

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



REVIEW OF DECEMBER 2012

NEWSLETTER 124

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NEXT MEETING: WEDNESDAY 29TH FEBRUARY 7.30.P.M. 2012

Farmland Birds and Ospreys Speaker: Blánnaid O'Connell

JANUARY AND FEBRUARY

The weather does not know whether it is winter or spring. A visit to Lincolnshire prior to Christmas produced a number of flowering plants out of season. These included Cow Parsley, Nipplewort, and Hogweed and Ribwort Plantain. At home in the wilds of Allendale, I found flowering Lesser Spearwort as well as several willows coming into bud and the buds of sycamores starting to green. There are likely to be similar stories of plants in our area. Winter has now taken a firm grip in the last week and the ground is now hard. It is unlikely that the flowering plants will survive but what will be the knock on effects in the spring?

Another side effect of the mild spell of weather has been at Lindisfarne on Fenham Flats. On the WeBs count in the middle of January, relatively few Light-bellied Brent Geese were recorded. Graham Bell provided an excellent insight into their ecology in the November meeting. But what has happened this year? Normally numbers of Brent hover around the 2,000 mark in January but this mid-month winter counts are likely to be below 900 birds. There were larger than usual numbers of Brent in October and November that took advantage of the excellent populations of Eel-grass *Zostera spp.* Did these birds by-pass Denmark in early autumn and then return later in the season? Hopefully in the coming seasons we will start to find out as it is hoped to fit satellite tags on a small number of birds that winter at Lindisfarne.

In the fields, 'boxing' matches have already started as male Brown Hares harry their potential mates and the females try to keep them at 'paws' length. The next few months are the best time of year to watch this performance. Your patience and guile can be rewarded with good views. Last week, I was standing still in a rushy pasture with three Brown Hares pursuing each other within 10 metre. What always amazes me, is that there are likely to be one or two others tucked away in their 'forms' watching from the side-lines. Sure enough another three animals were disturbed as I made my way towards the gate.

It is a sad state of affairs that we have to travel so far to see surely one of the British wildlife spectacles – lekking Black Grouse. Yes, the odd male or two can be found in the eastern Cheviots but there is nothing like the sound/sight of 30 male Grouse performing their territorial dance. One of the most notable leks that I have seen was south west of Inverness, where there was a group five males performing around a large (4m x 4m) boulder. The dominant male had taken up residence on top of the boulder – you had to see it to believe it. Closer to home, Allendale and the neighbouring valleys still have good lek sites. Recently, four males were found close to a minor road in the Mohope area feeding on grass shoots, rush seeds and Hawthorn berries and buds.

I hope that you are fully refreshed after the festive period and look forward to seeing you at the forthcoming meetings.

Jack Daw.

Meeting of Wednesday 14th December 2011

There was a rather sparse attendance for our Christmas meeting, despite some excellent nibbles being brought. (*If any members have thoughts about the content of future Christmas meetings and what we can do to make them as attractive as possible, please let us know before our February committee meeting*).

News of wildlife was more or less confined to birds in this cold weather, although it was noted that a few moth species do fly at temperatures only a degree or two above zero. A small flock of Bullfinches had been seen, unusually, on open moorland where it was assumed they were feeding on heather seeds.

The first talk, by George Dodds, featured the Machair habitat on the western coasts of the Outer Hebrides. These sand-based areas lie between the coastal dunes and the peat moorland, although in some cases the machair extends right down to the edge of the beach. Farmers grow barley and oats, but then leave the stubbles for 3 or 4 years so the brilliant wildflower flora grows through. Ploughing is always shallow and herbicides are never used. Fertiliser is provided by animal dung and cattle grazing is an essential part of the management regime. The machair holds good breeding populations of waders, including corncrakes.

Then Colin Scrutton talked about the Ghost Orchid (*Epipogium aphyllum*), Britain's rarest orchid. It is found in conifer woodland in central Europe, but in Britain it has been found in only two areas of broad-leaved woodland in southern England. Its flowering is so unreliable that it was formally declared extinct in the UK in 2005, but then a new flowering spike was discovered in 2009. The plant has no chlorophyll and so can't photosynthesise, so it gets all its nutrients from tree roots via the actions of mycorrhizal fungi. Most of its reproduction in Britain is by runners produced from the orchid's underground rhizome system.

Finally Richard Poppleton talked about Weeds. He used four headings – noxious weeds, invasive aliens, casuals and his own bêtes-noires. Sad to say many of these weeds were photographed in his own garden. He was particularly scathing about Procumbent Pearlwort, New Zealand Bitter-cress and the liverwort *Marchantia polymorpha*.

Then, after the delicious refreshments supplied by those attending, Keith Davison unveiled the Davison Christmas Quiz. It is unclear how George and Richard came to be in the same team, but there were certainly mutterings of rebellion elsewhere in the room when the marking revealed that their team had won.

Richard Poppleton.

Please access the website www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk and take a look at Stewart Sexton's Annual Howick Moth Review for 2011.



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Plant Corner

The excellence of the winter displays of berries on hawthorn, blackthorn and other roadside shrubs has been remarked on in various places, but I've not seen so much celebration of the crops of cones on many of our plantation conifers. Our only native conifers are Scots Pine, Yew and Juniper, but several other species were introduced many years ago and are regularly found in our area.

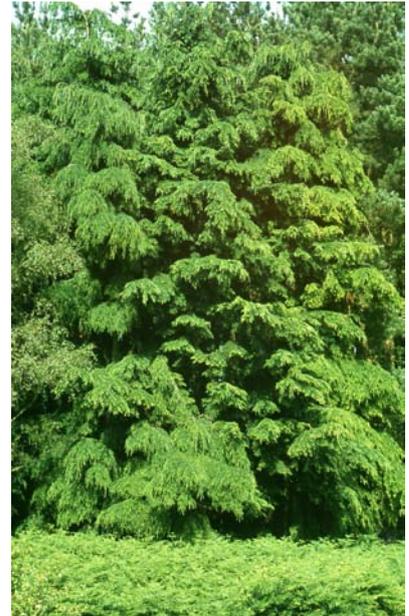
The two that I want to concentrate on are common-enough trees, both often found, in Northumberland, at the edges of plantations where they are used as shelter trees for the 'more valuable' timber crop trees like Sitka Spruce, Scots Pine and Larch.

Western Hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*). Plantations of western hemlock are often very dark places as they cast such dense shade that little else can survive underneath their branches. However



when they are seen as large trees at the edges of plantations they are often visually spectacular, forming a drooping curtain of soft foliage as shown in the photograph on the right near our home at Titlington Mount.

The needles are flat with two white bands or stripes on the underside. They are soft and have rounded ends. When crushed they smell a little like parsley. The small, numerous seed cones are greenish to reddish-purple and turn brown with age.



In its native North America western hemlock can grow to 50m or more, although it rarely reaches that height in the UK. When grown as a commercial crop in Britain it is almost exclusively used for timber and wood pulp and some sources say it is one of the best conifers for these purposes.

Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*). In the western US Douglas Firs (which, botanically, are not Firs at all) are among the tallest of all the mature conifers. The tallest, in the coastal forests of California and Oregon, reached 120m (almost 400ft), although all these biggest trees have now been felled. In Britain our record specimens are about half that height. Around the world Douglas Fir is perhaps the most important timber tree of all.



The needles are soft, flexible and narrow, with rounded tips and two narrow whitish-green stripes underneath. The cones are unique, with 3-forked, snake-tongue-like bracts extending from each scale and pointing towards the tip of the cone. The cones hang downwards on the branches, unlike cones of 'true' Firs which are held upright.



Richard Poppleton

Howick December Highlights.

A busy month with little daylight has resulted in fewer sightings of interest than normal. Some strong SW winds have resulted in a very mild month, a total contrast to 2010...

On 4th, a first winter **Mediterranean Gull** was feeding in stubble with a few Black headed Gulls just behind Cullernose Point. This is the third one of this scarce species I've seen in this area this year.

2 **Barn Owls** were catching some afternoon sun on the front of a nestbox locally. Lets hope for successful breeding in 2012.

A **Red Squirrel** was caching food right beside the road near Howick Hall. A very dark tailed individual. At dusk 2 **Woodcocks** flushed from the village wood.

The only snow of the month fell here on 10th, when we awoke to a covering of an inch or so. As a result a few birds were moving south along the coast to milder climes, **56 Golden Plover, 4 Lapwing and 27 Skylarks**. A **Red throated Diver** was on the sea at the Bathing House. The cold weather pushed a few more birds on to our garden feeders with up to **20 Tree Sparrows** together.

A finch flock of about 80 birds were at the Pond Field. It comprised of **Siskins, Goldfinch and Lesser Redpoll**. On 11th **69+ Curlews** were in stubble near the village.

My first gift arrived on **Christmas Eve** when a nice male **Siskin** was on our feeders, the first since spring. A flock of 5 **Purple Sandpipers** was a good record for the patch near the Bathing House.

The month closed with a walk around the village up to the hall where **3 Nuthatches, 2 Jays and 3 Reed Buntings** were the highlight on the 27th.



Reed Bunting and Siskin.

Stewart Sexton, Howick.

BEYOND THE BORDER (December 2011)

It is easy to think of fungi as though they only appear each Autumn but in reality the fruiting bodies of different species can be found throughout the year. Amongst those seen was **Tawny Funnel Fungus** (*Lepista flaccida*) with a good-sized troop occurring beneath **Birch** (*Betula sp.*) trees in the Yarrow Valley (December 27). The caps are quite large – up to 3½ inches (9cms.) across – and as its name suggests somewhat funnel-shaped. They begin life looking buff but become more tawny brown with age. This species can be eaten but consumption is INADVISABLE because they are said to have a poor flavour and, more importantly, several species (with a similar appearance) are highly poisonous. **Yellow Brain Fungus** (*Tremella mesenterica*) also caught my attention (Dec. 20). It was found on **Elder** (*Sambucus nigra*) brushwood along the former railway to the east of Kelso and is a species which often parasitizes existing crust-fungi. Its composition is gelatinous and wrinkled and the fruiting bodies are a most attractive golden-yellow colour. Personally, I prefer its original common name which was **Witches Butter**. That's most descriptive for these clusters of brightly coloured fruiting bodies and yes (if you really must!) it is edible.

December is hardly the time of year when you expect to see much colour but a few species did continue to flower. **Common Ramping Fumitory** (*Fumaria muralis*) was noted at Lurdenlaw (nr. Kelso/Dec.3) and there were a surprising number of **Red Clover** (*Trifolium pratense*) and **Hogweed** (*Heracleum sphondylium*) plants remaining in bloom at Eyemouth (Dec. 29). **Ivy-leaved Toadflax** (*Cymbalaria muralis*) originates from southern Europe but has been recorded in Britain since 1640. It's well-established nowadays and is most often seen trailing from walls or across rocky outcrops. The flowers are rather attractive – lilac with a yellow spot – and so it's such a shame that it can be really invasive (causing, for example, major problems at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh). Several patches were in flower (Dec.5) at Mayfield, Kelso and there was more along Nun's Walk, Coldstream (Dec.25) and near the harbour, St. Abbs (Dec.29).

It is the males of the **Winter Moth** (*Operoptera brummata*) which flutter weakly when caught in the glare of a car's headlights. Sightings were made near Graden (Kelso/Dec.22) and between St Boswell's and Roxburgh (Dec.27) but only small numbers appeared.

Officials are most anxious to conserve stocks of Marine Fish in our coastal waters but the long-awaited news has resulted in a rather mixed message. Quotas for the fishing of Cod, Herring and Whiting have been increased whilst (in the west of Scotland) those of Haddock were trebled. In order to offset this trawlers (and Prawn vessels) will only be permitted to operate for a maximum of four days per fortnight.

Fishing for **Atlantic Salmon** (by rod) has ended for the time being with the season closing on November 30.2011. These fish continued to move upstream along the River Tweed and its tributaries throughout December but in far smaller numbers. In a cruel twist of nature most of these magnificent fish die after spawning and their spent corpses float downstream....leading to 40+ carcasses being ensnared at just one Sprouston site (Dec.4). It's impossible not to have such a sad scene firmly etched upon your mind.

Little Grebes continued to frequent many stretches of the River Tweed with sightings (max.3) throughout the month. Another was on the River Teviot nr. Roxburgh Mains (Dec.26) and 2 were present at Alemoor Reservoir (nr. Craik/Dec.27). Although not seen by myself 'up to 8 Little Grebes' are said to have visited Hirsell Lake (Coldstream) during the last month of the year. Over 100 **Shags** inhabited the Eyemouth area (Dec.29) and **Cormorants** regularly fished well inland in addition to their coastal haunts.

Whooper Swans – most probably wintering from Iceland – were always thrilling to see. There was much activity, at times, on Redden which included 70+ on December 15. Others were seen at Crailing (31), Nisbet (nr. Jedburgh/6) and Alemoor Reservoir (13/all =Dec.27). My most abiding memory, however, was another 7 Whoopers – seen at the head of Loch of the Lowes (Selkirkshire) that same day. Dusk was descending and with a backdrop of low-cloud, swirling mist and contorted Willows (*Salix sp.*) these most elegant birds began to trumpet in a most hauntingly beautiful way.

Big herds of **Mute Swans** were a regular sight along the Tweed Valley between Coldstream and Kelso but there were also 3 within the harbour at St. Abb's (a popular haunt) and a pair on the sea offshore from Eyemouth (Dec.29). Amongst my records for **Pink-footed Geese** are 700+ at Easter Softlaw (Kelso/Dec 1) /7 flying NW over Smailholm Tower (Smailholm /Dec.23) and 650+ in a riverside field at Nisbet (Dec.27). **Greylag Geese** were more often seen but proved not to be as numerous. 220+ grazed in the Scottish side of the border at Carham (Dec.15) and the same number provided a fine sight and sound as they passed low (to NW/Dec.18) over snow-clad farmland near Sprouston in bright sunshine. 160+ flew over Kerchesters (Dec.21) at dusk and appeared to be heading towards The Hirsell (where there was only one on Christmas Day). An unknown number of Greylags could be heard descending onto Hoselaw Loch in the dark (Dec.22) whilst others were found at Bemersyde Moss (17→SW/Dec.24) and Duns Castle (4/Dec.29). 14 **Canada Geese** appeared near Sprouston (Dec.15) and that same day 20 headed upstream at Redden.

I am familiar with **Gadwall** but sadly missed those which visited Hirsell Lake and Yetholm Loch midway through the month. A pair of **Shoveler** fed on Whitrig Bog nr. Smailholm (Dec.24) and I also saw **Teal** at locations which included the River Tweed at Redden (90+/Dec.15) and Hirsell Lake (40+/Dec.25). Meanwhile **Wigeon** numbered 3 at Sprouston (10th), 120+ nr. Redden (15th), 130+→ Whitrig Bog (24th), 3→ Hirsell (25th) and 20+→Alemoor Reservoir (27th). A lone **Pochard** was on Hirsell Lake (Christmas Day) with 23 **Tufted Duck** but Yetholm Loch hosted 60+ 'Tufties' (Dec.14) and there were more at Alemoor and Hen Poo (Duns).

Frequent but small numbers of **Eiders** inhabited many of the coves and harbours of the Berwickshire coast (Dec.29) and a few of those were engaged in courtship displays. **Goldeneye** were discovered on lochs, reservoirs and rivers but included 50+ at Yetholm Loch (Dec.14) /8 on Loch of the Lowes (Dec.27 and 8 on St. Mary's Loch (Dec. 27). 'Every' stretch of the Rivers Teviot and Tweed seemed to hold **Goosanders** but there were also 25+ on Yetholm Loch (Dec.14) and 20+ arriving at dusk on Hen Poo (Dec.29).

Another bird found frequenting the Duns Castle Reserve on the 29th was a **Goshawk**. It swung round in a big arc and then, without flinching, flashed through an area of mixed woodland. I was also fortunate to witness a juvenile **Peregrine** chasing Teal above the River Tweed at Redden (Dec.15) and to add to my pleasure it later perched on the dead branch of a tree close beside me. (I'm still cursing the **Carrion Crow** which harried the falcon so much that it eventually flew off!). There was another Peregrine at Eyemouth (Dec.29)

We are all well-used to seeing **Pheasants** but I was certainly not prepared for the numbers encountered in (+near) the Yarrow Valley on the 27th. My jottings include: '30-50 Pheasants in a single field was frequently the norm but on occasions there would be 100+ on just one area of meadow! Sometimes melanistic ♂'s were amongst those groups...' To be a true albino an animal has to be 100% white and have a pink eye. I've been told of an albino Pheasant that lives near Kelso and which has 'a £50 forfeit on it'! (i.e. he or she who kills it must pay that sum of money to the Shoot). Two people are said to have taken pot-shots but, so far, it remains at large.

A pair of **Oystercatchers** had taken up early residence beside The Junction Pool at Kelso (Boxing Day) and there was at least one **Golden Plover** (which remained hidden) at Redden on Dec.15 whilst 8 more flew SE near Jardinefield (Whitsome/Dec.28). Those of you who reside in coastal Northumberland will laugh at this but 47 **Lapwings** seen near Maidenhall, St Boswells (Dec 24) is my biggest count so far! A single flock of 1200+ **Woodpigeons** rose above wooded farmland near Hutton Castle (Hutton/Dec.25) and 20+ **Collared Doves** were gathered together at Sandknowe nr. Smailholm (23rd).

Another bird not found by myself was the **Kingfisher** but I was advised of one upstream from Birgham and another at The Hirsell during December. My only record of a **Barn Owl** was a single near Trows, Roxburgh (Dec.27). The 'drumming' (i.e. resonating sound of bill on branch) created by **Great Spotted Woodpecker** is its equivalent of territorial/courtship song. One had begun early with the noise ringing out beside the mouth of the Kale Water (nr. Eckford/Dec.27).

A **Grey Wagtail** appeared beside the Old Manse, Sprouston on December 1 and that same village hosted one of the big **Redwing** flocks with 600+ seen on the 8th. What were almost certainly continental **Blackbirds** flooded many of the hedgerows early in the month with the biggest concentration found near Lurdenlaw where 300+ were present on Dec. 11. **Fieldfares** proved to be the most common Thrushes with a great many flocks of these Scandinavian visitors seen. Amongst those were 1500+ at Sprouston (Dec.3)/approx. 2000 near Wooden Dean, (Kelso/Dec.6) and 500+ close to Billiemains (nr. Reston/Dec.29).

Ravens are undergoing a slow but steady increase in numbers and single birds were studied near Swanlaws (Hownam/Dec.2) /beside the Halterburn (nr. Yetholm/Dec.22)/over Wester Alemoor (Craik/Dec.27) and near Eyemouth (Dec.29). **Tree Sparrows** have probably been under recorded because I seem to be finding them on more and more farms (and within villages) through much of Roxburghshire. My best single count was 25+ near the Old Dairy, Sprouston (Dec. 31). 150+ **Linnets** lifted up from a small game-plot at Lempitlaw (Dec.11). Small numbers of **Siskins** and **Bramblings** visited my garden during the cold snap of December 16-21. **Lesser Redpolls** were also found with 1 at Easter Softlaw (Dec.6)/6 in Sprouston (Dec.11) and 3 at Yetholm Loch (Dec.14) whilst **Crossbills** were another species discovered at Wester Alemoor Forest with 15+ on the fringes (Dec.27). Bullfinches were much recorded although 15+ along Lover's Lane, Roxburgh (Boxing Day) was the biggest single flock whilst 40+ **Yellowhammers** at Crailing (Dec.27) represented their peak at any one location.

A **Hedgehog** found dead at Kerchesters (Dec.31) appeared to have been stirred from the brush of a roadside bank by a mechanical hedge-cutter. Most **Grey Squirrel** sightings were again made in the vicinity of Sprouston-Kelso but another (Dec.27) was spotted near Sunlaws House, Heiton – nowadays known as the Roxburgh Hotel. **Grey Seals** will have given birth to the last of their pups with secluded colonies present in a few rocky coves. Two Grey Seals swam within Eyemouth Harbour – and another was lurking just outside the entrance on December 29. Signs of **Otters** were again apparent with tracks left in the snow and spraint deposited at a few of the wetland sites. It was soon after dawn on the 25th when I examined a freshly caught Salmon (with a single big chunk of flesh removed) lying on a riverside slab at Coldstream. An Otter had clearly eaten its Christmas meal at a very early hour!

ROGER MANNING.

SIGHTINGS DECEMBER 2011

SIGHTINGS DECEMBER 2011	
BIRDS	
Great Northern Diver	1 East Chevington on the 11 th
Mute Swan	28 Branton Ponds on the 17 th
Whooper Swan	10 Big Waters on the 3 rd , 53 Cresswell Ponds on the 11 th , 7 Branton Ponds on the 27 th
Brent Goose	353 Fenham Flats 22 nd
White-fronted Goose	5 East Chevington on the 11 th , 2 Branton ponds on the 15 th and 18 th , 21 at Branton on the 30 th
Little Egret	1 Fenham Flats on the 22 nd
Pintail	3 East Chevington on the 11 th
Goldeneye	14 Branton Ponds on the 2 nd
Hen Harrier	1 Hepburn Moor on the 23 rd
Peregrine	1 Branton Ponds on the 10 th
Water Rail	1 East Chevington on the 11 th
Woodcock	2 Branton Ponds on the 8 th , several at Hannah's Hill all month
Jack Snipe	1 Fenwick Stead's on the 1 st
Knot	1030 Fenham Flats on the 22 nd
Curlew	22 Branton Ponds on the 24 th
Golden Plover	220 Fenham Flats on the 22 nd
Sanderling	72 Fenham Flats on the 22 nd
Greater Yellowlegs	1 Hemscott Hill on the 11 th
Mediterranean Gull	1 Newbiggin on the 11 th
Short-eared Owl	1 East Chevington on the 11 th
Desert Wheatear	1 Beacon Point on the 11 th
Redwing	9 Branton Ponds on the 15 th , 30 Hedgeley Ponds on the 29 th .
Blackbird	Up to 50 Smeafield on the 4 th
Marsh Tit	1 Swarland on the 10 th and 17 th
Long-tailed Tit	7 Swarland on the 18 th
Raven	2 Alnwick Moor on the 4 th , 2 Thrunton Woods on the 27 th , 2 Bewick Moor on the 2 nd and 5 th
Jackdaw/Rook	Mixed flock of up to 3000 birds Branton Ponds on the 6 th
Tree Sparrow	31 Branton on the 7 th , 2 New Bewick on the 11 th
Brambling	3 Branton on the 24 th , 1 Howick Hall on the 3 rd .
Lesser Redpoll	1 Branton Ponds on the 17 th
Siskin	50 Branton Ponds on the 17 th
Common Crossbill	25 Thrunton Woods on the 27 th , 6 Hulne Park on the 6 th
Bullfinch	8 Hulne Moor on the 8 th
MAMMALS	
Hedgehog	1 Branton on the 14 th .
Roe Deer	3 Branton Ponds on the 15 th , several Hannah's Hill all month
Red Squirrel	3 Fenwick Wood on the 16 th , 1 Eglington on the 17 th
INVERTEBRATES	
Red Admiral	1 Branton on the 22 nd
RAINFALL	30.1mm
OBSERVERS	W Banks, J Clark, I & K Davison, P Hanmer, A Keeble, S Reay, M Rolley.

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