

# Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



## REVIEW OF APRIL 2013

### NEWSLETTER 140

www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

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**NEXT MEETING: SEPTEMBER 25TH, 2013 AT 7.30P.M.**

**‘World of Lichens’** Speaker: Janet Simpkin.

Janet Simpkin is an Ecological consultant specialising in botanical and lichen surveys, national vegetation classification, biological records, and ecological research.

A new membership card, with details of the next season’s meeting, will be sent to all members.

#### WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR IN JUNE

As I write this article, cold winds still prevail from the east and snow is predicted on the tops of the Cheviots and the Pennines. Yet in the gardens, hedgerows and woodland there is the sound of nestlings begging for food. June is supposed to be the time of plenty. Youngsters of all shapes and sizes are either looking for food or begging their parents for the next tasty morsel. In woodlands and tall hedgerows, the first brave **Tawny Owlets** venture onto branches as the canopy closes over. At the coast, rock pools are hotting up with activity as **molluscs**, **gastropods** and **crustaceans** battle for position. On rocky isles, streams of adult **auks** and terns venture to the Farne Deeps looking for **sandeels**. Meadows and verges are becoming full of flower and these are attracting a host of pollinating insects and their predators.

In the upland valleys, **Foxgloves** start to flower attracting at least 6 species of **Bumblebee**. Look for holes at the base of flowers which are the result of **Short-tongued Bumblebees** (e.g. **Buff-tailed** and **White-tailed**) cutting holes in the trumpet flowers. Normally these species feed on flowers with short corollas and daisy-type flowers but the flowers of the foxglove hold a rich source of nectar. Many of the larger flowering plants attract many different pollinators. These are prey for cryptic predators such as **Crab Spiders**, **Assassin Bugs** and **Ichneumon Wasps**.

Orchids such as **Common Spotted**, **Marsh**, **Fragrant**, and **Pyramidal orchids** appear in wet grassland, dunes or on limestone soils. Some of the best places to find these orchids are at Cocklaburn dunes, Lindisfarne and areas of wetland in upland settings. **Vetches** and **daisies** start to grow in profusion in meadows and pastures. Cliff tops such as at Dunstanburgh are adorned with **Thrift**, **Sea Heath** and **Sea Campion**.

June is the best month to see **Fox** cubs playing with their siblings and parents. As they grow bigger they become more adventurous and frisky. Fox cubs often emerge above ground before dusk, eager to get outside and play. You may hear the cubs before seeing them as they make a lot of noise!

The first of the young **frog** and **toadlets** leave the ponds and in some places in some years there can be thousands of young amphibians on the move. Some of the best places to find these are at Craggside, and Newton Pool. Craggside is also a good place to look for adult **Palmate Newts** leaving their breeding sites as they feed on land. Newt tadpoles can be found in weed around the edges of ponds and they look just like adult newts but with fluffy gills sticking out of the side of their heads.

June is a great month to watch wildlife from first light (3 am) to last thing at night (11 pm).

Happy watching!

*Jack Daw.*

Please send sightings reports for May, no later than 6th June 2013 to: Ian & Keith Davison, The Bungalow, Branton, Powburn, NE66 4LW or Tel: 01665 578 357 or email to [redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk](mailto: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.

## FIELD TRIPS

All queries please to Richard Poppleton 01665 578346 or [richard.pop@btinternet.com](mailto:richard.pop@btinternet.com)  
*Involvement with these field work activities needs to be restricted to AWG members and it would be very helpful if those wishing to take part would contact Richard in advance.*

### BRANTON PONDS – PLANTS DAY

A day designed to encourage members to improve their plant identification skills and to enjoy whatever wildlife is there. It's an excellent reserve

Date: **Sunday 23rd June** Time: 10.30am until we've had enough

Meeting Point: OS Landranger **81 NU 047 165**

North through Powburn on A697. Turn left towards Branton just before the main Breamish bridge.

After about 1km after sharp double bends car park is on right through gate.

Bring: Boots or wellies depending on weather. Packed lunch. Wildflower guide if you have one. Small notebook and pen.

### SLAINSFIELD MOOR - SURVEY DAYS

Surveys of this compact area of open access moorland. Our main concentrations will be on birds, butterflies and plants, but we shall also attempt to cover moths, small mammals, reptiles and amphibians at some point on the days or during the summer.

Dates: **Saturday 15th June** and **Sunday 11th August** Time: 10.30am until whenever

Meeting Point: OS Landranger **74 NT 952 395**

Approach from Ford. Turn right to Slainsfield Farm. At the sharp bend before the farm go straight on up the track, through the gate and park on the right.

Bring: Yourself and your expertise and/or enthusiasm. Appropriate footwear and clothing (there's a significant area of boggy ground). Food and drink.

Something to record your findings (notebook or voice recorder)

*Richard Poppleton.*

*Crab Spider*



*Assassin Bug*



*Ichneumon Wasp*



## Howick April 2013 Highlights.

April can be a month of 'firsts' depending upon the weather. As the weather in March was very cold and wintry, April at least showed a change from the winter.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> of the month a **Dandelion** in flower in the village was my first of the year, its sunny disposition brightening the day.

More 'firsts' followed on 6<sup>th</sup> with **Chiffchaff** singing and a pair of **Tufted Duck** on the pond. A pair of **Siskins** were on our garden niger feeder. Late at night emigrating **Redwings** could be heard calling in the darkness.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> the first **Puffin** of summer flew north offshore as did 20 **Razorbills** and many **Gannets**. Two **Stoats** appeared to be in dispute along the lane.

**Wheatear** is always a welcome harbinger of spring, so when a male appeared on 12<sup>th</sup> he was very welcome. It shared a ploughed field with **25 Pied Wagtails**, **4 Meadow Pipits** and a **Fieldfare**.

2 or 3 **Golden Plovers** flew south over the back field, calling. Another first on 12<sup>th</sup> was a **Toad**, very late as they usually appear in February, while the final 'first' came late at night when at least 3 **Sandwich Terns** were calling overhead in the darkness as they flew north.

Probably the most welcome 'first' for everyone is the first **Swallow** returning for the summer. Ours came back on 13<sup>th</sup> when **Tufted Ducks** increased to 4 birds and 30+ **Toads** were on their way to the pond to breed.

The 16<sup>th</sup> of April provided what may have been our final **Redwings** of the year when 25+ roosted in the village prior to their migration back to Scandinavia.

A male **Blackcap** was on our feeders on 18<sup>th</sup> along with a pair of **Greenfinches**. Mammal interest was provided by a **Hedgehog** on our drive, a **Brown Rat** below our bird feeders and 6+ in the back field.

On 19<sup>th</sup> the male **Blackcap** was joined on the feeders by a female.

The 20<sup>th</sup> seemed to have a burst of activity on the patch with 2 **Sand Martins** arriving on the coast path, then 10+ were at Rumbling Kern, 2 or 3 **Willow Warblers** were in song and the first butterflies of the year were in our garden, single **Peacock** and **Small Tortoiseshell**.



Whimbrel (left) with Redshank

**Whimbrel** can usually be relied on to appear each spring along the coast so one on the **21<sup>st</sup>** was to be expected near the bathing house. Another 2 Wheatears were nearby.

Along the coast, the gorse bushes were noticeably 'burnt' by the freezing salt laden easterly winds of March.



Grasshopper Warbler

Before work on **24<sup>th</sup>** a **Grasshopper Warbler** could be heard reeling across the field from our drive. This bird must have passed straight through as it was not heard again.

The Mothing this year has been desperate, but **24<sup>th</sup>** provided my first reasonable catch with 38 moths of 14 species including a nice **Red Sword-grass** only my second garden record and a **Pale Pinion**, a scarce moth up north.



Red Sword-grass

In the evening of **25<sup>th</sup>**, 80 **Golden Plovers** and 2 **Yellow Wagtails** ( firsts) flew north over the village and 7 **Wheatears** were in plough near the old rectory. Lots of **Violets**, **Primroses** and **Crosswort** were in flower along the coast path.

One of the best birds of the month came on **27<sup>th</sup>** when 2 **Lesser Whitethroats** sang from the coast path. Only one showed well. Its Common cousin, the **Whitethroat** arrived on site the same day and a **Bee Fly** fed from coltsfoot on our drive.

I think that makes it 21 'firsts' for 2013 during April! Not bad at all...

Stewart Sexton, Howick.

## Meeting of Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> April 2013

There was a good audience of 47 including six visitors and a new member, David Turnbull. George produced several specimens. A Moorhen, a Skylark and a selection of live moths caught by Stewart the previous evening – Powdered Quaker, Common Quaker, Hebrew Character, Clouded Drab and Red Chestnut.

Amongst the sightings were, notably, a flight of Common Cranes over Eglington, Short-eared Owls, a Pine Marten, and specimens of Toothwort and Alexanders (it's worth looking them up if you're not sure!)

Our *Speaker* was John Steele talking on the topic of *Northumberland's Wildlife Wonders*.

He began on the **Farnes** with the iconic Eider Ducks whose numbers have been dropping, possibly due to global warming pressures, but which have been known to live to 15 years. The beaks of Razorbill and Puffin show adaptations to catching and holding small fish with their backward-pointing spines in the roof of the mouth and the amazing hinge which allows the beak to be opened with the two mandibles parallel. Fulmars have a hooked tip to help hold fish and John speculated on the possible uses for the tube-nose features of these birds. We have 40% of the UK population and 3% of the world population of Grey Seals on the Farnes. Killer Whales are sometimes seen and there are records of Wolf Fish.

On the **Shores** the kelp beds are an important habitat. Two key predators are Lobster and Northern Octopus which will even enter lobster pots and take the trapped animals. Then there are the tiny Blue-rayed Limpets often washed up after storms and several species of sea slugs which graze on Barnacles and on Bryozoans. A good spot are the button-shaped basal discs of Thong Weed in the spring. John made a key point that to see the full range of sea shore species you need to be prepared to vary the times of your excursions, and even to consider occasional forays at night with a head torch. He covered a range of other species from the shore and then talked about the **Upper Shore** with its Springtails and the marine lichens. Naturalists also benefit from an awareness of shore geology and especially the fossils in the exposed limestone beds.

The **Coquet** is a major fishing river and the Mayflies show a unique lifecycle with two winged stages. Whooper Swans have built up good populations in recent years with >100 in 2011. The Coquet has seen a major success in attracting Otters back.

On **Moorland** Nightjars can be found at dusk in areas where young regeneration has begun after felling. They have amazing camouflage in their ground nests and you usually need to wait until you hear their churring calls. In crags and caves are False Scorpions with no stings, but strong pincers, and it's also worth looking for Cave Spiders which can sometimes be found in house outhouses. Crags are also the habitat for Tunbridge Filmy Fern. Ground-nesting Merlins are a good spot – John has ringed a nestling with most unusual feathered feet and has also seen an Adder taking a Merlin chick.

Cheviot Goats can often be seen on the higher moors and John was shown the horns of an old dead billy goat which were 38 inches long and with a 36 inch spread. On the ground, look for Green Tiger Beetles which eat ants; *Cladonia* lichens and Dwarf Cornel at its southern limit (a few years ago Ian & Keith found some on the moors above the Upper Breamish Valley).



Our **Woodlands** have good trees and you can sometimes find Herb Paris (left) in the ground flora. Woodcock can be seen roding (mating flight) at dusk and they can open their beaks underground to get worms out without them breaking. Conifer woodlands have Goshawk and Marmalade Hoverflies and Bee-flies can be seen.

The final habitat John covered was **Peat Bog** with the constantly changing hags and pools. Golden Plover are specialist breeders here and different species of insectivorous Sundews can be found in the wetter areas.

## Plant Corner

Garden plants often escape into the wild. Sometimes that isn't a particular problem because the native plants can easily cope with their new competitors. But sometimes it's much more of an issue.

In Ingram village, recently, two garden escape 'aliens' have been noticed and they represent these two extremes. **American Skunk Cabbage** (*Lysichiton americanus*) is found in big estate gardens, like Blagdon, where there are wet boggy areas and you often find this plant covering quite big patches. The photograph shows it at the early spring flowering stage and you can see that it is closely related to our native Lords and Ladies (*Arum maculatum*) which is found quite frequently in shady damp places as well as in gardens where it is often the Italian cousin (*A. italicum*) with the white lines down the veins in the leaves, a yellow unspotted spadix and a pale yellow spathe rather than the purple spadix and green spathe of the native plant.



Skunk Cabbage has spectacular big, bright yellow 'flowers'. The actual flowers are collected on the greenish central column or spadix while the yellow spathe that forms the hood is a modified leaf. As well as their colour these flowers have what the RHS website describes as an 'evil smell like a combination of skunk and garlic'. Well, I've never smelt skunks, but I get the message! The smell attracts small flies, midges and beetles which carry out the pollination.

After the flowers die down large fleshy leaves grow up and you can often get a small forest of the plants. This is where the problem arises because they spread rapidly wherever the ground is boggy and they crowd out other plants. The biggest concern comes when they appear beside running water and to find them beside the River Breamish at Ingram – which can carry the seeds down-stream to new sites – is a bit of a worry.



Then there's the wonderfully-named **Pick-a-back (or piggy-back) Plant** (*Tolmiea menziesii*). You could always try pronouncing the Latin name after a few drams. It's a member of the Saxifrage family and has heart-shaped, downy, yellow-green leaves and the strangely-shaped flowers that you can see in the photo. It's a native of western coastal areas in the USA but is sometimes grown here as a garden perennial.

Fortunately, although it does have underground rhizomes, they don't spread too aggressively and the plant will not always persist in areas outside gardens to which it has escaped. As with some other hairy or downy plants, you have to be a bit careful with handling it too much because it has been shown to cause dermatitis in sensitive skin.

This is a plant that hedges its reproductive bets. It spreads by rhizomes and by producing seed, but it also produces mini plantlets from the leaf stalks which fall off and root themselves.



Richard Poppleton

**SIGHTINGS APRIL 2013**

<b>BIRDS</b>	
Great Crested Grebe	1 (1 <sup>st</sup> ) at Branton Ponds
Bittern	1 at Newton Pool (7 <sup>th</sup> )
Little Egret	1 at Fenham Flats (14 <sup>th</sup> )
Brent Goose	29 at Fenham Flats (14 <sup>th</sup> )
Shelduck	16 (26 <sup>th</sup> ), 52 (27 <sup>th</sup> ), 100+ (29 <sup>th</sup> ) at Elwick
Pintail	17 at Fenham le Moor (14 <sup>th</sup> ), 2 at Elwick (26 <sup>th</sup> )
Gadwall	4 at Branton Ponds (25 <sup>th</sup> )
Mallard	12 at Elwick (26 <sup>th</sup> )
Teal	8 at Elwick (26 <sup>th</sup> )
Goldeneye	17 at Branton Ponds (1 <sup>st</sup> )
Pochard	2 at Branton Ponds (13 <sup>th</sup> )
Common Scoter	2 at Fenham Flats (14 <sup>th</sup> )
Eider	95 at Fenham Flats (14 <sup>th</sup> )
Red-breasted Merganser	7 at Fenham Flats (14 <sup>th</sup> )
Long-tailed Duck	2 at Fenham Flats (14 <sup>th</sup> )
Peregrine	1 at Fenham Flats (14 <sup>th</sup> ), 1 at Holy Island causeway (23 <sup>rd</sup> )
Grey Partridge	2 in Branton (2 <sup>nd</sup> )
Water Rail	2 at Branton Ponds (11 <sup>th</sup> )
Common Crane	7 over Shipley Lodge (22 <sup>nd</sup> ), 1 at Elwick (21 <sup>st</sup> )
Woodcock	2 at Kimmer Lough (17 <sup>th</sup> ), 1 at Hulne Moor (17 <sup>th</sup> )
Little Ringed Plover	1 at Hedgeley (21 <sup>st</sup> ), 2 on Holy Island (23 <sup>rd</sup> ), a pair on the River Breamish (27 <sup>th</sup> )
Golden Plover	14 at Fenham le Moor (14 <sup>th</sup> )
Dunlin	1 at Branton Ponds (17 <sup>th</sup> )
Common Sandpiper	1 at Branton Ponds (11 <sup>th</sup> ), 1 at Hulne Park (21 <sup>st</sup> )
Green Sandpiper	1 near Netherwitton (8 <sup>th</sup> )
Greenshank	1 at Bradford Kaims (23 <sup>rd</sup> )
Ruff	1 at Boulmer (7 <sup>th</sup> ), 1 at Elwick Flash (23 <sup>rd</sup> )
Black-tailed Godwit	1 on Holy Island (23 <sup>rd</sup> )
Whimbrel	1 at Rumbling Kern (21 <sup>st</sup> )
Curlew	47 at Branton Ponds (4 <sup>th</sup> )
Common Gull	200+ at Branton Ponds (12 <sup>th</sup> )
Lesser Black-backed Gull	18 at Branton Ponds (9 <sup>th</sup> ), 70+ at Branton Ponds (12 <sup>th</sup> )
Iceland Gull	1 at Branton Ponds (10 <sup>th</sup> )
Arctic Tern	1 at Branton Ponds (30 <sup>th</sup> )
Sandwich Tern	1 at Boulmer (7 <sup>th</sup> )
Cuckoo	1 near the Eglingham Burn (30 <sup>th</sup> )
Little Owl	1 at Elwick (24 <sup>th</sup> )
Short-eared Owl	1 at Alnwick Moor (24 <sup>th</sup> )
Tawny Owl	1 near Beanley (24 <sup>th</sup> )
Swift	3 at Branton Ponds (26 <sup>th</sup> ), 2 near Weldon Bridge (29 <sup>th</sup> )

Kingfisher	1 at Branton Ponds throughout the month, 1 at Hulne Park (21 <sup>st</sup> )
Skylark	9 at Hulne Moor (17 <sup>th</sup> )
Sand Martin	Several over Branton Ponds (13 <sup>th</sup> ), several near Felton (13 <sup>th</sup> ), 5 at Rumbling Kern (21 <sup>st</sup> )
House Martin	2 (13 <sup>th</sup> ), 10+ (18 <sup>th</sup> ) over Branton Ponds
Swallow	Several over Branton Ponds (13 <sup>th</sup> ), 1 at Bolton (15 <sup>th</sup> ), 2 at Hulne Moor (17 <sup>th</sup> ), 4 at Elwick (12 <sup>th</sup> )
Tree Pipit	Several at Thrunton Woods (27 <sup>th</sup> )
Meadow Pipit	44 at Hulne Moor (17 <sup>th</sup> )
Yellow Wagtail	1 at Branton Ponds (18 <sup>th</sup> ), 1 at Elwick Flash (23 <sup>rd</sup> ), 1 at Smeafield (28 <sup>th</sup> )
Grey Wagtail	1 at Brandon Ford (6 <sup>th</sup> ), 2 near Lesbury (11 <sup>th</sup> )
Pied Wagtail	1 "White" Wagtail at Branton Ponds (19 <sup>th</sup> )
Dipper	1 pair on eggs at Ingram (26 <sup>th</sup> ) and 3 nests with eggs at Hulne Park (27 <sup>th</sup> )
Wheatear	1 at Howick (7 <sup>th</sup> ), 4 at Rumbling Kern (21 <sup>st</sup> ) several on Holy Island (23 <sup>rd</sup> ), 6(of the Greenland race)near the Eglington Burn (30 <sup>th</sup> )
Redstart	1 at Hulne Park (21 <sup>st</sup> ), 1 at Thrunton Woods (27 <sup>th</sup> ), several near the Eglington Burn (30 <sup>th</sup> )
Black Redstart	1 in a garden at Embleton (9 <sup>th</sup> )
Redwing	2 at Branton (4 <sup>th</sup> )
Fieldfare	30 near Roddam (13 <sup>th</sup> )
Sedge Warbler	1 at Branton Ponds (22 <sup>nd</sup> )
Blackcap	1 at Branton Ponds (19 <sup>th</sup> ), 2 near the Eglington Burn (30 <sup>th</sup> )
Chiffchaff	1 at Howick (7 <sup>th</sup> ), 3 at Branton Ponds (9 <sup>th</sup> ), 1 near Low Angerton (8 <sup>th</sup> ), 2 near Lesbury (11 <sup>th</sup> ), 3 at Rumbling Kern (21 <sup>st</sup> )
Willow Warbler	2 at Branton Ponds (16 <sup>th</sup> ) and many by the 17 <sup>th</sup>
Common Whitethroat	1 at Branton Ponds (28 <sup>th</sup> )
Pied Flycatcher	1 at East Bolton (17 <sup>th</sup> )
Marsh Tit	1 near Felton (13 <sup>th</sup> )
Willow Tit	1 at Branton Ponds (19 <sup>th</sup> )
Jay	2 at Hulne Park (21 <sup>st</sup> )
Siskin	7 at Titlington Mount (10 <sup>th</sup> )
Lesser Redpoll	1 at Titlington Mount (10 <sup>th</sup> )
<b>FISH</b>	
Perch	1 dead at Branton Ponds (17 <sup>th</sup> )
<b>MAMMALS</b>	
Mink	1 on River Breamish near Branton (1 <sup>st</sup> )
Brown Hare	6 at Brandon (24 <sup>th</sup> ), several near the Eglington Burn (30 <sup>th</sup> )
Grey Squirrel	1 in a wood east of Eglington (30 <sup>th</sup> )
<b>REPTILES</b>	
Adder	3 at Branton Ponds (6 <sup>th</sup> ), and 4 (7 <sup>th</sup> ), 7 (13 <sup>th</sup> )
Slow worm	1 at Branton Ponds (7 <sup>th</sup> ), 2 (13 <sup>th</sup> )
<b>AMPHIBIANS</b>	
Common Newt	1 in Branton (9 <sup>th</sup> )

<b>PLANTS</b>	
Opposite-leaved Saxifrage	Near Felton (13 <sup>th</sup> )
Butterbur	In flower near Felton (13 <sup>th</sup> )
Centaury	Dried stems in a wet flush beside the Eglington Burn (30 <sup>th</sup> )
<b>INVERTEBRATES</b>	
Peacock Butterfly	1 at Branton (15 <sup>th</sup> ), 1 at Howick (21 <sup>st</sup> ), 1 near Eglington (30 <sup>th</sup> )
Small Tortoiseshell	1 at Howick (21 <sup>st</sup> )
<b>RAINFALL</b>	11.3mm
<b>OBSERVERS</b>	W Banks, R Bell, I&K Davison, G Dodds, P Hanmer, A Keeble, M McMahon, NNBC, R&J Poppleton, S Reay, J Rutter, S Sexton, H Tindle.

As the weather is (hopefully) picking up and more people are taking walks along the Northumberland coastline, **Northumberland Wildlife Trust** is calling on members of the public to keep their eyes peeled for stranded or dead animals on local beaches.

Earlier this month, the wildlife charity received reports from the public of 6 porpoises being stranded at various locations and has started receiving calls regarding a number of stranded seals, included young seals.

**Should anybody find either a stranded or dead seal, whale, dolphin or porpoise on any of the region's beaches, it would be really helpful if they could contact Steve Lowe, Head of Conservation at the Trust on: 0191 284 6884 or via email: [steve.lowe@northwt.org.uk](mailto:steve.lowe@northwt.org.uk) with the exact location, and, if possible, a digital photo of the animal.**