

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

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NEWSLETTER 186 MARCH 2017

Review of February 2016

APRIL MEETING – APRIL 26TH 2017 – A NATURALISTS SENSE OF PLACE – SPEAKER: GEOFF SAMPLE

Geoff is one of the UK's leading wildlife sound recordists. He has recorded many of the British Bird songs and calls as well as all of the Warblers that breed in the Western Palearctic. Geoff's presentation should be one of the most thought provoking talks of the season. The title is slightly different to that advertised within the event programme but will feature a number of sounds and pictures from North Northumberland.

NEW VENUE for AWG meetings

In the January newsletter we said that because of the rather disastrously changed acoustics in the hall at St Michaels, we would be looking at alternative venues. We are pleased to report that **FROM SEPTEMBER** we shall be meeting in the St James's Church Centre at the top of Pottergate in Alnwick, just below the Pottergate tower.

The room is the upstairs space used for the URC services. It has comfy chairs, an integrated sound system with a hearing loop for those with hearing aids and a big TV screen monitor that we shall use instead of a normal fabric screen. Although it is upstairs, there is a lift for anyone who finds staircases difficult. We shall be able to continue our tradition of providing free refreshments at the end of the meetings.

Parking should, if anything, be easier than at present. The roadsides on Northumberland Street and the bottom of Howling Lane will provide plenty of opportunities and the Morrison's car park allows 3 hours free parking providing you display a parking disc.

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

FEB 2017:

February started with some mixed weather but I managed some ringing near home with a new trainee on the 3rd. She was lucky enough to 'Control' two Siskins (D380019 & D229645) together with a Tree Sparrow I had originally ringed back on the 24/4/13 and a dozen new birds (mostly Siskins but including one each of Goldfinch, Great Tit, Black Bird, Tree Sparrow and a House Sparrow). The BTO's newly improved Ringing Recovery Report system quickly told me that D380019 had originally been ringed back in 2013 at Thetford in Norfolk, as an adult so it must be at least 6 years. The other Siskin (D229645) was also ringed back in 2013 but as a second year bird, so it must be 5 yrs old; from Alderton, in Suffolk.

Several further ringing sessions confirmed the arrival (and continuing passage) of quite a few Siskins, together with some Goldfinches (more of whom are resident). However, some of the always resident also proved interesting with the recapture of a Dunnock that is at least 6 yrs old; a Blue Tit that can be accurately aged to 6 yrs; and a Goldfinch that was originally ringed (as a juvenile) in 2012 and has been recaptured a total of twelve times since! I may have mentioned before that Blue Tits can often be the bane of a ringers life (because they show no fear and peck viciously!) but I have attached a photograph of a particularly well-marked bird ringed on the 13th of the month.

Meanwhile getting back to the travelling Siskins; the other picture is of an entirely healthy Siskin (S649107) ringed on the 24/2/17 which has an unusually 'overgrown' top beak mandible. This looks unusual but is clearly not handicapping the bird in its feeding. Another Controlled Siskin was captured on the 24th; and D380019 (from Thetford) is still regularly feeding on Niger seed in my garden.

The latest Barn Owl news comes courtesy of two birdwatchers (Alan Hall and Steve Rippon) that were out for a walk on Holy Island on the 15/2/17 and found a dead owl that looked as though it may have been blown against a building in a violent storm. The bird was carrying a ring and the information came back from the BTO that it had been ringed in its nest on the 5/8/16 at Landbeach in Cambridgeshire; that's 401 kms. away! So please, please, if you see a dead bird (of any species) just pause and check its legs for rings. If it is ringed, what the BTO needs is the number (usually one or two letters followed by some numbers) the date it was found and the location (you don't even have to identify the species). Send it into the BTO; you can do this via its website or post the information (the ring is optional) c/o the British Museum for Natural History in London; or give it to the nearest bird ringer – and they can put it in with their regular returns to the BTO.

I have not been purposefully checking on Barn Owls this month but have put up one new box near Chatton and replaced another (that was worn out) near Rennington. I am a bit short of money and time to make any more boxes just now.

Anyone interesting in ringing is invited to get in touch. I will mostly be continuing to ring near home but will gradually be starting to work with owls as we move further into the spring. Tawny Owls start nesting now and will have young in April.

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

PLANT CORNER

I know it's a long time since New Year, but the results of the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) New Year Plant Hunt have now been analysed and published.

This exercise only began in 2014 and its purposes are:

- a. To inject a bit of botanical interest into the period from 1st to 4th January each year.
- b. To begin to build up a series of annual records which may eventually have phenological significance.

Remember phenology? It was the subject of my Plant Corner article last month and it's the study of the timing of biological events, such as when plants flower.

The BSBI keeps a tally of the number of species seen in flower, but they also analyse the results to distinguish between those species that are British natives and those which are non-native. They also note the phenological flowering pattern of the different species in the list that are sent in.

From the phenological point of view a species found flowering at New Year will fall into one of four categories:

- a. Plants that naturally **flower all year** e.g. *Bellis perennis* Daisy
- b. Plants that are naturally **early spring flowerers** and may have produced a few very early blooms e.g. *Galanthus nivalis* Snowdrop
- c. Plants that are naturally **late flowerers** and may have a few blooms 'hanging on' after a mild autumn e.g. *Succisa pratensis* Devil's-bit Scabious
- d. Plants that usually **flower from spring to autumn**, or even just during the summer, so that any blooms seen may be either leftovers from autumn or unseasonably early spring flowers e.g. *Erica tetralix* Cross-leaved Heath

The BSBI Plant Hunt has gone from strength to strength in its four years so far. In 2014 only 70 lists were sent in (some from individuals and some from groups), while this New Year 416 lists were submitted. The total number of records has risen from 1173 in 2014 to 7123 this year, although 2016 was the peak year with 9160 records. 2017 was a relatively poor year, with the average number of species per list at only 15.5, while all the previous years had averages over 20. Undoubtedly this reflects the fact that many parts of the country had colder conditions in the period October to December 2016 than in the previous three years.

When I looked at the map showing where lists had been sent from, there appear to be only five submissions from North Northumberland in 2017. So perhaps next year AWG could try to get involved. It won't matter if you prefer to do your list as a solo observer or whether you want to visit your chosen patch as a group. You don't even have to be at home. Some lists have been submitted from areas round motorway service stations, presumably as families have been returning home from New Year excursions.

I shall try to remember to put a reminder in next December's newsletter and tell you what the simple rules are for taking part and how to send in your records. This is apparently best done on-line or via a smartphone app., although posted lists will also be accepted.

The league table for the whole country looks like this, with just the top ten ranked species for 2017 included:

Latin	Common	2017	2016	2015	2014
<i>Bellis perennis</i>	Daisy	1	1	1	2
<i>Senecio vulgaris</i>	Groundsel	2	3	3	1
<i>Taraxacum agg.</i>	Dandelion	3	2	1	3
<i>Poa annua</i>	Annual Meadow Grass	4	4	4	5
<i>Ulex europaeus</i>	Gorse	5	5	5	13
<i>Capsella bursa-pastoris</i>	Shepherd's-purse	6	11	6	7
<i>Euphorbia peplus</i>	Petty Spurge	7	14	8	7
<i>Stellaria media</i>	Chickweed	8	29	10	6
<i>Lamium purpureum</i>	Red Dead-nettle	9	8	13	9
<i>Veronica persica</i>	Common Field Speedwell	10	22	12	9

It is certainly interesting to see the apparent change in fortunes of one or two species, particularly in 2016 with Chickweed and Common Field Speedwell dropping to way down the list, but then recovering in 2017. But of course such variations may well simply reflect the areas that people who submitted lists were looking at. Quite what will happen if/when we get another winter like 2010 or 2011 when everything is covered with deep snow I'm not sure.

Richard



Gorse



Groundsel



Petty Spurge



Chickweed



Common Field Speedwell

31 members gathered and we welcomed Judith Smith, a new member from Hampeth. George produced a couple of Storm Petrel wings – amazing for their small size given that this is a bird that spends all its life at sea except for the breeding period each year. The wings had a fishy/oily smell despite having originally been found on a beach by Stewart Sexton nearly 25 years ago. Then there was a Herald Moth – one of our few species that hibernate as adults, often in garages and outhouses.



We then welcomed our speaker, Professor John Richards. John was, until his retirement, the Professor of Botany at Newcastle University. He is the botanical recorder for South Northumberland and is the UK expert on Dandelions and their numerous micro-species, as well as having been the national President of the Alpine Garden Society for a number of years.

He has visited Greece more than 50 times over the years, many of those as the leader of botanical nature trips. His topic was The Flowers of the Greek Mainland (or Λουλούδια από την ελληνική ηπειρωτική χώρα as Google Translate would have it!).



He began with the Mani peninsula which is part of the large area called the Peloponnese at the southern end of the mainland. The Peloponnese is almost a large island, but is connected to the rest of the mainland by the Isthmus of Corinth and the Mani is at its southernmost tip. Because it was once an island, the Peloponnese has evolved many truly endemic plant species in its hot and dry climate. Many of these special plants are bulbous and cormous perennials, some of which flower in the autumn and some in the spring. They include, amongst many others, many species of Narcissus, Crocus, dwarf Tulip, Cyclamen, Orchid and Fritillary. In the northern, mountainous part of the Mani there is even an autumn flowering Snowdrop (pictured left)

John then took us, in stages, further north in Greece, particularly in mountainous areas. Greece has been trying to develop its ski tourism and so mountains that previously would have been largely inaccessible now often have access roads. In many places there are wonderful meadows, still farmed in traditional ways, which help to maintain a fantastic flora. The whole Greek population is about 11 million of which nearly four million are in the Athens metropolitan area, so elsewhere the country is sparsely populated. Some of the endemic alpine species may be rare in Greece, but thrive in British alpine greenhouses, and, without breaking any laws, it is sometimes possible to make careful collections of seed and cultivate them back at home.

In the north west near the Albanian border there are mountains composed of serpentine rock. This is rich in heavy metals and so plants have evolved which can not only tolerate the metals but often have developed mechanisms for taking up and storing metals as an effective protection against herbivores like slugs. But interspersed with these rocks there are outcroppings and gorges formed from limestone. These have a very different flora from the serpentine areas.

Further east is the legendary Mount Olympus, the highest in Greece. This is a composite mountain with 52 peaks and deep gorges. The highest peak reaches more than 9,500 feet, and the whole area has its own special set of endemic species.

John's presentation included many beautiful images of the special plants and made at least this botanically-minded individual greatly regret never having been there. To finish this account I've chosen just three species that John illustrated, from left to right: *Lithodora zahnii*, *Ophrys speculum*, *Tulipa bakeri*.

Richard



Pictures from **MEETING OF WEDNESDAY 22ND FEBRUARY 2017**

From left to right: *Lithodora zahnii*, *Ophrys speculum*, *Tulipa bakeri*



PICTURES FROM: A RINGERS YEAR

February, a month of anticipation, and the end of winter. I think spring can begin any time after St Valentine's Day , but really, it is the monochrome winter season for several weeks yet to come.

Twice during the month we made the journey up to Cheswick and Goswick beaches to look for the wintering **American Black Scoter**, an extremely rare sea duck, that has been living alongside a huge flock of its European counterpart, the Common Scoter. Both times we failed, despite it being reported by other observers. This is believed to be the same individual that has turned up in North Northumberland over several winters, but I last saw him (it is a male) in 2015 at this same site.

Not to be despondent, there were other birds to keep us interested – **Velvet Scoter, 50+ Long tailed Duck, 3 Great Northern Divers, several Red throated Divers and a single Black throated Diver, 4+ Slavonian Grebe, 10+ Red breasted Merganser** being the highlights.

Nearby on a small pond and adjacent fields at Cheswick were **35+ Russian Whitefronted Geese and 2 Tundra Bean Geese.**

On 6th, I took a rare journey to the south of the county, to Prestwick Carr where a lovely **Great Grey Shrike** has spent the winter. On a lovely sunny sharp day, the bird was soon located sitting atop some stunted hawthorns where it swayed its tail side to side while scanning the ground for voles and mice.



Above – Great Grey Shrike on top of the hawthorn

Also here were **3 Willow Tit, a Fieldfare, 2 Buzzard, 40+ Golden Plover and 3 Snipe.**

A spare lunchtime at work on the 9th saw me drive down to North Shields Fish Quay on a Gull Mission.

2 juv Glaucous Gulls and 1 juv Iceland Gull showed very well indeed often at too close to photograph range, while an out of season Lesser black backed Gull was just out of season.

I was to get an unusual Howick surprise on Sunday 12th when as I left the house, a **Guillemot** was standing, penguin like, in the middle of the road! The previous nights storms had clearly been too much for it, so the bird was rescued. After looking at the sea that was still far too rough, I let it go onto DBCP to recover. Hopefully the sea will have calmed and it will have flown the short distance out to where it should be.

Another trip north at the end of the month was good, as we peered peeping tom-like into some gardens at Embleton. Our target, **2 Waxwings** feeding on a cotoneaster bush. Luckily we paid our respects and left before anyone got up and saw our nefarious activities!



Above – One of two Waxwings at Embleton.

Later on a stop at Budle Bay located the winter **Spotted Redshank** running around in a muddy creek feeding on bits churned up by the **Shovelers**. Another rare winter visitor, more often seen in August.



Above - Spotted Redshank, Budle Bay

Next month there should be some spring visitors to report...

Stewart Sexton, Howick.

FUNGI AT FORD MOSS

In the January newsletter a list of fungi recorded at Ford Moss was included. This article should have been included with the list to give it some context, but I forgot to send it to Barbara and somehow it escaped the Feb newsletter, so here's a third try!

In December I was contacted, via the Berwick Wildlife Group, by Sheila Lillie who lives at Lanton, north of Wooler. She moved to this area about a year ago and had started to look at the fungi at Ford Moss. Those of you who have been involved with our Ford Moss surveys in past years may remember that our coverage of Fungi has been minimal, so it was particularly interesting to discover that there is someone with expertise who has been looking at them in some detail.

Sheila has been happy to share her records so far and has promised to keep me posted with new records as she finds things. Presumably additions are now likely to be few until the coming autumn. In the January newsletter was the list of things she has found so far, but I thought it would be more attractive also to have some photos of the range of fungal types she has in her list. Not the full 56 species (!) but just a sample. If you have a fungus identification book you can check the others yourself – or search the Latin names on Google. I sent her list to Lord Joicey who was pleased to get these additions to his records.



Black bulgar



Crystal brain



Parrot waxcap



Meadow coral



Spectacular rustgill



Lilac bonnet

WHAT WILDLIFE TO LOOK FOR IN APRIL

Lighter mornings have allowed me to get a walk in before work. Even in February, the dawn chorus has been special. There is nothing better than listening to the 'warbling' ones of a Robin or the repetitive chorus of the Song Thrush. On the warmer mornings, the thrushes were joined by Great and Blue tits and Chaffinches. Even the ducks at Branton Ponds were getting into the act with Gadwall, Goldeneye, Wigeon and Tufted Ducks getting into the act. It is our smallest of ducks that is fast becoming one of my favourites; the male Teal is something of a work of art. In display, the extension of the crown and stretching of the pale cream panel on the flank together with the quirky squeaks and grunts make the male Teal's display well worth watching.

Getting up early has also allowed me to catch up with one or two interesting birds. The Bittern at Branton took three early morning visits before it was seen. Water rails squealed in the reed bed and parties of Curlew, Lapwing and Oystercatchers gathered in the fields. Early morning travels have also provided good views of Hen harriers and Barn owls.

SPECIES OF THE MONTH: ORANGE UNDERWING MOTH

An early spring walk in a birch woodland can be a little unrewarding. There is one creature that is worth looking for especially when the sun comes out – the Orange underwing moth. This moth can often be seen fluttering around the canopy of birch trees just before the trees come into leaf. The moths rarely descend low enough for close inspection and are best observed through binoculars. They appear orange in flight, although as the name suggests this colour is largely restricted to the hindwings. The forewings are blackish-brown with white markings.

The greenish caterpillars usually begin feeding on the catkins of the birch before moving onto the new green leaves.



Orange underwing moths are relatively scarce in Northumberland but I suspect that this species is under-recorded. I have seen Orange underwing moths on the old railway line east of Rothbury, Holystone, Beanley and Yardhope Woods and Craggside. It is likely to be a species that could almost anywhere where there are mature stands of either Silver or Downy birch.

Happy searching

Jack Daw

SIGHTINGS FEBRUARY 2017

BIRDS

Pacific Diver	1 still at East Chevington on 12 th
Red-throated Diver	2 at Cheswick on 19 th 6 at Cheswick on 19 th
Black-throated Diver	1 at Cheswick on 19 th
Great-northern Diver	1 at Cheswick on 19 th
Slavonian Grebe	1 at East Chevington on 12 th 4+ at Cheswick on 19 th
Bittern	1 at Branton Ponds from 17 th
Little Egret	1 at Branton Ponds on 12 th
White-fronted Goose	36(Eurasian) at Cheswick on 19 th
Tundra Bean Goose	2 at Cheswick on 19 th
Pintail	3 at Fenham Flats on 21 st
Pochard	1 at Branton Ponds on 7 th 5 at Druridge Bay CP on 12 th 4+ at East Chevington on 12 th
Shelduck	5 at Branton Ponds on 6 th
Scaup	6 at Druridge Bay CP on 12 th 8+ at East Chevington on 12 th
Goldeneye	30+ at East Chevington on 12 th
Red-breasted Merganser	8 at Druridge Bay CP on 12 th 5 at East Chevington on 12 th 10+ at Cheswick on 19 th
Long-tailed Duck	20+ at Cheswick on 19 th
Common Scoter	50+ at Cheswick on 19 th 400+ at Cheswick on 19 th
Kestrel	1 in Alnwick on 25 th and 28 th
Common Buzzard	1 in Alnwick on 25 th
Water Rail	1 at Branton Ponds on 1 st
Woodcock	1 at Beanley Woods on 5 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 7 th 1 near Quarry House on 26 th 1 at Smeafield on 9 th
Jack Snipe	1 near Quarry House on 26 th
Oystercatcher	78 at Branton Ponds on 19 th
Golden Plover	40 at Prestwick Carr on 6 th 2000+ at Budle Bay on 19 th
Spotted Redshank	1 at Budle Bay on 21 st
Barn Owl	1 at Broome Park on 13 th
Tawny Owl	2 at Branton on 4 th 1 on Alnwick Moor on 22 nd 1 in Alnwick from 15 th to 17 th
Little Owl	1 at Branton on 4 th
Kingfisher	1 at Branton Ponds all month
Wren	1 in Alnwick on 5 th and 28 th
Stonechat	1 at Cheswick on 19 th
Mistle Thrush	1 in Alnwick on 2 nd
Song Thrush	2 in Alnwick on 18 th and 25 th
Goldcrest	1 in Alnwick on 25 th
Long-tailed Tit	6 in Alnwick on 10 th and 12 th
Willow Tit	3 at Prestwick Carr on 6 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 9 th
Nuthatch	1 in Alnwick all month
Treecreeper	1 in Alnwick on 10 th and 12 th
Great Grey Shrike	1 at Preswick Carr on 6 th
Jay	2 at Smeafield on 9 th
Goldfinch	50-60 at Smeafield on 14 th 1 in Alnwick from 4 th - 12 th
Greenfinch	2 at Smeafield on 17 th 1 in Alnwick on 18 th and 28 th
Tree Sparrow	42 at Branton on 12 th
Twite	30 near Beal on 19 th and 55 on 21 st 18 at Fenham le Moor on 21 st
Common Crossbill	30+ in Harwood Forest on 4 th 8 in Beanley Woods on 5 th
Reed Bunting	20 at Cheswick on 19 th

MAMMALS

Red Squirrel 1 at Hedgeley on 2nd 1 at Harwood Village on 4th 1 at Branton Ponds on 13th 1 in Branton on 24th

Otter 1 at Newton Pool on 1st

Roe Deer 8 at P.O.Pylon on 6th 4 at Cheswick on 12th

REPTILES

Adder 1 at Branton on 15th and 5 on 17th with 11 on 27th

AMPHIBIANS

Frog Frogspawn at Branton Ponds on 22nd

PLANTS

Marsh Marigold In flower at Branton on 21st

RAINFALL 56mm

OBSERVERS

G Bell, V&P Boulton, M Carr, I&K Davison, G Dodds, A&M Goodall, P Jobson, G Plews, S Reay, J Rutter, S Sexton.
