

# Alnwick Wildlife Group



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Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna

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www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

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**NEWSLETTER 176 MAY 2016**

**Review of April 2016**

**MEETINGS:**

**WEDNESDAY 28TH SEPT**

**SAVE OUR MAGNIFICENT MEADOWS.**

**SPEAKER: NAOMI WAITE**

**WALKS & FIELD TRIPS**

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In April Michael Hall led an excellent walk in and around Ellingham which 18 members enjoyed. Then in early May Jim Clark's scheduled moorland walk from Quarry House to Harehope coincided with that awful day when the low cloud never lifted and the temperature never rose above 70C – so the eleven brave souls who turned up agreed that discretion was the better part of valour and we walked instead along the Breamish from Low Hedgeley to Harehope.

Many thanks to Michael and to Jim and also to Elma Clark who put on some hot soup at the end of the Harehope walk to warm everyone up.

By the time you get this newsletter George Dodds will have led the visit to wetlands near Bolam and we hope that will have gone well.

## **BRANTON PONDS BIO-BLITZ**

Don't forget our planned mini bio-blitz day (recording everything we can find) at Branton Ponds on 3rd July. Our data will help with the management plans for the reserve. There will be a plant recording effort to add to the 143 species that we recorded here on 10th May; a birding walk and, depending on the weather, a moth trapping exercise.

There will also be the opportunity for members who have special interests or expertise in other groups of organisms – butterflies, ladybirds, spiders, beetles etc etc – to do their own thing and add to the data we collect. Or perhaps anyone with a bat detector might wish to spend some time on the Saturday or Sunday nights trying to build up a bat list for the ponds.

Full details and timings will be in the June newsletter, but the birding walk is scheduled to start at 10.00 and should be confined to the morning session. The botany will start at 10.30 but is likely to last longer and those wanting to join in for the full duration should bring some lunch.

For any and all of the activities you don't need to have vast expertise – just an enjoyment of spending time on a specific reserve site and taking pleasure in seeing what you can find.

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**Please send sightings reports** for May, no later than 6th June 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.

**AWG welcomes contributions** for the newsletter and items for inclusion should be submitted by the 12th of the month to [redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk](mailto:redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk)

### APRIL 2016:

Purposefully avoiding any contact with Barn Owls at the moment means I have little to report; except the recovery of an owl apparently killed by a collision with a train near Howick. I originally ringed this bird as an owlet near Middleton in July 2009. At nearly 7 years this was quite a long lived Barn Owl and it has travelled both north and east since its hatching. If you see a dead bird please do check if it's ringed and try to get its full RING NUMBER. Either report this to the BTO or to me; this provides invaluable information.

However, Tawny Owls are now well into nesting so I have been checking boxes and recently ringed 2 pulli at a box near Hipsburn. I have another four to return to (with trainees) in the very near future. A sixth seems to have given up in the rather unpleasant weather. I don't really feel its a very good year for Tawny Owls but as I only sample a small part of the population I will defer judgement until my colleagues such as Martin Davison (Kielder) can report.

Last month I reported that I (and trainees) had enjoyed ringing (and controlling) a number of Siskins and Lesser Redpoll; all of which are still healthy. Thanks to the BTO's database, I can now add some fascinating details of these birds origins:

Siskins:

D287311 - ringed RSPB Lakenheath, Suffolk Nov 2013: At Lemmington Hall Apr 2016.

Z536638 - ringed Brandon, Suffolk Sep 2015: At Lemmington Hall Apr 2016.

D891134 - ringed Warsop, Nottinghamshire 6/3/16: At Lemmington Hall 30/3/16.

Y707505 - ringed Thetford, Norfolk Feb 2013: At Lemmington Hall Jan 2016.

V021800 - ringed Peebles, Scottish Borders Apr 2013: At Lemmington Hall Jan & Mar 2016.

D448630 - ringed near Clitheroe, Lancs. Apr 2013: At Lemmington Hall Mar & Apr 2016.

Z463253 - ringed near Montrose, Angus Aug 2015: At Lemmington Hall Mar 2016.

Redpoll:

Z139899 - ringed Oakington, Cambs. Feb 2016: At Lemmington Hall Apr 2016.

D266776 - ringed Mickley, Prudhoe May 2013: At Lemmington Hall Mar 2016.

Y659975 - ringed near Forfar, Angus Jul 2013: At Lemmington Hall Apr 2016.

Finally we also controlled a Great Tit which was ringed at Fenwick (east of Lowick) in Aug 2015 which has now taken up residence at Lemmington Hall. A rare movement for a tit.

The result of my research into the Willow Tits visiting gardens in Craster has produced fascinating results. V709707 was originally ringed as a juvenile at Low Newton by the Natural History Society Ringing Group; most interestingly this was in September 2007 thus making this little bird exceptionally long lived at nearly nine years old.

Migrating Chiffchaff (warblers) have arrived this month and one was captured on the 16/4/16 near home; this appears to be only a year old. Another captured on the 23rd was an adult which may have been back and forward from Africa several times.

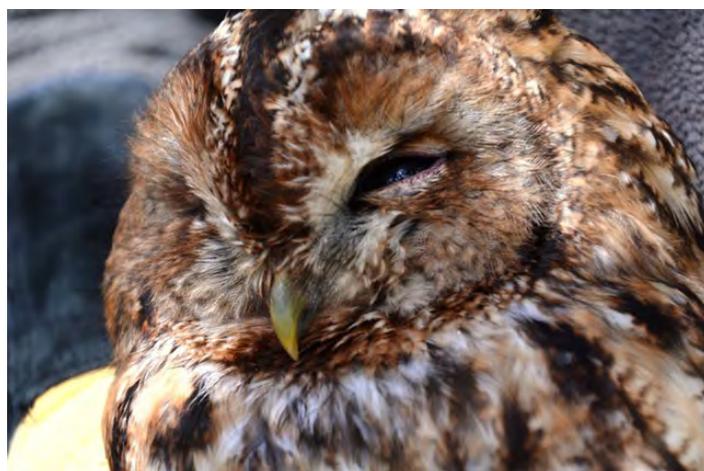
Most of our small resident birds such as tits and Tree Sparrows will be nesting in May so I will be nest recording and ringing soon.

*Phil Hanmer*

*A Ringer & Trainer*

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

*E-mail: tytoalbas@btinternet.com*



## PLANT CORNER

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My chosen plants this month have delightful names – Veronica in Latin and Speedwell in English. There are lots of them, but I thought I might take you on an imaginary walk along one of our country lanes, then through a grazing field and on into a woodland to see what we might find in early summer. This is a good time for many speedwells when they have not yet become submerged in taller vegetation.

The name speedwell comes from the idea that they are roadside flowers that speed you on your journey, although why they gained that reputation isn't clear. In any case you would have to assume that the association with 'God Speed' probably referred only to the commonest of the roadside species, Germander Speedwell. Meanwhile Nicholas Culpeper in his mid-1600s Herbal seemed unaware that there was more than one species and recommended speedwell as being "helpful against the stones and strangury and pestilential fevers" whatever that might mean.

Almost all Veronica species share the general pattern of being smallish plants with blue flowers with pale or white centres. So if we ignore the ones growing in water or the specialist mountain species or the ones that are only found in Britain in the sandy Brecklands of East Anglia, the challenge is still to know which species you are looking at.

The key features to take note of are: leaf size and shape; the presence or absence of hairs and their arrangement; the size and colour of the flowers and where they are produced; the nature of the developing fruit once the petals have been shed. And, of course, what type of habitat they grow in.

So to our walk. In the lane verges you will first find Germander Speedwell (*Veronica chamaedrys*). The flowers are bright blue with white 'eyes'. The leaves lack stalks and the flowers are borne in spikes arising from the angles (axils) of the leaves. The clinching feature is that the hairs on the stems are in two lines down opposite sides of the stem.

As you walk along you might come to a farm gateway and see small patches of the poorly-named Wall Speedwell (*V. arvensis*). It rarely grows on walls, although it is often in rather dry stony places. The flowers are very small and very bright blue and the whole plant is small and low-growing. Inside the gate is an arable field and at its edges, with the other crop weeds, you are very likely to find Common Field

Speedwell (*V. persica*). This is quite a sprawling plant with solitary flowers growing from the leaf axils and, a useful diagnostic feature, the lowest petal of each flower is very pale – often almost white.

Your walk now takes you into a grazing field where the commonest species among the cropped grass is Thyme-leaved Speedwell (*V. serpyllifolia*). This is a perennial species with the pale blue flowers in terminal spikes and the leaves, as the name tells you, are quite small and simple like the leaves of Thyme plants. If the field is on acid soil with dry patches you may well come across some of the Heath Speedwell (*V. officinalis*). I think this is the prettiest of the speedwells with its small serrated-edged leaves and its upright spikes of distinctly lilac-coloured flowers.

Next you move into some mixed woodland and without much searching you are likely to find Ivy-leaved Speedwell (*V. hederifolia*) which tends to grow flat along the ground and has leaves with three lobes a bit like small versions of ivy. There will also be Wood Speedwell (*V. montana*). Despite its Latin name this is not a mountain plant and is quite like Germander Speedwell, so you will need to look at the stems which are quite hairy with the hairs growing all round, unlike the two lines on the Germander stems. Its leaves also have short stalks, unlike Germander.

Finally you get back home and there, growing in your lawn, is Slender Speedwell (*V. filiformis*). This was unknown in Britain until about 150 years ago, but is now common in lawns and other grassy places. The leaves are mostly almost circular while the flowers are a purplish blue and have very long stalks growing out of the leaf axils. Serious lawn-o-philes may not like Slender Speedwell because it's a weed! But I think it's a very cheerful early-season plant that you won't see after about the end of June and a nice feature of many less-than-perfect lawns.

So, without needing to embark on a serious botanical hunt for rare species, a Sunday morning walk has revealed no fewer than eight speedwells and, I would hope, added to your appreciation and enjoyment of the countryside.

*Richard Popleton*

**PICTURES ON NEXT PAGE**



Germander Speedwell



Heath Speedwell



Wall Speedwell



Ivy-leaved Speedwell



Common Field Speedwell



Wood Speedwell



Thyme-leaved Speedwell



Slender Speedwell

## MEETING OF WEDNESDAY 27TH APRIL

32 members and visitors gathered and we were able to welcome Karen and Philip Griffin as new members. George produced a male chaffinch – a young adult from 2015. Vivien reckons it died when it flew into her leg. No-one else would dream of suggesting she might have kicked it! David Turnbull had again brought some of his copied newspaper articles of wildlife interest.



Paul Morrison then gave a talk about Coquet Island. Paul has spent 30 years with the RSPB team on Coquet Is., much of it as the Site Manager. The island is about one mile off the coast at Amble and covers an area of only about 8 hectares. There was a 15th Century monastery and the lighthouse, built in 1841, was sited on top of the remains of the main monastery. There are no mains services, but quite recently an array of solar panels has been installed to provide power. A small row of cottages has been restored and is used by the residential volunteers who come for 2-week stints on the island in the bird breeding season. These are the only visitors who are allowed to land on the island.

Coquet belongs to Northumberland Estates. Trinity House leases the lighthouse and the RSPB leases the rest. In the past stone was quarried from the island and the battlements of the Duke of Northumberland's London home – Sion House are made from Coquet stone. There is still a working foghorn. When the lighthouse was manned they grew their own vegetables. Their families came out and stayed in the cottages. But then Trinity House re-designated the lighthouse as a 'Rock Light' rather than a 'Land Light' and from then on the families weren't allowed to come.

The island consists of rocky shores and a central flat low plateau of rock. This used to be well covered with maritime turf, but more recently the grass Yorkshire Fog has invaded and out-competed the small turf grasses. There used to be rabbits which effectively managed the turf, but serious inbreeding weakened the stock and they died out. Now a few geese breed and they do eat the Yorkshire Fog, but this large grass causes problems for the puffins whose young sometimes get trapped in the network of strong grass roots.

The resident wardens arrive on 1st March and do all

the necessary repairs and grass-cutting before the first migrant birds appear. The old vegetable plots are now managed as nettle beds to provide cover for young birds and food plants for butterfly species. Attempts are made to deter the larger gulls which predate the puffin and tern chicks. An ingenious mobile phone alarm is used, powered by a solar panel. But to justify to Natural England that the gulls are a real problem and can therefore be legally targeted, the RSPB has to

collect lots of data from ringing and monitoring.

- The **Puffins** seem to do quite well, but they are internationally red-listed. To avoid undue disturbance they are only monitored every five years and now instead of wardens putting their arms down the burrows, cameras are used to check each burrow. Puffins are enormously curious and will actively explore and play with anything provided – bells, mirrors, flexible electronic keyboards!

- There are c. 4,500 pairs of **Black-headed Gulls** and monitoring is coordinated with the Farnes.

- **Eider** are counted by nesting females – 350 in 2015 – but declining. This is the southernmost breeding colony on the east coast and the Farnes decline is even more severe.

- 1160 pairs of **Common Terns**. They are very aggressive, but this benefits Roseate Terns which can only nest successfully if the Commons are there to protect them from Gulls.

- **Arctic Terns** are doing well (1471 nests). The walled 'garden' is these days used as a helicopter pad out of the breeding season. The wardens deliberately play Boules there and the dents made by the metal bowls are used by the terns. Arctic Tern numbers are falling on the Farnes but rising on the Long Nanny and there is an overall increase in breeding numbers.

- The non-aggressive **Sandwich Terns** have 1624 nests. They are tolerant of disturbance, but overall they are suffering big declines.

- **Roseate Terns** (pictures at end of article) are the Coquet speciality, along with Rockabill Island in the Irish Sea. They use small burrows and crevices and this is the only UK population (Rockabill is Irish).

The wardens have built mini-terraces and nest boxes on the shingle with considerable success. Pairs return to the same boxes each year. 98% of pairs used artificial boxes in 2015 when there were more than 100 breeding pairs.

Increasing numbers of seals (now about 500) haul out on Coquet and determined efforts are made to keep them off the plateau where they would squash the puffin burrows. The other great danger is persistent criminal egg thieves. They have necessitated security cameras and the island is never left unattended in the breeding season. Night is the problem time, but powerful lights are used to deter them. If caught they face a £5k fine, but some are so determined that this is not a deterrent.

Paul then ended with some short video clips of birds showing courtship behaviour and of puffins playing with the toys provided. There is an exhibition in the Baltic from 30th May to 5th June which we are encouraged to go to see.



### A NIGHT IN THE LIFE OF A RANGER

I arrive at Kielder in good time – dusk, just getting dark. It's a night-time practice for the Rangers and Fell Rescue Team from dark to dawn.

We split into groups of five to search for our 'casualty'. It's really black and it's surprising how difficult it is to see, even with a powerful torch. We set off along the road, as do the other teams.

I'm told, as junior partner, to check a small piece of wood for the casualty. There are some things you never think of when you are searching. I had to put my hand and forearm out in front of my face so that the twigs and branches didn't poke me in the face. It's dangerous stuff. But I find no casualty.

It's really cold – seeping through my thick coat. It's also eerie as there is no sound until I hear my companions chatting off to my right on the road. It's a long night and we become cold and miserable as we search.

At long last dawn comes up and there's the largest bat I've ever seen silhouetted against the sky – it must have had virtually an 18 inch wingspan.

The dawn is beautiful. We didn't find our casualty even though there were about 40 of us. But a lot was learned.

*David Turnbull*



Kielder at Night

## MICRO-MOTHS – YPONOMEUTIDAE

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The Yponomeutidae are a large family with 76 British species and I will deal with two of main genera here. First the Argyresthiinae, which contains 23 species with 19 recorded in Northumberland. Most have larvae that feed in the shoots, bark or fruits of shrubs. One is a relatively recent arrival in Britain, first recorded in 1982 in London, but now widespread across the whole of the UK. This is *Argyresthia trifasciata* which feeds in Juniper, Cypress and Thuja shoots and has spread via garden centres. Another common species is a pest that damages apple fruits, boring into the core, called *Argyresthia conjugella*.



*Argyresthia trifasciata* (Wingspan 8-9 mm)



*Argyresthia conjugella* (Wingspan 11-14 mm)

The Yponomeutinae is a smaller genera containing eight British species, six of which have been recorded from Northumberland. The adults are difficult to separate at species level, all having white wings with black spots and in some cases slight grey shading. The larvae mainly feed communally on the leaves of various trees in white 'tent' webs. Occasionally they make the news, since they can occur in hundreds of thousands and cover everything around in webs. The commonest species in Northumberland is *Yponomeuta evonymella* which feeds on Bird-cherry.



*Yponomeuta evonymella* (Wingspan 19-25 mm)



A small larval nest on Bird-cherry

*Alan Fairclough.*

## WHAT WILDLIFE TO LOOK FOR IN JUNE 2016

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What a difference a week makes. Last week, there was snow in the air and the wind was blowing cold. This week the temperatures have soared to a balmy 18°C with glorious sunshine. During the period of very cold weather, at the end of April, those Swallows and House martins that arrived in Glanton had disappeared. The warm weather of the first week of May saw a large influx of migrants. There were some very large movements of Swallows especially on the 3rd May. It is only in the last few days that there has been an increase in the numbers of butterflies and bumblebees. Species such as Green-veined white, Speckled wood and Orange-tips butterflies have appeared in numbers.

### SPECIES OF THE MONTH: GREEN HAIRSTREAK BUTTERFLY

This butterfly can be found in a range of habitats but in Northumberland it is generally found on the moorland edge where there is Bilberry, Bird's foot trefoil, Bramble and / or Gorse. Areas of moorland edge around Alnwick are especially good for this species but they can take some finding if the sun is not shining.

The flight period for this butterfly is from early May until late June. In the Northumberland, the best time to see this species is in late May and early June. The species forms distinct colonies which can vary markedly in size. Both sexes always settle with their wings closed. The brown upper side of the wing is only seen in flight. The underside of the wing gives the impression of being green. The effect is produced by the diffraction of light on a lattice-like structure found within the scales on the underside of the wings. The 'green' effect makes the species hard to see at rest

Eggs are laid singly on the food plant. Typically, the egg is laid on a tender shoot or flower bud. The eggs hatch into the larvae after two to three weeks. On hatching, the larvae which is the shape of a woodlouse bores into the shoot or bud. The instar over-winters and metamorphosis into the butterfly in the following May or June.

Happy searching

*Jackdaw*



## SIGHTINGS APRIL 2016

BIRDS	
Little Egret	1 at Branton on 1st 1 at Warkworth on 2nd
Whooper Swan	5 over Warkworth on 2nd 2 at Branton Ponds on 13th and 14th
Shelduck	8 at Branton Ponds on 10th
Goldeneye	19 at Branton Ponds on 17th
Osprey	1 at Branton Ponds on 6th 1 at Old Bewick on 16th
Marsh Harrier	1 at East Chevington on 2nd 1 at Druridge Pools on 3rd 1 near Hipsburn on 10th
Peregrine	1 at Cresswell Pond on 3rd
Merlin	1 at Hulne Moor on 23rd
Water Rail	1 at Branton Ponds on 7th
Avocet	2 at Cresswell Pond on 2nd and 6 on 3rd
Knot	60 at Warkworth on 10th
Grey Plover	2 at Cresswell Pond on 2nd
Little-ringed Plover	1 at Cresswell Pond on 2nd 6 on River Breamish on 17th
Curlew	82 at Fenham Flats on 10th
Whimbrel	1 at Craster on 17th
Black-tailed Godwit	4 at Warkworth on 10th
Greenshank	1 heard over Warkworth on 10th
Common Sandpiper	3 at Branton Ponds on 14th 1 at Charlton Mires flash on 17th
Green Sandpiper	2 at Hedgeley Lakes on 6th
Long-billed Dowitcher	1 still at Cresswell Pond on 3rd
Iceland Gull	1 at Branton Ponds on 7th
Lesser-black Backed Gull	61 at Branton Ponds on 7th
Sandwich Tern	2 at Cresswell Pond on 2nd 3 at Warkworth on 2nd and 2 on 10th 6 at Holy Island on 24th
Swallow	Many in Branton by end of month 1 at Smeafield on 8th and 2 on 18th
Sand Martin	5+ at Branton Ponds on 1st 2+ at Druridge Pools on 3rd 20 near Mouldshaugh Farm on 19th Hundreds at Branton Ponds by end of month
House Martin	1 near Ellingham on 17th 1 at Branton on 18th 1 at Blelford on 18th
Pied Wagtail	27 at Branton Ponds on 1st
Yellow Wagtail	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 20th
Meadow Pipit	25+ at Warkworth on 10th
Redstart	1 at Hedgeley on 16th 1 near Shepherds Law on 26th
Fieldfare	100+ at Botany on 17th
Ring Ouzel	Up to 30 in College Valley on 28th
Sedge Warbler	2 at Branton Ponds on 27th
Common Whitethroat	1 at Branton Ponds on 24th
Blackcap	1 at Branton Ponds on 4th 1 at Warkworth on 10th
Chiffchaff	Many at Branton Ponds by 14th
Willow Warbler	1 at Branton Ponds on 5th and several by 14th
Great Grey Shrike	1 at Harwood Forest on 7th
Raven	1 at Branton Ponds on 21st 1 at Otterburn Ranges on 22nd
Jay	2 at Smeafield on 20th
Tree Sparrow	17+ at Smeafield on 25th

Goldfinch	20+ at Smeafield on 25th
Common Crossbill	7 at Harwood Forest on 7th
Mealy Redpoll	1 at Howick on 17th
Twite	2 at Warkworth on 10th
<b>MAMMALS</b>	
Red Squirrel	2 at Harwood Village on 7th 1 with white stripe down back at Branton on 7th 1 at Ellingham on 17th up to 3 all month in Branton
Otter	A Female with 3 young cubs on River Breamish on 19th
<b>REPTILES</b>	
Adder	8 at Branton Ponds on 6th and 10 on 7th
Slow Worm	2 at Branton Ponds on 6th
<b>PLANTS</b>	
Primrose	In flower at Branton Ponds on 6th
Cowslip	In flower at Branton Ponds on 6th
Wood Aven	In flower in Crawley Dene on 7th
Moschatel	In flower near Ellingham on 17th
Common Whitlow Grass	At Otterburn Ranges on 22nd
Hares-tail Cottongrass	At Otterburn Ranges on 22nd
Common Cottongrass	At Otterburn Ranges on 22nd
<b>INVERTEBRATES</b>	
Early Bumblebee	1 at Branton Ponds on 6th
Tree Bumblebee	1 at Branton Ponds on 19th
Bee-fly	1 at Branton Ponds on 10th
Small Tortoiseshell	1 at Smeafield on 19th
Peacock	1 at Smeafield on 19th
Velvet Mite	1 at Branton Ponds on 20th
<b>RAINFALL</b>	72 mm
<b>OBSERVERS</b>	W Banks, M Clark, I&K Davison, G Dodds, S Fallaw, A&M Goodall, P Jobson, R&J Poppleton, S Reay, D&M Roughton, J Rutter, S Sexton, AWG Field Trip.