

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



REVIEW OF SEPTEMBER 2013 NEWSLETTER 145

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NEXT MEETING : 27TH OF NOVEMBER 7-30 P.M. 2013

THE LIFE AQUATIC – AN EXPLORATION OF THE WONDERS OF OUR NORTH EAST COAST

Our speaker for November will be from the Dove Marine Laboratory in Cullercoats. This is a main part of Newcastle University's School of Marine Science and Technology. We shall be joined by either Dr Jane Delany or Dr Heather Sugden. Jane is a Senior Lecturer who oversees many of the Dove Lab's marine projects. Heather is a lecturer whose brief includes a role as project officer for the Big Sea Survey, a Citizen Science project that records marine species and tries to use the information to detect evidence of the effects of climate change. We have no doubt that we shall be entertained, even amazed, by some of the wonders of our north east coast and perhaps may be enthused to get personally involved with the Big Sea Survey.

What to look for in November 2013

October has been a month of easterly winds with a wide range of migrants descending on our shores from northern and eastern parts of the World. Hoopoes, olive-backed pipits and little buntings have mixed with redwings, goldcrests and snow buntings.

In the roadsides, hedgerows and woodlands, the 'mast' of seed has been spectacular combined with the autumn colours. It certainly has been a time of plenty and many of our resident species and winter visitors should have enough reserves to see them through leaner times.

Things to look for in November

1. Look out for **puffballs** this month. Puffballs aren't shaped like a typical mushroom that has a central column topped off with a more-or-less flattened cap. Instead, a puffball is typically a spherical or ovoid mass that in some species may be larger than a watermelon. Initially they have a firm and rubbery white texture but when ripe look like stemless brownish sacs, which contain the spores. The outer layer of the fungus breaks down to a papery, thin-walled shell and if a drop of rain hits the surface then masses of spores are released in a cloud of dust that can look like smoke! There are a number of different species of puffballs that can be found almost anywhere such as Weetwood Moor, Embleton golf course or the Pastures in Alnwick.
2. The **daddy-long-legs spider** is an attractive spider that can be found on the ceilings of rooms, caves or cellars, it is also called **cellar spider**. Its legs are about 5 or 6 times the length of its body. One of its distinguishing features is its habit of shaking the web violently when disturbed. It is thought that this tries to blur the vision of a predator. They can catch and eat hairy house spiders, mosquitoes, and other insects. Until recent years, this spider has been rare in Northumberland but in the last 10 years has spread throughout the county. I know of at least two of these spiders inhabiting a corner of a kitchen in a house in Glanton.
3. A specialty of Northumberland winters are the flocks of **long-tailed duck**. The County holds some of the best places in England to see this attractive species from the Arctic Circle. These place are

dominated Stag Rocks (Bamburgh), Ross Sands and Holy Island. In midwinter Long-tailed Ducks begin their courtship displays. Several males gather around a single female and utter their mellow, barking, far-carrying call. In winter these diving ducks feed mainly on molluscs, shrimps, and crabs. While most diving ducks paddle with their webbed feet, the Long-tailed Duck uses its partially folded wings to propel itself underwater. It is one of the deepest-diving ducks.



Puffball sp.



Daddy-long-legs spider



Long-tailed duck

Please send sightings reports for October, no later than 6th November 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.

Aln Valley Railway

Would anyone like to make bird boxes for the railway.
Unfortunately, we cannot afford timber or pay you.

If you are interested, please telephone

Dave Turnbull

07852581492



The pleasant summer weather continued through a lot of the month.

Early on 1st, I took a walk down to the Rumbling Kern to do a seawatch for an hour or so. Whilst the weather wasn't classic for this pursuit, I did see a nice variety of species beginning their southward passage – **21 Meadow Pipits**, **20 House Martins** and a **Grey Wagtail** were soon logged overhead, while on the rocks were **16 Redshank**, **2 Turnstone** and **7 Golden Plover** (that soon joined the smaller birds and moved south). Off shore my first **Sooty Shearwaters** and **Bonxie** of the year flew North and a **Little Gull** lingered, feeding offshore.

A few mammals revealed themselves too with a **Stoat**, a **Brown Rat** and 6+ **Harbour Porpoises**.

The second week of September was spent up on the Ardnamurchan peninsular on the west coast of Scotland.

By the time we returned, autumn migration was well underway. On 21st 2 parties of 50 **Pink footed Geese** flew S, while **45 Swallows** and **6 House Martins** were still around the village. At sea, a **Red throated Diver** flew N, while a **Sandwich Tern** flew S. Singles of **Small Tortoiseshell**, **Speckled Wood** and **Small White butterfly** were in the garden.

Back down to the Rumbling Kern on 22nd found a change in species there. A **Bar tailed Godwit** roosted with the usual Oystercatchers, **Chiffchaff** and **Whinchat** were in the gorse and an adult **Mediterranean Gull** was in the field with a few Black headed. It's this constant turn over of new birds that makes the migration seasons so exciting...

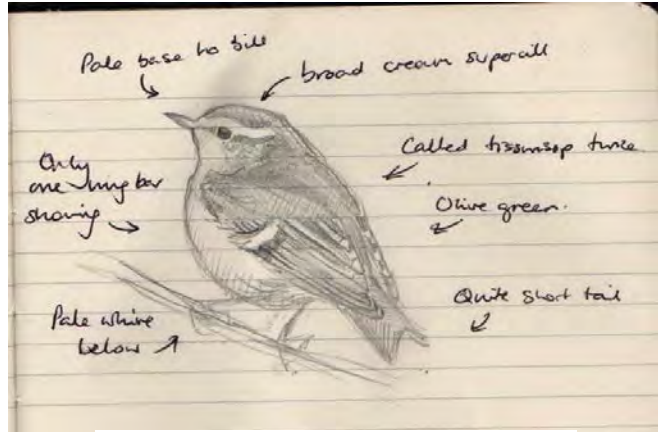
On 23rd I returned home from work to see the bizarre sight of a **Bonxie** circling over our village before regaining its bearings and heading back out to sea.

These last two dates were quite memorable, as on 22nd our home bred young **Swallows** stopped roosting in the shed, and on 23rd all of our village Swallows had gone. I wish them a safe journey south and look forward to their safe return in 6 months time!

On the 25th a huge arrival of that charming little Siberian waif, the **Yellow-browed Warbler** occurred from the Northern Isles all the way down to North Yorkshire. In our own county the following counts were made – 17 Holy Island, 10 St Mary's Island, 9 Farne Islands, 4 Low Newton, 4 Druridge and 2 Hauxley. An early finish from work showed that none had found Craster or Howick!



Whinchat



Yellow-browed Warbler

A gull roost on the sea off Cullernose Point contained the adult **Mediterranean Gull** and an adult **Lesser black backed Gull** in with several hundred **Herring and Black headed Gulls**.

A **Tawny Owl** showed well in the Village Hall trees on 27th at dusk. It then flew to our garden where it was nicely under lit by the glow from the moth trap.

Finally on 28th a **Yellow browed Warbler** was calling from the back hedge across the field behind our house. Some careful waiting and positioning ensured some nicely sunlit views as it made short sallies out after flying insects. Sharing the same spot were 2 **Chiffchaff** and a male **Blackcap**.

In the afternoon 80 **Pink footed Geese** flew S and 3 **Brambling** the first of the autumn, called as they dropped into the village wood.

Cullernose Point was my seat of choice to look at the sea on 29th. In half an hour here early morning I had 11 **Common Scoter**, 6 **Goosander**, 2 **Wigeon**, 11 **Cormorant**, 2 **Red throated Diver**, 4 **Shag**, 4 **Grey Wagtail** and a single **Pied Wagtail**.

A few migrants had arrived in the Craster Arnold Reserve – 12+ **Chiffchaff**, 1+ **Yellow browed Warbler**, 3 **Blackcap**, 1 **Lesser Whitethroat**, 1 **Pied Flycatcher**, 5 **Song Thrush** and 25+ **Robins**. From more locally, a **Willow Tit** was only my second sighting this year.

More butterflies were in the garden including my first **Red Admiral** of the year.

Stewart Sexton, Howick.

Meeting of Wednesday 25th September 2013

We kicked off the new season with an audience of 29 who were initially prepared to participate in the AGM. The audited accounts (which had already been circulated) were accepted subject to Richard's apology about a couple of year dates that read 2011 when they should have been 2012. The balance at the end of 2012 was £2143.86. George Dodds as Chair, Barbara Welch as Secretary and Richard Poppleton as Treasurer were all re-elected unopposed. The existing committee members were all ready to stand again, although George encouraged anyone else who wished to join the committee to approach one of the existing members.

George's specimens were a juvenile Great Spotted Woodpecker (victim of a conservatory window strike in Newton-on-the-Moor); a large pellet found on the Western Isles, probably from a Sea Eagle or A Golden Eagle and containing some beetle carapaces as well as mammal hair; a Peacock butterfly and a Burnished Brass moth.

Speaker: Janet Simkin spoke on *The World of Lichens*. Janet is one of only three serious lichenologists in Northumberland and has a comprehensive knowledge of our lichen flora.

The word lichen is almost always now pronounced to rhyme with *liken*, rather than *kitchen*, which had become popular when John Wyndham's 1960 book and the film made from it – "*Trouble with Lichen*" called it 'litchen'.

Lichens are neither plants nor animals, but fungi which have struck up symbiotic relationships with either green algae or the blue-green alga (or cyanobacterium) Nostoc. Usually the algae involved can live independently, but the fungal partner cannot because it relies on its pal to photosynthesise the organic food it needs. A free-living 'blob' of Nostoc on gravel is shown in the photo.



What you see when you look at a lichen is the fungus because the algal cells are within the fungal tissues. When the lichen is dry its upper surface (cortex) tends to be crusty and the whole often looks greyish, but once wet often the algae show through and the colour changes. Lichens can live in many environments where no other organisms can survive – for example on glacial rocks at >6000m in the Himalayas. Most lichens have the ability to lie dormant for long periods of time, but then return to life when conditions improve. Ideally they need alternations of wet and dry cycles because if they are always wet they tend to rot.

Their life habits fall into three main groups: Fruticose lichens are often large and sometimes almost bushy, like the *Usnea* species in damp woodland which can festoon branches. Foliose species grow **on** rocks, plants, wood or soil but can be prised off their substrate. Crustose species grow **in** the surface layers of bark or stone and cannot easily be separated. Reproduction is problematic. The algal partner often has lost the ability to produce spores, so when the fungus shoots its billions of spores into the air they need to land somewhere where the alga is already present for the symbiotic association to be re-formed – hence a tendency for lichens to grow on other lichens where the new arrival can pinch some of the resident's algae.

The Lobarion is a particularly rich lichen community (based on species of the genus *Lobaria*) characteristic of genuinely ancient woodland. There used to be three Lobarion sites in Northumberland, but now there is only one.



Their demise is related not only to the loss of habitat, but the increase in air pollution. Nitrogen oxides from diesel exhausts are particularly problematic. However the spectacular yellow lichen, *Xanthoria parietina*, which used to specialise in roofs where bird droppings provided the high nitrogen levels it likes has, in recent years become very widespread, often coating stems of shrubs like Elder.

Churchyards are fantastic lichen sites – rarely too much disturbed, with vertical and horizontal stone surfaces as well as trees and shrubs, dead wood (benches) and some bare soil. Heavy metal sites, such as old lead mines and their spoil heaps, provide very different lichen habitats.

Lichens usually grow very slowly. The oldest UK specimen is estimated at 800 years old, but there are examples in Lapland where the age of individuals is believed to be more than 9000 years. On the other hand some species grow faster and die younger.

Lichens contribute to the beginnings of soil formation on recently exposed glacial rocks; they can produce an amazing range of dyes for clothes and their colours vary depending whether they have been extracted with boiling water or with the ammonia in boiling urine; they are used in ranges of herbal teas and there is even one used as an emergency food source (called rock tripe) which is disgusting and probably has almost zero nutritional value.

PLANT CORNER

If you ask the general public (whoever they may be!) which is the most poisonous British plant I'll bet a fair proportion would say, correctly, **Deadly Nightshade** (*Atropa belladonna*). Even in Northumberland people are likely to know that fact despite the plant being recorded as 'extinct' south of the River Coquet and 'very rare and very scarce' in our northern area of the county. Of course one possible reason for its rarity may be that its extreme toxicity has led to it being deliberately eradicated wherever it has been found.



My photo of deadly nightshade is not brilliant (dreadful light conditions) but it is recent. I took it in early September in northern Germany and perhaps slightly unusually it simultaneously has both an open flower and the horribly tempting glossy black ripe fruits. Apparently as few as three can kill a child. The poisons found in all parts of the plant are mainly the alkaloids hyoscyamine and scopolamine which have both hallucinogenic and pain-killing properties – but get the dose wrong and you are likely to feel no pain ever again.

As with many poisonous plants, in the correct doses the toxins can be used medicinally and even cosmetically.

The name *belladonna* (beautiful lady) comes from the fact that extracts of the plant were used by Italian women because they enlarge the pupils of the eyes and this was considered to be a sign of beauty.

Some people may think they know where deadly nightshade grows locally, but the chances are that the plant they are talking about is **Woody Nightshade** or **Bittersweet** (*Solanum dulcamara*). It is reasonably common in Northumberland, particularly in the Tyne valleys and up the coastal strip. Its flowers are attractive, similar to those on potato plants, but you shouldn't be tempted to use them to decorate the bowl of salad at your next dinner party because all parts of the plant contain solanine which has unpleasant toxic effects that can be fatal. The small red berries really must not be mistaken for mini plum tomatoes, for the same reason.



This family, Solanaceae, with its various poisonous members, also includes the Tomatoes and Potatoes and both of these contain poisonous alkaloids. In tomatoes the amounts are low, even in the leaves and the unripe fruit, although at least one death has been reported where someone used the leaves to make a herbal tea. For goodness sake, why would you? In commercial potatoes alkaloid levels are usually only significant in the green parts of the plant, so do discard any tubers that are partly green from inadvertent exposure to light.

If you want to know more about poisonous plants you could always go to the Poison Garden in the Alnwick Garden. Or you could use the internet. Googling 'poisonous plants' brings up the main Wikipedia article and you can really frighten yourself with the vast list of species with descriptions of their nasty effects. It's a bit like googling your ill-health symptoms and finding out you've probably got bubonic plague.

RP

	SIGHTINGS AUGUST 2013
BIRDS	
Great Northern Diver	2 off East Chevington on 3 rd
Red-throated Diver	1 at Newton Point on 27 th
Little Grebe	2 at Branton Ponds on 6 th and 7 on 14 th with 9+ on 18 th
Great Crested Grebe	2 still at Branton Ponds 2 juveniles at East Chevington on 31 st
Little Egret	1 at East Chevington on 24 th 1 at Alnmouth all month 2 at Budle Bay on 6 th
Spoonbill	1 at Budle Bay on 1 st and 6 th
Manx Shearwater	1 off Newton Point on 4 th 120+ off Stag Rock on 20 th
Sooty Shearwater	3 off Stag Rock on 20 th
Goosander	3 at Branton Ponds on 14 th 90+ off Stag Rock on 20 th
Gadwall	10 at Cresswell Pond on 31 st
Pochard	1 at Branton Ponds on 30 th
Goldeneye	At least 7 at Branton Ponds on 18 th
Osprey	1(juvenile) at Hedgeley Bridge on 19 th
Honey Buzzard	1 at Holy Island on 26 th
Marsh Harrier	3 at East Chevington on 3 rd 1 at Fenham Flats on 25 th 1 at East Chevington on 23 rd
Merlin	1 at Mindrum on 20 th
Peregrine	1 at Budle Bay on 22 nd
Hobby	1 at East Chevington on 2 nd 1 at Holy Island on 23 rd
Grey Partridge	2 at Widdrington on 31 st
Water Rail	1 at Branton Ponds on 14 th 1 at East Chevington on 24 th
Spotted Crake	1(juvenile) at East Chevington from 1 st to 4 th and 24 th
Snipe	3 at Branton Ponds on 8 th and 12 on 14 th 5 at Alnmouth all month 20 at Monks House Pool on 29 th
Greenshank	4 at East Chevington on 2 nd 1 at Branton Ponds on 8 th up to 2 all month at Alnmouth
Whimbrel	14 at Newton Point on 1 st and 4 on 4 th 1 at Alnmouth on 19 th
Black-tailed Godwit	11 at Newton Point on 1 st 2 at Alnmouth on 29 th 36 at East Chevington on 31 st
Knot	1 at Alnmouth on 31 st
Turnstone	3 at Newton Point on 1 st
Ruff	4 at East Chevington on 2 nd and 30 on 31 st
Curlew Sandpiper	1 at East Chevington on 24 th
Spotted Redshank	3 at East Chevington on 24 th
Little Stint	1 at East Chevington on 24 th
Common Sandpiper	14 at Branton Ponds on 22 nd 1 at Alnmouth on 20 th
Green Sandpiper	1 at Branton Ponds on 2 nd and several days during month 1 at Alnmouth all month
Little Ringed Plover	2 at Branton Ponds on 6 th and 3 on 18 th
Lapwing	450+ at Branton Ponds on 18 th 100 at Cresswell Pond on 31 st 150 at East Chevington on 31 st
Pectoral Sandpiper	1 at Low Newton on 15 th
Arctic Skua	1 at Newton Point on 27 th 1 at Hadston Carrs on 25 th
Great Skua	3 at Newton Point on 27 th
Lesser Black-backed Gull	22 at East Chevington on 31 st
Little Gull	1 (juvenile) at East Chevington on 24 th

White-winged Black Tern	1 at East Chevington on 10 th
Black Tern	1 at East Chevington on 25 th
Roseate Tern	3 near Stag Rock on 29 th
Sandwich Tern	12 at East Chevington on 31 st
Cuckoo	1(juvenile) at Biddlestone on 16 th
Barn Owl	1 near South Charlton on 4 th
Tawny Owl	2 in Branton on 2 nd 1 near Branton on 4 th
Swift	1 over River Breamish on 18 th
Kingfisher	1 at Branton Ponds on 6 th 1 near Hedgeley Bridge on 19 th
Grey Wagtail	1 at Smeafields on 4 th
Yellow Wagtail	1(juvenile) at Newton Flash on 1 st
Whinchat	2 pairs with fledged young in College Valley on 15 th
Redstart	4 at Smeafields on 13 th
Reed Warbler	Several at East Chevington on 3 rd 1 at Smeafields on 3 rd
Grasshopper Warbler	1 at Druridge Pools on 2 nd
Blackcap	At Branton Ponds on 18 th
Garden Warbler	At Branton Ponds on 18 th
Booted Warbler	1 at Hadston Carrs on 24 th
Pied Flycatcher	1 on Holy Island on 25 th
Willow Tit	2 at Low Newton on 27 th
Raven	2 at Powburn on 8 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 19 th
Bullfinch	Several juveniles at Branton Ponds on 14 th
Crossbill	Several in Thrunton Woods on 17 th
INVERTEBRATES	
Painted Lady	1 at Branton Ponds on 1 st 1 at Ingram Valley on 15 th
Red Admiral	1 at Ros View 28 th
Small Tortoiseshell	At Swarland all month 1 at Ros View 28 th
Small Copper	1 at Branton Ponds on 3 rd and 4 on 18 th 1 at Ingram Valley on 15 th
Orange Tip	2 at Smeafields on 12 th
Grayling	1 at Holy Island on 25 th
Small Heath	2 at Weetwood Moor on 22 nd
Peacock	2 at Branton Ponds on 7 th several at Druridge Bay on 19 th 3 at Ros View 21 st 7 at Weetwood Moor on 22 nd
Wall Brown	1 at Ingram Valley on 15 th several at Thrunton Woods on 17 th 2 at Weetwood Moor on 22 nd 1 at Ros View 28 th
Meadow Brown	1 at Ros View 28 th
Large White	6 at Weetwood Moor on 22 nd at Swarland all month
Small White	4 at Weetwood Moor on 22 nd at Swarland all month
Speckled Wood	Many at Druridge Bay Country Park on 19 th 2 at Kylee Woods on 26 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 27 th 1 at Low Newton on 27 th at Swarland all month
Comma	1 at Branton Ponds on 18 th 1 Swarland Wood on 30 th several around Smeafield all month
Magpie Moth	1 at East Chevington on 10 th
Common Blue Damselfly	Many at Branton Ponds on 4 th

Blue-tailed Damselfly	1 at Branton Ponds on 4 th
Common Hawker	1 at Branton Ponds on 4 th
Black Darter	4 at Weetwood Moor on 22 nd several at Holy Island on 23 rd
Ruddy Darter	2 at Branton Ponds on 18 th 2 at Elwick on 25 th
Common Darter	1 at Branton Ponds on 12 th 1 at Thrunton Woods on 17 th several at Branton Ponds on 18 th several at Druridge Bay on 19 th
Southern Hawker	1 at Branton Ponds on 14 th
Giant Woodwasp	1 at Hauxley on 11 th
Dor Beetle	4+ at Weetwood Moor on 22 nd
Oiceoptoma Thoracica	A carrion beetle, 1 at Branton Ponds on 18 th
REPTILES	
Common Lizard	2 at Bamburgh Beach on 1 st
MAMMALS	
Hedgehog	2 in Branton on 1 st
Common Shrew	1 at Hipsburn on 31 st
Hare	2 near Chatton on 21 st 3 at Ros View
Mink	3 at Branton Ponds on 4 th not a welcome sight.
Roe Deer	1 at Branton Ponds on 12 th 1 in Swarland Wood on 30 th
Red Squirrel	1 at Branton on 10 th 1 in Swarland from 23 rd 1 at Swarland on 31 st
Otter	1 female and 2 youngsters at East Chevington on 11 th 1 at Alnmouth on 21 st
Porpoise	3 off Stag Rock on 20 th
PLANTS	
Sundew	Near Harbottle Lake on 10 th
Cranberry	In fruit near Harbottle Lake on 10 th
Bilberry	Near Harbottle on 10 th
Crowberry	Near Harbottle Lake on 10 th
Cowberry	In Thrunton Woods on 17 th
Grass of Parnassus	Many plants at Holy Island on 23 rd
RAINFALL	60.10mm
OBSERVERS	W Banks, I&K Davison, G Dodds, J Elliott, A Keeble,
	D Makepeace, M McMahan, S Reay, M Rolley, H Tindle,
	S Webster.