

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



Review of October 2013

NEWSLETTER 146

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NEXT MEETING: WEDNESDAY 11TH OF DECEMBER 7-30 P.M. 2012

BIRDING IN RETIREMENT – TOM CADWALLENDER

CHRISTMAS MEETING

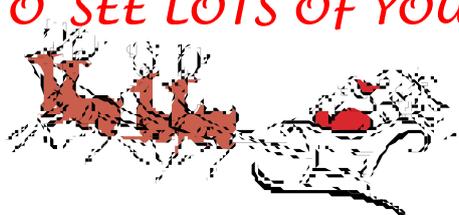
Do join us for the AWG Christmas Meeting on **11th December**

We've got **Tom Cadwallendar** talking about "Birding in Retirement". Tom is well known on the Northumbrian birding scene. For ten years he was the Natural and Cultural Heritage Officer for the Northumberland Coast AONB and he now runs his own environmental consultancy, specializing in birds. His talk is *Birding in Retirement*.

And we shall have Ian and Keith Davison's renowned Christmas Quiz.

And to make it all special we ask our members to **bring some Christmas nibbles** so we can have a festive end to our 2013 year of talks - as we've done every year since 2000.

HOPE TO SEE LOTS OF YOU THERE



Please send sightings reports for October, no later than 6th December 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 6th November 2013

A good audience of 42 included two new members from Alnwick, Anthony Allen and Jane Panton. George showed a range of specimens including a primary flight feather, probably from a juvenile Peregrine, a white butterfly pupa and an adult Svenssons Copper underwing moth.

The speaker was **Seamus Eaves**, a very experienced and enthusiastic bird ringer from Fylde in Lancashire talking about Bird Ringing and Migration. He assured us he was not one of the Hairy Bikers, despite appearances. 2009 was the centenary of bird ringing and Seamus has been involved for 30 years. The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) runs the British and Irish scheme which involves about 2600 ringers and 900,000 rings fitted each year, plus another 12,000 recoveries of previously ringed birds.



To ring birds you must first catch them. Methods include cage traps which are not used in Britain, but are good for ground-feeding finches in Canada; ringing nestlings; Heligoland traps (right) where birds in flight are channelled into a gradually narrowing mesh cage; mist nets which are the commonest method in the UK – traps are checked every 20 minutes and birds released; whoosh nets where a



bungee-powered net is used to trap groups of ground-feeding birds; canon nets where the net is fired over groups of birds (particularly waders) but for which you need a shotgun licence. All these methods allow ringing but also catch previously ringed birds ('recoveries'). Recovery data are particularly good for working out migration routes, but you can never be certain that a recovery location is actually that bird's final destination.



Migration comes in various guises. Conventional N↔S (eg Swallows); unconventional migration where the N and S routes are different (eg Lesser Whitethroat); partial migration where some birds move but others are sedentary (eg Robin); moult migration where birds move to specific moulting areas (eg some wildfowl); irruptive movements where there are periodic influxes to the UK driven by population pressures and food availability (eg Waxwing).

There is a range of modern methods for getting more information on bird movements. Some are simple like coloured leg rings or wing tags which can be seen with binoculars. Others are more high tech and expensive, such as satellite tags, radio transponders, data loggers etc.

Good data comes from Constant Effort Sites (CES) across Europe. At each site the same set of mist nets is deployed for the same six hour period on twelve occasions between May and August, but these are very labour-intensive and require ringers with great dedication. The data gives valuable information on breeding success and survival rates and enables birds to be weighed, sexed and aged and have measurements of things like wing length taken.

The BTO has a very good book called *Bird Ringing*. If you find a ringed bird, it is best to use the website www.ring.ac to send your information to the BTO.

PLANT CORNER

My Plant Corner articles over the last twelve years have invariably featured particular plant species that for one reason or another have caught my attention. This month's is different.

In early November Chris Metherell (the North Northumberland Botanical Recorder and a member of AWG) asked for volunteers for a lab-based project. So I turned up at 10.30, along with six others, at the Discovery Museum in Newcastle. It was half term and the place was swarming with children and families, but we were heading for the basement. Getting to the room where we were to work was a bit like moving through a prison, with doors being unlocked ahead of us and relocked behind. We eventually reached a rather sparsely furnished windowless room where there were large crates filled with many tens of thousands of Herbarium specimens. These needed checking, sorting, repairing, cataloguing and computerising. They had come from the University of Newcastle and from the personal effects of Professor George Swan, author of the Flora of Northumberland, who died last year.

So what, I hear you ask, is a herbarium specimen? Let's say you find a plant that interests you. You may or may not be sure what it is but you think it is worth collecting and keeping a sample for future reference or for someone else to identify it for you. Digital photography is a wonderful thing, but unless you are certain that you know which diagnostic features of a plant are the keys to its identity and then you have the photographic skills to be sure you've got images that capture those things, then photos may not be adequate. So you need to collect and preserve a specimen in good condition so that it will reveal all its important features.

I don't intend to describe how you set about pressing and preserving a specimen – if you want those details then go to an excellent online article at www.bsbi.org.uk/Collecting.pdf. Nor do I intend to spend long arguing the pros and cons of taking specimens from the wild. The same article sets out the general principles for taking samples. The problem is that those species that are abundant don't usually present any identification problems while the rarities, which may well need careful diagnosis, should normally be left well alone. All of this also ignores what the law says about uprooting wild plants (illegal) and about your entitlement to take plants from someone else's land without permission (you don't have any such right).



Anyway, back to the Discovery Museum. When you take a specimen sheet out of a herbarium folder it should be:

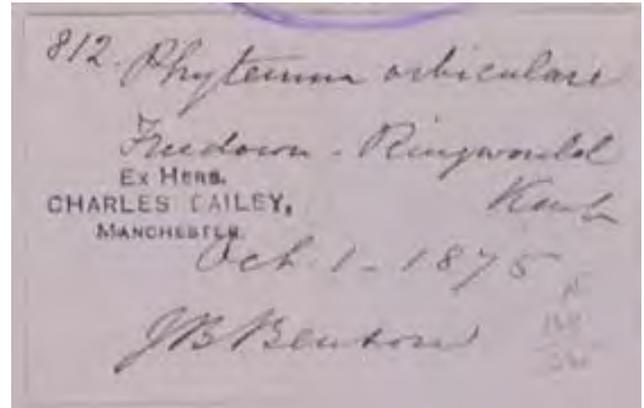
1. In good condition
2. Well mounted (attached to its sheet of, ideally, acid-free paper)
3. Fully labelled.

The labelling is particularly important. It needs to identify species, date, where it was found, who found it, who identified it if it wasn't the person who found it and whether it is part of a specific herbarium collection. The photograph shows three herbarium sheets as they should be – beautifully pressed and mounted and labelled. What a shame that so many are not in this condition at all.

You'd be amazed – well perhaps you wouldn't! – how many specimens simply have to be thrown out because they are in very poor condition or because they have totally inadequate labels. After all, even if you've got a beautifully pressed specimen with its Latin name but no indication of location, date or collector then it's no

use to anyone. As a collector, you may know where and when you found it, but if you are no longer available to ask (note my euphemism for 'deceased'), the specimen has no scientific value. Then there's the problem, sometimes, of whether you can actually read the writing on the handwritten labels. The one I've shown isn't actually too bad compared with some we came across.

Many of the specimens we looked at were old. Many had been collected in the early and middle parts of the 19th century and despite the fact that many will have remained unopened and unexamined since the day they were lodged in the University collection there were some in good condition and properly labelled but which had become detached from their sheets. These were set aside for re-mounting at some future date. The photo shows Chris Metherell working on herbarium specimens a few years ago in rather better organised and salubrious conditions than the ones we encountered.



A depressing feature of the day at the museum, at least for me, was that between the seven of us we dealt with a few hundred specimens in five hours. To process the whole mass of material will be a labour of years rather than months. I also ended with a question mark about the George Swan collection. His material consists not only of pressed plants but also has many letters, notes and other items so you could say that the whole represents his lifetime botanical diary. I'm really not sure whether dismantling this collection is a good thing

to do, but on the other hand if it isn't reorganised and catalogued then it cannot be properly available to researchers in the future.

At the end of it all the herbarium sheets, now reorganised and catalogued, will probably be sent to the Great North Museum (the Hancock) where they can become a major botanical research resource. That's always assuming that the Hancock has, or will have, enough proper herbarium cabinets to house the folders. All in all, after one five hour session, I have to admit that sorting and cataloguing old herbarium specimens is not really my idea of enjoyable botany, no matter how individually interesting some of the specimens may be. So I fear I shan't be a part of this particular workforce in the future.

What to look for in December 2103

As I write this, there is a winter feel to the weather, with frosts starting to be a regular occurrence. And yet summer does not want to give in; a swallow at Hethpool at the beginning of November, an Arctic tern off the Farne Islands and unbelievably, a peacock butterfly (12/11/2013) was seen flying over a field on the outskirts of Wooler. Autumn migration is coming to an end but there are still passages of fieldfares, redwings and blackbirds from Scandinavia. These migrants are accompanied by bramblings, siskins and snow buntings and as the moon increases to its zenith, there may be an influx of woodcock, Jack snipe and long-eared owls.

As the winter solstice approaches, much of our wildlife is hunkering down for the winter. A drop in temperature sees an increase in visitors to the bird table and gardens. This does not include birds but rodents, foxes, badgers and red squirrels may make an appearance. Below are two species to look out for during December:

Little auk: This black and white cousin of the puffin is the size of a starling. It breeds within the Arctic Circle on the boulder fields of remote islands. In winter, it heads off out into the North Atlantic in search of krill and other planktonic food. Occasionally, when the wind blows from the north, large numbers of little auks will enter the North Sea. In some years, huge numbers can be seen off our coast. The sight of flocks of little auks joining wader flocks flying across Fenham Flats will long remain in the memory. If this is to be a little auk year, birds can be seen just about anywhere – even inland. Berwick pier, Bamburgh, Craster and off Emanuel Head, Lindisfarne are all places where this enigmatic seabirds can be seen with a bit of patience and plenty of warm clothes.

Winter moth: The adult winter moths (*Operophtera brumata*) emerge from the ground in November or December, but only the male is able to fly. The female climbs to the base of a tree or building and attracts the male through the pheromone (sex scent) that she exudes. After mating the female lays a cluster of approximately 150 eggs under tree bark or in tree crevices, and her life is now over. The caterpillars can be a serious pest on fruit trees. It must be remember that the caterpillars of this moth are one of the most important food sources for our commonest breeding birds such as blue tits and great tits. Indeed many of these species depend on the life-cycle of the winter moth for a successful breeding season. This moth can be seen virtually anywhere; gardens, woodlands, moorland and hedgerows on a suitable winter evenings.



Little auk



Male winter moth



Female (flightless) winter moth

Happy Christmas to all Alnwick Wildlife Group members

Jack Daw

	SIGHTINGS OCTOBER 2013
BIRDS	
Red-throated Diver	3 off Stag Rock on 17 th 1 in Alnmouth Bay on 23 rd
Great Crested Grebe	Up to 3 all month at Branton Ponds
Slavonian Grebe	1 off Stag Rock on 17 th
Little Grebe	12 at Branton Ponds on 5 th
Manx Shearwater	2 at Annstead on 11 th
Sooty Shearwater	7 at Annstead on 11 th 8 in Alnmouth Bay on 11 th
Balearic Shearwater	1 at Annstead on 11 th
Little Egret	2 at Beal on 11 th 3 at Fenham Flats on 13 th 1 at Budle Bay on 29 th
Whooper Swan	2 at Branton Ponds on 6 th 10 on 9 th and 13 on 10 th 2 at Hedgeley Lakes on 15 th 13 over Branton on 17 th 7 at Branton Ponds on 25 th 2 at Hedgeley Lakes on 26 th 5 at Branton Ponds on 27 th
Brent Goose	723 at Fenham Flats on 13 th 57(Dark Bellied) at Holy Island on 20 th including 22 juveniles
Barnacle Goose	1 at Branton Ponds on 10 th and 26 th 400 at Fenham Flats on 13 th 100+ at Budle Bay on 29 th 2000 at Smeafield on 11 th
Pink-footed Goose	9 at Branton Ponds on 10 th 1000+ over Embleton on 29 th
Lesser White-fronted Goose	1(escape) at Hauxley on 9 th
Goosander	117 at Branton Ponds on 5 th and 78 on 6 th
Red-breasted Merganser	2 in Alnmouth Bay on 27 th
Wigeon	100 at Branton Ponds on 6 th 2570 at Fenham Flats on 13 th 10000 at Fenham Flats on 8 th
Shelduck	1 at Branton Ponds on 6 th
Pochard	2 at Branton Ponds on 19 th
Gadwall	4 at Branton Ponds on 26 th
Pintail	1 at Newton Pool on 5 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 5 th
Long-tailed Duck	7 off Stag Rock on 17 th 1 in Alnmouth Estuary from 25 th to 27 th
Common Scoter	6 off Howick on 12 th
Velvet Scoter	8 at Annstead on 11 th
Hen Harrier	1 in College Valley on 24 th
Sparrowhawk	1 on Holy Island on 3 rd
Merlin	1 juvenile on Holy Island on 20 th
Rough-legged Buzzard	1 at Holy Island on 8 th
Grey Partridge	2+ at Whinney Hill on 22 nd 9 in Branton on 30 th
Woodcock	1 over Haugh Head on 3 rd
Snipe	37 at Branton Ponds on 19 th 40 at Hedgeley Lakes on 26 th
Coot	61 at Branton Ponds on 31 st
Green Sandpiper	3 at Hedgeley Lakes on 26 th
Curlew Sandpiper	1 at Druridge Pools on 2 nd
Purple Sandpiper	6 at Stag Rock on 17 th
Lapwing	3 at Branton Ponds on 26 th
Golden Plover	250+ at Low Newton on 5 th 40+ at Whinney Hill on 22 nd 250 at Fenham Flats on 13 th

Curlew	14 at Branton Ponds on 23 rd
Redshank	1 at Branton Ponds on 23 rd 131 at Fenham Flats on 13 th
Arctic Skua	1 at Annstead on 11 th
Pomarine Skua	1 off Emmanuel Head on 14 th
Long-tailed Skua	1 at Budle Point on 2 nd
Great Skua	23 at Annstead on 11 th 1 in Alnmouth Bay on 11 th and 3 on 18 th
Lesser Black-backed Gull	55 at Branton Ponds on 5 th
Great Black-backed Gull	2 at Branton Ponds on 5 th and 19 th
Bonaparte's Gull	1 at Budle Point on 30 th
Arctic Tern	1 at Monk's House on 31 st
Barn Owl	1 near Branton on 4 th
Kingfisher	1 at Branton Ponds on 5 th and 15 th with 2 on 22 nd
Great Spotted Woodpecker	3 juveniles on Holy Island on 11 th
Swallow	2 on Holy Island on 14 th 1 at College Valley on 24 th
Dipper	1 at Branton Ponds on 19 th
Redstart	1 on Holy Island on 3 rd and 2 on 6 th
Stonechat	2 at Budle Point on 2 nd 7 at Budle Point on 17 th
Siberian Stonechat	1 at Howick from 20 th
Fieldfare	Several on Holy Island on 14 th 70+ over Branton on 21 st
Redwing	Several on Holy Island on 3 rd 15 over Branton Ponds on 10 th 100's on Holy Island on 11 th 50+ at Newton Point on 19 th 50+ at Branton Ponds on 31 st
Ring Ouzel	1 at Holy Island on 3 rd 10+ on Holy Island on 14 th
Subalpine Warbler	1 at Druridge Pools on 5 th
Lesser Whitethroat	1 on Holy Island on 3 rd
Common Whitethroat	1 on Holy Island on 6 th
Blackcap	2 on Holy Island on 3 rd 1 in Branton on 4 th several on Holy Island on 20 th
Willow Warbler	1 in Branton on 4 th
Chiffchaff	5+ at Branton Ponds on 5 th several in the Vicar's garden Holy Island on the 14 th including one good candidate for Siberian Chiffchaff
Yellow-browed Warbler	3 on Holy Island on 3 rd 1 at St Mary's wetland on 5 th 1 on Holy Island on 6 th
Firecrest	1 at St Mary's wetland on 5 th
Willow Tit	1 at Branton Ponds on 28 th
Marsh Tit	2 at Wallington Hall on 19 th
Jay	Several in Holystone Woods on 29 th
Tree Sparrow	20+ at Whinney Hill on 22 nd
Brambling	1 at Budle Point on 2 nd several on Holy Island on 3 rd 7 on Holy Island on 11 th 3 near Biddlestone on 29 th
Twite	7 at College Valley on 24 th 20+ at Alnmouth all month
Lesser Redpoll	Several on Holy Island on 14 th
Common (Mealy) Redpoll	Several on Holy Island on 14 th
Yellowhammer	30+ at Whinney Hill on 22 nd
Reed Bunting	20+ at Budle Point on 17 th 10 at Whinney Hill on 22 nd
Lapland Bunting	2 on Holy Island on 3 rd

Snow Bunting	4 at Budle Point on 2 nd 1 at Low Newton on 5 th
Reed Bunting	Many at Budle Point on 2 nd
MAMMALS	
Red Squirrel	1 at Branton on 3 rd and 7 th and 25 th 1 at Holystone Woods on 29 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 31 st 1 at Belford North Bank on 12 th
Roe Deer	3 on Holy Island on 6 th and 10 on 20 th 1 at Swarland on 31 st
Stoat	1 on Holy Island on 14 th carrying an apple
INVERTEBRATES	
Migrant Hawker	1 at Branton Ponds on 5 th
Southern Hawker	1 at Brandon Ford on 7 th
Common Hawker	1 at Branton Ponds on 29 th
Common Darter	Many around Branton Ponds on 8 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 23 rd
Peacock Butterfly	1 at College Valley on 24 th
AMPHIBIANS	
Common Newt	1 at Branton on 19 th
PLANTS	
Heath Grousel	College Valley on 24 th
Thyme	College Valley on 24 th
Mouse-eared Hawkweed	College Valley on 24 th
Thyme-leaved Speedwell	College Valley on 24 th
RAINFALL	83.5mm
OBSERVERS	W Banks, G&R Bell, S Carter, I&K Davison, G Dodds, A Keeble, M McMahon, S Reay, M Rolley, S Sexton, H Tindle, S Williams.