
Green Sandpiper	1 on (4th & 19th) at River Breamish
Kingfisher	1 at Branton Ponds (12th)
Green Woodpecker	1 at Bigwaters (15th), 1 at Widdrington Station (12th) and 1 at East Lilburn (19th)
Great Spotted Woodpecker	2 at Widdrington Station all month and 2 at Swarland (2nd)
Skylark	15 at Branton (12th)
Sand Martin	1 at Branton Ponds (28th), 1 at East Chevington (19th)
Grey Wagtail	1 at Alnwick (5th) and 2 in the Carey Burn (26th)
Dipper	1 at Powburn 24th feeding a fledgling
Waxwing	48 (19th) and 40 (21st) at Ashington
Chiffchaff	1 at Branton Ponds (22nd), 1 at Druridge 23rd and 1 at Bamburgh (24th)
Treecreeper	Many in Alnwick (5th) and 1 at Old Bewick (12th)
Hooded Crow	1 at Cresswell (12th)
Raven	2 at Branton (8th) and 1 in Carey Burn (26th)
Marsh Tit	2 at Widdrington Station (23rd) and 1 at Swarland (1st)
Brambling	1 at Hauxley (21st) and 1 at Swarland (13th)
Lesser Redpoll	1 at Harehope (15th)

### MAMMALS

Stoat	In ermine at Branton Ponds (8th) and Newton Lowsteads (7th)
Roe Deer	2 at Newton Lowsteads (11th)
Hedgehog	1 at Branton (25th)
Red Squirrel	1 at Widdrington Station (25th) and 1 at Hedgeley (30th)
Otter	1 at Hauxley (23rd)

## PLANTS

Coltsfoot	Branton Ponds (9th)
Primrose	Carey Burn (26th) and East Lilburn (19th)
Barren Strawberry	East Lilburn (19th)
Sweet Violet	East Lilburn 19th

## INVERTEBRATES

Peacock butterfly	1 at Branton Ponds (21st)
Tortoiseshell	2 at Branton Ponds (21st)
Comma	1 at Powburn (21st)

## REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

Adder	3 (7th) and 7 (19th) at Branton Ponds
Toad	100's at Branton Ponds (26th) {spawning}

**OBSERVERS:** V&P Boulton, J Clark, I&K Davison, A Keeble, P McHugh, M Rolley, H Tindale, S Wilson.

## SWARLAND SNAPSHOTS MARCH 2011

For many years March at this location has tended to be typically the first or second-most active period of the spring-time passage, prior to the main arrival of the recognised summer visitors. Finches and thrushes have generally been the core species involved in this traditional movement both in observational and bird ringing activities. This year, by comparison, has been really flat and largely without any exciting peaks, and by the last few days of the month there were even long periods with feeders devoid of birds!

Activity around the feeders was again dominated by finches. Chaffinches continued to be the most consistently numerous throughout the month, although peak numbers were generally lower than earlier in the year, reaching at most 20-25 at any one time but a dozen or so most often. One or two Bramblings came in occasionally, the last being seen on the 21st. Greenfinches were present regularly, usually small numbers in the mornings with noticeably more arriving during the afternoons, particularly by the second half of the month. There was a trickle of Siskins from the end of the first week which continued through to the end of the month, with two birds ringed elsewhere being caught on the 18th. At the same time a few Goldfinches began coming to the feeders almost daily, one in the small number caught being a bird ringed here in April 2008. A further indication of the spring movement being in progress was the sighting of a flock of about 100 resting briefly in the high treetops one evening towards the end of the month. The local Bullfinches were yet again being remarkably persistent feeders, three pairs, with the males in particular occupying the black sunflower dispensers most diligently.

The number of Blue Tits coming to feed increased slightly around the middle of the month, with a few two, three and four-year old individuals being retrapped, only to subside to occasional visits towards the end. Similarly Great Tits followed the same sort of pattern, although in smaller numbers and no "new" birds were caught. Both species were observed to be active at or near nest boxes, but only minimal evidence of nest building having started was found. By mid-month Coal Tits virtually ceased coming to the garden feeder, but continued using those nearer the woods.

Nuthatches continued to visit feeders occasionally but were frequently heard and in parts of the village with mature hardwood trees territorial activity was in full flow. A wren was singing on the 23rd and one was caught on 27th, but this species appears to have been hit by the severe winter this year as does Goldcrest, which was recorded just once with one singing on 23rd.

Mistle Thrush song was heard in at least three different locations around the village, but Song Thrush, heard first on the first of the month, has been heard only once since on 13th and one seen on the 18th, a drastic decline on the records for March last year. No movements of Fieldfare or Redwing were observed, continuing the notable absence of the two migrant thrushes here during this winter period. One female Blackbird caught on the 19th was carrying a Danish ring but apart from that there have been no indications of any number of migrant Blackbirds locally. The local population have settled down to four pairs in territory covering these three adjacent gardens and a hen was seen gathering nest material on 16th.

Pink-footed Goose was last seen on the 14th with 120 flying north mid-morning. Four Lapwings flew south on the 1st and the first Curlew arrived with two on the 21st followed by one song flighting on 23rd and 3 seen on the 27th. Two Buzzards were overhead on the 14th and singles were seen several times to the end of the month. A male Sparrowhawk was seen on the 19th to perform a spectacular vertical "power-climb" when inches short of hitting a mistnet.

Three Roe Deer, two of them bucks, were seen early morning on the 3rd. Red Squirrels were reported from several locations around the village, still coming to nut feeders but not as frequently as earlier in the year, and one was seen gathering dried grass for drey lining towards the end of the month, which is very encouraging. Signs of nocturnal Hedgehog activity began appearing on the lawn from the 17th and Bank Voles began appearing in the open quite frequently during the second half of the month. Some insect activity was noted with Pale Brindled Beauty and Hebrew Character moths attracted to the house lights on 3rd and 22nd respectively, Buff-tailed Bumblebees have been on the wing from the 21st and a 7-Spot Ladybird was found on the 22nd. *Dave Makepeace.*