

# Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

Email: redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

## NEWSLETTER 158 NOVEMBER 2014 Review of Oct 2014

**NEXT MEETING:** CHRISTMAS MEETING – December 10<sup>th</sup> 2014

Do join us for our Christmas meeting on 10<sup>th</sup> December at 7.30p.m.

We've got Ian & Keith's Christmas Quiz, plus Christmas Nibbles (PLEASE BRING SOME!). And to exercise the Yuletide brains, Chris Metherell is going to show us how to tell the different Ferns apart. Ferns are good because many of them are winter-green, so you can spend the rest of the winter practising what you've learnt.

**HOPE TO SEE LOTS OF YOU THERE**



### YOUR NEWSLETTER

Our Newsletter Editors, Des Taylor and Barbara Welch, are doing some work to improve the layout and appearance of our newsletters – especially to get some greater consistency of styles and fonts. We hope this will make them more attractive to read.

**BUT** we are a bit concerned at the very small number of people who actually write and provide items for the newsletters. It tends to make them a bit "samey" every month.

Could **YOU** help to increase the variety of the content? For example, could you:

- Send us examples of some of **your best wildlife photos?**

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

- Occasionally write a short piece about **your favorite walks or wildlife places to visit?**
- Send in some **mystery photos** – either to test the identification skills of our readers or because you genuinely want to know what the subject of your photo is?
- Write a regular short item e.g. 'Moth of the Month' or 'My best sighting'?

Please don't scan this request and then forget about it – take action to make our newsletters as lively as they can be and as representative of our members' interests as possible. And then do it every month or at least as often as possible.

Photos or text can be sent direct to Barbara at [redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk](mailto:redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk) or, if you are not computer minded, typed text or photos can be brought to the next meeting so we can borrow them, scan them and return them.

## WHAT WILDLIFE TO LOOK FOR IN DECEMBER

There have been some huge gatherings of waterfowl and waders on Fenham Flats. This was highlighted in the November's Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) where there were at least 11,000 wigeon and 2,500 **light-bellied brent geese** as well as the usual gathering of other species. Normally, the **wigeon** have started to move south to slightly warmer climates on the Wash and Lancashire. But this year, numbers of **wigeon** have remained higher than usual. Away from the coast the passage of wintering thrushes has been poor. Small numbers of **redwings** and **fieldfares** can be found but they are not in their usual numbers. One of the sights of the autumn, has been the movement of both **sea trout** and **salmon** on our rivers and streams. On the 14<sup>th</sup> November, at least 6 adult sea trout were observed laying and fertilising eggs on redds on a tributary burn in the AIn catchment. Some of the fish were at least 5 lbs. December can be a rewarding month for watching wildlife whether from the comfort of your own home (watching the bird table) or when you are out and about in the countryside. One thing you can do is test yourself with your tree identification. Many species of tree are characteristically shaped and you can get to grips with the different conformations of bark. Below are two species of tree that you may want to test your identification skills?

### Ash

In winter the Ash tree has a distinctive silhouette. The lower branches hang down but then have up-turned tips, and as early in the year as mid-January the large black buds, from which bright green leaves will emerge in springtime, are clearly visible even from a distance.



The bark is smooth and grey with fissures that appear as it grows older. The colour of the bark is thought to give the tree its name.

### Pedunculate (English) oak

As common oaks mature they form a broad and spreading crown with sturdy branches beneath. Their open canopy enables light to penetrate through to



the woodland floor.

Smooth and silvery brown bark becomes rugged and deeply fissured with age.

Winter is one of the best times of year to look at the mature trees in your neighbourhood. Why not go out and hug a tree!

I hope that you have a great festive period and a productive 2015.

Jackdaw

### Obituary Mrs Thompson

It is sad to report the death of Mrs Thompson. One of our oldest members at 94. Mrs Thompson was a regular in the front row of the hall at our evening meetings. She will be sadly missed and we send our deepest sympathies to her family and friends.

## PLANT CORNER

This autumn has been amazingly mild. Many trees are still clinging on to some of their leaves and there are all sorts of plants either still flowering or trying a second or third flush of flower. The other day Jane and I were walking on our local moorland at Titlington Mount and there was a whole range of things to see which in some years wouldn't be nearly as healthy-looking as this year – after all we're talking about November.

I took some photos and decided that this month's Plant Corner could be based on what we saw. The first shows a flowering shoot of Heath Milkwort *Polygala serpyllifolia*. The books say this flowers from May to September. Hm .... What is also nice about this particular specimen is that it is framed by a 'nest' of leaves of Lousewort *Pedicularis sylvatica*. To find these looking so fresh in November was very surprising.



I've put a little insert photo to remind you what Lousewort looks like when it's in flower.

This autumn one feature of our countryside that has been startling is the weight of fruit on Hawthorn *Crataegus*



*monogyna*. On our walk there was a particular pair of rather isolated small hawthorn trees that looked stunning in the sunshine against a backdrop of silver birch. The key to good fruiting years is usually that the conditions have been just right at flowering time; warm enough for pollinating insects to be on the wing and a lack of night-time



frosts which would otherwise harm the fresh flowers. The next thing we particularly noticed was a section of very old dry stone wall which had some prolific growth of lichens. The two photos below show some heavily covered sections. I wish I was good at lichen identification. It should be easy enough, shouldn't it, with species as large and distinctive as these, but if I make a stab at identifications that I'm not at all sure of then I shall end up risking misleading people.

Finally I took this photo in the middle of a grassy track.

It could well qualify as one of the mystery photos that we've asked members to send in. It could be an egg cluster from some species of invertebrate. It could be a rather heavy-looking mass of 'cuckoo spit', concealing the larva of a leaf-hopper insect, except it's the wrong time of year.



I think it is most likely one of the very strange and primitive life forms called a Slime Mould. Despite the word mould, these are not fungi. Most of the time they exist as single celled, free living organisms, a bit like *Amoeba* that you learned about in school biology lessons. Then, in response to some unclear chemical signal, in the autumn they converge on a common point and merge together as though they are a massive single cell with multiple nuclei. In this massed state they can reproduce before they disperse again.

If there's someone out there who knows whether or not I'm correct I do hope they will email the editor and tell us.

Richard

## STEWCHAT

---

As is fitting for the Halloween season, this month's column is going to be dedicated to mainly one creature, the **Death's Head Hawk-moth** *Acherontia atropos*.

Many of you will be aware that I was lucky enough to have the caterpillar of one of these fantastic moths fall into my possession in September. Here I will give a little more information surrounding what happened next, but first, some history of *Atropos*.

In Northumberland *Atropos* has always been a rare moth, but used to be found more frequently than it is today. There are 51 records in total, but only 9 in the last 50 years. The last few were singles in 2008, 2002 and 1982.

Historically this moth has been an object of fear, surrounded by myth and legend. Its name reflects this. In Greek mythology, *Acherontia* is derived from Acheron, the river of pain in the underworld and *Atropos* is fate who cuts the thread of life. This naming probably was a result of the striking skull pattern present on the thorax and from its squeaking behaviour when handled.

One legend states that its appearance in a candlelit room was an omen of death in the house, especially if its fluttering snuffed out the flame. A large influx of this moth into Brittany, France brought panic as it coincided with widespread pestilence. The Death's head has even entered modern fable when it was present in the movie, 'The silence of the lambs' where the serial killer placed its pupa in the mouths of his victims. It is even rumoured that two Death's head moths were in the bed chamber of King George III at the time he was suffering from dementia!

Nowadays, though such nonsense as put aside, and moth trappers around the UK hope one day that this, the holy grail of British Moths, will find its way into their traps.

It is not a species I ever thought I would come across, but this year, fortune was on our side.

My partner Jane's sister, Victoria, lives in Northamptonshire. She sent me a text message one morning in September with a photograph of a large yellow caterpillar and asked 'Is this dangerous?' I recognised it immediately, and rang, not to advise on safety, but to ask where it was now? Luckily she had the foresight to realise this was not something commonplace and had taken it home. After some hasty planning she agreed to send it to me by Royal Mail via Special Recorded delivery guaranteeing its arrival before 9am the next day.

An eagerly awaited postman arrived at 8am with the goods, and all was well. A huge, finger thick, lime and yellow caterpillar was well packed in a Tupperware carton. We tried to feed it on its known food plants – potato tops, privet and even buddleia but it was not interested. This meant that it was ready to pupate.

Not having done this before, I contacted AWG member Alan Fairclough who has many more years of experience in these matters than I ever will who gave me tips on what to do next.

I gathered a bucketful of molehill soil ( it has been pushed from below the surface so should be free of man made contaminants) and gave it a quick blast in the microwave to rid any natural pests. Jane seemed ok with this, honest....

When cool the soil was placed in a small tank and levelled at about 3 inches deep. *Atropos* was placed on the surface under a small heat lamp to keep the temperature up to about 24 degrees C. In only a few minutes, it buried its way out of sight to pupate under the surface.

Two weeks later, the mahogany coloured shiny pupa was carefully excavated and placed on the surface where it could be monitored. It was kept warm and sprayed with tepid water to keep humidity up for a further two weeks.

Then, on the 17<sup>th</sup> October, I checked the tank to find the pristine adult Deaths Head Hawk-moth had emerged. What a stunner it was too, we couldn't believe our eyes.

Such a rare creature is bound to generate some interest and over 70 people came to see it at Howick Village Hall over the next weekend. He, it is a male, even gained 15 minutes of fame on BBC2's Autumnwatch Unsprung. Featuring, appropriately enough, in the Halloween edition.

At the time of writing he is still alive and is fed every two or three days on honeycomb and water solution. In the wild, they raid beehives for honey. We don't know how long he will live, it is too cold to release him now, but it has been a great privilege and an education to watch and rear it through all the life stages.

Probably a once in a lifetime event.

See pictures on next page...

PS A normal column will resume next month....

Stewart Sexton, Howick...



From Top Left –

**Deaths Head Hawk-moth** stages from caterpillar going under soil to pupate, pupa and adult moth showing skull mark on thorax.  
Howick Oct 2014.

## **NORTHUMBERLAND NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY - BARN OWL BOX PROJECT**

---

When working for the Authority in the late 1990's it became clear to me that many cavernous old ash trees were disappearing from our hedgerows. Some were being felled in the interests of safety; others were just past their sell-by date and falling down. Trees in the county provide a vital source of nesting and roosting sites for the barn owl population which was relatively small at that time.

The importance of such trees prompted me to find possible ways of redressing the balance, where individual trees had been lost. In a wider context I had to be aware that the felling of trees carried a duty of care on the landowner towards protected species like barn owls, but gale blown trees were a different matter.

It also became clear at this time that many redundant farm buildings were being converted into second homes or holiday accommodation, compounding the reduction of bolt holes for the owls.

The obvious way forward in planning terms was to ask developers of such sites to provide accommodation for owls if it was clear that they had taken up residence. This usually took the form of an owl nest box being put up in an adjacent modern farm building which would otherwise be unsuitable for the owls to use.

The erection of nest boxes was the obvious way forward where trees were concerned but thereby posed a long term problem of length of box life and maintenance issues that needed to be addressed. Newly planted ash trees won't become cavernous until 150-200 years old.

The only way forward in the short term seemed to be to provide high quality boxes that would last longer than the normal ones that self-destruct in 5 to 10 years in Northumberland's weather, and to raise awareness within local communities of the difficulties barn owls have to face this far north in the UK.

A substantial triangular design of box had been devised by a barn owl enthusiast from the uplands of Galloway. This was adopted as the standard pattern to be built because of its proven durability. Good

quality materials were used to give as long a life to the boxes as possible, within budget limits. These were built in-house to start with, but as numbers needed



blossomed, the boxes were manufactured by local joiners.

Initially 10 boxes were made and erected in the Wooler area and proved to have a 50% take up from the local discerning owls and were also well received by the farming and local community.

A series of mild winters, combined with habitat improvements supported by Government environmental grant schemes at this time, saw an increase in barn owl numbers across the county and it was felt that the project was worthy of being rolled out to a wider audience. This initiative led to a National Park wide scheme with boxes now installed in the river valleys of the Breamish, Coquet, Redesdale and North Tyne, together with another group in the Hadrians Wall area.

To date 65 boxes have been installed and are now being monitored annually to see how many are occupied and how successful the owls are in raising chicks. All in all, the entire scheme has been a great success producing some 400+ chicks with approximately 30% occupation rate, which includes

breeding as well as roosting birds. On the public relations side, awareness of barn owl issues has been raised to a much higher level now than previously, highlighted by the bad winter of 2010-11. Reports of dead or dying owls came in thick and fast at this time with approximately 100 owls being reported to the Authority by people aware of the project.

Thankfully the owls have largely recovered from this catastrophic winter with record brood sizes and chick numbers encountered in 2014, with at least 3 pairs apparently producing double broods, which is almost unheard of this far north.

Clearly after almost 17 years of north-east weather some of the oldest boxes are showing their age and the very generous donation from the Alnwick Wildlife Group will go a long way towards refurbishing them with new marine plywood roof coverings.

Many thanks.

**John Steele**

Voluntary Project Coordinator on behalf of  
Northumberland National Park Authority



## A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A RANGER

Today is my day for cleaning the toilets – it's Tuesday. I have to be up early at 6a.m. as I have to start at 6.45 in order that the toilets are clean by 8a.m.

The van contains various fluids and potions as well as smellies for the 'Netties'.

I leave home at 6.30 for the first set of toilets. There's no one about at the block and I do the 'bowls' and floors.

I leave and head for the next of three sets of toilets that need to be cleaned. I see something in a field and decide to wait and see if it moves. It's merely a gull and I must get moving.

I have a walk at ten which me and Andy practiced yesterday. We're to lead six groups of school kids from the Visitor Centre at Housesteads to the 'Wall'. We discussed and agreed who was to say what and where. It's great fun entertaining the kids and looking at their amazed faces as we tell them facts and figures.

After a spot of lunch we continue the afternoon programme. It's our turn to win 'Oscars' as we show the new voluntary wardens how to handle situations on their patrols.

The new volunteers are put through their paces and they're taught how to handle "hooligan" situations in the park.

I'm to be the litterlout. I sit behind a wall with land strewn with litter. As each group comes through the gate they notice the litter and ask me to pick it up. I refuse and tell them in no uncertain terms that they should pick it up. This is the world volunteers face. I know. I've done it from the side of the volunteers. Half a dozen groups pass and we teach. We're accused of overacting afterwards by the organizers. We get accused of this every year. It's our chance to get rid of our pent up frustrations.

When this is finished I have a guided walk at three p.m. I take a group of kids to Housesteads Fort and tell them its history. I then get out my 'goody bag', which contains various items that I've collected for the last few days. The kids are visibly thrilled as I tell them about biodiversity. The walk and talk finish at ten to four.

I pick up the van and head back to Once Brewed. Getting there, Derek asks me if I can find a fault reported by a bus driver. I look at a tyre and find that the fault is the 'skirt' of the side of the bus is catching the tyre causing a noise. I'm able to bend it back into position with the use of hands only. It's fixed and I bask in the 'thank you's' afterwards.

It's now 4.50 and Paget tells me to get away home. It's been a ten hour + day. I'm tired but well satisfied.

*David Turnbull*

## FORD MOSS SURVEY

In 2014 we are going to do another Ford Moss survey for Lord Joicey at Ford & Etal. For much of the wildlife we can't really start until the Spring, but for BIRDS there's no reason why we can't start now. It would be good to get some early winter bird records.

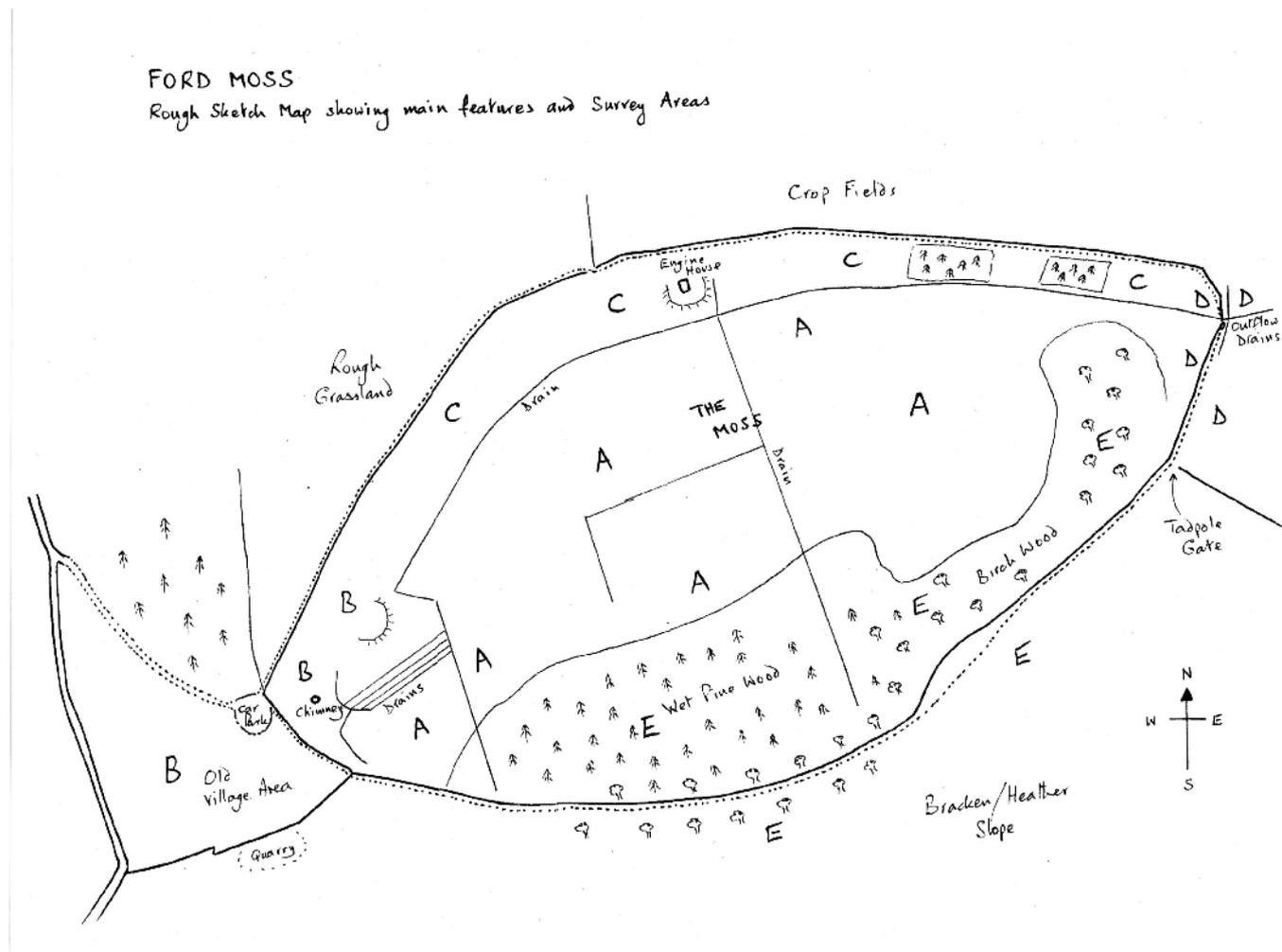
All you need to do is to have a winter walk around the perimeter path and record all you see and hear. Then send the results (with your name and the date of your visit) to me either by post – Richard Poppleton, Grey-stone Cottage, Titlington Mount, Alnwick NE66 2EA or by email to [rich.titlington@btinternet.com](mailto:rich.titlington@btinternet.com).

The sketch map on the next page shows the layout with the perimeter path as the dotted line around the outside. Wellies would be a good idea because the path, especially on the NW side, can be rather muddy.

Park by the roadside at NT 963 377 (Explorer Map 399. Landranger 74 has the parking point just on its right hand edge). Please **don't use the parking area marked as "Car Park"** on the sketch map – the track is very rough and there's really not much space to leave cars.

Ring me if you've got any queries 01665 578346.

Richard



## BRANTON PONDS FIELD TRIP.

Keith and Ian Davison will be leading a walk around Branton Ponds for the AWG on Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> January 2015. Meet at Branton Ponds car park, grid ref NU 049166, at 10 am. We suggest strong waterproof footwear. Food optional in case it extends beyond lunchtime. If unsure about weather please phone 01665 578357 on the morning of the walk.

## SIGHTINGS OCTOBER 2014

### BIRDS

Red Throated Diver	2 at Newton Point on 5 <sup>th</sup> 1 in Alnmouth Bay on 16 <sup>th</sup>
Slavonian Grebe	1 at Branton Ponds from 15 <sup>th</sup> and still present at end of month
Great Crested Grebe	6 at Branton Ponds on 7 <sup>th</sup>
Little Grebe	13 at Branton Ponds on 15 <sup>th</sup>
Bittern	1 at Branton Ponds on 18 <sup>th</sup>
Little Egret	1 on Holy Island causeway on 11 <sup>th</sup> 4 at Fenham Flats on 12 <sup>th</sup>
Whooper Swan	3 at Branton Ponds on 13 <sup>th</sup> and 3 on 25 <sup>th</sup> 9 at Warkworth on 27 <sup>th</sup>
Barnacle Goose	350 over Budle Point on 27 <sup>th</sup>
Pink-footed Goose	1 over Branton on 30 <sup>th</sup>
Brent Goose	585 at Fenham Flats on 12 <sup>th</sup>
Pochard	4 at Branton Ponds on 5 <sup>th</sup>
Widgeon	1518 at Fenham Flats on 12 <sup>th</sup>
Scaup	1 at Amble on 27 <sup>th</sup>
Hen Harrier	1 male at North Northumberland on 10 <sup>th</sup>
Merlin	1 on Holy Island on 11 <sup>th</sup>
Grey Partridge	4 near Belford on 14 <sup>th</sup>
Water Rail	3 at Branton Ponds on 15 <sup>th</sup>
Ruff	8 at Newton Scrape on 5 <sup>th</sup>
Lapwing	46 at Branton Ponds on 11 <sup>th</sup>
Sanderling	157 at Fenham Flats on 12 <sup>th</sup>
Whimbrel	1 on Aln Estuary on 6 <sup>th</sup>
Green Sandpiper	1 at Branton Ponds on 18 <sup>th</sup>
Curlew Sandpiper	1 on Aln Estuary on 2 <sup>nd</sup>
Lesser Black Backed Gull	40+ at Branton Ponds on 7 <sup>th</sup> 95 at Branton Ponds on 11 <sup>th</sup>
Little Gull	12 at Newton Point on 5 <sup>th</sup> 3 off Emmanuel Head on 11 <sup>th</sup>
Long Eared Owl	1 at Boulmer on 15 <sup>th</sup>
Kingfisher	2 at Branton Ponds on 11 <sup>th</sup> and 1 on 18 <sup>th</sup> 2 on River Aln on 2 <sup>nd</sup>
Dipper	3 at Wooler Water on 1 <sup>st</sup>
Blackbird	100+ at Smeafield on 29 <sup>th</sup>
Mistle Thrush	7 in College Valley on 2 <sup>nd</sup>
Redwing	30 at Branton on 15 <sup>th</sup> and 50+ on 30 <sup>th</sup> 9 at Smeafield on 29 <sup>th</sup>
Fieldfare	1 over Branton on 30 <sup>th</sup> 40+ at Black Lough on 30 <sup>th</sup> 6 at Smeafield on 6 <sup>th</sup>
Yellow Browed Warbler	1 on Holy Island on 11 <sup>th</sup>
Goldcrest	4 on Holy Island on 11 <sup>th</sup>
Willow Tit	1 at Branton Ponds on 4 <sup>th</sup>
Long Tailed Tit	16 at Smeafield on 27 <sup>th</sup>
Nuthatch	Several at Holystone Woods on 29 <sup>th</sup>
Raven	3 in College Valley on 2 <sup>nd</sup>
Goldfinch	6 at Smeafield on 28 <sup>th</sup>
Lesser Redpoll	1 at Branton on 9 <sup>th</sup>

### INSECTS

Common Darter	Several at Branton Ponds on 7 <sup>th</sup>
Speckled Wood	1 at Wooler Water on 1 <sup>st</sup> 1 at Titlington Mount on 12 <sup>th</sup> 1 at Smeafield on 17 <sup>th</sup>
Red Admiral	Several at Branton Ponds on 7 <sup>th</sup>
December Moth	1 at Branton on 31 <sup>st</sup>
Mervielle de Jour moth	2 at Howick on 1 <sup>st</sup>
Large Wainscot	1 at Howick on 1 <sup>st</sup>
The Brick	1 at Howick on 1 <sup>st</sup>
Death's Head Hawkmoth	1 at Howick on 18 <sup>th</sup>

## MAMMALS

Stoat	1 at Wooler Water on 1 <sup>st</sup> 1 in Alnmouth on 26 <sup>th</sup>
Weasel	1 at Branton on 9 <sup>th</sup> 1 at Smeafield on 12 <sup>th</sup>
Red Squirrel	1 at Hedgeley on 8 <sup>th</sup> 1 in Branton on 14 <sup>th</sup> 1 at Branton Ponds on 16 <sup>th</sup> 1 at Holystone Woods on 29 <sup>th</sup> 1 at Howick Hall on 29 <sup>th</sup> 1 at North Bank Belford on 5 <sup>th</sup>
Bottle-nose Dolphin	2+ in Alnmouth Bay on 16 <sup>th</sup>

## PLANTS

Autumn Hawkbit	Wooler Water on 1 <sup>st</sup>
Upright hedge parsley	Wooler Water on 1 <sup>st</sup>
Tormentil	College Valley on 2 <sup>nd</sup>
Harebell	College Valley on 2 <sup>nd</sup>

## FUNGI

Fairy Club	College Valley on 2 <sup>nd</sup>
Meadow Waxcap	College Valley on 2 <sup>nd</sup>
Larch Bolete	College Valley on 2 <sup>nd</sup>

## RAINFALL

68mm

## OBSERVERS

I&K Davison, G Dodds, M McMahon, R&J Poppleton, S Reay,  
J Rutter, S Sexton.

### ***SUBSCRIPTIONS***

Remember that subs are due in January. Still no increase - £10 single, £17.50 for two or more at the same address. Please make cheques to Alnwick Wildlife

Group and bring to the December or January meetings or post to:

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

Some members now pay by Standing Order with their bank. If you'd prefer to do so please let Richard know and he'll organize the relevant form for you.