

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

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NEWSLETTER 185 FEBRUARY 2017

Review of January 2016

MARCH MEETING – MARCH 29TH 2017 AN INDOOR BADGER WATCH. SPEAKER: RICHARD MUGGERIDGE

Richard Muggeridge, with his wife Janet, has been a member of AWG for several years. He has been watching and videoing Badgers for some time and we look forward to learning more about the private life of this fascinating mammal



Siskin: see 'Ringers Year'

Please send sightings reports for February, no later than 6th March 2017 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.

AWG welcomes contributions for the newsletter and items for inclusion should be submitted by the 12th of the month to redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

JANUARY 2017:

My ringing year started with the receipt of a Ringing Recovery Reports from the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). The first was to tell me that one of a brood of Tree Sparrows ringed in its nest near Whinnyhill Farm, Longhorsley; on the 6th June 2016 was subsequently controlled (very much alive) by another ringer at Druridge Links on the 29th October. So it's clearly joined a flock of Tree Sparrows on the coast for its first winter. As you will know the weather has been somewhat mixed and since I need calm dry weather to catch birds ringing has been a bit uncertain. However, on the 6th I managed a small catch of 17 birds in a couple of hours. Eight of these were new including a couple of Tree Sparrows; together with 9 re-traps. These included a Great Tit first ringed in 2014 and a Tree Sparrow also ringed in 2014. The next day, with two trainees present, we managed 34 birds including a new female Bullfinch. However we did not see my favourite winter bird until the 21st January when we captured four Siskins (*I had actually seen the first Siskin feeding on Niger seed in the garden on the 18th Jan*). One of the birds was a new male but the three others already had rings (see picture). One had been ringed back on the 7/10/15; another on the 31/1/16 and the third was a completely unknown bird (a Control); which I will have to wait for the BTO to tell me about.

On the 22nd Jan; 27 birds were captured including (amongst the Blue, Great and Coal Tits; Tree Sparrows, Chaffinch and Goldfinch) another re-trap Siskin. This one had been ringed first on the 7/10/15 and then in every month (several times) up to and including March 2016. On the 26th a further three new birds were captured in a feeder trap that was not even set! I find the Siskin and its predilection for 'travelling' to be fascinating and have personally both ringed and controlled birds that have gone to/come from every corner of England, all over Scotland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, France and Belgium.

The Siskin is something of a success story and although 90% of its 'European' population breeds in Fennoscandia and the neighbouring areas of the Baltic States and Russia; the breeding population has been increasing in the British Isles for the last few decades. They typically start nesting in April (which is early) in Spruce and Pine trees and usually have a second brood before starting to disperse. If there is still local food available then they will not go far but if food is scarce then they may undertake what may appear to be erratic migrations generally south and west. In Britain they frequently appear feeding on river side Birch and Alder. However, it's on returning north that we most notice them (in the New Year) as they come searching for food in our gardens. While they will eat Peanuts its safer to feed them Niger seed (*because damp peanuts do go mouldy if not eaten quickly*) and a quick check of my ringing records show 52 captured in Jan 2013; 64 in 2014; only 2 in 2015; and 8 to date. We will see if numbers build up over the next few weeks.

Perhaps the most fascinating feature of these irruption migrations is that some birds habitually return to the same wintering areas in subsequent years (but may not be seen every year!).

I have not been checking on Barn Owls this month but have just used up all my remaining wood to make two new owl boxes and went just south of Rothbury to put one of these up, in a disused Hemmel, last Friday; and then to the coast to replace a worn out box, yesterday (Monday).

Anyone interesting in ringing is invited to get in touch. I will mostly be ringing near home this winter and then starting some Barn Owl work in March.

Phil Hanmer
A Ringer & Trainer
Natural History Society of Northumbria Ringing Group (Hancock Museum)
E-mail: tytoalbas@btinternet.com

PLANT CORNER

This month's article is a bit different. It starts with plants, but then veers sideways into other aspects of wildlife. But bear with me.

As I may have mentioned before, along the farm track from our house is a small group of larch trees at the edge of a plantation. There are plenty of other larches around, mostly the hybrid species (*Larix x marschlinsii*) and of various ages. The trees I'm talking about are probably 15 years old. The thing that makes this group stand out is that the leaf buds break very early and in fact almost two months before many of the other larches.



Last year I noticed the first small green leaf clusters emerging on 31st January and it has been the same this year. Even though we have the whole of February to go before the start of the meteorological Spring, these very early buds give me hope for the changing of the season.

Which brings me to the matter of phenology. Not, you will note, phrenology, which was the 19th Century pseudoscience of determining aspects of a person's character and mental condition by measuring the dimensions and shape of the skull and noting its various bumps and hollows.

Phenology is the study of the timing of natural stages in the lives of organisms. Events such as the timing of bird migration; the appearance of frogspawn; the opening of the first flowers of particular plant species. These are all affected by factors such as:



- temperature
- increasing or decreasing day length
- the amount of rain and snowfall
- the amount and intensity of sunlight

In these times of climate change (no matter what Trump may deny), phenological recording can give genuine evidence of the extent to which the climate is changing and the ways that organisms are adapting to it. My observations of the timing of leaf break in these larches aren't much use on their own, but they could have been relevant if I'd had the foresight to record the dates of the event for the 20+ years we've lived here.

If you are one of our AWG members who enjoys wildlife but for whatever reason doesn't feel confident (or hasn't the time or inclination) to take part in wildlife surveys, perhaps getting involved in simple recording of the annual timing of specific events in your garden or local area is a way to add a level of enjoyment and to contribute to the sum total of human knowledge!

So, let's assume that you decide to make a belated New Year's resolution and set aside a notebook to jot down your observations, what could you start with? Perhaps the date of arrival of your first swallows of the year; or when you see your first white-tailed bumblebee in the garden; or your first spot of a fly agaric mushroom in the autumn; or even the timing of your first and last lawn grass cuts of the year. Good, straightforward,



simple observations. If you are consistent with your recording then in, say, 2027 you will have ten years' records and you will be able to start to see real trends.

As usual, while your records will be interesting for you, they only become scientifically valuable if you share them with others. At this point I know I stand in danger of annoying those of you who don't use the internet. But perhaps you will have friends or relatives who do because I want to direct you to a website called www.naturescalendar.org.uk. This provides an excellent and easy way of contributing your own phenological records to a large national database. To quote the website:



“This kind of recording has moved from being a leisure hobby to a crucial source of evidence as to how wildlife is responding to climate change”

Just as with the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch, contributing your records to Nature's Calendar will make you part of a real piece of scientific research.

So, start keeping your records and send them in. The actor Philip Glenister has a current TV advertisement pushing the advantages of switching energy suppliers. His final catchphrase, delivered direct to camera, is “Go on then – what are you waiting for?” Well then??

Richard

Our first meeting of 2017 saw 34 of us gather to hear Tim Dean's talk on the birds of the Amazon, the Andes and northern Peru. Tim is one of the four editors of the 2015 Northumbrian Bird Atlas. His co-editors, Dick Myatt and Tom and Muriel Cadwallender are all members of AWG so we can bask in their reflected glory. Tim is also the Bird Recorder for Northumberland, so his birding expertise isn't in doubt.

The Nature Trek tour that Tim had been on mostly involved staying in specialist birding lodges in each of the major habitats they visited. Their small group included a woman who Tim described as having the most extraordinary bird-spotting eyes he'd ever come across, plus a chap with spreadsheets who seemed to have little interest in the actual birds other than to be able to tick them off on his lists.

All the photographs were Tim's own and the quality of modern digital photography is such that some were taken through the window of a moving bus, while others were in almost dark conditions, using a high ISO setting making the camera very sensitive to the little light available.

[Unusually, because I knew that almost every bird Tim showed would be unfamiliar to me, I abandoned any efforts to record all the names and I just sat back to enjoy the images]

On the trip they recorded almost 800 species and so his images showed only a fraction of the total. Some groups, like the hummingbirds, were represented by many species, often quite similar (to the uninitiated). This was at least partly because most of the lodges provided a feeding area with artificial flowers and sugar solution so the birds could be photographed in close-up. However one species – the Marvelous Spatuletail Hummingbird (pictured) – provided what for me were the most memorable images.



The trip began in Iquito in the Peruvian Amazon Basin. It has a population of about 350,000, but no road access, so the streets simply swarm with wheeled rickshaws and mopeds, but no cars. The river itself is about half a mile wide here, so most of the birding is from boats in the small tributaries and backwaters.

From the rainforest they moved into the Andean highlands and from there, via the northern Peruvian desert, to the Pacific coast which had numbers of waders familiar to British birders.

Altogether a magical display of so many unfamiliar and often brilliantly marked birds that many of us will never see in their wild habitats.

Richard



Pacific Diver, DBCP.

Probably the natural history highlight of January 2017, and possibly the whole of 2017, was the arrival of a quiet, unassuming, Diver on East Chevington North Pool. Originally identified as a Black throated, it soon became apparent that this bird didn't look quite right. After a few people came and went, recording Black throated Diver in their notebooks (if there is still such things out there...Notebooks, not Black throated Divers...) sharp eyed Alan Curry began to look a bit closer, and on Friday 20th January pronounced that the bird was indeed a first winter **Pacific Diver** *Gavia pacifica*, all the way from America!

This first for Northumberland, and only about the 7th for the UK was not on anyone's radar as an addition to our county's avifauna. The main wintering areas for this species are off the Pacific west coast of North America, with lesser numbers wintering on the Atlantic side. It breeds in the Canadian Arctic as close as Greenland, so the recent westerly storms that battered Scotland may have been responsible for its arrival over here.

Superficially similar to our own Black throated Diver, *Gavia arctica*, the Pacific Diver was once thought to be a race, the American form of Black throated, only being given full specific status in 2007. No sooner had it been 'split' then the first for the UK turned up on a gravel pit in North Yorks. Since then, the other few records have mostly been in the far south west of Cornwall, so to get one on our doorstep was quite amazing.

The way to identify Pacific Diver, from Black throated Diver is by the following points –

Size. No larger than a Mallard, where Black throated is quite a large bird, and obviously bigger than Mallard.

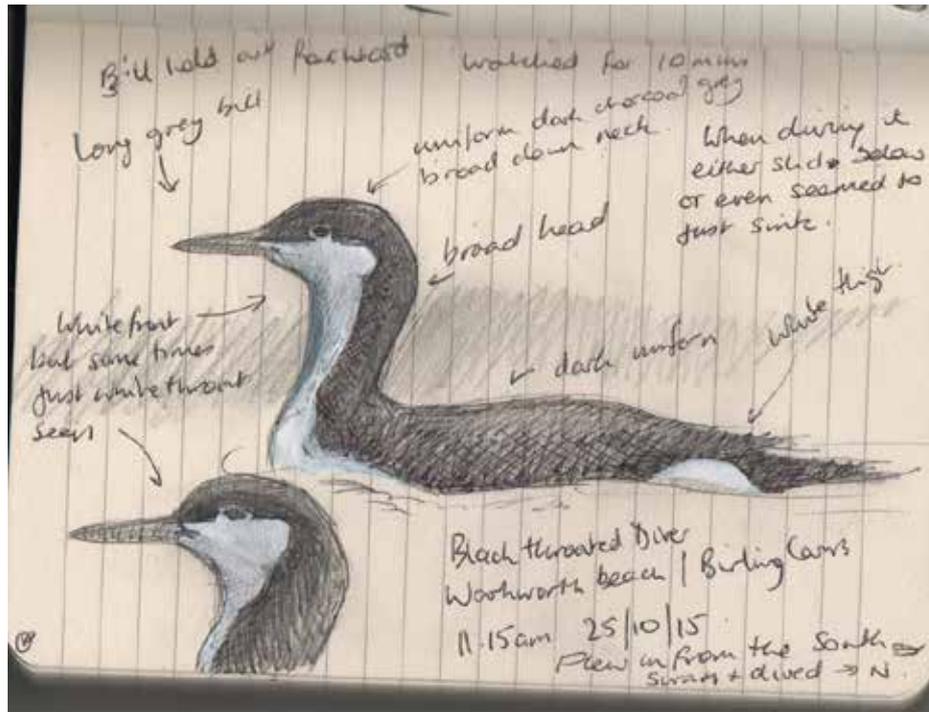
Flank / Thigh Patch. Pacific Diver has all dark flanks right down to the under tail, where Black throated shows a large white oval just behind the legs at the rear of the body.

Head. More subtle but Pacific has a paler, softer looking head in winter than the snake-like smoothness of Black throated.

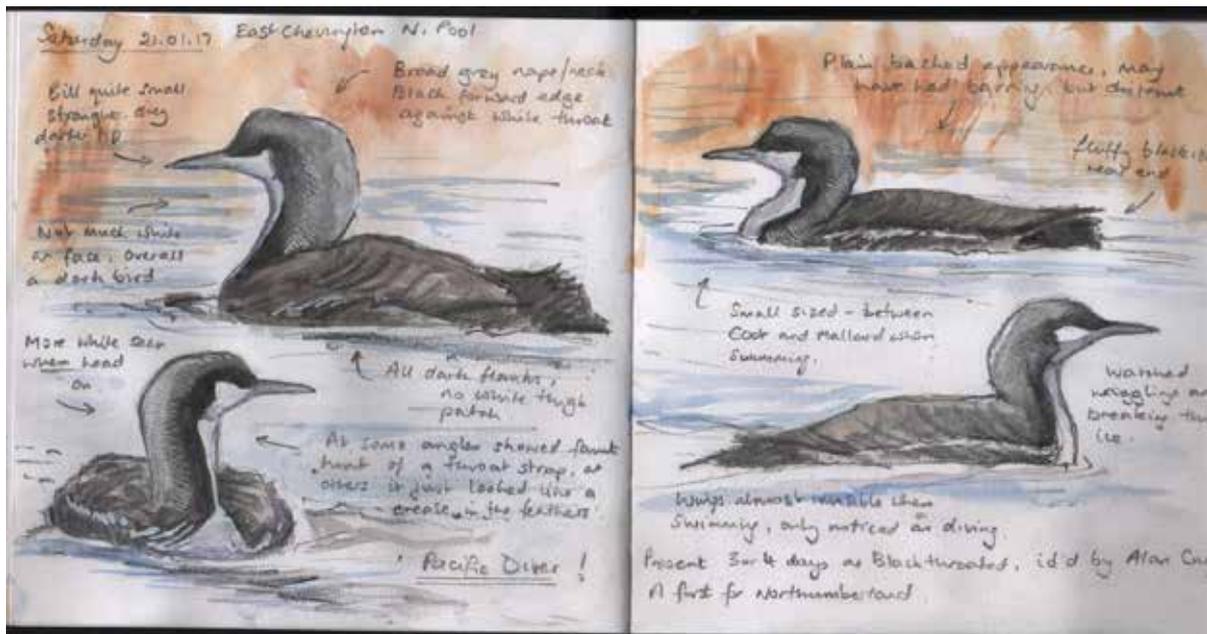
Bill. Small and short in Pacific, Long and sturdy, dagger like in Black throated.

Given very good views, Pacific often shows a fine dark 'strap' under the throat and the same under the undertail coverts.

Luckily, our Pacific Diver could be observed down to less than 20 feet at times where all of these features could be seen and photographed, leaving the ID in no doubt.



To compare, here is a Black-throated Diver at Warkworth in 2015



And the Pacific Diver field notes from East Chevington.

At the time of writing, the Pacific Diver is still present, favouring East Chevington North Pool, but sometimes getting on to Druridge Bay Country Park. Try and see it, its come an awful long way to winter in Northumberland.

AMPHIPODS:

Amphipods are typically small crustaceans found primarily in salt- and fresh waters, although a few species are terrestrial. There are nearly 10,000 species, worldwide, with over 400 species in the U.K. Amphipods (see left-hand photo below) somewhat resemble isopods (such as woodlice; see right-hand photo) that have become sideways-compressed. Common names include 'freshwater shrimp', 'scuds' or 'sideswimmers'. A distinguishing feature is the multi-use ('amphibious') nature of their seven pairs of legs ('poda') which has allowed them to diversify into a wide variety of life styles.



Typically, amphipods are bottom-dwellers, but most species can swim - although they tend to do this interspersed with bouts of crawling. Frequently, they tilt to one side which gives the impression of them swimming on their sides. Some species are strong diggers (see left-hand photo below) and live in U-shaped burrows in sediment from which they periodically emerge to feed on surrounding detritus. Others, known as skeleton shrimp, climb about in algal fronds where evolution has modified their bodies accordingly (long and thin with large grasping claws; see right-hand photo below).



There are also many amphipods that live in the open ocean where they feed on smaller members of the plankton community. Often, these are bioluminescent (see left-hand photo below) and undergo extensive, vertical feeding migrations on a daily basis. Others live commensally inside the bodies of larger plankton, such as salps (see right-hand photo below).



Many species are so small (less than 1 mm) that they live interstitially among sand grains where, in the absence of light, they have become blind. At the other end of the scale, amphipods growing to over 15 cm have been found to depths exceeding 5 km in the deepwater trenches of the Pacific (see photos below).



Some amphipods possess organ systems that allow them to exhibit complex and highly precise behaviours. Among the best studied are those seen in species that live between the high and low tides marks on sandy beaches. For example, the 'beach-flea' *Talitrus* (see photo and habitat below), lives amongst stranded seaweed and in burrows near the high tide mark. Should it be displaced from this location, it uses its eyes to determine the angle of the sun for comparison against an internal map sense of the east-west orientation of the particular beach on which they live. An internal physiological clock provides the correct adjustment for the changing angle of the sun during the course of the day. At night, other celestial cues are used. Experiments have shown that individual *Talitrus* transported, in the dark, to a beach at a different longitude operated on the same time regime as that of the original beach. Only after several days did they re-calibrate to the new longitude.



In 2010, the so-called 'killer shrimp', *Dikerogammarus villosus* (see photo below), invaded the U.K. from eastern Europe. The species is a voracious omnivore whose diet includes a wide range of freshwater invertebrates. As a consequence of this broad diet and a high reproductive rate (it can reach sexual maturity in 4 to 8 weeks) it can become extremely abundant in waters supporting its preferred habitat, namely rocky and stony substrates. It was first detected in Grafham Water in Cambridgeshire, but has since moved northwards and west into Wales. In Europe, it has displaced native amphipod species and has compromised the biodiversity and functioning of invaded ecosystems.



*Dudley Williams
Newton on the Moor*

WHAT WILDLIFE TO LOOK FOR IN MARCH 2017

The mixture of cold nights and relatively warm days has meant that there are quite a lot of Prunus type bushes flowering in gardens, birds are starting to sing and the first lambs of spring can be found. The mornings and evenings are starting to pull out and with this Barn owls are becoming quite obvious (e.g. 2 birds sitting on posts within 100m near Akeld on the 7th Feb).

At Glanton, the bird feeders are very busy with House Sparrows and Jackdaws. They are accompanied by small numbers of Collared Doves, Robins, Dunnocks and Blackbirds. Starlings are now regular since I altered the bird feeder – why I am not so certain. In the past Starlings only visited our back yard when there was snow on the ground, this January they have been daily.

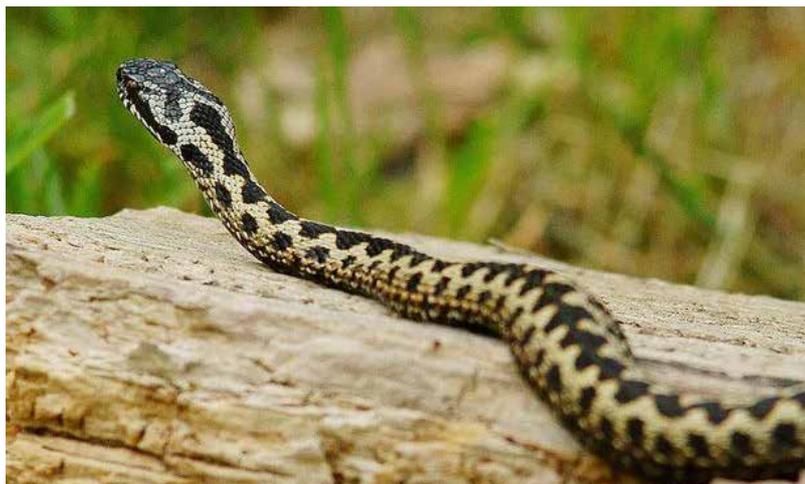
The other thing that puzzles me is the difference in size between some pairs of Jackdaws. Learned journals indicate that males are bigger than females and yet in some cases males appear almost twice the size. Several times this winter, I have had to look again at a pair of Jackdaws to make sure they are the same species!

Winter is a great time to watch the nuances of bird behaviour whether it is the shaping of the tail and sky gazing of Robins when in dispute or the behavioural interaction of Dunnocks and Robins. There is plenty to learn from our commonest birds

SPECIES OF THE MONTH: ADDERS

Late February is often a good time to look for Adders. Last weekend there were at least two cars from the 'Toon' looking for the first Adders of the years to appear at Branton Ponds.

The only British venomous snake, the Adder has distinct 'V' or 'X' shaped markings on the head. Increasingly, these markings are being used by enthusiasts to identify individuals. Adders have a characteristic indented or zigzag stripe on their back and their flanks usually have a row of dark oval spots. Back-ground colour can vary from almost white or pale grey through to yellows, browns and occasionally brick red. The skin tends to darken before it is 'slough off'/replaced.



Females (65 cm) are generally larger and range from yellows and browns in colour. Whereas males (60cm) are paler (greys, steel colour or white).

BREEDING AND YOUNG

Males appear from hibernation in early spring, the females follow approximately a month later. Mating occurs in the later part of April and the first half of May. Males are territorial at this time and may occasionally be seen to duel or "dance" as a show of strength. Adders give birth in late summer to approximately 8 live young that measure 15 - 20 cm. The young are contained in a membrane that breaks immediately after they are born. Adders usually only reproduce every other year in the UK.

WHAT ELSE COULD IT BE?

This snake maybe confused with the Grass Snake. The Grass Snake is a far more slender species and lacks the characteristic zigzag stripe of the Adder. The Adder may also be distinguished by its vertically slit pupil.

Sometimes the Adder is confused with the Slow-worm, which is a leg-less lizard and not a snake at all. The Slow-worm is a smaller creature (40 - 45cm) with a glassy grey/brown appearance.

Jackdaw

SIGHTINGS JANUARY 2017

BIRDS	
Red-throated Diver	15 off Stag Rocks on 7th 11 off Goswick on 8th 2 at Football Hole on 2nd
Pacific Diver	1 at East Chevington on 23rd, a first for Northumberland and only the 7th for UK.
Little Grebe	2 at Hedgeley Lakes on 11th
Slavonian Grebe	2 off Stag Rocks on 7th
Little Egret	2 at Seahouses Point on 2nd 1 at Budle Bay on 8th 1 at Alnmouth on 16th
Whooper Swan	13 at Low Newton Pool on 2nd 35 near Warkworth on 15th
Brent Goose	1272 (Pale-bellied) at Lindisfarne during month
Barnacle Goose	1000+ at Elwick on 7th
White-fronted Goose	6 (Eurasian) at Lindisfarne during month
Pink-footed Goose	2000 at Elwick on 7th 1000+ near Cresswell on 23rd 4000 at Lindisfarne during month
Bean Goose (fabalis)	6 at Harpers Heugh on 6th
Bean Goose (sp)	6 (probably fabalis) at Elwick on 7th
Bar-headed Goose	1 at Elwick on 7th
Shelduck	A pair at Branton Ponds on 10th 3102 at Lindisfarne during month 255 at Smeafield on 9th 5 at Alnmouth on 16th
Shoveler	3 at Branton Ponds on 2nd 28 at Budle Bay on 7th
Wigeon	150+ on Branton Ponds on 2nd
Gadwall	2 at Branton Ponds on 20th 5 at Hedgeley Lakes on 30th
Scaup	1 at Cresswell Pond on 15th 1 at East Chevington on 15th
Goldeneye	13 at Football Hole on 2nd 11 at Lindisfarne during month
Goosander	20+ at Branton Ponds on 20th
Red-breasted Merganser	1 in Annstead Burn on 2nd 6 off Goswick on 8th 38 at Lindisfarne during month
Common Scoter	50 off Goswick on 8th 4 at Football Hole on 2nd 575 at Lindisfarne during month
Velvet Scoter	1 at Football Hole on 2nd
Black Scoter	1 off Goswick on 8th
Long-tailed Duck	50+ off Stag Rocks on 7th 10 at Football Hole on 2nd 32 at Lindisfarne during month
Eider	357 at Lindisfarne during month
Peregrine	1 at Druridge Bay Country Park on 23rd 1 at Smeafield on 13th
Hen Harrier	1 ringtail on 2nd
Grey Partridge	55 at Ratcheugh and Snableazes on 9th
Water Rail	2 at Branton Ponds on 5th and 1 on 13th 1 at Druridge Bay Country Park on 23rd
Woodcock	1 at Smeafield on 12th 1 at Hannah's Hill on 4th and 2 on 11th
Oystercatcher	605 at Lindisfarne during month
Bar-tailed Godwit	35 at Boulmer on 15th 2175 at Lindisfarne during month
Black-tailed Godwit	14 at Lindisfarne during month
Curlew	1073 at Lindisfarne during month
Lapwing	2500 at Lindisfarne during month 340 at Smeafield on 13th
Golden Plover	2012 at Lindisfarne during month 265 at Smeafield on 13th
Grey Plover	3 at Boulmer on 15th 848 at Lindisfarne during month
Dunlin	3649 at Lindisfarne during month
Knot	104 at Smeafield on 9th
Sanderling	8 at Stag Rocks on 8th
Temminck's Stint	1 at Fenham Flats on 15th
Redshank	1533 at Lindisfarne during month
Green Sandpiper	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 29th 1 at Branton Ponds on 30th

Purple Sandpiper	12 at Stag Rocks on 7th
Mediterranean Gull	7 at Newbiggin on 15th 1 at Amble on 15th
Iceland Gull	1 at North Shields Fish Quay on 15th
Glaucous Gull	1 at Boulmer on 13th 1 at North Shields Fish Quay on 15th 1 at Longhoughton Steel on 14th
Tawny Owl	1 in Branton on 17th
Short-eared Owl	1 in Goswick Dunes on 8th 7 at Lindisfarne during month
Kingfisher	1 on River Breamish on 2nd 1 at North Shields Fish Quay on 15th 1 at East Chevington on 15th 1 at Druridge Bay Country Park on 23rd
Skylark	25+ at Newton Point on 2nd 2 at Ratcheugh on 9th
Shore Lark	7 at East Chevington on 15th
Pied Wagtail	17 at Hedgeley on 11th
Rock Pipit	2 at Stag Rocks on 7th
Dipper	1 on Denwick Burn on 9th
Waxwing	1 at Glanton on 17th 1 at Hipsburn on 2nd to 17th
Stonechat	A pair in Annstead dunes on 2nd
Redwing	40+ near Hedgeley on 10th 6 at Branton on 14th
Fieldfare	20+ at Branton on 14th 150-200 at Elwick on 10th
Chiffchaff	6 at Wooler sewerage works on 3rd 1 at Alnmouth on 9th and 16th
Willow Tit	1 at Branton Ponds on 12th and 3 on 30th
Jay	1 at Branton Ponds on 2nd
Raven	1 at Branton on 14th
Treecreeper	2 at Branton Ponds on 2nd 1 at Hipsburn on 27th and 31st
Nuthatch	2 at Spindlestone Hides on 7th
Tree Sparrow	33 at Branton on 8th
Siskin	15+ at Branton Ponds on 2nd 60+ at Druridge Bay Country Park on 23rd 25 at Harehope Hillend on 23rd and 30 at Harehope Burn on 30th
Lesser Redpoll	1 at Branton Ponds on 2nd 30 at Hannah's Hill on 7th
Twite	42 at East Chevington on 15th 7 at Alnmouth on 22nd and 28th
Linnet	26 at Smeafield on 14th
Goldfinch	50+ at Branton Ponds on 2nd 50+ at Smeafield on 15th
Brambling	2 at Smeafield on 14th
Tree Sparrow	30+ in Branton on 1st
Yellowhammer	8 near Middlesteads on 1st 5 at Branton Ponds on 5th
MAMMALS	
Roe Deer	1 at Branton Ponds on 5th
Stoat	1 at Branton Ponds on 4th and 1 on 11th in full ermine 1 at Chatton on 20th in full ermine
Red Squirrel	1 at Branton Ponds on 5th 1 at Branton on 7th
Porpoise	2 off Stag Rocks on 7th
Otter	Tracks beside River Breamish on 25th
INVERTEBRATES	
Peacock Butterfly	1 at Paddler's Pool Amble on 8th
Common Wasp	1 at Branton on 23rd
RAINFALL	27mm
OBSERVERS	
S Binyon, J Clark, I&K Davison, G&G Dodds, P Jobson, M McMahon, S Reay, J Rutter, S Sexton, D Taylor, LNNR.	