

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



REVIEW OF FEBRUARY 2013

NEWSLETTER 138

www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

email: redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

NEXT MEETING - WEDNESDAY, 24TH APRIL 2013

THE WILDLIFE OF NORTHUMBERLAND

SPEAKER: JOHN STEELE

John Steele worked for more than 20 years for the Northumberland National Park Authority. He was the Senior Ranger in the Park, and specifically the Species and Habitat Officer. He has been closely involved with monitoring projects on Barn Owls and Curlews and periodically has cropped up on TV in these roles. After retirement he ran programmes of talks and walks for the Park. Among his other talents is a real feel for wildlife watercolour art. John has given talks to AWG several times in the past and never fails to be informative and entertaining.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR IN APRIL

At the time of writing, a **Swallow** and **Sand Martins** have already appeared in the south of England, despite the snowy weather. April is the month when spring really gets going. At sea, ducks and divers moult into their breeding plumage and move off north and **Guillemots** and **Razorbills** return to their cliffs. On the coast, there are large movements of waders and waterfowl and terns congregate in large numbers by the end of the month. Inland, the breeding season has started in earnest, frogs are in full croak, hedgerows are starting to bloom and there is a real zest for life.

One of the plants to look for in the hedgerows, meadows and rough ground is **Garlic Mustard** or **Jack-by-the-Hedge**. This is a biennial and a member of the brassica family. The kidney shaped lime-green leaves become pointed with age. The flowers are produced in spring and summer in button-like clusters. Each small flower has four white petals 4–8 mm long and 2–3 mm broad, arranged in a cross shape. The fruit is an erect, slender, four-sided pod 4 to 5.5 cm long, called a silique. **Garlic Mustard** is one of the main food plants for the larvae of **Orange-tip Butterflies** which start to appear by mid-month. This butterfly is easily identified with its predominately white wings with orange-tips. The combination of yellow and black scales on the under-wing forms a green blotchy effect. This butterfly can turn up almost anywhere but good places to see it would be Wooler Common, Branton Ponds and at the riverside in both Alnwick and Rothbury.

This is a busy time in the badger sett. Setts can be vast, and can sometimes accommodate multiple families. In the latter case, several isolated passages and nesting chambers occur. Some setts may have exits which are only used in times of danger or play. Three nesting chambers occur in setts, some of which are open both ends. Badgers dig and collect bedding throughout the year, particularly in autumn and spring. Sett maintenance is usually carried out by subordinate sows and dominant boars. The sett chambers are frequently lined with bedding, which is brought in on dry nights, consisting of grass, bracken, straw, leaves or moss. Up to 30 bundles can be carried to the sett on a single night. They are fastidiously clean animals, which regularly discard old bedding.

A number of species of bird will have eggs and possibly chicks by now e.g. **Ravens**, **Grey Herons** and **Crossbills**. Many of our common species of bird are starting to think about setting up territory and building a nest. The Nest Record Scheme (NRS), run by the British Trust for Ornithology, gathers vital information on the breeding success of Britain's birds by asking volunteers to find and follow the progress of individual birds' nests. The data collected are used to produce trends in breeding performance. Anyone can be a nest recorder. Some people watch a single nest box in their back garden while others spend hundreds of hours finding and monitoring nests in the wider countryside. For more information visit the BTO's website or speak to your local representative (Tom Cadwallender (tel: 01665 830884).

Jack Daw.

PLANT CORNER

After 13 years of Plant Corner articles it becomes increasingly hard to find species that have so far escaped my pen – particularly if I want to choose plants that are reasonably seasonal. However, this month I've chosen three plants, two of which are new to Plant Corner and one that I last featured in 2001.



Stinking Hellebore (*Helleborus foetidus*) is a familiar plant of gardens and by late March it will have been in flower for some time. Unlike the open star-shaped flowers of most of the variously coloured cultivated Hellebores, our plant has clusters of downward facing bell-shaped flowers with purple edges to the yellow-green petals (which are actually the outer sepals).



Stinking Hellebore is a native plant on limey soils in the south and south west of Britain, but in Northumberland, apart from occasional occurrences of garden escapes, you will only find it in one location. There is a steep wooded bank above the river South Tyne at Warden where it has been known since at least 1831, but even there it is assumed to have been originally introduced, rather than being native.

Very different is **Blackthorn** (*Prunus spinosa*). In many of our hedgerows the first of the attractive white-flowering shrubs is Blackthorn. The flowers appear well before the leaves, from late March. The twigs are black and have the long very sharp spines that can puncture car tyres if you drive over blackthorn cuttings at hedge-trimming times. This shrub spreads by suckering, so it often forms almost impenetrable thickets. This also makes collecting the fruit – the sloes – a very painful experience in the autumn. But if you want your Sloe Gin you just have to grin and bear it.



Lastly there's a plant that is far more often found as a weed of gardens and arable fields than truly in the wild. **Petty Spurge** (*Euphorbia peplus*) is a small annual, rarely reaching a foot in height. The seedlings can start appearing in March, although they won't usually flower until later in April. Mind you, the flowers are such small green structures, lacking both petals and sepals, that you'd be forgiven for not noticing them. They do grow, however, in clusters cupped in yellowish-green leafy bracts that can be mistaken for petals.

In common with all the Spurges, the plants have milky-white sap which is intensely irritant, so if you get any on your hands while you are weeding, don't rub your eyes. The sap's effects can be powerful enough to 'burn off' warts – allegedly!

Richard Poppleton

Howick February 2013 Highlights.

Looking back on last February's highlights, this year seems rather 'thin'.

A nice spring-like day on the 9th felt like there was change in the air. Several groups of **Pink footed Geese** flew N while 2 **Skylarks** were in song along the coast path. 30+ **Fulmars** were soaring around the cliffs and heading off to prospect the quarries inland.

My first **Chaffinch** song of the year was heard in the village today.

The weather turned more like February on 10th with a cold south east wind and thick cloud. A party of 8 **Shelduck** flew north along the coast and 6 **Goldeneye** fed on the sea at the burn mouth. Further offshore, thousands of **Auks** were moving north towards near and far breeding grounds.

In the village, a single male **Yellowhammer** was my first sighting locally this year. The feeding flocks must be beginning to disperse to nesting areas. This was my only new bird sighting for the local patch competition this month taking me to 92 species here for the year.

On 16th 181 **Curlews** was a good count near the Seahouses Farm. 10 **Skylarks** flew North.



Curlew

A window of mild weather on 17th found me setting the moth trap in the garden. A reasonable catch of 9 moths included a **Spring Usher** and 2 **Dark Chestnuts**. While looking at the trap in the morning a **Blackbird** was in full song, though for one day only, and by the month end I hadn't heard him again. Maybe he was too obvious to the local Sparrowhawk.

Later on 17th I met up with John Rutter to do the Wildfowl count at Branton and Hedgely where the highlights were **Kingfisher** and an immature **Peregrine** resting on one of the tall pylons behind Branton west pit.

All month **Tawny Owls** have been very vocal in the Howick area, with up to 4 hooting males at any one time.

This is the first time in a few years that I have not seen a single amphibian locally before the month end. Lets hope things warm up soon...



Spring Usher

Stewart Sexton, Howick.

New members

A warm welcome to new members who have joined our group over the last few months: -

Carolyn Brewster from Eglington, Philip Loft from Alnwick, David & Gill Sanders from Berwick upon Tweed, Ann & Russel Wills from Alnwick, Finn Willcock from Glanton, Mick McMahon from Lesbury, Vicky Telford from North Broomhill.

Please send sightings reports for March, no later than 6th April 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 27th February 2013

An audience of 43 gathered to view George's two specimens – a window casualty female Great Spotted Woodpecker and the 'bone' of a smallish Cuttlefish.

After a rather desultory round of sightings – well, February tends to depress many of us – George introduced Andrew Craggs who is now the only official warden on Holy island where he has worked for ten years. With the help of volunteers he manages the Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve and also the Newham Fen reserve.

Lindisfarne NNR was created in 1964 with land leased from several landowners. The causeway was built at the same time and originally stood well proud of the sand. The management aims were largely related to the control of wildfowling. The reserve, with its 60km of coastline, now has a string of protection designations.

The current management regime covers birds (especially waders and wildfowl); scarce plants like the Lindisfarne Helleborine and the small lettuce-like Liverwort called Petalwort; the Seal colonies and various nationally rare invertebrates. As well as the habitats that are essential for these species, the management plan also covers the historical features of the island and enables the reserve to be used as an educational resource.



Over 12 thousand Bar-tailed Godwit overwinter and the worms in the mudflats are a key resource for them and for the Curlews, so dealing with persistent bait-diggers has had to involve night-time patrols. The important winter populations of Light-bellied Brent Geese have in recent years been joined by about 250 Barnacle Geese. Little Terns nesting in unsuitable situations have been relocated to the area near the beacons. The Rocket Field is also a very good area for a wide variety of birds.

The management of vegetation, which was at one stage overrun with rabbits, involves cattle, sheep and goats. These grazers help to control Pirri-pirri Bur, Michaelmas Daisy and Montbretia which are all invasive. Target grazing is carefully controlled with electric fences. Allowing the dune slacks to become quite wet in the winter controls Pirri-pirri. Any Giant Hogweed that appears is hand-weeded. All of this encourages Lindisfarne Helleborine which showed 62 flower spikes in 2012, but also Coral-root Orchid, Marsh Helleborine, Early and Northern Marsh Orchids, Grass of Parnassus and Common Butterwort.

The geese and ducks – especially Wigeon – depend on the big Eelgrass (*Zostera*) beds – which are subject to lots of monitoring and research. Limited wildfowling is still permitted and the numbers shot (c. 800), largely Wigeon, are an insignificant proportion of the total populations.



Recreational use is controlled rather than banned, but there are often problems with rough camping in sensitive areas and inevitably with litter. Recreational zones are set for horseriding. The reserve now has more than 500,000 visitors a year. A Holy Island Partnership has been set up to deal with issues like car parking and interpretation boards. Progress is slow but the arrangement is working and is essential. As well as Lindisfarne NNR itself, adjacent land is now increasingly managed by agreement with the landowners.

SIGHTINGS FEBRUARY 2013

BIRDS	
Red-throated Diver	3 off Stag Rock (24 th), 1 off Cullernose Point (28 th)
Great Crested Grebe	2 at East Chevington (16 th)
Slavonian Grebe	2 off Guile Point (9 th), 25 at Fenham Flats (9 th), 4 off Stag Rock (24 th)
Fulmar	8 near Howick (28 th)
Bittern	1 at Cresswell Pond (18 th)
Little Egret	1 near Fenham Hill (9 th), 1 at Budle Bay (28 th)
Cormorant	3 at Branton Ponds (6 th) [including one looking very much like the form sinensis]
Whooper Swan	22 over Branton (18 th)
Pink-footed Goose	340 Between Fenham and Ross (9 th), 450 near Elwick (15 th), 40 at Ross (19 th), 140 at Budle Bay (28 th)
White-fronted Goose	4 at Woodhorn (20 th)
Bean Goose(Taiga)	At least 1 near Budle Bay (28 th)
Brent Goose	1000 near Elwick (15 th), 28 at Boulmer (16 th), 120+ at Ross (19 th), 1000 at Smeafield (19 th), 300+ from Harpers Heugh (24 th), 480 at Budle Bay (28 th)
Barnacle Goose	40 near Elwick (15 th), 250+ at Ross (19 th), 250+ from Harpers Heugh (24 th), 14 at Budle Bay (28 th)
Greylag Goose	250 at Lilburn (15 th), 130+ at Ross (19 th), 300 at Budle Bay (28 th)
Goldeneye	5 including 3 displaying ♂'s at Branton Ponds (6 th), 37 at East Chevington (16 th)
Red-breasted Merganser	1 in the Long Nanny Burn (13 th), 2 at Warkworth (17 th), 10 at Budle Bay (24 th)
Smew	1 Redhead at East Chevington (16 th)
Goosander	12 (6 th) and 8 (16 th) at Branton Ponds
Shelduck	1 on Branton Ponds (6 th), 250 at Fenham Flats (9 th), 12 at Branton Ponds (18 th)
Eider	221 at Fenham Flats (9 th)
Long-tailed Duck	12 at Guile Point (9 th), 4 at Fenham Flats (9 th), 6 off Stag Rock (24 th +28 th)
Goldeneye	12 at Branton Ponds (16 th)
Wigeon	16 (16 th) and 56 (19 th) at Branton Ponds
Teal	45 at Branton Ponds (19 th), 40 at Ross (19 th), 120+ at Budle Bay (28 th)
Gadwall	2 at Branton Ponds (23 rd), pair at Whinney Hill (26 th)
Shoveler	27 at Druridge Pools (18 th)
Pintail	9 at Fenham Flats (9 th), 2 at Druridge Pools (18 th)
Common Scoter	1 at Fenham Flats (9 th), 15 (10 th) and 100+ (24 th) off Stag Rock
Tufted Duck	37 at Branton Ponds (19 th)
Scaup	1 at Fenham Flats (9 th), 1 at Cresswell Pond (16 th)
Pochard	1 at Branton Ponds (15 th)
Hen Harrier	1 near Ross (19 th)
Sparrowhawk	1 large female at Branton Ponds (6 th)
Merlin	1 at Fenham Flats (9 th)
Peregrine	1 near Fenham Hill (9 th), 1 near Beal (15 th), 1 at Branton Ponds (17 th), 1 south of

	Holy Island causeway (19 th), 1 off Stag Rock (24 th) 1 at Monks House Pool on (14 th +28 th), 1 at Budle Bay (14 th)
Grey Partridge	2 pairs at Whinney Hill (26 th), 2 near Budle Bay (28 th)
Coot	19 at Branton Ponds (19 th)
Snipe	3 at Branton Ponds (16 th)
Woodcock	1 near the Black Lough (4 th), 1 near Elwick hide (9 th)
Curlew	23 at Branton Ponds (7 th), 290 at Fenham Flats (9 th), 650 near Elwick 915 th), 90 at Budle Bay (28 th)
Bar-tailed Godwit	230 at Fenham Flats (9 th), several at Beadnell Bay (13 th), 12 at Boulmer (16 th)
Oystercatcher	204 at Fenham Flats (9 th), 14 at Branton Ponds (15 th)
Grey Plover	28 at Fenham Flats (9 th)
Ringed Plover	Several near Fenham le Moor hide (9 th), 1 at Beadnell Bay (13 th)
Golden Plover	35 at Newton (13 th)
Lapwing	31 (16 th) and 85 (21 st) at Branton Ponds
Dunlin	24 at Boulmer (16 th)
Sanderling	23 at Boulmer (16 th)
Purple Sandpiper	1 at Boulmer (16 th), 40 at Stag Rock (24 th)
Greenshank	2 at Budle Bay (28 th)
Kittiwake	20 at Cullernose Point (28 th)
Glaucous Gull	1 juvenile at North Shields Fish Quay (26 th)
Stock Dove	1 at Old Swarland (1 st)
Tawny Owl	Several birds calling around Branton (15 th), 1 at Elwick (1 st), 1 at Smeafield (15 th)
Short-eared Owl	2 at Goswick (15 th), 1 at East Chevington (16 th)
Barn Owl	1 near Chatton (9 th), 1 near Roseden (9 th), 1 at Christon Bank (21 st)
Kingfisher	2 at Branton Ponds all month
Skylark	4 at Whinney Hill (26 th)
Rock Pipit	7 at Boulmer (16 th)
Redwing	6 at Branton Ponds (19 th), 5 at Swarland (4 th)
Fieldfare	12 at Branton (3 rd), 25 at Eglington (14 th), 30 at Swarland (4 th)
Willow Tit	1 at Branton Ponds (23 rd)
Marsh Tit	1 at Weldon Bridge (16 th)
Treecreeper	Several at Beanley Woods (23 rd)
Nuthatch	1 at Eglington (14 th)
Raven	1 at Eglington (14 th)
Jay	Several in Hepburn Woods (17 th)
Tree Sparrow	Up to 15 all month in Branton
Bullfinch	4 at Branton Ponds (16 th)
Lesser Redpoll	2 at Branton Ponds (16 th), 6 in an Alnwick garden from the 23 rd
Brambling	1 (6 th) and 1 (13 th) in Branton

Twite	60 near Cresswell Pond (16 th)
MAMMALS	
Roe Deer	3 on Alnwick Moor (3 rd), 8 at Ross (28 th), 3 at Charlton Mires (26 th), 2 at Monks House Pool (28 th)
Water Vole	1 at Branton Ponds (19 th)
Red Squirrel	1 at Spindlestone (24 th), 1 at Thrunton Woods (19 th)
Brown Hare	4 at Branton Ponds (14 th), 3 at Whinney Hill (26 th)
Otter	Tracks in Fawdon Burn near Branton (4 th)
Stoat	1 in full ermine at Branton Ponds (19 th), 1 in ermine at Beanley Woods (23 rd), 1 in ermine near Longframlington (19 th)
Badger	Tracks at Fenham Flats (9 th)
Harbour Porpoise	2 off Stag Rock (3 rd)
PLANTS	
Winter Aconite	Several clumps around Branton (5 th)
Winter Heliotrope	A small patch at Beadnell (13 th)
Ramson	At Whinney Hill (26 th)
Primrose	At Whinney Hill (26 th)
Larch	The first green shoots showing at Titlington Mount (15 th)
INVERTEBRATES	
Pale Brindled Beauty	5 at Howick (16 th)
Spring Usher	1 at Howick (16 th)
Chestnut	1 at Howick (16 th)
Dark Chestnut	2 at Howick (16 th)
Bumblebee(spp)	1 at Smeafield (27 th)
REPTILES	
Adder	1 (26 th) and 2 (27 th) at Branton Ponds
AMPHIBIANS	
Common Frog	Frogspawn at Whinney Hill (26 th)
RAINFALL	16.2mm
OBSERVERS	G Bell, I&K Davison, G Dodds, B Egdell, M Hall, A Keeble, M McMahon, R&J Poppleton, S Reay, M Rolley, J Rutter, S Sexton, NNBC.

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