

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



REVIEW OF MARCH 2013

NEWSLETTER 139

www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

email: redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

NEXT MEETING - WEDNESDAY, 29TH MAY

RED SQUIRRELS IN THE NORTH EAST.

Russell Tait and Katy Cook work for Red Squirrels Northern England (RSNE). Russell is the Conservation Officer who manages the Ranger team (formerly a ranger for the Northumberland National Park) and Katy is the Engaging Communities Officer. In 2011 Nick Mason spoke to AWG when RSNE was quite a new organisation, but time has moved on and Russell and Katy should be able to bring us much more up to date on RSNE's successes and, perhaps, ways in which AWG could consider contributing to the efforts to save and promote this iconic species. They will discuss the ecology of Red Squirrels and what is being done to eradicate Grey Squirrels in north Northumberland.

Katy Cook is keen to receive news of squirrels in/around Alnwick, so please contact her with sightings etc. by emailing Katy.cook@RSNE.org.uk

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR IN MAY

As I write this article the first of the swallows have arrived back in Glanton after been held up by a prolonged cold spell of weather. Spring will slowly catch up and May should be a month to look forward to. Hedgerows, woodland grasslands and verges start to bloom and flourish as flowers insects and birds start to multiply. Moorlands echo to the warbling display call of the **Curlew** and winnowing display of the **Snipe**. On the coast the cliffs are filled with jostling **Auks** and burrows echo to the haunting calls of **Puffins**. The breeding season should be well under way after a very slow start.

One of the characteristic features of the countryside in May is the flowering hedgerows. One of the commonest plants is the **Hawthorn** (*Crataegus monogyna*). Other names for this plant include Haw, Thornapple, Quick, Hag (old English) and Porn (old Norse). family. The name 'Hawthorn' derives from the Anglo-Saxon 'Hagathorn' or 'Haegthorn' and refers to its use as hedging (Haga meaning hedge). The scientific name 'Crataegus' derives from the Greek 'kratos' meaning 'strong' relating to the hardness of the wood. Hawthorn has more connections with ancient beliefs and traditions than almost any other tree. It was a powerful supernatural force for good or for evil. The appearance of the May blossom was the herald of the end of winter and the beginning of summer. There are at least 230 species of invertebrate that are associated with hawthorn. A rich diversity of bees, sawflies, hoverflies and flies can be found feeding on the May blossom during the month.



The upland woodlands of Northumberland are an excellent habitat to be exploring at this time of year. There is a wide range of plants, invertebrates and birds that can be found. One of the most spectacular of these birds is the **Redstart**. This summer migrant arrives in late April and almost immediately the male starts to take up its territory and trying to attract a mate. The **Common Redstart** shows some affinity to the Robin in many of its habits and actions. It has the same general carriage, and chat-like behaviour, and is the same length

at 13–14.5 cm long but slightly slimmer and not quite as heavy, weighing 11–23 g. The orange-red tail, from which it and other redstarts get their names ("start" is an old word for "tail"), is frequently quivered. The male in summer is a stunning bird which has a slate-grey head and upperparts, except the rump and tail, which, like the flanks, underwing coverts and axillaries are orange-chestnut. The forehead is white; the sides of the face and throat are black. The wings and the two central tail feathers are brown, the other tail feathers bright

orange-red. The female is browner, with paler underparts; it lacks the black and slate, and the throat is whitish. Some of the best places to see this species are the Harthope Valley and Holystone Woods but they can be found almost anywhere where there are large trees with suitable nesting holes.

May is an excellent time of year to look for Northumberland wildlife. Here is hoping that the sun shines and the breeding season is better than last year. *Jack Daw.*



*Male
Redstart*



*Female
Redstart*

FIELD WORK – DATES FOR YOUR DIARIES

Branton Ponds A day is being arranged for interested members to spend several hours at Branton Ponds to concentrate mainly on plants. There is plenty there of interest for those with some botanical expertise, but we hope to make this a ‘training’ session for those who would like to get better at identifying plants.

This is planned for **Sunday 23rd June**. If the weather looks as though it will be foul I’ve pencilled in a reserve date of Sunday 30th June. We will aim to meet at Branton at 10.30am and the day will last as long as people remain interested. Plan to bring a packed lunch. Further details in the May Newsletter.

Slainsfield Moor AWG has agreed with Lord James Joicey to carry out a survey of this rather nice moorland site. We hope to cover birds, plants, butterflies, possibly moths (if Stewart Sexton can organise his trapping gear) and possibly mammals (if we can get Don Griss to come with his small mammal traps as he did for us at Ford Moss), reptiles and amphibia (if we can involve Stephen Block from Berwick) and potentially anything else that we feel we can reasonably cover.

Two dates are suggested: **Saturday 15th June and Sunday 11th August**. Again, check the May Newsletter for further details.

Meeting of Wednesday 27th March 2013

Our audience of 34 included three visitors who were first presented with George's two specimens – a Lapwing showing the full iridescence of its plumage and a window-casualty Sparrowhawk.

Speaker Chris Metherell, the Botanical Society of the British Isles (BSBI) Recorder for North Northumberland (Vice County 68).

Chris gave a brief background to the current New On-Line Flora of North Northumberland project. He explained that over a ten year period all 500+ tetrads (2Km²) are being surveyed and the results will eventually be available to anyone who wants to see them on-line.

The recording 'rules' have changed over the years so that now all species are recorded providing they are outside gardens (even the outside surface of garden walls counts as recordable) and included also are trees and shrubs in parks and forestry even though they may originally have been planted.

Particularly valuable are records from special areas of interest which may be as large as Holy Island or as small as a churchyard. Some of these areas act as valuable reservoirs for otherwise uncommon species. Recording is not just a 'stamp-collecting' exercise, but includes plenty of real science. For example, Blinks (*Montia Fontana*) is a small species of wetter areas, but there are four subspecies and up to now there is no data for the presence or distribution of these sub-species in Northumberland. Use of a binocular microscope or even a decent hand lens can reveal the seed type which is crucial for their identification.

So far, three years into the programme, about 23,000 records have been accumulated and 172 tetrads have been covered. We might have expected rather more records, but many of the tetrads so far covered have been upland squares which have a much lower diversity of species than lowland ones.

Chris then showed and talked about a range of species of interest, divided into categories such as Old Friends, Rest in Peace, In Need of TLC, Absent Friends, New Friends (or Enemies). For example:

- Did you know that Howick has the only known British tuft of Lady Clermont's Spleenwort, a hybrid between Maidenhair Spleenwort and Wall-rue?
- Lindisfarne Helleborine is an orchid unique to Holy Island.
- Wild Liquorice used to grow at Annstead Dunes but hasn't been seen for years.
- Purple Milk Vetch is doing well in Northumberland but not in the rest of England.
- Prickly Poppy used to be a fairly common cornfield weed but is now very rarely found
- Pick-a-back Plant and Skunk Cabbage can both be found at Ingram.

Finally Chris advertised the recording week due to be held this year in late July and concentrating on the Cheviots.



Lady Clermont's Spleenwort



Wild Liquorice

Plant Corner

How can I have written Plant Corner articles for so long without including Bluebells? The native **Bluebell** (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) used to have the generic name *Endymion*. Botanists in their wisdom in the late 1980s decided to change it to *Hyacinthoides* – which is sad in that Keats’s poem *Endymion* (“A thing of beauty is a joy forever” etc.) has had its title name consigned to the dustbin of science.

We all know what Bluebells look like, but the botanically interesting issue is the extent to which the native species has been and is being replaced in some situations by the Spanish invader, *Hyacinthoides hispanica*. A successful Spanish Armada perhaps. Can you tell whether the plants in your local wood or road verge are the natives or the Spanish? Or maybe they are hybrids between the two.



The photo on the left is the native. The flower spike (raceme) is drooping (pendent). The flowers are all more or less on the same side of the raceme and the individual flowers, which are highly scented, also droop. The petals and sepals, which are identical and are called tepals, have strongly rolled-back (recurved) tips.

The leaves are also comparatively narrow, rarely exceeding 20mm and the flowering stem often grows quite tall, to as much as 50cm.

The right hand photo shows the Spanish species. Here the whole raceme is held upright and the flowers are all round the stem. They usually don’t droop very much and they only manage a rather faint perfume. The whole flower is more bell-shaped without the strong recurving of the tips of the tepals.

The leaves are often wider, reaching 35mm and the whole plant tends to be more solid-looking and stockier, not usually exceeding 40cm.

Of course, if your plant seems to have characteristics about half way between these two descriptions, then you’ve probably got the hybrid. Hey ho! Almost all Bluebells in gardens are Spanish or hybrids, but inevitably they’ve escaped into the wild and to be sure of finding pure bred natives you really need to find plants in old woodland. The problem for our native species is that where Spanish plants meet natives they very readily hybridise and the hybrid offspring are fertile.



On the moorland at Titlington Mount there are patches of native Bluebells which almost undoubtedly shows that this area was once wooded – an assumption that is backed up by the good populations of Wood Anemone and Wood Sorrel amongst the bracken.

SIGHTINGS MARCH 2013

BIRDS	
Red-throated Diver	7 off Stag Rock (3 rd)
Great Crested Grebe	1 at Branton Ponds (24 th)
Slavonian Grebe	4 off Stag Rock (16 th)
Little Egret	2 at Fenham Flats (10 th)
White-fronted Goose	2 at Harpers Heugh (3 rd)
Pink-footed Goose	450+ at Elwick (1 st), 250 at Harpers Heugh (3 rd)
Bean Goose	1 at Elwick (1 st)
Brent Goose	52 at Elwick (1 st), 200 at Harpers Heugh (3 rd), 89 at Fenham Flats (10 th)
Goldeneye	6 at Alnmouth (5 th), 7 at Fenham Flats (10 th), 12 at Branton Ponds (24 th)
Wigeon	80+ at Branton Ponds (24 th), 110 at Townfoot (15 th)
Shelduck	158 at Fenham Flats (10 th)
Eider	62 at Fenham Flats (10 th)
Pintail	2 at Fenham Flats (10 th), 153 at Fenham Flats (10 th)
Common Scoter	150 off Stag Rock (3 rd)
Long-tailed Duck	23 off Stag Rock (3 rd), 7 off Guile Point (10 th), 4 at Fenham Flats (10 th)
Pochard	2 (10 th) and 1 (23 rd) at Branton Ponds
Gadwall	2 at Branton Ponds (10 th)
Sparrowhawk	1 at Alnmouth (5 th), 1 near Lemmington Hall (23 rd)
Peregrine	1 in North Northumberland (16 th)
White-tailed Eagle	Possible sighting of 1 bird near Howick (31 st)
Black Grouse	1 near Ninebanks (15 th)
Grey Partridge	2 at Glanton (15 th)
Woodcock	1 at Harpers Heugh(3 rd),1 at Newton le Moor(30 th),2 at Townfoot(15 th),4 at Harehope Hillend (30 th)
Moorhen	1 in Branton garden all month
Curlew	237 at Fenham Flats (10 th), 24 at Townfoot (15 th)
Bar-tailed Godwit	297 at Fenham Flats (10 th)
Knot	280 at Fenham Flats (10 th)
Ringed Plover	4 at Fenham Flats (10 th)
Golden Plover	26 at Elwick (1 st), at least 3 over Glanton (15 th)
Grey Plover	66 at Fenham Flats (10 th)
Lapwing	15 at Townfoot (15 th)
Green Sandpiper	1 on the River Breamish near Hedgeley (5 th +12 th)
Redshank	1 at Branton Ponds (16 th)
Lesser Black-backed Gull	1 (6 th), 6 (16 th), 8 (23 rd) at Branton Ponds
Barn Owl	1 at Kettleburn (12 th), 1 at Harehope Hillend (25 th), 1 at Shipley (27 th)
Tawny Owl	2 near Glanton (15 th)
Short-eared Owl	3 near Guile Point (10 th)
Little Owl	1 near Glanton (15 th)
Kingfisher	At least 1 all month at Branton Ponds
Green Woodpecker	1 at Harehope Hillend (29 th)

Skylark	5 at Elwick (1 st), 34 over Branton (23 rd)
Grey Wagtail	1 on River Breamish (5 th)
Fieldfare	20+ at Branton Ponds (27 th), 45 at Shepherds Law (17 th)
Redwing	9 at Branton Ponds (28 th)
Treecreeper	2 at Swarland on fatballs all month
Nuthatch	1 at Ingram (30 th)
Raven	2 at Hillend (6 th)
Tree Sparrow	All month up to 15 in a Branton Garden and 24+ at Smeafield, 12 near Lemmington Hall (23 rd)
Linnet	80 at Harehope Hall Wood (5 th)
Brambling	6 in Swarland (2 nd), 4 at Smeafield (28 th), 6 at Lilburn Pond (27 th)
Greenfinch	2 at Smeafield (18 th)
Goldfinch	30+ at Smeafield all month
Siskin	5 in Branton (16 th), 20+ near Lemmington Hall (23 rd), up to 4 at Smeafield from the 6 th
Crossbill	2 near Lemmington (31 st)
Yellowhammer	20+ near Branton (24 th)
Reed Bunting	2 near Lemmington Hall (23 rd)
INVERTEBRATES	
Pale Brindled Beauty	1 at Howick (2 nd)
Clouded Drab	1 at Howick (2 nd)
MAMMALS	
Roe Deer	2 bucks at Branton Ponds (5 th), fighting 8 at Smeafield (5 th), and 12 (27 th)
Red Squirrel	1 at Hannahs Wood (26 th)
Brown Hare	2 at Smeafields (29 th)
Stoat	1 in almost full ermine at Brandon Ford (6 th)
Porpoise	1 off Stag Rock (16 th)
AMPHIBIANS	
Common Frog	Frogspawn in Branton Ponds (17 th), Frogspawn at Howick (24 th) + Swarland Wood (25 th)
REPTILES	
Adder	1 (10 th), 4 (29 th) at Branton Ponds
PLANTS	
Common Scurvey-grass	Fenham Flats (10 th), Buston (30 th)
Coltsfoot	Branton Ponds (24 th), Shilbottle (30 th), Old Swarland (29 th)
RAINFALL	45.8 mm
OBSERVERS	W Banks, J Clark, I&K Davison, G Dodds, P Hanmer, A Keeble, M McMahon, S Reay, M Rolley, J Rutter, S Sexton, H&D Steele.