

# Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

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## NEWSLETTER 174 MARCH 2016

### Review of February 2016

#### NEXT MEETING:

Coquet Island - its Wildlife and Management.

WEDNESDAY APRIL 27TH 2016

SPEAKER: PAUL MORRISON

Paul is the RSPB warden for Coquet island.

#### WALKS AND FIELD TRIPS

We've put together some walks and field trip outings over the next few months. We hope there will be one or two that catch your imagination and don't clash with holidays and other commitments.

For the first two dates the details are correct. For subsequent events, the dates are correct but the details of timings etc will appear in subsequent newsletters.

#### SUNDAY 17TH APRIL

Ellingham – an exploration of the local area and its wildlife. Led by Michael Hall.  
Meet at 10.00am in Ellingham Village (Grid Ref NU 169 258). Duration 2 to 3 hours.  
Do note that this is NOT Eglington or Edlington, but Ellingham.

#### SATURDAY 7TH MAY

Harehope and Quarry House moor – a moorland walk which, with correct organisation of cars, will be one-way and mostly level or downhill. Led by Jim Clark.  
Meet at 9.30am (early start!) at Nursery House, Harehope Hill End (GR NU 081 207 The Hill End farm road is opposite the end of the road that links Scotts' Sawmill on the A697 to the Eglington road)

#### SATURDAY 21ST MAY

Near Bolam. The destination will be a wetland area with a good bird hide. Led by George Dodds.  
Details in the April Newsletter

#### SUNDAY 3RD JULY

Branton Ponds Bio-blitz. A full day of wildlife spotting and recording that people can dip in and out of. If you are into moths and bats you may also be able to stay half the night with the moth trappers and bat detectorists. Organised by George Dodds, Ian & Keith Davison and Stewart Sexton  
Details in the May Newsletter

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Please send sightings reports for March, no later than 6th April 2016 to: Ian & Keith Davison, The Bungalow, Branton, Powburn, NE66 4LW or Tel: 01665 578 357 or email to [redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk](mailto: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.

### FEB 2016:

The weather has continued to be a little unkind from a bird ringing point of view but I have managed to get quite a lot of new (and replacement) small bird boxes put up near Longhorsley, Doxford, and in the Breamish Valley. This led to a marvellous experience when I was putting some boxes up for Marsh Tits (a small but otherwise fairly conventional box); a 'tit' started calling in the trees above me – I played a recording back to it (a standard survey technique for the small rare tits) but it ignored the sound of a Marsh Tit. I then switched to a recording of a Willow Tit and the bird immediately reacted by flying much closer; and switched itself from a short call to a full song. I have no doubt that this was a Willow Tit prospecting for a nest site. Later that week I had made three Willow Tit boxes and returned to put them up in the general area. These are packed with wood shavings because these birds like to partly excavate their own holes. I have a plan available for these specialist boxes if anyone would like one. I have also got several new boxes put up for owls this month.

It's been a bit of a come down from ringing in South Africa (see pictures – can you identify the birds) but I have managed to do a few ringing sessions near home with trainees. As well as new birds we have also recaptured a Goldfinch and a Siskin both originally ringed in 2013; a Chaffinch first ringed in 2006 (so 10 yrs old) and a Great Tit ringed in 2010. I have also observed several Blackbirds fighting over food and 'territory'; the result of which was a dead Blackbird being found today – which proved to have been ringed as a juvenile in 2011.

At present I am trying to check on a sample of our Barn Owl boxes; to undertake repairs, clean out 'jackdaw sticks', put in new bedding (wood shavings); and ring some adult owls. I stop doing this in just a few weeks so the owls can settle down to breeding in April and May.



*Phil Hanmer*

*A Ringer & Trainer*

*Natural History Society of Northumbria Ringing Group  
(Hancock Museum)*

*E-mail: [tytoalbas@btinternet.com](mailto:tytoalbas@btinternet.com)*

## PLANT CORNER

By the time you read this we shall be inching towards 'Apple Blossom Time'. That has led me to think about fruit trees in the countryside.

Down in the grazing fields below our house there are a couple of smallish hedgerow trees that I have always assumed are Crab Apple. The fruit in most years are plentiful, but small and hard and I've certainly not been tempted to eat them. Sometimes, particularly at road sides, there are apple trees that will have grown from pips in apple cores tossed into the verges from passing cars, but the fruit on these trees are often not dissimilar to smallish crab apples.



Apple trees are usually not self-fertile, so when they grow in the open countryside rather than in controlled orchard conditions they

are at the mercy of whatever pollen is brought by the pollinating insects and it is virtually impossible that the fruit produced will in any way resemble the commercial variety from which the tree originated. How then can you tell whether the tree you are looking at is a crab apple (*Malus sylvestris*) or the offspring of a domestic apple (*Malus domestica*)? You need to look carefully at the underside of the leaves, the flower/fruit stalks and the outside of the flower sepals. If they are totally hairless (glabrous) and often with spiny protrusions on the twigs then it's a crab. If any of these parts are at all hairy and the twigs lack spines then it's a domestic.

Then there's the problem of wild plums. We are all familiar with roadside Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) bushes with their small black fruit called sloes. (Pictures left)



In March and early April some of our rural lanes have fantastic displays from Cherry Plum (*P. cerasifera*) which are the earliest of the *Prunus* species to come into flower –

usually even earlier than Blackthorn. These two species were natives of the Balkans and a very long time ago they naturally hybridised to produce plants of *Prunus domestica*, the Wild Plum.

So far so good, but the wild plum has diversified into three subspecies. One is the wild plum itself (Picture below) with large fruit and very flattened stones from which the flesh of the fruit readily separates. The second



is the Damson or Bullace (and try as I might I cannot find any book which satisfactorily distinguishes between these two). These are smaller plums, but not as small as sloes, with much more rounded stones to

which the flesh of the fruit tends to adhere. The third is the Greengage which supposedly is halfway in characters between the wild plum and the damson, but, of course, with yellowy green fruit. But then the New Flora of the British Isles says, less than helpfully: "However, these subspecies have been so much hybridised that differences between them have partly broken down and they are often impossible to tell apart".

All this means that if you come across a flowering plum in a hedgerow, don't be disheartened if, using a Tree book, you can't decide which it is.



Fortunately you can sometimes turn your attention to the other reasonably common wild species of *Prunus*, the Bird Cherry (*P. padus*). I think it's a more delicate and attractive small tree than many of the others and its major feature is that the very pretty flower spikes are usually held more or less upright. (Picture above)

*Richard Popleton*

I find that February is one of the quietest months for those seeking wildlife. The excitement of the New Year is over and we wait in the doldrums for spring to appear.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> February it wasn't so much wildlife that was of interest, but more of an environmental phenomenon when some rare cloud formations appeared. Nacreous Clouds only form over the UK when the polar vortex drifts far enough south for us to see them. Up in the stratosphere, the temperature drops lower than -78\* forming small oval or square clouds with a rainbow or mother of pearl sheen. They are best seen at dawn and dusk. It was on my way to work at Hipsburn early on 2<sup>nd</sup> that I saw them, but they had been seen as the sun dropped for a few nights previously.

More evidence of arctic weather took a more typical form on 3<sup>rd</sup> with a first winter **Iceland Gull** showing very well at Ashington's QEII Lake, feeding on bread with the usual ducks and swans.



Figure 1: First winter Iceland Gull.

On 5<sup>th</sup>, at least one of the wintering **Chiffchaffs** remained active around Howick, favouring the ditch running along the side of the lane into the village.



Figure 2: Chiffchaff wintering at Howick

A trip down to the Coquet Estuary on 8<sup>th</sup> and back home via Boulmer made a nice change from the usual Howick fare. The **Coues's Arctic Redpoll** was still at Birling with 20 **Mealy and Lesser Redpolls**. Song Thrushes were in full voice now in several locations. While at Boulmer **Peregrine, Bar tailed Godwit, Twite, a pale bellied Brent Goose** and masses of shoreline waders made it into the notebook.

In a quiet winter for them, a lone **Waxwing** spent a week feeding in an isolated hawthorn bush next to the A189 at Widdrington Village. It was a nice but 'drive by' brief on my way to work.

After a couple of days of sun, frost and clear skies when I am at work, the weekend of 13<sup>th</sup> was horrible with a cold Easterly gale, heavy rain, sleet and hail. Trying to make the most of it, I tried a seawatch from the car at Craster, seeing a **Great Northern Diver, 10 Shelduck and 2 Razorbill**. The first two being new birds for the year. Back at home, 10+ Tree Sparrows were at the bird table and 20 Stock Doves were in the field behind the house, a good count anywhere these days.

Valentine's Day began with a very light covering of snow at Howick, a sight less common than Waxwings in recent winters. It didn't last too long but the day was nice with clear sunny spells. Another visit to the Coquet Estuary turned up my first **Mediterranean Gull** of the year on the little shore and Shelduck numbers had increased to 24 birds. Along at the Birling 'Redpoll Field' the Arctic Redpoll remained elusive but there were **30 each of Yellowhammer and Reed Bunting, 6+ Meadow Pipit, 12+ Tree Sparrows and 30+ Redpolls** that wouldn't sit long enough to check through them.

Still on a Redpoll mission, on 21<sup>st</sup> we visited an old stamping ground at Widdrington Tip. Not sounding too glamorous, it is disused now and has been replanted with Alders, Birch and Willow. There are rushy damp areas too that are great habitats for birds. Today we found 50+ Redpolls including at least **3 Mealy Redpolls, 4 Snipe, a Woodcock, 1+ Willow Tit, 6+ Reed Bunting, 2 Bullfinch and 9 Crossbills**. Not bad for a brown field site.

Continued on next page...

I ended the month with a visit up north to Budle Point and Stag Rocks on 28<sup>th</sup>. It was a lovely cold sunny day and the scenery is breath taking with a snow capped Cheviot to the left, Lindisfarne Castle to the right and the Farnes and Bamburgh Castle to the south. Hundreds of Brent Geese flighted into Budle bay to feed while offshore **5 Slavonian Grebes and 4 Long tailed Ducks** were with 50 **Common Scoter**.

And to think I said February was quiet...

Stewart Sexton



Figure 3: Common Scoter and Slavonian Grebes

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## A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A RANGER

It's ten o'clock. Time to start the day.

I look westwards to the farm to luckily see a Barn Owl weaving its way through the tractor shed openings. A beautiful sight – I'm so lucky. After an hour a car stops and the driver asks for my help. He has cut his foot on glass and is going to hospital. I think that as the bleeding has stopped he doesn't need a bandage, so I clean the wound from my water bottle which I haven't drunk from and give him a bandage to use in case it starts bleeding again. It will need stitches, so I only want him to use the bandage if the bleeding starts again.

Someone tells me that a seal has washed ashore dead, so I tell them to leave it and I will get in touch with the Borough Council who will take it away. I phone from the pub.

A guy who has been 'helping' me to keep an eye on things is arrested in a Police covert operation. I'm told he was keeping too much of an eye on the nearby nudist colony.

There's always someone who complains about paying to get parked and on to the beach. Today's no exception – there are two complainants.

Complaints today of the threat of opencast mines

probably don't realise that there has been a campaign in the past to try to stop a nuclear reactor power station at Druridge. I meet and shake hands with Bridget Gubbins, the campaign leader.



Druridge Bay

The building down the coast a little that looks dilapidated was in fact a military blockhouse which likely would have housed Home Guard Platoons. It's really just four walls with, perhaps, surprisingly large windows. Many wartime relics are still in place including the tank traps.

It's now 4.00pm and time to go home. On the way I'll take the litter to Sisters and check at Alnmouth South Beach.

*David Turnbull*

Gill Thompson has been working as an ecologist for the Northumberland National Park (NNP) for sixteen years. An audience of 41 gathered for her talk about *The Iconic Birds of the National Park*.

The NNP is the most northerly of the English national parks. It is one of the smaller ones in area but stretches a long way from north to south. Roughly 20% is MoD land in the Otterburn Ranges and another 20% is covered by commercial conifer forestry. The constitution of the NNP requires it to:

- work to enhance both wildlife and the cultural heritage
- promote public involvement and enjoyment
- foster social and economic well-being of local communities

In our case about 2000 people live in the NNP and its largest settlement is Elsdon, although places like Bellingham, Otterburn and Wooler are very close to the boundary. The geology is varied. The southern part is on carboniferous rock with intrusions of the hard Whin Sill. In the north is the granite of the Cheviot massif with surrounding volcanic andesites. The Fell Sandstones form an arc round the eastern side which deflects the northern rivers so they drain into the River Till which runs north to empty into the Tweed.

The Cheviots have few major crags, so there are few crag-nesting birds, but there is plenty of moorland. Humans have removed the trees and maintain the moorland through grazing. Some upland areas are grassy and some are heather moorland. Remaining upland hay meadows survive only by cooperation of the farmers. Less than 1% of the NNP is semi-natural ancient woodland.



The **Eurasian Curlew** is the emblem of the NNP. It is the largest European wader and can live to more than 30 years. They arrive in March from the coast (mostly the Solway and Ireland) and they breed in the Park. There has been a significant decline since the 1968

census, but the NNP is not in too bad a state. The current research is looking for reasons for the decline and it could be significant that the Otterburn Ranges have seen a decrease in breeding density.

The **Ring Ouzel** or Mountain Blackbird is a ground nester, favouring rocky ledges in the Cheviot cleughs. They need short-grazed open areas for feeding. Their breeding density has been decreasing and their range is reducing. Nationally there were 5322 breeding territories in the UK (a 29% reduction since 1999). In NNP there are probably 30 breeding pairs. The birds migrate and are shot over France and Malta on their way back in the spring. All we can do is to make the breeding habitats as good as possible. The Harthope Valley is our hotspot.



Male **Black Grouse** or Black-cock indulge in noisy lekking behaviour in April to attract the smaller Grey Hens. Across the world this is a woodland edge species. The population is significantly reducing here. The birds are doing well in the North Pennines but not in NNP. In 2014 there was only one breeding pair in Otterburn where once there were good-sized leks. Attempts are being made to carry out conservation planting in the College Valley, but our population is now probably too small to be viable.

Our **Red Grouse** is an endemic sub-species, *scoticus*. Again the population has been decreasing. Unlike birds such as pheasant and red-legged partridge Red Grouse are not captive-bred and released. Instead heather moorland is managed for them with patchwork controlled burning and predator control by legal trapping and shooting. Other species do benefit from the grouse management regimes.

Gill also made some brief comments about **Merlin** and **Hen Harrier**. This latter species had only six breeding pairs in England in 2015, with two of those in the NNP where six chicks were fledged.

## MICRO-MOTHS – GRACILLARIIDAE

This is a group of 35 species, 20 of which have been recorded in Northumberland. Most larvae feed on tree or shrub leaves, initially making a small mine then folding over or rolling the leaves. Nearly all the adults have a characteristic resting posture, where they raise up on their forelegs with the tip of the wings touching the ground.

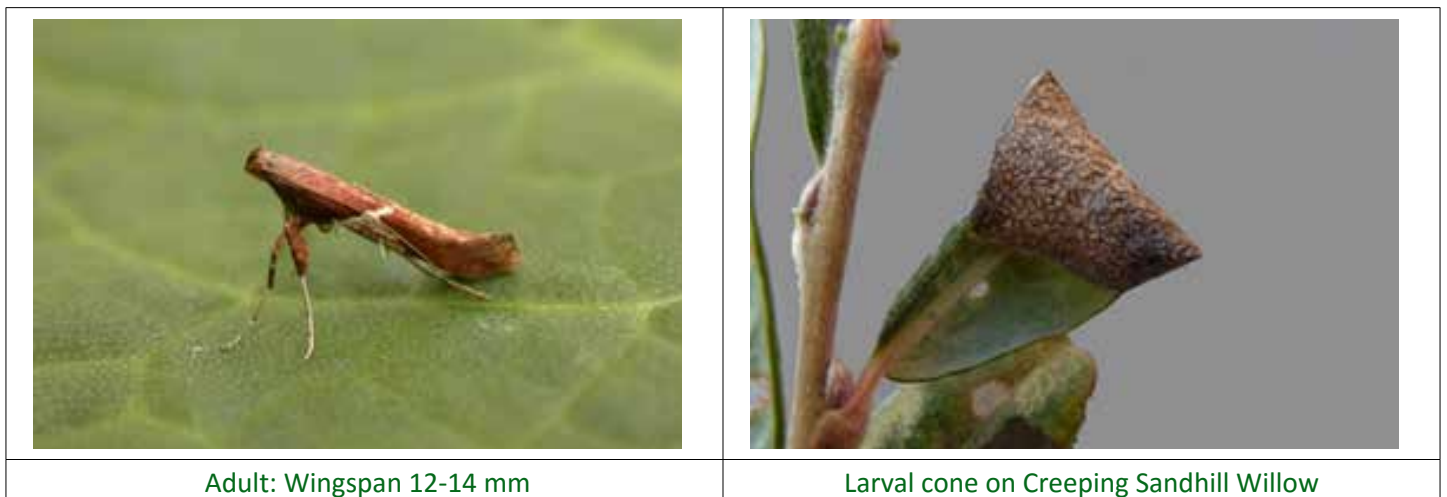
*Caloptilia elongella* is fairly common in Northumberland. The larvae feed on Alder species including the commonly planted Grey Alder in coastal areas.



*Caloptilia syringella* is very common, feeding on Lilac, Privet and Ash. They make a fairly large mine (very noticeable on Lilacs), before making one or more cone shaped leaf folds.



*Caloptilia stigmatella* is widespread in Northumberland, feeding on Willow species.



## WHAT WILDLIFE TO LOOK FOR IN APRIL 2016

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As I write this, there is still a nip in the air and frosts in the morning. The signs of a very early spring have all but evaporated - even the daffodils are reluctant to flower. Early mornings are now full of the song of Robins, Blackbirds, Song Thrushes, Great Tits and others. Rooks and Jackdaws are nest building and Moorhen chicks have appeared, on a pond, in the College Valley. Spring is coming but it is definitely not here yet!

### WHAT SPECIES TO LOOK FOR: SAND MARTIN



May be by the time you have read this article, Sand Martins may have already arrived. Although not the earliest migrant, they can start arriving in the north east in late March. This is a distinctive species of our riparian corridors that winters in the Sahel region of West Africa. One over-riding memory of a visit to Senegal, in January, was seeing large flocks of Sand Martins sitting on the desert floor at dawn.

Sand Martin's dark brown upper parts and dark underwings contrast with pale under parts and a distinctive brown chest bar. Sand Martins are easily told apart from their hirundine relatives; the Swallow and the House Martin, by their brown colour and shallow forked tail.

When Sand Martins first arrive from Africa, they can be found along suitable riparian corridors or congregating over gravel pits and large ponds/lakes. Nests are up to 1m into a sandy bank. The rate of excavation is approximately 8 – 10 cm per day. Suitable breeding sites can be found in many places on the Rivers Till, Aln, Coquet and parts of the Wansbeck. They will also take readily to artificial banks and one of the best examples in the region is on Hexham racecourse, although not easily viewed by the public.

The clutch size is 4 -5 eggs which take about 14 days to hatch. Once chicks fledge they quickly move south to large roosts on the south coast where they put on fat for the journey south. In 2015, the latest bird to fledge was on the 5th September in the Till Valley. This is very late with main reason being a very cold and late spring that resulted in first clutches being abandoned or not laid.

*Jack Daw*



## SIGHTINGS FEBRUARY 2016

SIGHTINGS FEBRUARY 2016	
BIRDS	
Red-throated Diver	1 at Guile Point on 21st
Little Grebe	1 at Branton Ponds on 2nd 4 at Hedgeley Lakes on 18th
Little Egret	2 at Fenham Flats on 21st 1 near Whittingham on 25th
Pink-footed Goose	500 at Doddington on 9th 375 at Fenham Flats on 21st 200 over Branton on 27th 350 at Smeafield on 3rd
Barnacle Goose	400 at Smeafield on 3rd
Shelduck	5 pairs at Branton Ponds on 19th
Wigeon	100+ at Warkworth on 8th 500+ at Foxton Bends on 8th
Pochard	2 at Branton Ponds on 2nd
Gadwall	1 at Branton Ponds on 2nd
Goldeneye	5 at Branton Ponds on 2nd
Long-tailed Duck	1 at Guile Point on 21st
Goosander	3 at Branton Ponds on 2nd
Red-breasted Merganser	4 at Warkworth on 8th 9 at Guile Point on 21st
Common Buzzard	4 at Bilton on 27th 6 at Harehope Hillend on 6th
Kestrel	1 at Bilton on 27th
Sparrowhawk	1 at Beanley Moor on 27th 1 at Lesbury on 27th
Goshawk	1 in North Northumberland on 28th
Merlin	1 at Guile Point on 21st
Peregrine	1 at Boulmer on 8th 1 near Doddington on 9th 1 at Smeafield on 11th
Grey Partridge	7 at Branton Ponds on 4th 3 at Townfoot on 20th 27 at Ratcheugh on 22nd
Lapwing	250+ at Branton Ponds on 8th 208 at Ratcheugh on 22nd
Woodcock	3 at Chillingham on 2nd single birds at Hannahs Hill between 3rd and 26th
Snipe	16 at Branton Ponds on 19th
Oystercatcher	95 at Branton on 27th
Purple Sandpiper	8+ at Boulmer on 8th
Green Sandpiper	2 at Hedgeley Lakes on 18th and 1 on 27th 5 on River Breamish near Beanley on 1st
Redshank	50+ at Boulmer on 8th
Curlew	24 at Branton Ponds on 3rd 200+ at Boulmer on 8th 380 at Fenham Flats on 21st
Turnstone	50+ at Boulmer on 8th
Bar-tailed Godwit	20+ at Boulmer on 8th 590 at Fenham Flats on 21st
Dunlin	100+ at Boulmer on 8th
Sanderling	40+ at Boulmer on 8th 119 at Fenham Flats on 21st
Knot	810 at Fenham Flats on 21st
Iceland Gull	1 at Q.E. 2 Park on 3rd
Glaucous Gull	1 at Branton Ponds on 27th
Barn Owl	1 at Branton Middlesteads on 3rd 1 at Townfoot on 20th 1 at Branton on 22nd 1 at Battle Bridge on 26th 1 at Birling Farm on 26th 1 at Hannah's Hill from 20th onwards
Tawny Owl	1 in Branton on 18th
Green Woodpecker	1 heard at Harehope on 16th
Great-spotted Woodpecker	1 at Branton on 14th

Skylark	2 near Doddington on 9th 6 at Townfoot on 20th
Stonechat	1 at Boulmer on 27th
Fieldfare	40 at Townfoot on 20th
Redwing	35 at Townfoot on 20th
Chiffchaff	1 at Howick on 5th
Goldcrest	1 at Branton Ponds on 3rd
Willow Tit	1 near Hedgeley on 3rd
Nuthatch	2 at North Bank Belford on 25th
Raven	1 at Old Bewick on 20th
Tree Sparrow	33 at Branton on 14th
Coues Arctic Redpoll	1 still at Birling Carrs for 4th week
Lesser Redpoll	5 at Branton Ponds on 3rd 1 at Howick on 5th
Mealy Redpoll	3+ at Birling Carrs on 8th
Brambling	7 at Howick on 5th
Linnet	250+ at Howick on 5th
Chaffinch	50 at Howick on 5th
Bullfinch	3 at Branton Ponds on 11th
Yellowhammer	22 at Townfoot on 20th 19 at Ratcheugh on 22nd
MAMMALS	
Red Squirrel	2 at Branton on 9th and 1 on 12th and 13th 1 at Branton Ponds on 24th 2 at Branton First School on 26th
Otter	1 at Branton Ponds on 19th
REPTILES	
Adder	1 at Branton Ponds on 12th
INVERTEBRATES	
Small Tortoiseshell	1 at Branton on 22nd
RAINFALL	23mm

#### OBSERVERS

I&K Davison, J Dean, G Dodds, J&N Dods, A Hall, P Jobson, R&J Poppleton, S Reay, D Roughton, J Rutter, S Sexton, Branton First School children. J Clark.