

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



Review of November 2013

NEWSLETTER 147

www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

email: redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

NEXT MEETING: 29TH JANUARY 2014 7-30pm

WILDLIFE ON BRITISH ISLANDS

Speaker: John Almond

John Almond is well known in the Alnwick area for his wide knowledge of wildlife. A retired teacher, for many years he has been Chairman of the Alnwick and District Natural History Society and he has regularly led wildlife walks in the area. He is also immensely widely travelled, both in the UK and worldwide.

THANK YOU!

40 members and visitors enjoyed an excellent **Christmas meeting** with Tom Cadwallender's talk, Ian and Keith's Quiz and a heaving table of Christmas nibbles.

Many, many thanks to all those who brought the food and to **Jane, Barbara, Sandra, Trish** and other helpers who dealt with all the organisation of the refreshments, as they have done for the last 117 meetings in our 13 year history.



Photo Sandra Webster.

****SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE NOW DUE****

See last pages

Please send sightings reports for December, no later than 6th January 2014 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.

What to look for in January 2014.

As I write this, Britain has just suffered one of the largest storm surges in the North Sea for 60 years. A number of large trees have been lost from our landscape. Many of these would have provided shelter / breeding sites for bats, owls, woodpeckers and many insects. These species will find new homes but the trees will often not be replaced. If this continues the landscape of Northumberland will be treeless in future generations. Recording where the current sizeable trees are found and encouraging the planting of hedgerow trees is may be something AWG should be promoting.



The winds have also blown in a rare visitor from the north – Ivory gull. This is a bird that follows polar bears around the Arctic ice in search of scraps of seal meat. They are a 'dumpy', white-winged gull that is slightly larger than a black-headed gull. Ivory gulls can be very confident especially if there is a dead seal or porpoise lying around!

Figure 1: Adult Ivory Gull.

January is often a quiet time of year. The days are getting longer after the winter solstice in December. This is an important time of year for feeding the birds. A range of food types will attract a good selection of commoner birds (e.g. robin, dunnock, blue tit, great tit, coal tit, chaffinch and greenfinch). It is also a time of year when unusual visitors will turn up on the bird table. These include blackcaps, bramblings, lesser redpolls and siskins. In snowy weather, fieldfares will hold territory over a prize berry bush, chasing off the local blackbirds and song thrushes. Anything can turn up at any time.



Blackcap



Brambling



Lesser redpoll



Siskin

By the third week of January the first of the snowdrops should be nudging through the soil and the first leaves of aconites may have appeared. Garden and established woodlands are some of the best places to find these species.

I hope that you have a prosperous 2014.

Jack Daw

Meeting of Wednesday 27th November 2013

An audience of 30, including a new member, Gillian Osborne from Alnwick, had turned up despite an emailed warning from Barbara that our intended speaker from the Dove Marine Laboratory in Cullercoats had withdrawn at short notice.

George produced an excellently displayed (and not too smelly) Rose Sea Star (*Crossaster papposus*). This Echinoderm animal is sometimes also called a Common Sun Star. Mick McMahon had brought it in from the beach at Alnmouth. George then flourished the new ornithologist's bible – The New National Bird Atlas – an essential, if expensive, addition to British birders' libraries. Lastly he talked about the Lesser Grey Shrike that has been around at the Long Nanny for some time. This starling-sized bird is a very rare vagrant from Eastern Europe and the Middle East and is the smaller cousin of the rather more common Great Grey Shrike.

Then Richard stepped in to replace the scheduled speaker with a presentation on the *Trees of Northumberland*. He began with conifers. There are only three native conifers – Scots Pine, Yew and Juniper and the last is particularly at risk at the moment from a *Phytophthora* fungal disease. The reason for the presence of Yews in churchyards is not clear. They could be deliberately planted to symbolise death or to avoid any grazing of

their poisonous foliage by stock – but many of these trees are much older than their churchyards, so it may be that neither of these is a valid explanation.



Then there are the introduced and often naturalised forestry conifers like the Larches and the Spruces. Richard then picked out a few of the ornamental species – Monkey

Puzzle, the three Cedars and the Giant Sequoia or Wellingtonia. In Northern California and Oregon the very tallest trees (up to 120m tall) used to be Douglas Fir, but that timber was prized and so these giants have all been felled, leaving the Wellingtonia and the closely related Coast and Dawn Redwoods as the remaining record holders at a mere 110 to 115m.

He then turned to the broadleaved trees. We have a number of native species ranging from the large Oaks and Ash to the almost shrub-like smaller Willows. The fact that Oak is so ancient in our landscape explains why it is host to such a large number of invertebrates that live and feed in it. Ash is currently under attack from *Chalara fraxinea* which causes Ash dieback. Wych Elm still survives here where English Elm was killed off by Dutch Elm disease. Wych Elm grows as separate trees while English Elm produces suckers so all the trees in a row are interconnected, making the spread of any disease inevitable and fast.

Then there is a range of horticultural (escaped from cultivation or deliberately planted) trees, some of which are so familiar and dominant that it is hard to believe they are not native. Sycamore, Beech (which is native in southern counties), Limes and both Sweet and Horse Chestnut come into this category.



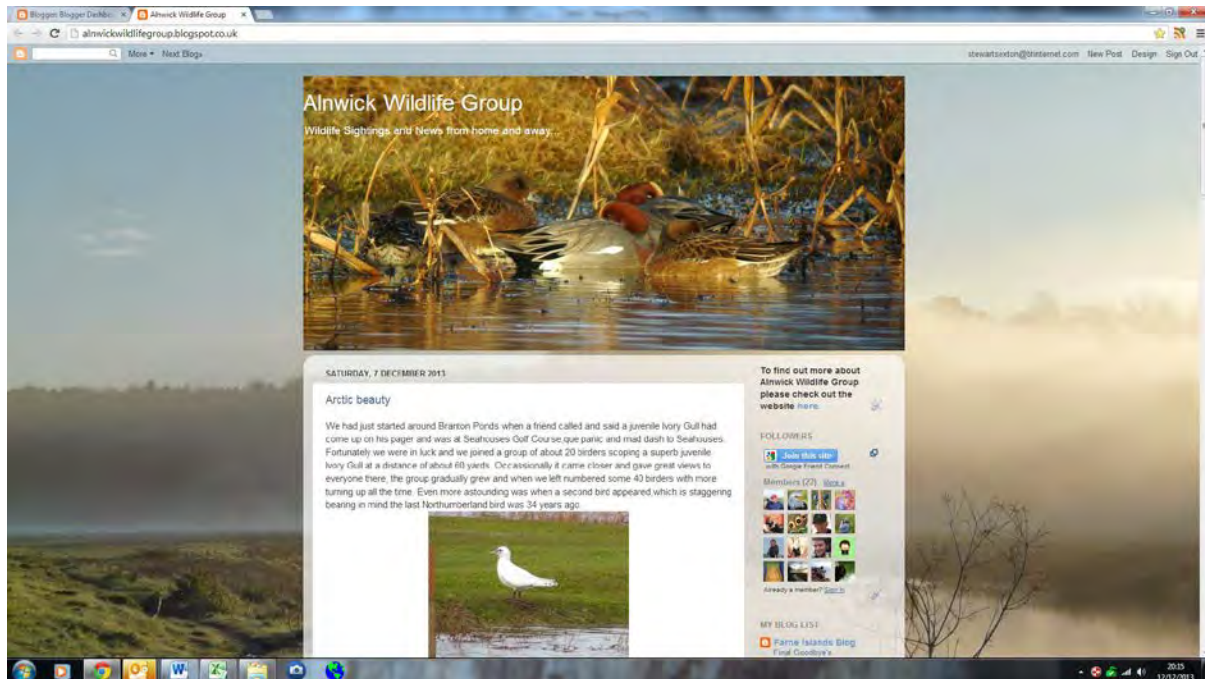
Richard ended with a slide showing a tall mature Scots Pine which had grown up with an equally mature Beech whose boughs are wrapped round and embracing the pine.

In the review of Oct 30 the date was recorded as November 6th. Apologies for this error.

Alnwick Wildlife Group Online!

Can I take this opportunity to remind members that you can also participate with the group online. Please check us out at -

www.alnwickwildlifegroup.blogspot.co.uk



Take a look at the current posts on there, anything goes! We especially like details of your personal experiences with wildlife either local or further afield, from Alnwick to Arizona. Maybe you enjoy the birds at your garden feeders and have some nice shots of them, or you've been away on holiday and seen some exciting flora?

We want your sightings and stories!

If you feel adventurous and would like to see some of your notes and photographs on here for all to enjoy feel free to email me at –

stewchat@btinternet.com

Send a short piece, say, from 10 to 500 words and your pics to me with your name and address, and that's it really. I will get them online straight away. Don't worry about your format etc leave that to me...

Thanks

Stewart Sexton, Howick.

Howick November 2013 Highlights.

This month has turned out to be a particularly quiet one on the Howick patch so I am going to add a few things seen elsewhere.

On 10th we took a trip to the Warkworth Gut new wetland areas.



On arrival, the tide was full so we took our time strolling down the north side, checking the newly created pools near the caravan park. There were good numbers of **Teal, Wigeon and Redshank** plus a few **Meadow Pipits** and **Reed Buntings**. We used to catch Snipe for ringing here a few years back.

Further down towards the pier and on the estuary mudflats were a single **Snow Bunting, 6 Black tailed and 1 Bar tailed Godwit, Knot, Dunlin, Redshank, Ringed Plover, Grey Plover, Lapwing and Turnstone**. Two **Buzzards** squabbled overhead and a **Sparrowhawk** took a Redshank from close in front of us.



Field sketch of Whooper Swans.

Back down towards the other side of the estuary along the Amble road were 15 newly arrived **Whooper Swans**.

Closer to home, on **11th** I received a cryptic message on our answer phone about an unusual bird in the wood at the north end of Longhoughton village. It took me two visits to see it, but what a surprise when it finally showed itself! A stripey part albino **Robin**. No wonder there had been some confusion.



Robin. Leucistic.

At home on **14th** finally some interest as my first **Merlin** of the year dashed by flushing a field full of **Starlings**. This excitement was short lived however when attention was diverted further north....

On **16th** a call from Gary Woodburn, saw me rushing off to see my second ever **Lesser Grey Shrike** at the Long Nanny car park, Newton by the Sea. This first winter bird has been mistakenly identified as a great grey shrike for a couple of days until Gary found its real identity. A real showy bird too, staying for a full week feeding on mealworms put out for it.

Back closer to home on **21st**, the wind had swung NW gale force through the night decreasing at dawn. A seavatch from Howick had **3 Great Northern Divers, 8 Red throated Divers, 2 Velvet Scoter, 1 male Pintail** all flying N.

A male **Peregrine** flew over our village on **23rd** while a dozen **Grey Partidges** were in a field nearby.



Immature Lesser Grey Shrike

Another visit to see the Long Nanny Shrike on **24th** we also found a **Black Redstart** on the roof of the tern wardens hut and 2 **Merlins** chasing a single **Skylark** overhead. A **Weasel** here was the first I've seen for a very long time.

A **Small Tortoiseshell** butterfly was flying around our house on **26th**. I put it in the fridge to restart hibernation overnight, then carefully placed it on an open shed wall for the winter. It remains there to date (12/12/13)

The month ended with a very late final new moth for the garden on **30th**, a **Scarce Umber**.



Scarce Umber

Stewart Sexton, Howick.

PLANT CORNER

At the end of our November meeting, when I had given a talk on Northumbrian trees, David Sanders asked about Spindle trees. David and Gill are from Berwick and they have planted a significant number (I think he said 200) of Spindles. He was interested to know how well I thought they might do in Berwick where they are planted on a clay soil.

Having seen only one Spindle in Northumberland, by the golf course in Hexham, I couldn't really make any informed comment, but David's question inspired me to look up details of this small tree which is often no more than a multi-stemmed shrub. Stewart Sexton says there are several planted Spindles in the arboretum at Howick Hall in the area by the Pond Field.

Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*) is native to Britain as far north as southern Scotland. It is described as frequent in hedges, scrub and open woods on calcareous and other base-rich soils.

It is worth explaining that the terms *basic* and *base-rich* are chemical terms indicating that these soils have significant quantities of alkaline salts, particularly of calcium and magnesium. Many base-rich soils overlie limestone rocks and others, which are mostly coastal, have salts which come from the sea water and shell sands. These soils are usually neutral to alkaline.

In Northumberland our environment has comparatively few base-rich soils and we are in any case near the northern limit of Spindle as a native tree. As a result Swan's *Flora of Northumberland* says the plant is very localised and scarce in the county.

Its attraction as a planted species comes largely from the berries. Richard Mabey's *Flora Britannica* describes them as like "*miniature shocking-pink pumpkins*". Each one has four swollen lobes and as they open and separate they reveal round bright orange seeds. As you can imagine, shocking pink and bright orange make for an interesting combination.

The name of the tree apparently comes from one of its uses as a source of spinning spindles, but it seems this name only appeared in the 17th Century and there are older names like 'skewer wood' which show that it was more often used for skewers and knitting needles because of its straight, strong thin twigs.

As the photographs show, if David and Gill can keep their trees healthy and strong they will have a real visual spectacle each autumn.



SIGHTINGS NOVEMBER 2013

BIRDS	
Red-throated Diver	1 at Stag Rock on 16 th 2 at Boulmer on 22 nd 8 at Craster on 22 nd 2 at Newton Point on 23 rd
Great Northern Diver	3 at Craster on 22 nd
Slavonian Grebe	1 at Stag Rock on 16 th
Black-necked Grebe	1 at Cresswell Pond on 30 th
Red-necked Grebe	1 at Bamburgh on 17 th
Gannet	20+ at Craster on 22 nd
Little Egret	1 at Long Nanny on 7 th 1 at Alnmouth on 20 th
Whooper Swan	4 at Branton Ponds on 10 th 11 at Fenham Flats on 10 th 3 at Newton Pools on 28 th
Pale-bellied Brent Goose	1120 at Fenham Flats on 10 th 3 at Boulmer on 22 nd
Dark-bellied Brent Goose	100+ in Holy Island harbour on 26 th
Pink-foot Goose	6 at Branton Ponds on 8 th and 20 on 10 th 250 at Fenham Flats on 7 th
Barnacle Goose	300 at Fenham Flats on 7 th
Canada Goose	100 near Rothley on 29 th
Greylag Goose	384 at Branton Ponds on 10 th
Wigeon	50+ at Craster on 22 nd 1500 in Beadnell Bay on 23 rd
Pintail	1 at Craster on 22 nd
Velvet Scoter	2 at Stag Rock on 16 th 2 at Craster on 22 nd 1 at Bamburgh on 17 th 1 at Alnmouth on 21 st
Long-tailed Duck	3 at Stag Rock on 16 th 5 off Newton Point on 23 rd
Shelduck	94 at Fenham Flats on 10 th 800 at Fenham Flats on 29 th
Eider	25 at Boulmer on 22 nd
Red-breasted Merganser	3 at Boulmer on 22 nd 1 on River Aln on 20 th 8 at Alnmouth on 12 th
Goosander	5 at Branton Ponds on 2 nd
Scaup	1 at Cresswell Pond on 30 th
Goldeneye	2 at Craster on 22 nd
Gadwall	2 at Branton Ponds on 3 rd
Hen Harrier	1 at Fenham Flats on 29 th
Goshawk	1 in Eglingham area on 6 th
Sparrowhawk	1 at Brandon Ford on 7 th 1 at Fenham Flats on 9 th
Peregrine	2 at Budle Bay on 16 th 1 at Fenham Flats on 6 th
Merlin	1 in dunes near Links House on 23 rd 1 at Alnmouth on 10 th 1 at Smeafield on 8 th
Grey Partridge	14 at Townfoot on 18 th 7 at Ratcheugh on 20 th 14 at Smeafield on 4 th
Woodcock	4 at Kylee Woods on 27 th 1 at Townfoot on 18 th 1 at Ratcheugh on 20 th
Water Rail	1 near Longhoughton on 22 nd 1 at East Chevington on 10 th
Coot	57 at Branton Ponds on 8 th
Jack Snipe	1 at East Chevington on 10 th
Snipe	3 near Rothley on 29 th
Sanderling	128 at Fenham Flats on 10 th 3 on Beadnell Beach on 23 rd
Dunlin	196 at Fenham Flats on 10 th 100+ at Craster on 22 nd
Redshank	57 at Fenham Flats on 10 th 12 at Boulmer on 22 nd

Grey Plover	40 at Fenham Flats on 10 th 3 at Boulmer on 22 nd
Golden Plover	100+ at Craster on 22 nd 200+ at Alnmouth on 25 th
Lapwing	150 at Branton Ponds on 15 th 35 near Rothley on 29 th
Curlew	22 at Branton Ponds on 15 th 38 at Townfoot on 18 th
Black-tailed Godwit	1 at Fenham Flats on 10 th 1 at Cresswell Pond on 30 th
Bar-tailed Godwit	52 at Fenham Flats on 10 th
Purple Sandpiper	2 at Craster on 22 nd
Greenshank	1 at Budle Bay on 16 th
Lesser Black-backed Gull	1 at Branton Ponds on 2 nd
Glaucous Gull	1 at East Chevington on 10 th
Bonapartes Gull	1 at Stag Rock on 16 th
Barn Owl	1 near Glanton on 23 rd 1 at Haugh Head on 27 th
Tawny Owl	3 near Glanton on 24 th 2 at Middlesteads on 27 th
Short-eared Owl	1 at Alnmouth on 12 th
Long-eared Owl	1 at Kylee Woods on 27 th
Little Owl	1 near Glanton on 24 th
Kingfisher	2 at Branton Ponds on 12 th and 1 on 24 th 1 at Swarland Fence on 27 th
Swallow	1 at Howick on 19 th
Dipper	2 at Hedgeley on 24 th 1 at Swarland Fence on 27 th
Waxwing	At least 1 near Wooler on 5 th 1 at Harehope Hillend on 15 th
Fieldfare	12 over Branton on 8 th many around Branton Ponds on 14 th 120 near Rothley on 29 th 150 at Townfoot on 18 th 5 at Smeafield on 2 nd
Mistle Thrush	4 at Smeafield on 5 th
Redwing	3 over Branton on 8 th
Blackbird	20+ at Branton Ponds on 14 th 119 at Ratcheugh on 20 th
Goldcrest	Many near Brandon Ford on 28 th
Willow Tit	1 at Branton Ponds on 8 th and 28 th
Bearded Tit	1 at East Chevington on 10 th
Treecreeper	Several near Branton on 28 th
Lesser Grey Shrike	1 at Low Steads car park on 16 th still there on 23 rd
Starling	400 near Rothley on 29 th 400 at Smeafield on 16 th
Tree Sparrow	31 at Townfoot on 18 th 102 at Ratcheugh on 20 th 50 at Smeafield on 22 nd
House Sparrow	12 near Rothley on 29 th
Bullfinch	3 at Branton Ponds on 2 nd and 6 on 14 th 3-5 probable “ Northern” at Once Brewed carpark on 21 st
Chaffinch	52 at Ratcheugh on 20 th
Brambling	Large flock at Smeafield on 5 th
Siskin	8 at Branton Ponds on 2 nd
Linnet	200+ near Rothley on 29 th 14 at Townfoot on 18 th
Twite	40+ at Long Nanny on 3 rd 60+ at Long Nanny on 7 th
Lesser Redpoll	25+ at Branton Ponds on 8 th
Crossbill	7 in Harwood Forest on 17 th
Yellowhammer	8 at Glanton on 3 rd 28 at Ratcheugh on 20 th

Lapland Bunting	2 at Bamburgh on 30 th
Snow Bunting	7 at Long Nanny on 3 rd 35 at Ross Back Sands on 9 th
INSECTS	
Common Darter	1 at Branton Ponds on 3 rd
Small Tortoiseshell	1 in Branton on 29 th
Bumblebee	1 at Smeafield on 28 th feeding on Rosemary
MAMMALS	
Brown Hare	2 at Branton Ponds on 1 st
Red Squirrel	1 at Branton on 8 th 2 at Harwood Village on 17 th 1 at Titlington on 27 th 1 in Branton on 29 th
Roe Deer	1 at Hazeltonrigg on 30 th
PLANTS	
Honey Waxcap	Near Glanton on 3 rd
Meadow Waxcap	Near Glanton on 3 rd
Snowy Waxcap	Near Glanton on 3 rd
Giant Funnel Fungus	At Swarland Wood on 17 th
Wavy Hair Grass	At Glanton on 3 rd
Sheeps Fescue	At Glanton on 3 rd
Tormentil	At Glanton on 3 rd
RAINFALL	50.4mm
OBSERVERS	J Clark, I&K Davison, G Dodds, A Keeble, M McMahon, S Nelson, S Reay, S Sexton, H Tindle, B Welch, R Wills.

Christmas is a time for giving – and It's Subscription Time!

Your AWG subscriptions are due from **1st January** – unchanged for the 11th year running thanks to our good housekeeping, the donation income from our survey work and the fact that many members are able and willing to receive their newsletters by email.

If you can't get to the January or February meetings could I please ask you to fill in the payments slip below and send it to me with your cheque. The fewer reminders I have to send out the less the drain on our funds.

Several members opt to pay by **Standing Order** with their bank so the subscription will be paid automatically each year. The final page of this newsletter is a Standing Order form.

If you wish to use this method of payment, please:

- (a) detach the sheet (or print it out if your newsletter arrives electronically),
- (b) fill in the necessary details in the boxes shaded pink,
- (c) **sign and date it** and send it to your bank so it arrives in time for the first payment to be made on 1st February. Subsequent years' payments will be on 1st January.

Then **PLEASE** let me know that you've done so (richard.pop@btinternet.com or 01665 578346).



PAYMENT SLIP

Name(s)

Address

Email address (if possible)

Payment rates (unchanged for the 11th year running):

£10.00 for a single member; £17.50 for two or more members at the same address.

Please send cheques made to **Alnwick Wildlife Group** to:

Richard Poppleton, Greystone Cottage, Titlington Mount, Alnwick NE66 2EA

REGULAR PAYMENTS FORM

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Account name

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Standing Order Beneficiary

Sort code 2 0 5 8 1 7

Account Number 4 0 5 5 3 1 3 1

Beneficiary name: ALNWICK WILDLIFE GROUP

Reference: AWG Subscription

Payment details

Amount of first payment Date of first payment 0 1 / 0 2 / 1 4

Amount of usual payment Date of usual payment 0 2 / 0 1

Frequency of payment **Annually**

Customer signature(s)

Customer contact telephone number

Date / /

Please send this completed form to your bank (or take it in to your branch)