

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



Review of December 2013 NEWSLETTER 148

www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

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Next Meeting February 26th 2014 7-30pm

Make your records count. Speaker: Katherine Pinnock

Our speaker for the February meeting is **Katherine Pinnock** and her topic is *Make your Records Count – how your sightings can help protect wildlife*. Katherine is the North East Coordinator for ERIC (Environmental Records Information Centre Northeast) based in the Great North Museum (Hancock) in Newcastle.

She has a tremendous overview of all the people and organisations in our area who collect and submit wildlife sightings and she knows precisely how those records are used and who benefits from having this coordinated approach to record keeping. She's also a lively and engaging speaker.

SUBSCRIPTION REMINDER

Annual subs were due on 1st January. Thanks to those who have already paid.

If you haven't, cheques, please, (£10 single, £17.50 household) made to

Alnwick Wildlife Group and sent to:

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

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

What to look for in February

As I write this, we are already past 12 days into the New Year. The weather has been extremely mixed with periods of wet and windy conditions followed by colder days. There has not been a lot to see in terms of wildlife. Budle Bay holds 230 barnacle geese and there are similar numbers of greylag. Long-tailed ducks and both common and velvet scoters can be found feeding off shore from Ross Sands or Stag Rocks. In land the catkins of hazel are much in evidence and there are good flocks of tree sparrows, chaffinches, twite and other finches associated with strips of wild bird cover.

February can be a very strange month in terms of wildlife. If there is snow and frost then the wildlife can be difficult to track down but more and more birds will start visiting garden feeders. If the weather becomes mild then we may see the first signs of spring; frog's spawn, colour on the woodland floor and an increase in bird song.

This is a good time of year to sort out the identification of mistle and song thrush. February is the time of year when both species of thrush start to sing. The mistle thrush is a pale, black-spotted thrush which is large, aggressive and powerful. It is the largest native thrush. It can often be seen defending bushes with berries from blackbirds, redwings and fieldfares. It stands boldly upright and bounds across the ground while in flight, it has long wings and its tail has whitish edges. It is most likely to be noticed perched high at the top of a tree, singing its fluty song or giving its rattling call in flight.



Mistle thrush



Song thrush

The song thrush is smaller than a blackbird and mistle thrush. It has brown upperparts and creamy underparts with obvious dark brown spots. The beautiful song is loud and musical, with repeated phrases. In flight, a soft 'sip' call is produced. The song thrush population has declined by about 70% in the last 30 years. These losses are not as great in the North East of England.

Both species can be seen throughout our area and typical habitats are gardens, scrub, and farmland with a mosaic of grassland, hedges and woodland.

Jack Daw

Meeting of Wednesday 11th December

Our Christmas meeting saw a gathering of 40 members and visitors, including a new member, Gordon Plews from Eglington. People had brought an impressive quantity of food for the ‘nibbles’ table.

George began by passing round a well-marked male Mottled Amber moth. The females are almost wingless and completely flightless. They can sometimes be found, very well camouflaged, on fence posts and tree trunks where they produce pheromones to attract males. The males fly at or after dusk from October to January. George then talked about the extraordinary recent sighting of two juvenile Ivory Gulls on Seahouses golf course. These are gulls from the high Arctic, doubtless driven south by the violent northerly winds that accompanied the big tidal storm surge in the first week of December. These two birds are only the seventh Northumberland record and none have been seen in the UK since 2002.

Our speaker was Tom Cadwallender who has recently retired from his work with the Northumberland Coast AONB. He talked about *Bird(watch)ing in Retirement*. It soon became apparent that retirement has been merely an excuse for Tom and Muriel to embark on an extensive schedule of trips to the world’s most rewarding birding areas. Tom is a self-confessed ‘lister’ and his lifetime list currently stands at over 3200. In the past couple of years they have been to places ranging from Cuba to Australia.

He showed a fantastic array of images of the (to us) exotic species in these locations and he picked out some memorable features from each of the areas visited:

Cuba: unfriendly and mercenary people, but a good range of endemic birds

Finland: very midgy and close to the Russian border. Close encounters with bears, but no Siberian Jays

Ghana: precarious aerial walkways in the rainforest and the ‘holy grail’ of the Yellow-headed Picathartes [pictured]

Madeira: with the Desertas Islands forms the caldera of a long-extinct volcano. While answering a call of nature, He was memorably pooped on by a Cory’s Shearwater.

Thailand: special for leaf-warblers and a big range of waders, and he saw three of the critically-endangered Spoon-billed Sandpipers which are currently the subject of major conservation efforts.

Australia: excellent birds, including the ‘big three’ endemics – Western Whipbird, Western Bristlebird and Noisy Scrub-bird. Plus some close encounters with Emus.

Tom’s talk was followed by a break for food and then the now-traditional Christmas Quiz set by Ian and Keith Davison. The winning table scored a scarcely credible 19/20, although it did happen to be the table which included Tom and Stewart.



Howick December 2013 Highlights.

Time for a change I think....This month will be the last 'Howick Highlights'. For 2014 I am going to try and focus a little more detail on specific things that I come across during the month rather than just listing the sightings ...

December turned out to be milder than usual with no sign of a white Christmas. Even ground frosts were infrequent with temperatures staying well above freezing most of the time.

On 2nd, a few dog walks locally turned up 4 **Snipe** from a wet field corner, **Sparrowhawk** and **Kestrel**, 25 **Linnets** and a lone female **Bullfinch**.

One of the most exciting records of the year arrived on 7th.

After working in the garden all morning I came in after lunch to find several text messages alerting me to the presence of **2 first winter Ivory Gulls** on the shore between Beadnell and Seahouses. These birds are very rare nationally and there hasn't been one in Northumberland since Christmas 1979, so you can imagine my the adrenalin rush...

I arrived on site at 3pm, and after a couple of false starts finally found the birds resting out on a rocky skeer just north of Beadnell. These arctic vagrants should be following Walrus and Polar Bears on the pack ice of the arctic where they eat the droppings and food scraps that are discarded. Northumberland is way too warm for them!

They stayed and showed really well for half an hour before being pushed off their base by a rising tide, to fly north towards Seahouses. They were not seen the following day much to the disappointment of twitchers who had travelled from southern England to see them.

It has since transpired that these birds are part of a small national influx of 8 or 9 birds scattered along the coast of northern Britain.

On 8th I returned and spent the morning chatting with birders from near and far but the only things noted were several **Long tailed Ducks**, **Purple Sandpipers** and **Bar tailed Godwits**.

A visit to Stag Rocks, Bamburgh to look for seaducks, grebes and divers on the 29th was quite rewarding. We had **50+ Purple Sandpipers**, **4 Knot**, **50+ Common Scoter**, **1 Great Northern Diver**, **10+ Red throated Diver**, **5 Long tailed Duck**.

Our next stop was to the Long Nanny Burn in Beadnell bay. Unusually a **Raven** was feeding in the fields near the saltmarsh and showed well at times. **24 Ringed Plover** and **9 Sanderling** were on the beach.



Field notebook – Ivory Gulls.

The rest of the month was taken up by Christmas preparations, so little was seen other than a couple of **Winter Moths** and **Mottled Umber** moths attracted to our kitchen window, and **Tawny Owls** were still being very vocal around the Village Wood area.



Mottled Umber

Stewart Sexton, Howick.

PLANT CORNER

For many botanists the British winter is a time either for bringing all one's plant records up to date or, if inclination and available budget allow, for going off to warmer climes where there are new plants to find. There is, however, a third alternative. You can wrap up warm and get yourself out into the countryside and concentrate on plants that are evergreen. That could be conifers or some of the ferns, but even more rewarding are the mosses. Many are very healthy in the winter even if they don't necessarily have their spore capsules until the spring.

I have no great expertise with mosses. The latest British Bryological Society field guide, published in 2010, describes over 750 species of moss, plus another 220 or so liverworts, so clearly this is not going to be an easy group of plants to get to grips with. But with a little perseverance you can start to recognise a few of the commoner species. I've written before about species of *Sphagnum* and *Polytrichum* but this time I'll try to introduce you to some others that you are likely to be able to find in your own garden. I need to warn you that another problem with mosses is that there really aren't many useful, commonly-used, English names, so you'll have to put up with Latin.

I've decided to put all the illustrations in a 'photo gallery' at the end rather than mix them in the text.

Unless you are a lawn perfectionist it is highly likely that you will have *Rhytidiadelphus squarrosus* in yours, often in large quantities. The shoots can grow upright to as much as 10 - 15 cm and characteristically, when viewed from above, the shoot tips have a star-like shape because of the way the leaves bend at right angles away from the reddish stem.

On areas of bare, disturbed soil with plenty of organic matter there's a moss called *Funaria hygroskopica*. Unusually it has a valid common name – Bonfire Moss – which tells you where it is often found, although I've had it growing on the surface of builder's sand still inside its transparent plastic sack. The leafy shoots are short and the most obvious characteristic is often the miniature forest of curly-stalked spore capsules. For the purists, the stalk of a moss capsule is called a *seta*.

On stone walls or concrete garden ornaments there are three common cushion or patch-forming species. If the small, raised, rounded cushions have whitish-grey furry surfaces then you are probably looking at *Grimmia pulvinata*. Its leaves have long white hairs at their ends. When it produces capsules they are on very short setae and so are mixed up in the foliage in the surface of the cushion as can just about be seen in the photo.

Even more common on mortar and concrete is *Tortula muralis*, which also has leaves with terminal hairs, although their hoary grey appearance is often only obvious when the moss is dry. *Tortula* has narrow, spindly reddish capsules held well clear of the shoots.

Lastly there is *Bryum capillare*. The shoots that form the patch or cushion are very short but if you peer closely you can see that the individual leaves are comparatively large (up to 5mm long!) and are widest just above halfway along their length. Most characteristic in the spring are the capsules that droop at the tops of their red setae.

If you do decide to have a look at your garden mosses and you need some more photos to help with the identification then you can Google the Latin name and look at the range of images. Do beware that sometimes Google images can be very misleading because no-one checks to make sure all the photos are what their captions say they are.



Rhytiadelphus squarrosus



R. squarrosus showing starry appearance



Funaria hygrometrica (Bonfire Moss)



F. hygrometrica capsules



Tortula muralis



T. muralis capsules



Bryum capillare and close up of capsule and leaf



Grimmia pulvinata

SIGHTINGS DECEMBER 2013

BIRDS	
Red-throated Diver	2 at Fenham Flats on 15 th 1 off Stag Rocks on 26 th and 3 on 29 th 3 at Boulmer on 30 th 8 off Stag Rocks on 12 th
Great Northern Diver	1 off Stag Rocks on 26 th and 12 th
Red-necked Grebe	1 at Stag Rocks on 25 th
Slavonian Grebe	1 off Stag Rocks on 26 th
Manx Shearwater	1 at Boulmer on 30 th
Gannet	6+ at Boulmer on 30 th
Little Egret	1 near Angerton on 12 th 1 at Fenham Mill on 14 th
Whooper Swan	20+ at Fenham Mill on 14 th
Brent Goose	760 at Fenham Flats on 15 th
Pink-footed Goose	500+ near Beadnell on 7 th 100+ over Branton on 9 th 350 at Cresswell Pond on 18 th
Barnacle Goose	275 at Ross on 13 th
Pintail	13 at Fenham Flats on 15 th
Goldeneye	1 at Branton Ponds on 4 th and 7 on 15 th
Goosander	4 at Branton Ponds on 4 th
Red-breasted Merganser	2 at Cresswell Pond on 18 th several off Stag Rocks on 25 th
Shelduck	130 at Fenham Flats on 15 th 850+ at Fenham Flats on 14 th
Common Scoter	400+ off Stag Rocks on 26 th and 300 on 12 th
Eider Duck	150 at Fenham Flats on 15 th 265+ at Fenham Flats on 14 th
Long-tailed Duck	4 at Fenham Flats on 15 th 8 off Stag Rocks on 29 th
Sparrowhawk	1 at Branton Ponds on 2 nd
Peregrine	1 at Branton Ponds on 4 th 2 on Black Law on 15 th 3 at Fenham Flats on 14 th 1 at Budle Bay on 12 th
Common Buzzard	7 over Titlington Mount on 16 th
Red Grouse	4 at Black Grouse on 2 nd
Water Rail	1 at Branton Ponds on 30 th 1 at Cresswell Pond on 31 st
Golden Plover	4 at Black Lough on 2 nd 235 at Fenham Flats on 15 th 300 at Ross on 13 th 120 at Boulmer on 30 th
Grey Plover	18 at Boulmer on 30 th
Lapwing	300 at Fenham Flats on 15 th 230 at Boulmer on 30 th
Snipe	2 on River Breamish on 10 th 3 at Cresswell Pond on 31 st
Woodcock	3 near Post Office Pylon on 1 st 2 at Hannah's Hill on 5 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 7 th 1 near Angerton on 12 th
Dunlin	230 at Fenham Flats on 15 th
Sanderling	138 at Fenham Flats on 15 th
Curlew	21 at Hedgeley Lakes on 15 th 192 at Fenham Flats on 15 th
Bar-tailed Godwit	130 at Fenham Flats on 15 th
Black-tailed Godwit	1 at Fenham Flats on 15 th
Green Sandpiper	1 on River Breamish on 15 th
Purple Sandpiper	35 at Stag Rocks on 29 th 6 at Boulmer on 30 th
Redshank	202 at Fenham Flats on 15 th
Grey Phalarope	1 at Stag Rocks on 25 th
Ivory Gull	2(juveniles) at Seahouses on 7 th , the first in Northumberland for 34 years

Little Gull	2 at Boulmer on 30 th
Kingfisher	1 at Branton Ponds throughout month 1 at Felton on 10 th
Great Spotted Woodpecker	1 near Low Weldon on 10 th
Grey Wagtail	1 on River Breamish on 15 th 1 near Angerton on 12 th
Dipper	4 on River Breamish on 15 th
Waxwing	6 at Felton on 13 th
Stonechat	1 at Stag Rocks on 29 th 2 at Boulmer on 30 th
Fieldfare	25 over Branton on 10 th
Marsh Tit	2 near Angerton on 12 th
Willow Tit	2 near Angerton on 12 th
Treecreeper	Several near Branton on 10 th
Raven	4 at Bewick Moor on 18 th
Brambling	50+ at Thrunton Woods on 26 th
Crossbill	15 at Thrunton Woods on 26 th
Siskin	8 at Branton Ponds on 9 th 8 at Branton Ponds on 26 th
Linnet	150+ at Elwick on 13 th 150 at Old Bewick on 30 th
Lesser Redpoll	1 at Branton Ponds on 9 th 6 at Branton Ponds on 26 th
Bullfinch	5 near Post Office Pylon on 1 st 4+ near Angerton on 12 th 4 at Branton Ponds on 26 th
Snow Bunting	15 at Guile Point on 15 th
Yellowhammer	6 at Cresswell Pond on 31 st
Mixed flock(total approx..100) of Chaffinch, Tree Sparrow, Yellowhammer, Greenfinch and Reed Bunting at Old Bewick 30 th	
INVERTEBRATES	
Scarce Umber	1 in Branton on 1 st
MAMMALS	
Red Squirrel	1 in Branton on 6 th 1 near Whittingham on 25 th
Fox	1 at Newton le Moor on 11 th
Roe Deer	4 at Branton on 25 th
Reindeer	A small flock over Branton on night of 24 th /25 th
Otter	Evidence of Otter at Black Lough 2 nd 1 at Cresswell Pond on 18 th
AMPHIBIANS	
Common Toad	1 at Branton Ponds on 21 st
PLANTS	
Tremella Mesenterica	At Branton Ponds on 26 th
RAINFALL	
65.1 mm	
OBSERVERS	
C Bird, J Clark, I&K Davison, G Dodds, A Keeble, G Osborne, R&J Poppleton, S Reay, S Sexton, R Wills.	