

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



REVIEW OF JANUARY 2012

NEWSLETTER 125

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NEXT MEETING, WEDNESDAY 28TH MARCH
BIRDS OF FLORIDA SPEAKER: DAVID NOBLE-ROLLIN

David Noble-Rollin was, until he retired, the Secretary of the National History Society of Northumbria. Some years ago his father ran a Bird Research Centre from the family home in Glanton and David has a long history of wildlife involvement in Northumberland and further afield. He continues to run courses on aspects of birding and any talk by him promises to be fascinating.

Notes from Jack Daw

In the last month, the weather has been very changeable. There were very cold days and nights towards the beginning of February but by the end of the month the temperature was very mild. Yet, on the continent and in southern England the weather has been a lot colder with temperatures below -16°C . These cold temperatures are some of the reasons for the influxes of **Bean** and **White-fronted Geese**. There were at least 120 of the latter species with Pink-footed Geese, Pale-bellied Brents and a small number of **Barnacle Geese** on Fenham Flats during mid-month. There have also been unprecedented numbers of Barnacle Geese in Budle Bay with a high of 680 birds. These are likely to have originated from Svalbard and normally winter on the Solway Firth.

Another bird that has been very noticeable in the last few months has been **Short-eared Owls**. I found a roost of at least 11 birds on a very small area of blanket bog south west of Longhorsley. There have been similar records across other parts of our area and a comment was made on Winterwatch with matching photographs. Many of these birds are likely to be of Scandinavian origin. Apparently the breeding season was very good on the taiga with large numbers of voles and Lemmings. This can be an inquisitive bird and close views can be obtained if you are patient. As day length increases there is a very good chance of seeing this bird hunting over moorland, rough pasture, sand dunes and along field margins.

At this time of year entomologists and botanists start to get itchy feet! Already there are small numbers of spring moths on the wing and gnats and flies are starting to appear. The best habitats to find spring moths are in our semi-natural woodlands especially where there is a supply of flowering plants such as **Dog's Mercury, Primrose, Grey Willow** etc. Common species include **Common Quaker, Hebrew Character** and **Early Grey**. A number of these spring moths can be found in your garden if an outside light is left on. The first of the hibernating butterflies will also start to appear by the end of the month; **Peacocks, Red Admirals, Small Tortoiseshells** and possibly **Commas** and **Brimstones** may start appear from there hibernation sites on suitable warm days.

One early flower that's worth looking out for is the **Coltsfoot**. This is one of our earliest flowering plants of the year. They can be very common on bare ground, buildings sites, waste ground areas of scrub, waterlogged ground and edges of woodland. Coltsfoot is a member of the daisy family but it is unusual in the fact that the vibrant yellow flowers come out long before the leaves (May). It can be a pest species in gardens and allotments with its long rhizomatous roots especially on heavy soils.

It will be an interesting spring for our amphibians. The first of the frogs may already have appeared. Water tables appear to vary across the county. Certainly, in parts of the Till Valley, the water levels in a number of the ponds that I know are currently very low. In other parts of the County such as the North Pennines they have had more than usual rainfall. On the 20th February, it rained for over 24 hours in the Allenheads area. It would be interesting to hear people's views about water levels in our part of the County at the next meeting. There is plenty to see at this time of year and our swallows are only weeks away from returning.

AWG Meeting of Wednesday 25th January 2012

An audience of 55 gathered for our first meeting of 2012. George's specimens included an exotic moth found in a bunch of bananas from Sainsbury's; a piece of fossilised forest tree found in Zambia; a bare-rooted young Rowan showing the mass of fibrous roots encouraged by the root pruning at the tree nursery.

Wildlife sightings included primroses, cowslips and coltsfoot in flower. Two stoats in ermine had been seen and short-eared owls have been common near the coast.

Speaker: Philip Hanmer gave a presentation on *Barn Owls in North Northumberland*.

Phil has been ringing barn owls for some years and has been providing and monitoring nest boxes. Of British owls barns are most in need of help and they are more docile and easy to handle than tawnys. He showed slides of a range of nest box types and locations. Commercial pyramid-shaped boxes are expensive and not ideal – they are hard to secure in trees and hard to clean out. Best are simple shoe-box shapes, often home-made. Jackdaws are a pain: they fill boxes with sticks and prevent owls from nesting. In 2011 a few boxes were occupied by kestrels.

Pulli (nestlings) are weighed, measured and (if possible) aged and sexed, and then ringed. Adult males are very white below while females are often much spottier, particularly on the flanks. In 2008 an exceptional 12-year-old owl was controlled (re-caught and the ring checked) in Northumberland, having been ringed as a nestling in Cumbria in 1996.

There are an estimated 5000 pairs of barns in England, with about 150 of these in Northumberland where typically they raise a single brood each year. Success is very weather-dependent and it affects % occupancy of boxes and % fledging success. The heavy pre-Christmas snow in 2010 caused high mortality, although even that winter there was better survival and breeding success near the coast.

Richard Poppleton.

SQUIRREL ALERT

Item extracted from Berwick Wildlife Group Newsletter.

As you may know, unusually large numbers of Grey Squirrels have been seen locally recently. This is worrying as they carry squirrel pox, which has now spread to several well-known Red Squirrel populations nearby. It is essential to combat this as soon as possible by controlling the Greys.

Equally importantly, should you be lucky enough to have squirrels in your garden and you use feeders to attract them, please stop feeding for the time being. The danger of squirrel-pox infection is much greater than the danger of starvation.

The Alnwick area does not yet have a Red Squirrel local group.

So if you have squirrel sightings to report from our area please do so EITHER by using the form on the website www.northernredsquirrels.org.uk/sighting.htm OR by ringing the hotline 07878 061880 and leaving a message. You will need to be quite accurate about the location of your sighting, ideally with a grid reference. Reporting sightings of Grey Squirrels in the Alnwick area is arguably even more important than reporting reds.

NORTHUMBERLAND ESTATES BIRD SURVEYS

In the spring of 2007 AWG started their surveys of five upland sites for Northumberland Estates as part of their Red Grouse programme. So this month sees the end of the first five years of the work. In the mean time we have added two coastal farms just north of Alnmouth to help the Estates see how effective their work is in support of Grey Partridge recovery.

Many members will realise that as well as the surveys being enjoyable for the 15 or so of us who have been taking part, they are so useful to the Estates that they pay AWG for the work we do. This money is one of the key reasons why our finances have become relatively healthy without the need to increase subscriptions for the last nine years.

This note about the surveys is to say an enormous thank you to Jim Clark. He suggested the idea in the first place. He negotiated everything with Northumberland Estates. He does all the planning and paperwork and he writes up all the annual reports. Without him the whole project could not have happened. In April we embark on the next five years and if you want to know more, do have a word with Jim at one of the AWG meetings. **Thanks Jim!**

SWARLAND SNAPSHOTS DECEMBER 2011-JANUARY 2012

Following a relatively quiet early December, the latter half of that month and through January the feeding points have been consistently busy with both numbers and the variety of species visiting.

Greenfinch and **Chaffinch** were present almost daily with peaks of each up to 30 occasionally, although there tended to be fewer Greenfinches after the middle of the month. A solitary female **Brambling** was seen on the 24th and 30th. **Goldfinches** appeared most days, usually just three or four, but by mid- January there were on some days as many as ten with fifteen on the 24th.

Following their unusual autumn activity here **Siskins**, which have not been a regular winter bird at this location, were seen occasionally through January. A few were caught of which three were birds ringed last autumn and one last spring. **Lesser Redpoll** has been a very infrequent user of the seed feeders here, but there were two or three daily from 19th December and into the first half of January, after which from ten to at least a dozen have been daily “regulars”, with some being present at almost any time of the day. At least three pairs of **Bullfinch** are using the feeders daily, taking sunflower, nyjer seed and peanuts. It is a species which has increased noticeably at this location. During the first decade (1970's) of observations here it was recorded infrequently. A rise began in the 1980's when 50 were ringed, this continued through the 1990's to 168 ringed and further into this century, with up to the end of 2011 a rise to 277 ringed. Sighting of it has come from being uncommon and worthy of drawing to others' attention, to being as unremarkable as that of a sparrow.

Blue and **Coal Tits** appear to be visiting the feeders in roughly equal numbers and the outcome of ringing activity broadly confirms this, but the makeup of the two groups of birds proves to be rather different. In six ringing sessions in the month, for Blue Tit 2.4 new birds were caught versus 1 retrap; but for Coal Tit the ratio was only 0.5 new birds to every retrap. A quarter of these retraps (8) were birds that have not been caught here for at least a year, the oldest having been ringed in early 2006. **Great Tits**, whilst here every day, are clearly in the minority with just 8 new and 7 retraps in the same period.

Other than Coal Tit, which has been singing since 31st December, Marsh Tit song was heard on 14th and 17th January whilst Great Tit has been singing from the 22nd.

There has been no sign of any of the winter thrushes to date but **Mistle Thrush** song has been heard sporadically since the 8th January. There is a regular complement of three pairs of **Blackbirds** competing for the morning distribution, along with a regular accompaniment of up to 30 **House Sparrows**, which briefly swelled to ten birds on the 20th, the additional four may well have been migrants.

There was little in the way of wildfowl activity, 40 **Greylag** flew west on 6th December as did another 28 the next day, after which 100+ **Pink-foot** flew north around midday on 11th January.

Buzzard, **Sparrowhawk** and **Kestrel** have all put in an appearance occasionally and the local **Tawny Owls** have been serenading. Recently the occasional **Rook** has abandoned foraging to indulge in a few preliminary romantic overtones – but the cold east wind of the last two days appears to have quelled that burst of enthusiasm!

Red Squirrel activity has been quiet, with reports limited to one location which has been attracting one or two to a nut feeder up to the middle of January. There was one fatality in December, with a predated animal found on the 18th, probably the victim of a Crow attack, as its injuries were limited to the head and eyes. The vetlab report indicated it was a healthy female animal, freshly killed with no signs of infection or indications of squirrel pox.

Dave Makepeace.

BLAGDON VISIT – 27TH MAY AT 10.00AM A DATE FOR YOUR DIARIES

AWG has not had a visit to Blagdon for several years. Lord Ridley has long been one of our members and he has said several times that he would like to invite us to visit again. He is no longer able to act as the group's guide to his gardens as he did in 2002 and 2003, but we would be welcome to organise our own route. However ideally we would like to include the wetland areas that Matt Ridley took us to in 2007 and for that the Estate requires that we be escorted. Eunice Ridley, who organises these visits, has kindly found us a keen birdwatcher, Bob Gajdus, who has privileged access and who will act as our guide.

If you've been to Blagdon before you will know how delightful the gardens and Estate are. If you haven't been then we hope you won't want to miss this opportunity. We shall meet at the Estate Office car park at 10.00am sharp on Sunday 27th May. We plan that the visit should be over by 12.30 at the latest, so you will be able to get away for your Sunday lunch. Further details will be in a newsletter closer to the time.

Howick January 2012 Highlights - Stewart Sexton.

A few cold frosts in January, particularly 14th – 17th where temperatures dropped to -5 degrees were to be expected and much better than some of the snow falls we have seen in recent winters.

On **New Years Day**, a walk from Howick to Craster was generally quiet except for single **Purple Sandpiper** and **Ringed Plover** in the harbour.

The first **Snowdrops** of the year were very early, on the **2nd**, when 15 – 20 plants were in flower behind the village.

Two **Barn Owls** were very vocal and were seen flying around the village on **6th and 17th**.

Along the Howick coast path the **Fulmars** returned to inspect the cliffs on **14th** when over 30 birds were present. Thereafter they were seen flying inland overhead to prospect around the local quarries. Also, 8 **Mistle Thrushes** and 5 **Redwings** fed in the hawthorn hedge behind the village while a **Stoat** was in the village wood.

The cold weather on the **15th** shuffled local birds up, pushing a flock of 10 **Skylarks** to fly N overhead and a nice male **Reed Bunting** into the small village pond willows.

The rest of the month remained quiet, but several walks into the arboretum produced several **Great spotted Woodpeckers** and **Long tailed Tit** flocks also held the odd **Goldcrest** and up to 3 **Treecreepers** together.

A sizable flock feeding in a game crop west of the Heugh consisted of 150+ **Linnets**, 25 **Yellowhammers** and 5 **Grey Partridges** .

Fulmars on Howick Cliffs.



08/01/12 **Winter Aconites** starting to flower in Denwick Church Yard, many in bloom by first week of February.

22/01/12 Two **Stoats** seen at Branton East Pit, 1 **Kingfisher** on Branton West Pit,

6 Russian White-fronted Geese in field south of Branton Pits. Pair of **Dippers** displaying on R. Breamish, Hedgely.

22/01/12 A stone wall at Alnwick Summer Seats was covered in mosses lichens and ferns inc **Black Spleenwort**, **Maidenhair Spleenwort** and **Harts Tongue Ferns**.

29/01/12 Budle Bay - 1 **Greenshank**, 1 **Hooded Crow**, 2 **Peregrines** sat together on sands, 300+ **Barnacle Geese**.

29/01/12 Stag Rocks, Bamburgh – 1 **Great Northern Diver**, 6 **Slavonian Grebe**, 6 **Long-tailed Duck** and 91+ **Razorbills**.

08/01/12 The only moths recorded at Howick this month were 2 **Dark Chestnut** and 1 **Winter Moth**.

Winter Aconites



Greenshank



BEYOND THE BORDER

(January 2012)

I must begin with not one but two sets of apologies. In my last summary (December 2011) I referred to **Yellow Brain Fungus** (*Tremella mesenterica*) and went on to mention the alternative common name of Witches Butter. It does sometimes attract that title (e.g. 'Identifying Mushrooms'/Pegler & Spooner:Kew) but I agree that it is more commonly applied to a related species - i.e. **Witches Butter** (*Exidia glandulosa*) which I've recorded at Branxton, Howick etc. The first-named fungus is golden-yellow in colour and the second black.

I'm most anxious not to confuse and so it's all the more embarrassing to have spoken of **Ivy-leaved Toadflax** (*Cymbalaria muralis*) as being problematic in the Royal Botanic Garden which is grossly misleading. The real culprit at Edinburgh is its relative *Cymbalaria hepaticifolia* and I'm told that even the tiniest of pieces will germinate and invade. My grateful thanks to the readers who provided such constructive criticism – and from myself: sorry!

One species of fungi which I regularly encountered during January was **Velvet Shank** (*Flammulina velutipes*) and it should be possible to find fresh examples well into February. The fruiting bodies are up to 4 inches (10cms.) tall with a shiny brown-orange cap and stems which have a velvet texture towards their base. The flesh of this fungus is pale yellow in colour and said by some people to be 'extremely tasty'. Many of the best examples I came upon were along the former Berwick-upon-Tweed to Kelso railway-line and all were attached to dead branches/trunks of **Wych Elm** (*Ulmus glabra*).

It's always possible to find a few plants flowering in the midst of winter although this January did seem to throw up a few surprises. **Pink Purslane** (*Claytonia sibirica*) was in bloom at Sprouston on January 12 but one look at its Latin name and you will realise that it does not naturally occur in the Tweed Valley! **Lesser Stichwort** (*Stellaria graminea*) is a straggly plant with tiny white petals that are deeply cleft. It is normally seen in late-summer/autumn but continued on with examples along a roadside verge near Lurdenlaw (Kelso/Jan 6). **Winter Aconite** (*Eranthis hyemalis*) – a showy member of the Buttercup family was nearer its likely date with specimens at Springwood near Kelso in bloom by January 5. Other unexpected finds included **Wild Strawberry** (*Fragaria vesca*/Windywalls/Jan 13) and **Primrose** (*Primula vulgaris*/nr. Kerchesters/Jan 2). The first flowering **Snowdrop** (*Galanthis nivalis*) was seen on New Year's Day but I was surprised to discover over one hundred spikes beside the River Teviot (nr. Roxburgh) by the early date of January 5. Towards the end of the month these delightful little gleaming jewels were brightening up woods, hedgerows, roadside verges and gardens throughout the Scottish Borders.

Up to 20+ **Whooper Swans** remained in fields close to Crailing for most of the month. A return to Alemoor Reservoir (nr. Craik/Jan 3) resulted in a further 11 being found and that same day another pair swam in a snow storm at Loch of the Lowes (Selkirkshire). **Greylag Geese** and **Pink-footed Geese** were spotted on a fairly regular basis (and from many locations) but no unusually large numbers were recorded. Meanwhile the biggest gathering of **Canada Geese** took place near Hendersyde Mill (to NW. of Kelso/Jan 14) with 45 seen.

I was greatly surprised but thrilled to see a ♂ **Pintail** resting beside the River Tweed nr. Springhall (Hendersyde, Kelso/Jan 28). The drakes are particularly handsome with a dark head and a prominent white line which runs down from the nape to a white breast. They also have unusually long tails and this was most apparent whilst the bird was lit by bright sunshine. A **Gadwall** swam on Romany Marsh (Town Loch), Yetholm on January 16 and both **Teal** + **Wigeon** were regulars at Redden. Over 300 of the last mentioned species were joined (Jan 7) by 250+ **Mallard** and 20+ **Tufted Duck** as part of a huge armada on Hoselaw Loch which is a reserve managed by the Scottish Wildlife Trust. Yetholm Loch also provided an important refuge for Tufted Duck with 22 counted there on January 4 together with 60+ **Goldeneye**.

Some fishermen merely shrug their shoulders but for others its a case of all-out war against **Goosanders** because of their tendency to consume tiny fish. I am almost certain that, at a few isolated locations along the River Tweed these sleek duck (termed Sawbills) are being indiscriminately shot. Over 30 were on Hoselaw Loch (Jan 7) and 20+ flew upstream at Belford-on-Bowmont (Cheviot Hills/Jan 16). Another 26 were in the vicinity of Kelso Bridge (Kelso/ Jan 17) whilst further (very regular) sightings included 20+ on the River Tweed near Redden (Jan 28).

It was at Redden (Jan 2) that I was again able to observe a juvenile **Peregrine**. The falcon appeared from 'nowhere' and immediately scattered a large flock of **Woodpigeons**. Most **Grey Partridge** remained grouped together in coveys but a few had begun to pair off. **Oystercatchers** continued to trickle back upstream with a pair beside the Tweed at Sprouston (Jan 9) and 8 near Hendersyde Mill (Jan 15). **Golden Plover** were also in the area with 26 near Gateside, Redden (Jan 2). The small flock were tucked behind a hillock and huddled down close to the ground to escape the worst of a strong westerly blast. 60+ **Lapwing** fed on Easter Hendersyde (Jan 28) and 2 **Snipe** were flushed from the mouth of Edenwater (nr. Birgham) that same day. A **Green Sandpiper** obliged by feeding just below the main Coldstream to Kelso road on January 12th +15th.

Man is often blamed for the downfall of different species but **Woodpigeons** have greatly increased as a result of his presence. Amongst the many big wintering flocks was a gathering of 1000+ on farmland nr. Oxton in Lauderdale. An **Iceland Gull** frequented the harbour at Eyemouth for a time and a **Tawny Owl** was spotted near Printonan (Swinton). Many birdwatchers headed to the Barns Ness – Dunbar area where **Short-eared Owls** – with diurnal hunting habits – were observed. Another **Great Spotted Woodpecker** was heard ‘drumming’ – at Nottylees (Jan 30).

Studies of **Pied Wagtails** on the Tweedside farm of Whitmuirhaugh led to the conclusion that they were roosting amongst big round bales. The straw has now been moved (to bed housed cattle) and so although their new shelter has not been located its quite possible that a large **Ivy** (*Hedera helix*) patch will have proved a suitable alternative. 6 **Dippers** were counted along the Bowmont Valley (Jan 6) with some birds already singing. Another was on Kale Water (nr. Hownam/Jan 6) and a total of 4 seen on stretches of the River Teviot and Slitrig Water (at/near Hawick /Jan 25).

A **Robin** sang within the Palm House at the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh (Jan 26) and later a ‘fight’ ensued between this bird and another Robin on the outside of the same pane of glass! Visiting **Thrushes** from Scandinavia continue their migration towards the SW (with many reaching Ireland) and so numbers are greatly reduced mid-winter. Evidence of a few stragglers was provided by 2 **Redwings** near Cliftoncote (Bowmont Valley/Jan 16) and my biggest January tally of just 40+ on the old railway nr. Kerchesters (Jan 9). **Goldcrests** are one of our tiniest birds and I was rewarded by regular sightings throughout the month (albeit with each only being in single figures) along the Tweed Valley and beyond. I often find myself happily wasting time as I savour the sight and sound of **Long-tailed Tit** flocks. They frequently appear in my garden and (Jan 13) it was thrilling to observe 6 on just one Peanut feeder with another 2 looking on. I thought that the occupants of Nottylees were fortunate to have 30+ **Blue Tits** in and around their farmhouse garden on the 31st. **Treecreepers** were present in the Bowmont Forest (Jan 27) where I studied the feeding habits of a single + pair. Lone birds were also found at Banff Mill and Nottylees and I even had one appear (Jan 28) during my RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch.

I failed to find any signs of nesting behaviour but **Ravens** may well have started their breeding season before January was through. Foraging birds did come into view fairly often, however, and these consisted of 3 in the Bowmont Valley (Jan 16) together with singles at Cappercleugh (Yarrow Valley/3rd), Edgerston (nr. Jedburgh/20th) and the Dun Law Wind Farm (Soutra/26th). **Jackdaws** were taking particular interest in chimney-pots at Sprouston (Jan 13) and (generally on sunny days) thereafter. There was a time when **Great Grey Shrikes** would have been reasonably regular visitors but nowadays they are extremely scarce. One of these ‘Butcher Birds’ was said to be present in the grounds of Duns Castle during January.

Some of my highlights for the month have been the big gatherings of farmland birds. To some cynics these might well be ‘just common species’ but not only are they an utter joy to behold but they represent a snapshot of our country-life that has already disappeared from so many parts of the British Isles. Amongst the many sightings was a flock near Windywalls (Jan 8). It consisted of a single **Tree Sparrow**/120+ **Linnets**/50+ **Chaffinches**/40+ **Yellowhammers** and 2 **Reed Buntings** whilst that same day (nr. Mellendean) was another gathering which was made up of 60+ Tree Sparrows and 250+ Yellowhammers. Another farmland scene unfolded on January 3 where 350+ Chaffinches – with 2 **Bramblings** amongst them – fed alongside a field-margin at Highchesters nr. Roberton.

I very quickly realised that I cannot afford to continue providing Nyger seed in my garden with a large dispenser being completely emptied in a day! Chaffinches – joined by up to 19 **Goldfinches** – have been lapping it up. My luck at finding **Lesser Redpolls** largely deserted me with just one discovery. It was a single →found beside Yetholm Loch (Jan 4). **Siskins** were again present in the Bowmont Forest (Jan 27) and with them were 2 **Crossbills**.

Mole activity is rarely obvious during the Winter months. I particularly like mornings (such as January 15) with a keen hoar frost. You look around and see the all-white landscape defaced by small mounds of newly-dug soil! If an unusually large Mole hill is noticed then that will be the ‘fortress’ where the young are raised. It was another busy month for **Grey Squirrel** sightings and I began to realise just how many must live around the area when I saw 4 feeding together (Jan 25) in the grounds of Kelso Abbey. The Royal Botanic Garden at Edinburgh has long been home to an unusually large population and (Jan 26) without any specific search being made, I came upon 25+ as I wandered around. That figure included 11 seen from one point at one time!

Brown Hares had also paired up in some instances but all the chasing males were being rejected by the females. A Jill at Nottylees (Jan 31) repeatedly boxed a Jack letting him know that she was unwilling to accept his advances. A group of 3 **Roe Deer** near Kersquarter (Sprouston/Jan 19) reminded me that it was almost certainly a doe with her two fully-grown young who had become indistinguishable in size. My records of **Stoats** were confined to single animals in the Bowmont Valley, nr. Proctor’s Smithy (Kelso) and near Easter Softlaw. The second-listed animal displayed a part-white pelt but, unfortunately, none of my sightings were in full ermine.

ROGER MANNING.

Plant Corner

In this second week of February one just hopes that winter doesn't do something silly, but that we can slowly emerge into Spring. Simplistically I mentally divide the year into 3-month blocks, so I reckon that spring starts on 1st March no matter what meteorologists may say about equinoxes. This means that when you get this newsletter it will only be a couple of days before spring and I can justifiably write about two early spring species.



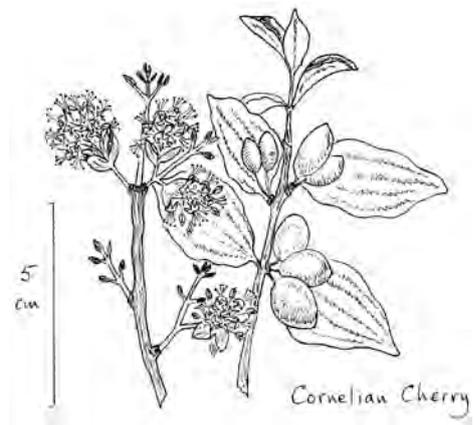
Colt's-foot (*Tussilago farfara*) is a favourite for many people because its bright yellow flowers appear so early. By late February the flower stalks, which appear a good two months before the leaves, should be becoming visible on waste ground and road verges. It prefers clay soils in damp situations, but will grow happily in sand dunes and shingle and at any altitude from sea level to over 1000m. One place we often look for it is by standing on Old Bewick bridge where the Breamish changes its name to become the Till. If the water isn't too high there is usually a shingle spit in the river just below the bridge where Colt's-foot is readily visible.

The flowers grow on stalks with prominent reddish scale-like leaves. They have small male disc florets and numerous thin female ray florets. They close at night. The seed heads develop into white masses like dandelion clocks. The large leaves show from late April and have white woolly undersides and margins with irregular small dark teeth. They used to be dried and smoked as a cure for asthma, or infused and added as an ingredient to cough mixtures.

A flowering shrub that is not found in the wild much if at all in Britain, but is planted for show in various places locally and whose small yellow flower clusters are worth searching out from mid-February to late March is **Cornelian-cherry** (*Cornus mas*).



Despite its name Cornelian-cherry is not a cherry but a Dogwood, as can be seen from its generic name, *Cornus*. Floras often almost dismiss it because it is a mere hortals (cultivated species). Generally, botanists don't really rate hortals unless they can be shown to have become naturalised. But for those who are simply delighted to see this attractive species in flower it is a very cheerful harbinger of spring, whether in the garden or elsewhere.



The attraction comes from the early bright yellow clusters of small flowers with spoon-shaped yellowish bracts at the base of each cluster. My drawing also shows an autumn twig with red berries, but actually fruiting is rare in Britain.

In case anyone is wondering why I've chosen Cornelian-cherry rather than the even more spectacular very early flowering Witch Hazels (*Hamamelis spp.*) it's because, to my knowledge, the latter are only garden pants and are not found as hortals or naturalised specimens anywhere in Britain.

SIGHTINGS JANUARY 2012

BIRDS

Great Northern Diver	1 Stag Rock on the 8 th
Red-throated Diver	2 Stag Rock on the 8 th , 1 Ross Sands on the 15 th
Slavonian Grebe	23 Stag Rock on the 8 th , 1 Ross Sands on the 15 th , 2 Stag Rock on the 12 th
Little Grebe	1 Hedgeley Ponds on the 22 nd , 1 near Horncliffe on the 1 st
Cormorant	1 at Catcleugh Reservoir on the 20 th
Mute Swan	100+ at Wark-on -Tweed on the 1 st
Whooper Swan	1 Q E 2 country park on the 23 rd , 100 near Ellington on the 24 th
Bewick Swan	2 East Chevington on the 23 rd
White-fronted Goose	21 Branton on the 2 nd , many at Low Newton on the 7 th , 14 Branton Ponds on the 18 th .
Barnacle Goose	450 Harpers Heugh on the 21 st . 120 Budle Bay on the 26 th 25 at Smeafield on the 24 th
Pink-footed Goose	100+ at Swarland on the 11 th , 1000 from the 24 th to 31 st at Smeafield
Brent Goose	40 at Budle Bay on the 12 th and 30 on the 19 th 1200+ in the area around Fenham Flats on the 1 st
Bean Goose	1 Low Newton on the 7 th .
Bar-headed Goose	3 Hedgeley Ponds on the 22 nd , 3 at Newton Pool on the 19 th
Shelduck	1150+ in the area around Fenham Flats on the 1 st
Pintail	12 Fenham Flats on the 21 st
Lesser Scaup	1 Marden Quarry on the 2 nd
Goldeneye	5 males displaying to 1 female Branton Ponds on the 20 th
Long-tailed Duck	6 Stag Rock on the 8 th , 4 Guile Point on the 15 th , 5 off Stag Rock on the 12 th
Smew	1 Q E 2 country park on the 23 rd
Buzzard	2 at Harehope Hillend on the 11 th
Peregrine	1 Fenham Flats on the 15 th (chasing Knot), 1 near Monks House Pool on the 12 th
Hen Harrier	1 ringtail near Rothbury on the 31 st
Sparrowhawk	1 at Swarland on the 14 th
Goshawk	2 Holystone Woods on the 28 th
Grey Partridge	27 Townfoot on the 9 th , 8 Branton on the 13 th
Sanderling	25 Newbiggin on the 2 nd
Golden Plover	400 at Newton Flash on the 5 th
Grey Plover	20+ Holy Island on the 1 st
Lapwing	100 at Newton Flash on the 5 th , 200 at Smeafield on the 12 th
Knot	2 Newbiggin on the 2 nd , 780 Fenham Flats on the 15 th
Bar-tailed Godwit	450+ Holy Island on the 1 st
Curlew	113 Townfoot on the 9 th , 200+ Holy Island on the and 600+ at Fenwick Steads both on the 1 st
Redshank	250+ Holy Island on the 1 st
Green Sandpiper	1 River Breamish on the 16 th
Purple Sandpiper	1 Newbiggin on the 2 nd
Mediterranean Gull	1 Newbiggin on the 2 nd
Razorbill	5 off Stag Rock on the 26 th

Little Gull	1 Newbiggin on the 2 nd
Woodpigeon	1000+ at Wark Common on the 10 th
Tawny Owl	1 Branton Ponds on the 20 th
Short-eared Owl	2 Foxtan on the 4 th , 23 rd and 24 th , 2 at East Chevington on the 13 th
Kingfisher	1 Branton Ponds all month, 1 Hedgeley on the 22 nd
Green Woodpecker	1 at Harehope Hillend on the 12 th and 14 th
Great Spotted Woodpecker	1 drumming at Warkworth on the 8 th , 1 on the 7 th at Old Bewick
Desert Wheatear	1 Newbiggin on the 2 nd
Blackbird	10 at Swarland on the 20 th
Redwing	80 at Swarland on the 2 nd
Goldcrest	Up to 14 Old Bewick on the 2 nd , 10 and 14 th
Marsh Tit	1 in Swarland on the 14 th and 17 th
Long-tailed Tit	7 all month at Harehope and up to 12 throughout the month at Smeafield
Nuthatch	1 Ingram on the 1 st , 2 daily in Swarland during first half of month
Jay	3 Holystone Woods on the 28 th
Raven	1 Ingram on the 1 st , 1 at Carter Bar on the 20 th
Tree Sparrow	52 Branton on the 4 th , 20 all month at Smeafield
Chaffinch	50 Branton on the 4 th , up to 25+ on the 15 th in Swarland, 250+ at Fenham le Moor on the 1 st
Bullfinch	3 pairs in Swarland all month, 11 feeding on heather at Old Bewick Hill on the 27 th
Goldfinch	Up to 15 in Swarland on the 24 th , 15 in Swarland on the 28 th up to 20 all month at Smeafield
Brambling	8 Branton on the 4 th , 1 on the 24 th and 31 st in Swarland, 4 at Swarland on the 28 th
Greenfinch	60 Branton on the 4 th , 100+ at Elwick on the 13 th
Siskin	Up to 7 on the 27 th in Swarland,
Lesser Redpoll	Up to 11 on the 26 th in Swarland, up to 5 in Swarland on the 28 th , 20 at Old Bewick Hill 27 th
Linnet	100 Branton on the 4 th , 250 Bamburgh on the 8 th , 125 Townfoot on the 8 th
Crossbill	9 Botany on the 9 th , 50 + Holystone Woods on the 28 th
MAMMALS	
Stoat	Singles in full or part ermine at Ingram on the 1 st , Yearle on the 7 th , the River Breamish on the 14 th and Harehope on the 2 nd and 16 th
Red Squirrel	3 at Yearle all month, (2 were later found dead with Squirrel Pox and the 3 rd was also seen with the disease)
Fox	1 on Fenham Flats on the 15 th , 1 near Longhorsley on the 22 nd and 1 at Holystone Woods 28 th
Roe Deer	5 at Harpers Heugh on the 25 th
Otter	1 at East Chevington on the 13 th and tracks plus half eaten fish on the River Breamish 12 th
Badger	1 near Mindrum lon the 13 th
RAINFALL	20.4 mm
OBSERVERS	W Banks, G & R Bell, J & E Clark, I & K Davison, A Keeble, D Makepeace, R Manning, M Mayfield, S Reay and M Roley

Please access the website: www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk