

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



REVIEW OF NOVEMBER 2012

NEWSLETTER 135

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NEXT MEETING - WEDNESDAY, 30TH JANUARY 2012

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIA IN NORTHUMBERLAND

SPEAKER: STEPHEN BLOCK

Stephen Block used to live in the south of England, but fairly recently moved to the Berwick area where he joined the Berwick Wildlife Group. His speciality is herpetofauna (amphibia & reptiles) and he has in the past contributed data to the Herpetological Conservation Trust for their National Amphibian and Reptile Recording Scheme and their 'Make the Adder Count 2006' survey. He contacted AWG last year to ask about our Ford Moss surveys because he hoped to do some work himself on reptiles there.

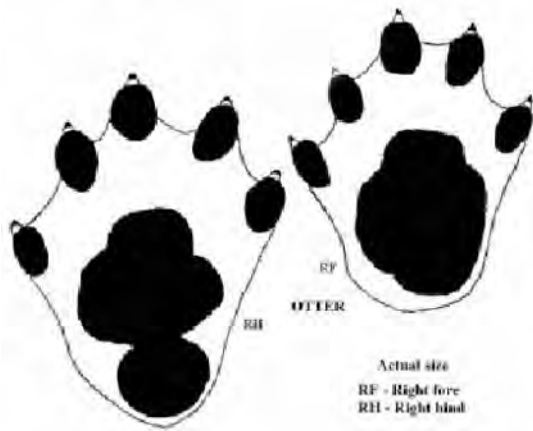
WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN JANUARY

With the winter solstice over, January can feel as though we are rubbing the sleep out of our eyes and getting ready for the first signs of spring. Frosty mornings and evenings can be extremely atmospheric especially with a 'hoary' frost coating spider's webs and the last of the leaves on the bushes and trees. January can be a month full of surprises; there can be influxes of geese and swans from the continent, small parties of Fieldfares and Redwings venture across the North Sea and by the end of the month the first of the year's flowers can be in bloom but this is all dependent on the weather.

Cold continental weather can lead to an influx of geese and swans into our area. Some of the best places to see these species are in the Tweed Valley, around Lindisfarne and in Budle Bay. Small flocks of migrant geese or swans can be found almost anywhere. A notable species is the Bewick's Swan. This species migrates into the Low Countries of Europe or The Ouse Washes or Slimbridge from northern Russia but none regularly winter in Northumberland. It is smaller than its cousin, the Whooper Swan, with a shorter neck and in my view looks 'whiter'. Getting a good view of the bill is often one of the best ways of clinching their identity. The bill is black and yellow and the yellow areas are □-shaped when viewed head-on whereas the whooper swan is W-shaped.



There can also be influxes of geese such as Eurasian White-fronted, both Taiga and Tundra Bean Geese as well as Brent. More than 80% of the World's population of Spitsbergen Light-bellied Brent geese can be present on Fenham Flats if wintering grounds in Denmark are frozen.



January can be a good time to look for Otters. Tracks are easily located in mud or snow. The five toes and wide pads are easily recognised. A further indications that otters have been in the area can be 'tunnels' through tall vegetation or slides on a muddy or snowy bank. The otter can be very elusive but places to look for them include Branton Ponds and the River Breamish, Newton Pool, along the river at Berwick – in fact anywhere where there is a reasonable river or large pond or lake. By the end of the month, if temperatures have been above freezing, the first signs of flowering plants can be found. These include Snowdrops and Lesser Celandines.

The former are relatively easy to identify with their white

down-turned bells and can be present in virtually every garden. The latter is a plant of unimproved pasture. The Lesser Celandine produces a heart-shaped dark green leathery leaf with pale spots which is prostrate to the ground. By the end of the month, on warm sunny banks, the first yellow star-shaped flowers can appear.

Let's hope that the weather is kind to our wildlife over the coming month.

Best wishes for Christmas and the New Year.

Jack Daw.

Please send sightings reports for December, no later than 6th January 2013 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.

Meeting of Wednesday 28th November 2012

An audience of 43 saw and heard the newly purchased PA system which will be even better when we have a cordless lapel microphone. As it was George struggled manfully with the hand-held mike and the sound quality was good. The existence of the new AWG Blog was publicised as was the forthcoming Christmas meeting.

George showed a Goldfinch nest; a copy of the recently published *Mushrooms* by Peter Marren; and an intervertebral disc from a small cetacean found on a Hebridean beach.

Our Speaker was **Dave Stebbings**, talking about *Butterfly Migration*. Dave is the Butterfly Conservation Officer for Northumberland. He thanked members for the sightings they submit and encouraged a continued effort in future because there are really very few observers in North Northumberland who send in records.

Butterflies fall into three categories: • sedentary (or specialist); • generalist (or nomadic); • migratory. Sedentary species need specific food plants and include **Large Heath** on Hare's-tail Cotton-grass and **Northern Brown Argus** on Rock Rose. Generalists wander around and need common widespread food plants, such as **Peacock** using nettles. Migrants travel long distances to find suitable habitats and conditions.

The **Painted Lady** breeds mainly in North Africa, has simultaneous hatching of vast numbers in February and the population pressure drives them to move north. Many stop to breed in southern Europe in May and the next generation completes the northern movement to Britain. They may pause to breed again in southern England and again the new generation continues northwards. Our peak here is in September and October. But when the temperature sinks below 5°C it has recently been discovered that the adults do a return migration, in one go, at about 1500 feet down to North Africa.



Red Admirals, on the other hand, are strong fliers and when temperatures in southern Europe get too high they migrate north over a period of 2 – 3 weeks at high altitudes. They fly as individuals rather than in Painted Lady-type swarms. In mild winters some may survive here, but most go back south when temperatures get below 5°C. These returners will be a different generation than the ones who arrived in the spring and summer.

The **Monarch** is a large butterfly found throughout the US and Canada where they can't survive the winters. Big swarms form in September. To the west of the Rockies as few as a million insects fly down to Southern California, but in the east perhaps 110 million of them all go south to a tiny 10ha (22 acre) patch of forest in the Mexican Sierra Madre mountains where they stay in more-or-less dormant roosts in the trees. How they navigate is a mystery, but, flying only by day, it may involve their antennae. In the spring these same adults fly back north, although it may take up to four generations along the way to reach the northern parts of their range.



Dave also dealt with quite uncommon migrants in the UK like **Camberwell Beauty** and **Clouded Yellow** (pictured left). This latter species was assumed to have died out in Britain when none were found between 1950 and 1983, but then a few reappeared and have continued to do so irregularly since.

Finally he talked about migrant moths such as **Silver Y**, a day flier, which has an annual migration in quite large numbers; **Hummingbird Hawkmoth** whose caterpillars require Bedstraw food plants; **Death's-head Hawkmoth** with a 12 cm wingspan which eats honey in bee hives; **Crimson Speckled** and **Flame Brocade**.

[n.b. Both photographs have been taken from the Butterfly Conservation website]

Howick November 2012 Highlights.

Due to a family bereavement in November I wasn't out and about as much as usual. The month was, as usual, wet and cold with a few clear and frosty days.

On the 3rd, I had a good walk around the Howick area as far up as Cullernose Point. 9 **Robins** right on the shore were incoming migrants, but 6 **Long tailed Tits** at the foot of Cullernose Cliffs was much more unusual. Later 8 arrived high from the east into the village from the coast path. Very strange these tiny birds looked flying high in tight formation over open fields. 9 **Grey Partridges** were in stubble. A few plants still in flower included **Hedge Woundwort, Knapweed and Red Campion**.

4 **Waxwings** heralded the start of a good influx of this exotic looking species on the 4th when they fed on apples in a neighbour's garden. A **Brambling** was in the village copse.

On the 6th it was clear that a drama had befallen the pond field **Mute Swan cygnets** when two of them were found on a puddle on Howick Village green. I rescued them back to the pond, but their mother was not to be seen. It seems that they had followed a ditch up to the village and over subsequent days they were found wandering around the roads too.

As they gained their flight they all went missing, with at least one being found killed in the woods. It's a dangerous time for young swans as they learn to become independent.

Waxwings increased to 14 birds in the village on 7th when another 53 were in the Hall gardens.

By the 8th it was becoming evident that **Waxwings** were to be the main feature of the month. 36 were now in the village, along with 7 **Siskins**, 1 **Brambling**, 2 **Bullfinch** and a **Jay**. A female **Merlin** was my first, locally, this year as it dashed straight through by the village hall. They seem to be less common in recent years?

On 10th **Waxwings** increased to 100+, 2 **Crossbills** flew over east, 20+ **Tree Sparrows** were on garden feeders and a **Grey Wagtail** was on the burn.

The **Waxwing** flocked peaked in the village on 12th with 143 birds.

A change from the birds came on the 17th, when we were pleased and surprised to find a large pod of **Bottle-nosed Dolphins** feeding in Howick bay. At least 20+ could be seen on the surface at anyone time, so many more must have been underneath. 4+ calves(?) were with the adults. They were watched jumping right up and side slapping, head butting fish along the surface and generally slashing into prey on the calm sea. A large pod of over 100 were seen off Bamburgh recently so maybe this was them moving south for the winter.

The final sighting of interest was on 27th when a **Barn Owl** was watched hunting below a bright full moon. Its flickering wings looked silver in the moon light against the dark field.



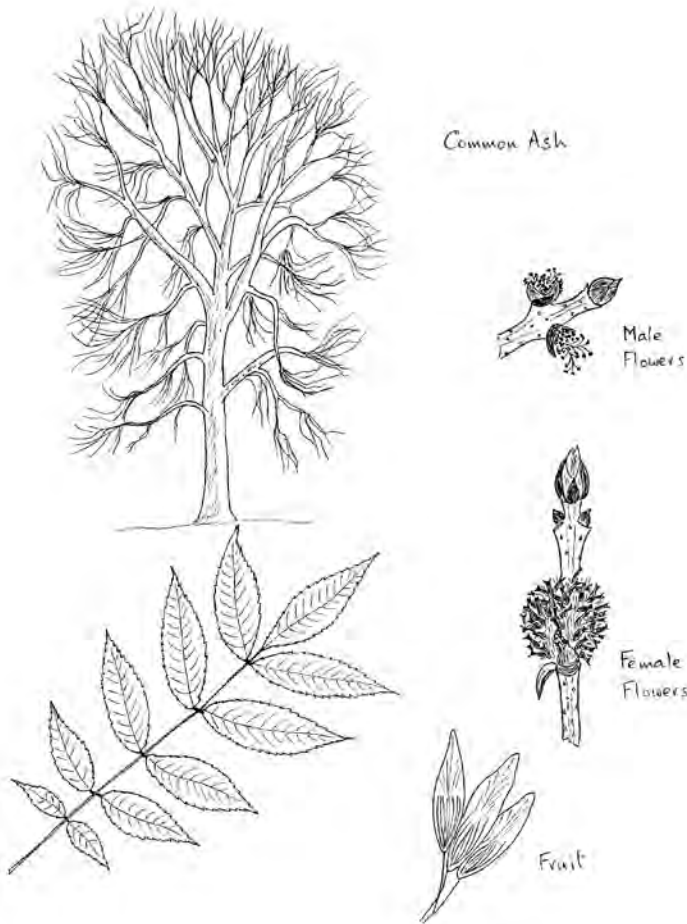
Waxwings at Howick

Stewart Sexton, Howick.

PLANT CORNER

At a recent meeting George Dodds mentioned the appearance of our major deciduous woodland trees in silhouette. So that seemed a suitable topic for this cold December Plant Corner. Britain has only 35 native tree species, of which three are conifers (Scots Pine, Yew and Juniper), but there are over 500 introduced species and varieties, some of which have been in our countryside for many hundreds of years.

I could have limited myself to drawings of the winter shapes of some common species, but then enthusiasm overcame me and I decided to add the foliage and some flowers and fruits as well. Choosing three species wasn't easy, but one had to be **Ash** (*Fraxinus excelsior*) whose very existence in our landscapes is now under threat. The **Small-leaved Lime** (*Tilia cordata*) is a lovely tree, despite the fact that probably all the specimens in North Northumberland are planted rather than native. **Sweet Chestnut** (*Castanea sativa*) is not too common here except in large parks, gardens and planted woodland, but the bark is so characteristic and beautiful that it seemed a good choice.



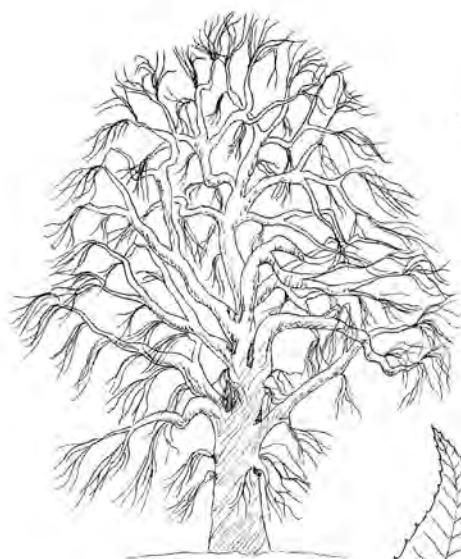
Ash trees grow to a maximum of about 40m. With their pale grey bark and the very characteristic squat black conical buds they are usually quite easy to identify even in winter. You are more often likely to find the trees at the bud stage than not because they are the last main species to break bud in the spring and the earliest to drop leaves in autumn so they don't contribute much to autumn colour in the landscape. Foresters often regard Ash as a weed species because of the ease with which the seeds germinate where they are not wanted and the speed of growth - as much as 2m in a season. Ash is a very flexible wood and coppices easily, which is why Northumbrian fishermen used to use Ash sticks to bend to create the frames of their crab pots.

Small-leaved Lime is also called the Linden tree and can grow to 38m. The undersides of the leaves are pale green and in the axils of the veins they have pale orange tufts of hairs. With smallish leaves - about 3 to 6 cm across - it is distinctly different from its close relative the Large-leaved Lime (*Tilia platyphyllos*). Where both are found together they tend to produce the hybrid offspring, the Common Lime (*Tilia x europaea*) which is a commonly planted tree in southern Britain. As with Ash, the tree is an excellent coppicer and can potentially live

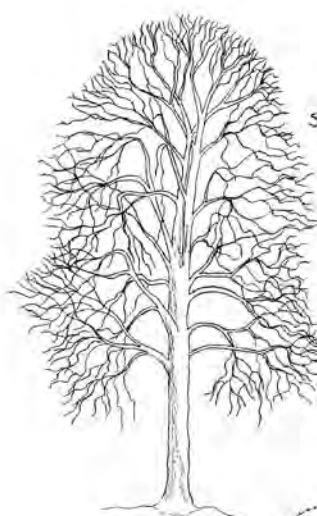
almost indefinitely as a coppiced 'stool' with stems arising as a ring around the edge of the stool. One stool in Gloucestershire is estimated to have been in continuous coppice production for at least 2,000 years and possibly for 6,000 years. The timber is excellent for intricate woodcarving.

Sweet Chestnut probably arrived with the Romans. It grows to 35m and mature trees have a broad and chunky trunk and main branches. The leaves are large and have sharply toothed margins. Probably the easiest way to identify the species in winter is from the bark which has deep fissures which run spirally round the trunk. It is a

long-lived tree with oldest examples exceeding 600 years. The timber in its coppiced form is used for chestnut paling fencing and in its more mature form is often used in furniture as an oak- substitute.



Sweet Chestnut



Small-leaved Lime



Bract and Fruit

Small, late, withered male catkin



Fruit

Two leaves showing pale undersides with pale tufts of hairs in axils of the veins

	SIGHTINGS NOVEMBER 2012
BIRDS	
Red-throated Diver	6 off Stag Rock (14 th), 1 off Guile Point (24 th), 1 at Fenham Flats (24 th)
Black-throated Diver	1 off Stag Rock (13 th)
Slavonian Grebe	1 off Guile Point (24 th), 2 at Fenham Flats (24 th)
Little Grebe	2 at Howick Gardens (17 th), 6 at Hauxley (24 th), 1 at Cresswell Ponds (2 nd), 1 in Alnmouth Estuary (8 th)
Little Egret	1 at Fenham Flats (24 th), 2 at Fenham Flats (24 th)
Bewick Swan	6 over Branton Ponds (30 th)
Whooper Swan	1 at Branton Ponds (15 th), 5 at Hauxley (24 th), 4 at Fenham Flats (24 th), 10 at Fenham Mill (29 th), 18 at West Weetwood (29 th), 5 over Branton Ponds (30 th), 7 at Cresswell Ponds (1 st)
Brent Goose	630 at Fenham Flats (24 th)
Pink-footed Goose	3 at East Chevington on(1 st)
Barnacle Goose	183 at Ross (29 th), 200 at Budle Bay (13 th)
Wigeon	388 at Fenham Flats (24 th), 200 at Cresswell Ponds (2 nd)
Pintail	21 at Fenham Flats on(24 th)
Long-tailed Duck	9 at Stag Rock (14 th), 36 at Fenham Flats (24 th), 2 off Stag Rock (13 th)
Goldeneye	9 (2 nd) and 7 (4 th) at Branton Ponds
Shoveler	3 at Cresswell Ponds (2 nd)
Mallard	60 at Branton Ponds (2 nd)
Tufted Duck	150 (2 nd) and 60+ (4 th) at Branton Ponds
Teal	70+ at Branton Ponds (4 th)
Scaup	7 at Fenham Flats (24 th)
Common Scoter	10 at Seaton Point (29 th)
Eider	538 at Fenham Flats (24 th)
Red-breasted Merganser	10 at Fenham Flats (24 th), 1 (14 th) and 2 (25 th) at Alnmouth
Goosander	16 at Branton Ponds (4 th)
Common Scoter	9 at Stag Rock (14 th)
Hen Harrier	1(ringtail) on Holy Island (7 th , 1 in North Northumberland (21 st)
Goshawk	1 in the Seaton Burn area (16 th), 1 over Branton (18 th)
Merlin	1 at Fenham Flats (24 th), 2 on Fenham Flats (24 th), 1 at Smeafield (29 th)
Peregrine	1 at Fenham Flats (24 th), 1 beside Smeafield/Elwick road (19 th), 1 at Hipsburn (8 th)
Grey Partridge	15 at Bothal (5 th), 4 at Cresswell Ponds (1 st)
Woodcock	1 in Upper Coquetdale (11 th), 1 near Branton (21 st)
Water Rail	2 at Howick Gardens (17 th)
Green Sandpiper	1 at Branton Ponds (4 th)
Sanderling	7 at Hauxley (24 th)
Purple Sandpiper	4 at Newton Point (11 th), 42 at Stag Rock (14 th), 3 at Hauxley (24 th), 110 at Stag Rock (29 th)
Jack Snipe	1 at Cresswell Ponds (1 st)
Long-billed Dowitcher	1 ((7 th +8 th +11 th) at Long Nanny
Black-tailed Godwit	1 at Fenham Flats (24 th)
Golden Plover	130 at Fenham Flats (24 th)
Curlew	151 at Fenham Flats (24 th)

Redshank	100 at Fenham Flats (24 th)
Greenshank	1 at Budle Bay (29 th)
Turnstone	64 at Stag Rock (14 th)
Lapwing	70 at Branton Ponds (20 th), 150 at Cresswell (2 nd)
Sandwich Tern	1 at Alnmouth (11 th)
Short-eared Owl	1 at Long Nanny (11 th), 1 at East Chevington (1 st), 1 at Long Nanny (15 th)
Barn Owl	1 at Roseden (5 th), 1 at Lilburn (9 th), 2 in Branton (19 th), 1 at Haugh Head (19 th), 1 at Canada Farm north of Longframlington (20 th), 1 on Chatton Moor (24 th), 1 at Seaton Point (30 th)
Tawny Owl	1 at Branton Ponds (2 nd)
Long-eared Owl	1 on Chatton Moor (24 th)
Kingfisher	2 at Branton Ponds (1 st) and up to 3 for the rest of the month, 1 at Bothal (5 th)
House Martin	1 at Boulmer (11 th)
Swallow	2 at Low Newton (3 rd)
Pied Wagtail	10 on Howick beach (17 th)
Waxwing	4 at Howick Village (4 th), 9 at Stannington and 18 at Kingston Park (6 th), 100 in the Ellingham area (6 th), 5 on Holy Island (7 th), 7 in Branton (7 th), 14 in Howick Village (7 th), 53 in Howick Hall (7 th), 32 at Wooler (8 th), 40 at Lanehead near Bellingham (7 th), 100 at Howick (10 th), 14 in Branton (18 th), 20 at Hulne Park (22 nd), 58 (27 th), 5 at Spindleston (13 th), 3 (6 th -8 th) at Harehope Hillend 60 in Alnwick (23 rd)
Stonechat	3 at Stag Rock (14 th)
Fieldfare	20 at Alnham (10 th)
Chiffchaff	1 at Branton Ponds (14 th), 1 at Wooler Water (15 th)
Goldcrest	13 at Hannah's Hill (15 th)
Marsh Tit	1 at Swarland (18 th)
Long-tailed Tit	20 at Lilburn Pond (12 th)
Hooded Crow	1 at Fenham Flats (24 th)
Raven	4 (11 th) and 7 (20 th) in Upper Coquetdale, 1 at Harehope Hillend (29 th)
Crossbill	2 near Howick (10 th), 6 at Harwood Forest (17 th)
Brambling	1 at Swarland (19 th +30 th)
Linnet	200 at Fieldhouse Farm (21 st)
Twite	12 at Long Nanny (11 th), 32 in North Northumberland (21 st), 43 at Fenham Flats (24 th), 12 at Alnham (10 th)
Lesser Redpoll	1 (2 nd), 5 (11 th) at Branton Ponds
Siskin	20 (2 nd) and 50 (11 th) at Branton Ponds ,100+ at Stag Rock(14 th)
Snow Bunting	1 near Wallington (22 nd)
PLANTS	
Hare's- foot Clover	Seed heads beside the River Breamish (4 th)
Heath Grousel	Near Kielder (7 th)
Climbing Coryadalis	Near Kielder (7 th)
Tunbridge Filmy Fern	Near Kielder (7 th)
Hard Fern	At Harehope (21 st)
Lesser Sea Spurrey	Upper Coquetdale (20 th)
Sea Rocket	At Guile Point (24 th)
Harebell	Near Bamburgh (14 th)
Cat's Ear	Near Bamburgh (14 th)

Autumn Hawkbit	Near Bamburgh (14 th)
Sea Mayweed	Near Bamburgh (14 th)
Sea Rocket	Near Bamburgh (14 th)
Polypody Fern	Near Bamburgh (14 th)
MAMMALS	
Roe Deer	Tracks beside the River Breamish (4 th), 3 at Branton Ponds (27 th)
Fox	1 at Harwood Forest (17 th)
Common Seal	1 at Fenham Flats (24 th)
Bottle-nosed Dolphin	20+ off Howick (17 th)
Red Squirrel	1 at Percy's Cross (10 th), 4 in Harwood village (17 th), 1 near River Breamish caravan site (14 th)
Bat (spp)	1 (13 th) and 6 (14 th) at Branton Ponds, 2 large unidentified bats over Hannah's Hill (15 th)
Otter	Tracks beside the River Breamish (4 th)
INVERTEBRATES	– all seen at Howick (15 th) with the exception of the Red Admiral
Acleris Sparcana	1
December Moth	3
Red-Green Carpet	3
Spruce Carpet	4
Green Carpet	1
Winter Moth	1
Chestnut Moth	1
Yellow- Line Quaker	1
Angle Shades	11
Rosy Rustic	1
Silver Y	1
Red Admiral	1 at Swarland (10 th)
CRUSTACEANS	
Freshwater White Clawed Crayfish	Several in the River Wansbeck (22 nd); some were the victims of Otters
RAINFALL	81.2mm
OBSERVERS	W Banks, J&E Clark, I&K Davison, G Dodds, S Fallaw, M Hall, P Hanmer, A Keeble, M McMahon, R&J Poppleton, S Reay, S Sexton.