

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

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NEWSLETTER 162 MARCH 2015 REVIEW OF FEBRUARY 2015

NEXT MEETING APRIL 29TH 2015 7-30PM

THE BORDER MIRES – WASTELAND OR WONDERLAND

SPEAKER: BILL BURLTON

Bill Burlton spent all his working life as a professional forester, some of it in Scotland, but much of it in Northumberland. Since retirement he still receives commissions to do ecological surveying and gives advice on wildlife management - hence his particular interest in the Border Mires

Laurie Campbell – 24th February

This was the first time in AWG's fourteen years of existence that we have put on a high-profile event of this sort. It was our Chairman's idea and the rest of the committee thought "oh go on then – let's give it a go!"

Even though we were using a commercial venue, there was plenty of background organisation needed to make sure it would be a success. And it **was** a success! We must have attracted close to 200 people, with quite a number paying on the night to swell the audience of those who had pre-booked. The Playhouse seemed pretty full and the atmosphere was great.

Then, of course, there was Laurie himself. He has been a good supporter of AWG over the years, often allowing us to use some of his copyright images in the newsletters and on our publicity material. He really came up trumps for us on this occasion. His photographs, as you would expect from someone of his international reputation, were first class and his commentary took us through the locations and the techniques he used to get his shots.



Our thanks are due to the Playhouse and its staff, to all who attended, to committee members who donated most of the raffle prizes and most of all to Laurie Campbell for a brilliant evening.

On the mercenary front, AWG emerged with a boost to our funds of approximately £400 from a combination of the profits from ticket sales (after deducting all expenses) and from the raffle.

Richard

Please send sightings reports for March, no later than 6th April 2015 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.

FIELD TRIPS AND SURVEYS

Saturday 28th March Ford Moss Introductory Visit

If you hope to contribute to our Ford Moss surveys but would like a pre-visit to the area, then this is for you.

Meet at 10.30 by the end of the track to the reserve (there's marked road-side parking) at Grid Ref NT 963 377 (Explorer 399, Landranger 74). The visit will probably last about 2 hours. You'll need wellies and, ideally, binoculars. The total walking distance is no more than 1½ miles.

Sunday 26th April Cawledge Burn Local Wildlife Site

We shall be helping Alnwick Town Council by carrying out a wildlife survey. On this visit we'll introduce people to the site and concentrate on spring birds and plants. Sturdy footwear and suitable clothing, plus binoculars.

Meet at 10.30 behind the Lionheart industrial park at Grid Ref NU 197 118. Take the Shilbottle road from the A1 slip-road at the south end of town. Turn left opposite the new petrol station and go down to the T junction at the end where you turn left and then right at the next T junction. Park on the right hand side.

Sunday 10th May Holystone

Ian and Keith Davison will lead this walk in the excellent Holystone Woods. Birds & plants.

Meet at 10.30 in the parking area outside Holystone Village at about Grid Ref NT 950 025. Bring binoculars and perhaps some lunch. More details in the April newsletter.

Saturday 30th May Thomas Percy Local Wildlife Site

This is a second Alnwick Town Council site. It is very small and it is unlikely that we shall spend more than 90 minutes on this first visit. We shall record everything we can find.

Meet at 10.30 on Blakelaw Road in Alnwick at Grid Ref NU 187 124 by the old Thomas Percy School site (now a house building site).

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. In the last newsletter we published an article by John Gill, a long-standing member who lives in Humberside. The introductory sentence said he 'lives near Google'. It should have said 'near Goole' but Word's auto-correction facility thought it knew better. Sorry John!
2. Des Taylor from Seahouses prints our newsletters and works with Barbara Welch on our website. He does so much for AWG that your committee decided to offer Des Honorary Membership in recognition of his efforts and he has accepted.
3. At the end of this newsletter you will find our audited accounts for 2014. The auditing has been done free of charge, once again, by Norman Dunn from Glanton who has been a member for many years. Thank you Norman.
4. **Change of Speaker:** Dr Gordon Beakes from Newcastle University was due to speak to us about Fungi at the May meeting. Unfortunately this has coincided with his retirement and complications have arisen which have caused him to give his apologies. We are working to find a replacement speaker. Watch this space.
5. At the end of the Laurie Campbell event at the Playhouse we found we still had two raffle prizes unclaimed. A bottle of white wine had the **White Ticket 300** on it and the Year's Free Membership of AWG (or £10 refund for an existing member) had **Green Ticket 156**. If you think either of these should have been yours, please contact Richard on 01665 578346.

PLANT CORNER

Sometimes life and enthusiasms seem to go in phases. This has been a conifer winter for me and I've gained some confidence with recognising some of our less common trees – all planted and not native to Britain. Conifers are ideal for winter botany because, with the exception of the larches, they keep their needles and you've often got cones to help with the identification.



At Christmas Jane and I were walking our daughter's dog near Bellingham when I spotted a pine that I didn't know. It had the characteristic long needles of a pine but they were in groups of five rather than the more usual twos or threes and the cones weren't like 'normal' pine cones. It turned out to be one of the Soft Pines, Bhutan Pine (*Pinus wallichiana*) which is



apparently quite often planted in large gardens.

Whittingham Wood is largely Scots Pine, Norway Spruce and Douglas Fir, as befits a Forestry Commission (FC) wood. But Bill Burlton and I then saw



a small group of conifers with pale grey green foliage and quite smooth grey bark. There were no cones to help us and Bill, whose whole career

was in forestry, didn't know what they were other than the fact that they were a species of Silver Fir (*Abies*). The key character was that the medium length needles (c. 5cm) were all up-swept, giving an unusual appearance. Research at home showed that these were Colorado Silver Fir (*Abies concolor*). What they were doing in a FC wood is anyone's guess.

In February, again with Bill, I was in Hulne Park where, of course, the main driveway from Ratten Row is lined with an avenue of smallish conifers of unusual shape. The base of the trunk has red spongy bark that is flared and heavily grooved. These are Dawn Redwood which



delights in a real mouthful of a Latin name, *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*. This species was only first discovered in China in 1941 and in the wild it is regarded as critically endangered, so perhaps the fact that it grows well in the UK and has been frequently planted in gardens and policy woodlands is no bad thing. In China it grows to giant proportions, but British trees are still in their comparative infancy, so come back in another hundred years or so if you want to see them in their full glory. Sadly in Northern Europe it very seldom produces flowers and cones.



The Debdon area north of Rothbury has plenty of moorland but also several planted woodlands. I was there in late February and at the edge of one

wood were some rather bronzy-looking conifers. From a distance I thought they were Western Red Cedars (*Thuja plicata*), but when I got close they clearly weren't. Neither the leaves nor the cones were right. I took one or two small samples and back at base they proved to be

Japanese Red Cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*) which, despite the English name, is not closely related to the Western one. My photo shows the clusters of young male cones and the very characteristic needles.

This is another tree that grows very large in its native Japan but is not too often seen here and apart from some larger gardens you are only rarely likely to find it in plantations.

Richard

STEWCHAT...

February is a bit of a dull month for wildlife in Northumberland. A lot of the wintering birds have started to move on and we have a long wait for the summer flowers, insects and birds. But if you persevere some good days can be had.

The saying 'Its an ill wind that blows no good' was never truer than on the 1st Feb. A window rattling NNW gale made for a very lumpy sea, meaning only one thing – seawatching! I dashed down to Craster and viewed from the shelter of the car for an hour. A very worthwhile hour too with **31 Little Auks**, **3 Razorbill**, **3 Guillemot**, **7 Kittiwake**, **1 male Velvet Scoter**, **3 Shelduck**, **1 female Long tailed Duck** and **1 Red throated Diver** were all noted. Some good patch year list additions in that lot.



Figure 1- Little Auks from the high arctic.

A couple of species were added to the year list around Craster during the month – Willow Tit and Collared Dove, whilst up to 5 Purple Sandpipers could be found feeding in the harbour.

Down at Warkworth on 15th to view the Coquet Estuary turned up another arctic wanderer – a first winter **Iceland Gull**, quite a rare species in north Northumberland. I bathed for 10 minutes before flying off never to be seen again.

On 18th John and myself took a trip up to Holy Island to recce the area for the AWG field trip on 21st. It was very windy and cold but we still managed a pair of **Ravens** feeding in a field near the Care Ends. On leaving the island we popped a few miles north to Cheswick Sands where a very rare seaduck had taken up temporary residence. It took quite a while to find in the choppy sea, but once located, the male **Black Scoter**, an american version of our own Common Scoter stood out like a beacon. Whilst we searched the waves **1 Slavonian Grebe**, **1 Great crested Grebe**,

10+ Red throated Divers, **20+ Red breasted Mergansers** and **3+ Long tailed ducks** kept us occupied.



Figure 2 - Black Scoter

By the 20th, 100 Kittiwakes were on the sea offshore from the breeding cliffs at Howick, a week earlier than usual.

Another visit down to Warkworth Gut on 27th was interesting. Here we had **3 Short-eared Owls** hunting and squabbling over the dunes and saltmarsh. This bird has become ever more scarce in recent winters when it used to be quite a regular sight. On this occasion was also saw a nice **Barn Owl** carrying a vole that was almost snatched from its grasp by a bold Carrion Crow.

So, who says February is quiet!

Stewart Sexton, Howick.

SATURDAY 21ST FEBRUARY 2015 - AWG FIELD VISIT TO HOLY ISLAND.

On a sharp sunny, frosty morning a dozen of us met up at the start of the causeway across to Holy Island. We then du-bunked into three cars to save on parking space and headed off on to the island. Our route was basically an anti-clockwise walk around the village via the school, Vicars Garden, the Heugh, Harbour, Rocket Fields and along to the Lough, returning via the crooked Lonnon back to the village at lunchtime.

The main purpose was to have a look for some of Lindisfarne's wintering birds of which it is well renowned.

A few of us used telescopes to view the vast open sand and mud flats to the south and west of the island where many waders feed. Today such a selection included Golden Plover, Knot, Bar – tailed Godwit, Grey Plover and Redshank. The tidal channel behind St Cuthbert's Isle turned up one of the mornings highlights – a Slavonian Grebe. This black and white, winter plumaged individual was an education for several of the group and its key i.d features could be pointed out. Also here but seen only briefly was a drake Long-tailed Duck.

The higher vantage point of the coastguard view station on the Heugh gave us 3 Red throated Divers, Shag and more Bar tailed Godwits.

Lower down, we wandered out along the short harbour pier where 4 Red breasted Mergansers gave

quite good views fishing off shore. From here we had a dramatic view of several hundred Pale bellied Brent Geese flying across the majestic front of the castle.

Next stop, the new, very expensive, rocket field viewpoint. 13+ Black tailed Godwit were particularly noteworthy on here, being possible the only ones wintering in Northumberland this year? A drab looking female Shoveler prompted some good natured banter, while it was outshone by two gaudy multi patterned Shelduck.

A longer wander around to the Lough gave us better views of the Brent Geese where we could compare dark and light bellied forms together. At the Lough more Shoveler feeding on open water included a few smart looking drakes, while a pair of Gadwall or two were more subtle. The Coots here were already in full spring territorial mode, kicking up a right fuss.

Time was pressing on so we headed back, but not before Mick and George gave advice on publicity to an up and coming pop group who were checking out the geese calls as background to their new album, due to be released soon. You're never sure who you will come across on these visits!

As we left the island a Little Egret fished in the channel near the causeway bridge, luckily for me as I had already called one on the rocket fields when it was actually a Herring Gull!

All in all, a nice morning out with some nice birds and even nicer company.



WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN APRIL 2015

After a period of frosts, milder weather appears to be its way. This milder weather was greeted with a large **Common Frog** on the door-step of 5 Front Street, Glanton in the evening. Despite this movement of amphibians, there does not appear to be any frog spawn in the village. Yet in ditches in Thrunton Woods there is frog spawn everywhere. Who knows what the reason for this may be? The other interesting bit of news from the last weekend (7th / 8th March) was the large movement of **Whooper swans** on the Sunday. The Lindisfarne Nature Reserve held at least 155 birds, many of which were asleep after flying against a westerly wind. These birds probably set off from The Fens in favourable winds but fortunes changes as they moved north.

One of the greatest spectacles of April and early May is the dawn chorus. This can be experienced anywhere – even in the centre of Alnwick. Although the best place to experience it is within a large area of deciduous woodland which has clearings. Places such Holystone Woods, Harthope Valley, Hepburn Woods, etc. For the best experience it is better to be on site before it is light. **Tawny Owls**, **Grasshopper Warblers**, **Lapwing** and **Curlew** are very early risers. These can be accompanied by the haunting ‘bark’ of a **Roe Deer** or the call of a **Fox**. Early on in the dawn chorus is the best time to see and hear ‘roding’ **Woodcock**. For a long time, people thought that the frog like croak that the male omits was part of a territory display. Research has shown that this display flight may be more akin to a black grouse lek as male woodcock try to woo females by flying around a pre-determined circuit. As the night becomes day, **Song Thrushes**, **Blackbirds** and **Wrens** join the fray. **Wood Pigeons** and **Great Spotted Woodpeckers** join the ensemble. Then gradually warblers such as **Chiffchaffs**, **Willow**

Warblers and **Blackcaps** join in and a distant **Cuckoo** can be added to the list. At this point the dawn chorus is in full flow and even as someone who has listened to so many, it can be difficult to pick up individual species. As the full hiatus starts to wane, this can be the best time to pick out some of the specialists songsters such as **Redstarts**, **Pied Flycatchers**, **Marsh** and **Willow Tits**.



Singing male Pied flycatcher



Woodcock

Even if you cannot get out into the countryside, why not take in the dawn chorus from your garden or back yard. Even if you find it difficult to differentiate the different bird species, you will be amazed at what you hear.

Jack Daw

MOTH OF THE MONTH - APRIL

If there is one group of moths that are characteristic of early spring, it is the genus *Orthosia* (Drabs and Quakers). Six of the nine British species are relatively common in Northumberland and likely to turn up at lit windows, though rarely staying for long. While most difficult to distinguish from each other without some practice, one species, the Hebrew Character (*Orthosia gothica*) is easy to identify by the black mark (rarely reddish brown) on the wing that resembles the Hebrew letter Nun (נ). At rest it is about 20 mm long.



They may turn up in March in a forward year – I had 26 in my trap in March last year, but the majority appear in April (331 last year), continuing into May (51). Since the trapped moths are released several hundred metres away after recording, the re-catch rate is minimal. The larvae are polyphagous, eating the leaves of a wide range of trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants from April until August.

Alan Fairclough

MYSTERY BIRD COMPETITION.

Hello all, this one is just for fun, no prizes...results next month.



Bird 1



Bird 2

Clue – Its all in the harbour....

SIGHTINGS FEBRUARY 2015

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver	11 off Cheswick Beach on 11 th 3 off Craster on 14 th 4 at Holy Island on 21 st 2 off Cheswick Beach on 21 st
Slavonian Grebe	2 at Holy Island on 21 st 1 off Cheswick Sands on 21 st 1 at Holy Island on 21 st
Black-necked Grebe	1 at East Chevington on 5 th
Great Crested Grebe	1 off Cheswick Beach on 21 st
Gannet	12 off Craster on 14 th
Whooper Swan	7 north of Warkworth on 15 th
Brent Goose	Mixed flock of Dark and Pale Bellied numbering 240 birds on Holy Island on 21 st 2 at Seaton Point on 19 th
Pink-footed Goose	560 at Fenham Flats on 8 th 600 at Smeafield on 19 th
Shoveler	6 on Holy Island on 21 st
Pochard	2 at Maidens Hall Lake on 15 th
Common Scoter	100+ off Cheswick Beach on 11 th
Black Scoter	1 off Cheswick Beach on 11 th and 21 st
Goosander	11 at Branton Ponds on 15 th
Red-breasted Merganser	3 off Cheswick Beach on 11 th
Shelduck	300 at Fenham Flats on 8 th 128 at Smeafield on 19 th
Long-tailed Duck	1 at East Chevington on 5 th
Hen Harrier	1 in North Northumberland on 10 th
Common Buzzard	3 at Ford Moss on 19 th
Sparrowhawk	1 at Ford Moss on 19 th
Kestrel	4 at Smeafields on 12 th
Peregrine	1 near Titlington on 28 th
Grey Partridge	16 at Townfoot on 25 th 4 pairs between Smeafield and Elwick on 9 th
Purple Sandpiper	5 at Craster Harbour on 9 th
Green Sandpiper	1 at Branton on 3 rd
Knot	450 at Fenham Flats on 8 th
Ruff	1 at Cresswell Ponds on 15 th
Oystercatcher	20 at Branton Ponds on 14 th 60+ at Brandon on 20 th
Woodcock	1 at Ford Moss on 19 th
Common Snipe	10 at Alnwick Moor on 10 th
Curlew	23 at Brandon on 20 th 45 at Townfoot on 25 th 160 at Smeafield on 19 th
Black-tailed Godwit	13 on Holy Island on 21 st
Herring Gull	86 at Branton Ponds on 27 th
Iceland Gull	1 at Warkworth Weir on 15 th
Stock Dove	1 at Yearle on 10 th
Tawny Owl	1 at Beadnell on 13 th
Barn Owl	1 near Doxford on 13 th 1 at South Charlton on 13 th 1 at Lesbury on 26 th 1 at Ratcheugh on 27 th 1 at Warkworth dunes on 28 th
Short-eared Owl	2 at Alnwick Moor on 10 th 3 at Warkworth dunes on 28 th
Kingfisher	2 at Branton Ponds on 1 st
Skylark	13 at Townfoot on 25 th
Grey Wagtail	1 near Hedgeley on 3 rd
Pied Wagtail	3 at Smeafield on 24 th
Waxwing	1 at Morpeth on 25 th
Dipper	1 at Lesbury on 14 th
Fieldfare	100+ at Branton on 2 nd 8 at Ford Moss on 19 th 21 at Townfoot on 25 th
Redwing	20 at Branton on 2 nd 6 at Townfoot on 25 th
Mistle Thrush	9 at Townfoot on 25 th
Goldcrest	4 at Ford Moss on 19 th 2 at Howick Gardens on 20 th
Blue Tit	30 at Kettleburn on 10 th
Willow Tit	1 at Branton Ponds on 6 th 2 at Craster on 14 th 1 near Hedgeley on 27 th
Treecreeper	1 at Ford Moss on 19 th 1 at Hedgeley on 20 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 27 th 2 at Lesbury on 20 th
Starling	350 at Branton on 2 nd
Rose-coloured Starling	1 at Prudhoe on 5 th
Raven	2 at Ford Moss on 19 th
Jay	3 at Ford Moss on 19 th 4 at Hedgeley on 20 th
Tree Sparrow	14 at Elwick on 19 th 15 at Branton on 23 rd
Linnet	24 at Elwick on 19 th
Crossbill	Several at Harwood Forest on 14 th 8 at Thrunton Woods on 28 th

Bullfinch	15+ at Howick Gardens on 14 th 8 at Beanley Woods on 27 th
Yellowhammer	19 at Branton Ponds on 5 th 31+ at Craster on 20 th 18 at Townfoot on 25 th 4 at Smeafield on 12 th
Snow Bunting	11 at Guile Point on 8 th
Reed Bunting	6 at Townfoot on 25 th
MAMMALS	
Red Squirrel	1 at Yearle on 10 th and 16 th 1 at Branton on 19 th 1 at Howick Gardens on 20 th
Roe Deer	2 at Beanley Woods on 27 th
Fallow Deer	2 at Hulne Moor on 9 th
Porpoise	1 off Cheswick Sands on 11 th
Badger	1 near Hedgeley Ponds on 13 th
Otter	1 at Branton Ponds on 14 th 3 at Hauxley on 5 th
Stoat	1 in full ermine at West Stobswood on 15 th 1 at Branton in full ermine on 15 th 1 at Lesbury on 27 th in full ermine
Brown Hare	1 at Ford Moss on 19 th 3 at Cullernose Point on 20 th 19 at Townfoot on 25 th
AMPHIBIANS	
Common Toad	1 at Branton Ponds on 18 th
REPTILES	
Adder	2 at Branton Ponds on 20 th and 3 on 24 th with 5 by 26 th
PLANTS	
Common Polypody	Holy Island on 21 st
RAINFALL	
26mm	
OBSERVERS	
G&R Bell, I&K Davison, G Dodds, A Gibson, M McMahon, E Pantou, R&J Poppleton, S Reay, J Rutter, S Sexton.	

BTO House Martin Survey 2015

We know surprisingly little about House Martins despite the fact that they breed alongside us, using our houses on which to build a nest made of hundreds of beakfuls of mud.

Critically, we do not know why this species is in rapid decline in the UK. Currently, it is 'Amber listed' in the Birds of Conservation Concern listings, compiled by the UK's leading conservation agencies.

How can you help in Northumberland?

In this first year of the survey we need help to visit 81 'random' (i.e. pre-selected) 1-km squares, across the whole county, for breeding House Martins.

We need volunteers who are willing to carry out two or three visits to a 1-km square between late May and mid-July, to look for House Martins and their nests.

How long will each visit take?

The survey visits will involve walking around the square looking for House Martins and their nests and mapping and recording a few details about any nests that you find. In most squares each visit will normally take around one to two hours - however, the visit length depends on the habitats within the square: visits to urban squares may take longer, whereas visits to squares with only a small number of buildings may take less than half an hour.

To sign up

To select a 1km square please visit <http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/house-martin-survey>
If you are new to BTO online surveys you will need to register to obtain a 'user name'. This is easily done on the website.

Thanks

Tom Cadwallender

BTO Regional Representative - Northumberland

ALNWICK WILDLIFE GROUP - Accounts for 2014

RECEIPTS

Subscriptions	£1,012.50
Pay-at-the-door	£20.00
Mannings store sponsorship	£50.00
Northumberland Estates survey donations	£800.00
Other donations	£20.00
TOTAL	£1,902.50

PAYMENTS

Subscription refund	£17.50
Insurance premium	A & M Keeble had no N/Ls in 2013
Website maintenance & licence	£113.00
Hire of Hall	£60.00
Speakers' expenses	This chq written '13 & cashed '14. (2015 Chq written '15)
Room hire for Committee mtgs	£450.00
Stamps, envelopes & printing for newsletters	Two 2013 chqs cashed in 2014. Two 2014 chqs not cashed until 2015
2nd hand Laptop + case	£250.00
Donations	£80.00
	Covers 2 invoices for 2013 not previously received, + 3 mtgs in 2014
	£338.14
	£85.00
	£475.00
	£200 ea to John Steele & Philip Hammer for Owl work & £75 to Jim Clark for Survey Reports
TOTAL	£1,868.64

Bank balance at 1 January 2014	£3,062.13
Add receipts	£1,902.50
Total	£4,964.63
Less payments	£1,868.64
Balance at 31 December 2014	£3,095.99

I have examined the record of income and expenditure presented to me, including an explanation of the activities of the Group. I believe this summary to be an accurate record of the financial activities of the Group.

Signed: *[Signature]*
 Name: *Helen Dunn*
 Date: *23 Feb 2015*