

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



REVIEW OF JANUARY 2013

NEWSLETTER 137

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NEXT MEETING - WEDNESDAY, 27TH MARCH 2013

THE NEW FLORA OF NORTH NORTHUMBERLAND SPEAKER: CHRIS METHERELL

Chris Metherell is the Botanical recorder for North Northumberland (Vice County 68) for the Botanical Society of the British Isles (BSBI). That's all a bit of a mouthful! Suffice it to say he is a very knowledgeable botanist with a distinctly non-pompous approach to his subject. For the last two years he has been setting up a new on-line Flora for North Northumberland. A number of people have been involved in doing botanical surveys of the 450+ tetrads (2km square areas) north of the Coquet and Chris will be letting us see some of the progress that has been being made. Soon the website should be open for anyone to start using and submitting records to and we hope that AWG members will be able to contribute to the project.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN MARCH

March is the month that beckons in spring. **Snowdrops, Aconites, Hazel** catkins can all appear before the month has started but the month provides impetus for new life. The grass becomes greener, flowers start to appear, early nesting birds begin to build and lay eggs, **Brown Hares** box and the first of the year's summer migrants can appear by the end of the month.

In woodland, the carpets of Snowdrops and Aconites are joined by **Primroses, Dog's Mercury** and **Ramsons** (*Wild garlic*). Primroses are a characteristic species of native woodlands especially where there are glades and warm sunny banks. The name primrose stems from the old French word for *prime rose* or the old Latin word *prima rosa* meaning 'first rose'. Primroses can be found in many of our native deciduous woodlands, as well as grassy banks, sand dunes and species-rich ancient hedgerows. The flowers are hermaphrodite with 'pin' and 'thrum' flowers and are fertilised by insects including the **Bee Fly**. Places to find primroses include Howick, Lindisfarne and Cocklaburn dunes, Harthope Valley and many other places.

March brings the emergence of many of our amphibians especially **Common Frogs** and **Toads**. Their reliance of ponds, lakes and areas of shallow water are the focus for their activity at this time of year. This focus can lead to large migrations of frogs and toads to these breeding sites. Wet warm evenings at this time of year, roads can be moving with frogs and or toads of all sizes. This can lead to large numbers of fatalities as a result of being squashed by vehicles. Places to find these movements of frogs and toads would be Cragside, the minor roads around Lilburn pond and Howick; although, movements of frogs and toads can be found almost anywhere.

On the coast, large numbers of birds especially waterfowl and waders start to move back towards their breeding grounds. A couple of sites that come to mind include around Lindisfarne harbour and Ross Sands. These sites, when the sea is calm can provide an excellent selection of sea duck, divers and grebes. Four species of grebe can be found; **Slavonian, Red-necked, Great Crested** and **Black-necked** can all be found with a bit of luck and perseverance. There can also be impressive numbers of Slavonian Grebes and I have counted 35 on flat calm days from the beach at Ross and up to 28 from the Fenham shore. At this time of year, a number of the birds can start to change into their summer plumage; black head with golden feathers above the eye are some of the characteristic features.

Even if you cannot get into the countryside, make a note of birds that are starting to build nests in your garden. You may be able to fill in a nest record card for the British Trust for Ornithology.

Hopefully, the weather will allow us to watch our local wildlife.

Jack Daw.

Please send sightings reports for January, no later than 6th March 2013 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.

Meeting of Wednesday 30th January 2013

At the December meeting our new Public Address system had been used for the first time. Now it was joined by a wireless radio lapel microphone which proved much easier to use than the wired hand-held mic and gave good quality all-round sound. George presented the audience of 37 with a tiny, mummified Pipistrelle Bat, followed by an Alder twig just starting to show signs of new season activity (*See Plant Corner in this issue*).

After the usual roundup of wildlife news and contributions from the audience he introduced the speaker, Stephen Block with his topic *Reptiles and Amphibia of Northumberland*. Stephen has only fairly recently moved to the Berwick area from his previous home in Devon.

The problem with the animals in these two groups is that although they are active carnivores and stay fairly sedentary in their territories, they are quite hard to find. Where they are present they are good indicators of healthy habitats. Ideally you find them by a combination of looking and listening, with the added use of torches at night and the placing of 'refugia', often pieces of corrugated iron, on the ground which can be lifted at intervals to reveal the animals.

There are only nine native species in Northumberland – Common, Palmate and Great Crested Newts



(*photo, left*); Frog and Toad; Grass snake and Adder (*photo below*); Slow Worm and Common Lizard. Stephen then went on to show the main identification characteristics of each species, including differences between adults and juveniles and between the sexes. He also talked about their various habitat requirements. Clearly the five amphibians have a greater need for water than the reptiles because their breeding cycle demands water for the tadpoles, but even then the newts need much longer periods in water than the frogs and

toads.

The Northumbrian reptiles are characterised by being remarkably cold-adapted and their behaviour gives them sophisticated temperature control regulation by making use of fine variations in external temperature. And of course they all hibernate, so suitable safe shelter is a major habitat requirement. As well as what one might think of as 'natural' habitats, south-facing railway embankments and brown-field sites in urban areas can often prove to be good places for them.

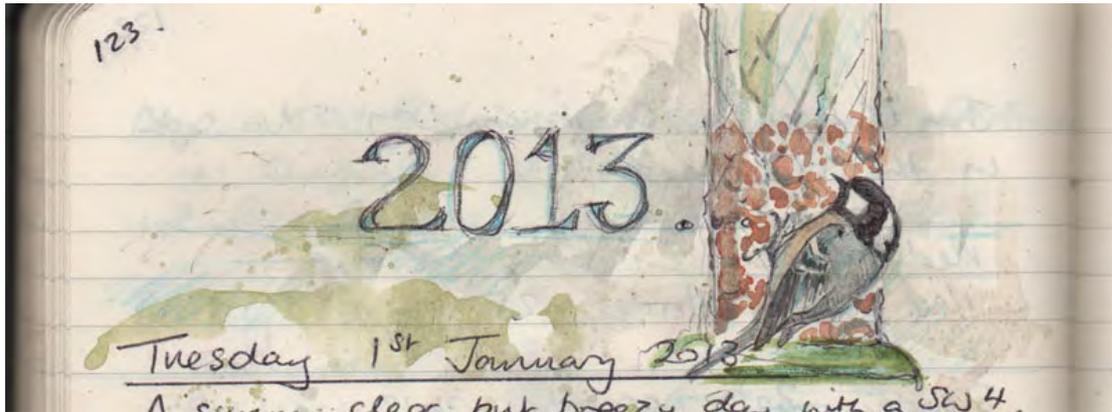


SAD NEWS FROM 2012

Over the years of AWG's existence we've experienced the deaths of a number of members. But 2012 was a particularly dire year. As a newsletter we don't go in for detailed obituaries, but we thought you might like to be informed that in 2012 no fewer than four members died:

Irene Keating; Elizabeth Rich; Lord Matthew Ridley; Prof George Swan

Howick January 2013.



This month I thought I would try a different approach to the 'Howick column'.

I seem to have added more sketches than usual to my notebook, so I thought I would delve in and preview them here...

During January, myself and 200 other bird watchers right across the UK have been taking part in a Local Patch competition where we try and see as many different species as possible on our chosen area. All areas must not exceed 3x 1km squares on an OS Map, and points are allocated per species and if you found the bird yourself there is a small bonus.

On the 1st of the month a couple of village walks turned up a respectable 50 species. Of note were 208 **Pink footed Geese** all flying S, 17 **Crossbills** and 10 **Bar tailed Godwits** flying N along the coast. All nice birds to help see in the New Year.

Another highlight appeared on the 2nd when a drab looking first winter **Mediterranean Gull** was feeding with Black headed in one of the coast fields. This is becoming an ever more regular sight in Northumberland when once this was a very rare bird here. In the same field a good count of 152 **Curlews** were found.

On 6th, I took my first moth in the trap, a **Hebrew Character**, my earliest record of this moth that usually appears in late Feb or early March.

On the same date a look out from the Rumbling Kern added **Kingfisher**, **Purple Sandpiper**, **Red throated Divers** and **Red breasted Merganser** to my totals.

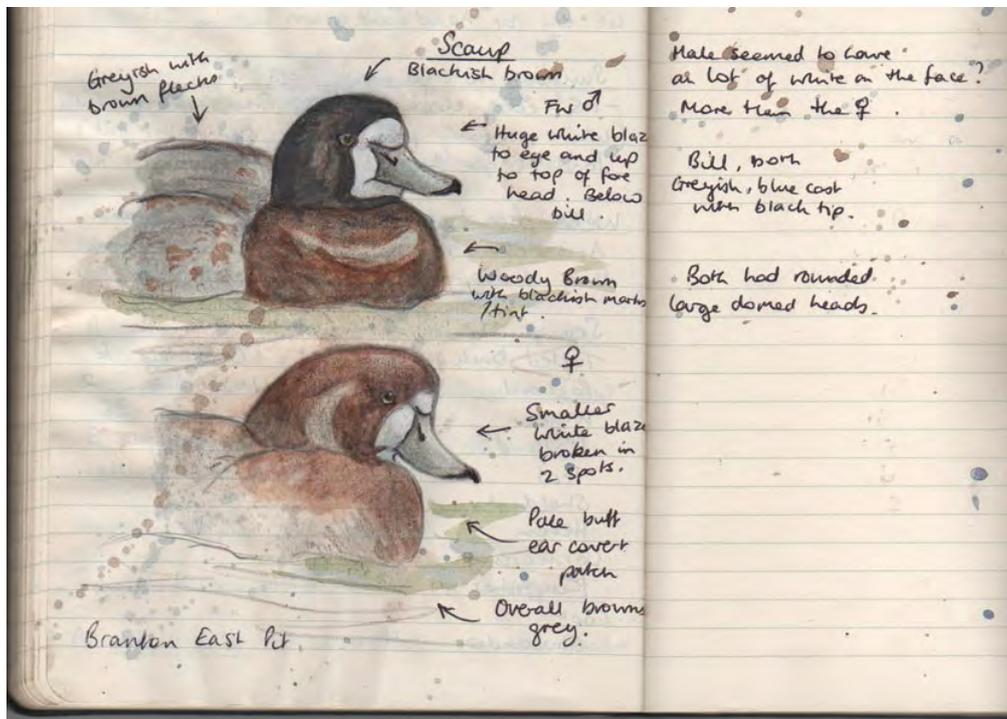
More unusually a female **Blackcap** was in the Long Walk feeding in ivy cover.

A walk up to Craster on 9th found a nice **Willow Tit** on feeders at the chalet next to the main car park and a Brambling called as it flew south over our garden.

An away day on 13th up to Branton Pits to do the wildfowl count was enlivened by **2 Scaup**, a **Green Sandpiper** and a **Dipper** with some fresh **Otter** tracks too on the River Breamish.



Green Sandpiper.

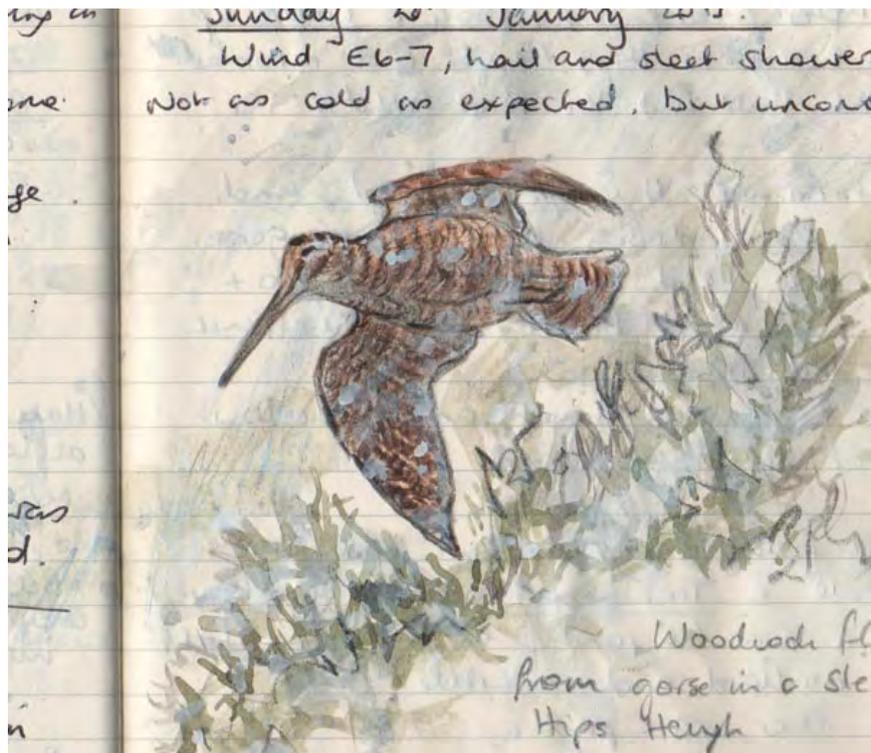


Scaup.

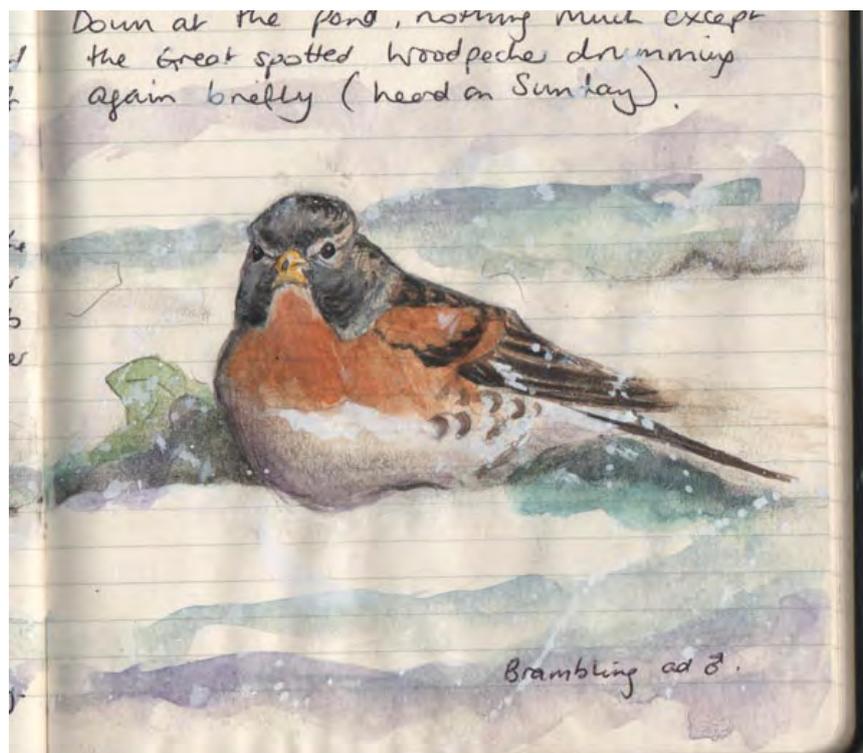
Back at home on this date my first **Snowdrops** were in flower, almost 2 weeks later than last year.

From the 18th we experienced a big drop in temperature and quite a bit of snow on occasion. This pushed a few birds towards the coast where **Fieldfares**, **Golden Plovers** and **Woodcock** became more obvious.

On 22nd 4 **Bramblings** joined the 20 strong **Tree Sparrow** flock in our garden while we fed up to 17 **Fieldfares** on shop bought apples.

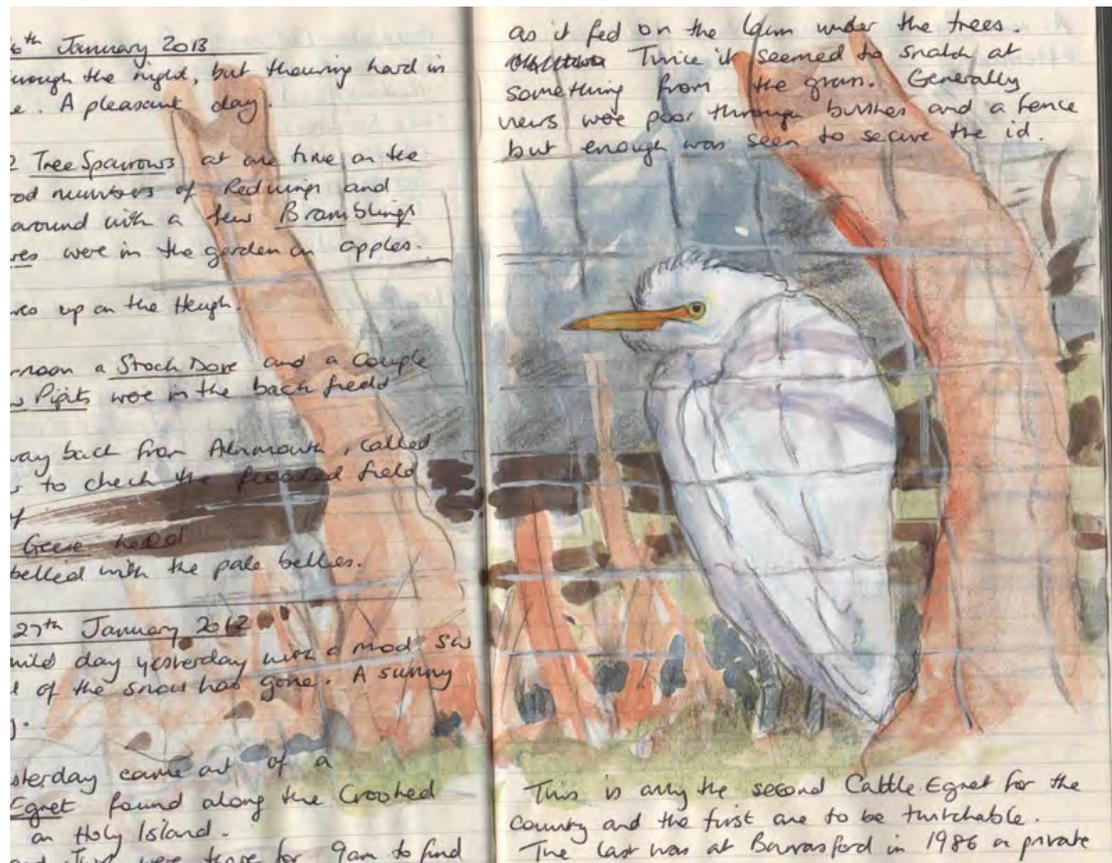


Woodcock



Brambling

A bit of excitement on 27th found me off to Holy Island where Northumberland's second **Cattle Egret** had taken up residence. In the windy cold weather it took shelter in the large garden along the crooked lonnen where it could only be seen by peering through a hedge and a wire fence!.



Cattle Egret

A good month for bird watching ended with a nice party of 5 **Waxwings** along the lane into Howick Village on the 30th.

I ended the month with an excellent total of 91 bird species around Howick and Craster. Things are bound to slow down now until the spring migrants arrive...

And I'm sure this part of the newsletter will be back to a more manageable size...

Stewart Sexton, Howick.

PLANT CORNER

The end of winter and early spring is the time when many of our native trees produce flowers. I would imagine that as the ice retreated at the end of the last Ice Age, the availability of pollinating insects would have been very low and so the trees that became our successful native species tended to be those which relied on wind pollination – hence the predominance of catkins, which are almost invariably separately male and female. The three trees I've chosen to write about this month are all monoecious, having separate male and female catkins, but on the same plant. All three are common in North Northumberland.

Identifying tree species when they are without leaves is not always easy, but often a knowledge of the catkins, which appear before the leaves to aid wind pollination, enables an identification to be made.



The first catkins I noticed this year, in mid-January, were those of **Alder** (*Alnus glutinosa*). In some ways there is nothing very remarkable about the male catkins (long, thin, pale yellow or straw coloured), but the real clue to identification is that these trees usually retain the previous year's female fruits as small cones.



The young female flower clusters are dull red, not very distinguished and not always very obvious. But after fertilization they swell and develop as fresh green cones which go brown and dry-looking once the seeds have been shed. You'll most easily see Alder in wet, often boggy areas and on river and stream banks.

Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) is a small, often multi-stemmed tree found most often as a hedging plant or in the under-storey of deciduous woodland. It was often coppiced to produce wattle fencing hurdles. Another good reason to dislike Grey Squirrels is that they tend to take all the young hazel nuts before they ripen so preventing hazel from reproducing effectively.



As you can see from the photos, the male catkins are not too dissimilar to those of the alder, but the identification is made much easier if you can find some of the tiny bright red female flowers, sometimes at the base of the twigs that carry the male catkins. There are two female flowers in the left hand photo if you look carefully.



Finally there is the **Goat Willow** or **Pussy Willow** (*Salix caprea*). You could assume that this is the easiest of the three to identify because the male catkins are so attractive and distinctive. Botanists might be rather less sure of this since the genus *Salix* is notoriously difficult with many similar species and frequent hybrids. For our purposes the only issue will be whether the plant you are looking at is the Goat Willow or its very close relative, the Grey Willow (*S. cinerea*). In practice, if the male catkins are large and very obvious with their yellow stamens, then the likelihood is that you are looking at Goat Willow. The female catkins (in the right hand photo) start off smaller and greyer, but soon show the developing fruits.

So, good tree-hunting this early spring.

Richard Poppleton

SIGHTINGS JANUARY 2013

BIRDS	
Red-throated Diver	1 off Newbiggin (3 rd)
Great Northern Diver	1 at Bamburgh (24 th)
Slavonian Grebe	1 at East Chevington (3 rd), 2 at Bamburgh (24 th)
Little Grebe	6 at Hedgeley Ponds (13 th)
Cattle Egret	1 on Holy Island from the 24 th (it is only the second for Northumberland)
Whooper Swan	42 at Fenham Mill (13 th)
Bewick Swan	1 near Holy Island causeway (13 th)
Brent Goose	103 at Fenham Flats (13 th), 15 at Seaton Point (23 rd), 133 at Budle Bay (3 rd)
Barnacle Goose	100 at Ross (13 th)
Pink-footed Goose	2500 in field north of Cresswell Pond (3 rd), 45 over Branton Ponds (4 th), 400 at Elwick (21 st), 500+ (27 th)
Shelduck	1 at Branton Ponds on the 6 th and 4 on the 7 th 409 at Fenham Flats on the 13 th
Tufted Duck	100+ at Branton Ponds on the 13 th
Teal	50 at Monks House Pool on the 3 rd
Pochard	1 at Branton Ponds (13 th), 1 on Hedgeley Ponds (15 th)
Scaup	2 at Cresswell Pond (3 rd), 2 at Branton Ponds (13 th), 2 on Hedgeley Ponds (15 th)
Goldeneye	12 (4 th), 7 (13 th) at Branton Ponds
Smew	1 at East Chevington (8 th)
Long-tailed Duck	2 at East Chevington (3 rd), 17 at Guile Point (13 th)
Goosander	6 at Branton Ponds (13 th)
Pintail	1 at Cresswell Pond (3 rd), 318 at Fenham le Moor (13 th)
Buzzard	2 at Branton (4 th)
Kestrel	2 at Branton Ponds (19 th) mobbing a Stoat which was carrying a Vole
Sparrowhawk	1 at Branton (4 th)
Goshawk	1 near Harehope (3 rd)
Merlin	1 at Fenham le Moor (13 th)
Peregrine	1 at Branton Ponds (9 th), 1 in Branton (13 th), 1 at Guile Point (13 th), 2 over Branton (24 th), (1♂+1 ♀), 1 at Longhoughton Steel (13 th), 2 at Budle Bay (24 th)
Red Grouse	2 near Moorhouses (24 th)
Grey Partridge	26 at Townfoot (6 th)
Water Rail	1 at Branton Ponds (24 th)
Moorhen	9 at Hedgeley Ponds (13 th)
Lapwing	200+ at Cresswell Pond (3 rd), 35 at Branton Ponds (13 th)
Grey Plover	34 at Boulmer (26 th)
Woodcock	2 at Haugh Head (18 th), 3 at Smeafield (19 th), 1 at Hannahs Hill (18 th)
Snipe	15 at Branton Ponds (24 th)
Bar-tailed Godwit	345 at Fenham Flats (13 th)

Curlew	23 at Branton Ponds (9 th), 109 at Fenham Flats (13 th), 22 at Hedgeley Ponds (13 th)
Green Sandpiper	1 on the River Breamish (13 th)
Purple Sandpiper	12 at Newbiggin (3 rd), 2 at Boulmer (26 th), 19 at Stag Rock (3 rd)
Herring Gull	26 at Branton Ponds (9 th)
Mediterranean Gull	At least 10 at Newbiggin (3 rd)
Common Gull	50+ at Branton Ponds (9 th)
Kittiwake	1 at Seaton Point (23 rd)
Stock Dove	1 at Town Foot (6 th)
Barn Owl	1 at Branton Ponds (4 th +7 th), 1 at Haugh Head (18 th), 1 at Branton Ponds (24 th), 1 near Bolton (25 th), 1 between Lordenshaws and Forestburngate (24 th), 1 at Alnmouth (24 th)
Short-eared Owl	2 at Fenham le Moor (13 th), 1 at Boulmer (26 th), 1 in Alnmouth throughout January
Tawny Owl	Up to 3 at Titlington (24 th)
Kingfisher	At least 1 at Branton Ponds all month, 1 on River Breamish at Hedgeley (15 th)
Great Spotted Woodpecker	1 at Titlington (24 th), 1 at Harehope Hillend (22 nd)
Green Woodpecker	1 at Edlingham (26 th)
Waxwing	2 at Harehope Hillend (10 th)
Dipper	1 on River Breamish near Hedgeley (15 th) chasing a Kingfisher
Stonechat	4 at Branton Ponds (19 th), 2 at Low Newton (10 th)
Fieldfare	17+ at Howick (22 nd), 12 at Smeafield (27 th), 11 at Monks House Pool (24 th)
Marsh Tit	2 at Harehope Hillend on 3 days during the month.
Willow Tit	1 at Branton Ponds (9 th +24 th)
Long-tailed Tit	4 at Howick (22 nd)
Treecreeper	1 (7 th) and 2 (10 th) at Branton Ponds
Starling	250 at Smeafield (27 th)
Jay	1 at Harehope Hillend (22 nd -24 th)
House Sparrow	5 at Smeafield (16 th)
Tree Sparrow	6+ at Howick (22 nd), 14 at Smeafield (16 th)
Siskin	60 in Lemmington Hall area (c23rd), 10 in Swarland all month
Chaffinch	10+ at Howick (22 nd)
Goldfinch	5 at Howick (22 nd), 22 at Smeafield (16 th)
Brambling	1 (1 st), and 2 (15 th) Branton, 4 at Howick (22 nd), 4 at Seaton Point (23 rd), 3 in Swarland from the 18 th
Lesser Redpoll	2 at Townfoot (6 th), 2 (10 th) + 4(27 th) at Branton Ponds , 13 in Swarland all month
Bullfinch	1 at Townfoot (6 th), 4 at Branton Ponds (24 th), 4 at Smeafield (3 rd), 6 at East Chevington (8 th)
Yellowhammer	15 at Branton Ponds (17 th), 47 (5 th) and 100+ (10 th) at Smeafield
Reed Bunting	1 in a Branton garden (14 th)
MAMMALS	
Bat(spp)	Several in Branton (4 th)

Brown Hare	4 at Townfoot (6 th), 1 at Fenham le Moor (13 th), 1 at Alnmouth (22 nd)
Otter	Tracks by the River Breamish (13 th), the tracks of a female and at least 1 cub at Branton Ponds (27 th)
Stoat	1 in ermine at Glanton (26 th)
Roe Deer	4 at Howick Hall Gardens (11 th), 2 at Newton on the Moor (30 th)
PLANTS	
Snowdrop	A few plants in flower in Branton (31 st)
RAINFALL	81.2mm
OBSERVERS	J&E Clark, I&K Davison, G Dodds, P Hanmer, A Keeble, M Mayfield, M McMahon, R&J Poppleton, S Reay, M Rolley, J Rutter, S Sexton, H Tindle, S Williams.

Subscription Reminder

Your AWG subscription was due from 1st January – unchanged for the 10th year running thanks to our good housekeeping, the income from our survey work and the fact that many members are able and willing to receive their newsletters by email.

If you can't get to the February meeting could I please ask you to fill in the payments slip below and send it to me with your cheque. The fewer reminders I have to send out the less the drain on our funds.

Don't forget that if you've set up a Standing Order, using the form in the last Newsletter, I really need you to let me know that you've done so. If you don't I shan't know until I get our next bank statement and in the meantime I may waste money by sending you a reminder.



PAYMENT SLIP

Name(s)

Address

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Email address (if possible)

Payment rates (unchanged for the 10th year running):

£10.00 for a single member; £17.50 for two or more members at the same address.

Please send cheques made to **Alnwick Wildlife Group** to:

Richard Poppleton, Greystone Cottage, Titlington Mount, Alnwick NE66 2EA