

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

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NEWSLETTER 165 June 2015

Review of May 2015

NEXT MEETING: SEPTEMBER 30TH 2015 – “LADYBIRD SPOTTING IN NORTHUMBERLAND” SPEAKER: CATHLEEN THOMAS

Cathleen is the recently appointed Community and Events Officer for Northumberland Wildlife Trust.

She completed her PhD in the evolution and ecology of ladybirds at Hull University and since then has worked for a number of years in conservation posts. One of the more exotic of these was as Education Officer at the Welsh Mountain Zoo!

MOTH OF THE MONTH - JULY

For July I have chosen a day-flying moth called the Yellow Shell (*Camptogramma bilineata*). About 25 – 30 mm across, they are easily disturbed by day and fly freely towards dusk, feeding at flowers such as Thistles and as below Yellow Rattle. The specimen in the photo is a relatively dark orange specimen, which is the commonest form here in the north, but they vary to quite bright yellow. They are very common throughout the county, from the coast to the uplands, wherever the larval foodplants including Bedstraws, Sorrels and Dandelions grow.

There are very few other yellowish day-flying moth species and these are generally uncommon, so there very little chance of mistaking the Yellow Shell with anything else.



Alan Fairclough.

MOTH TRAP OPENING SESSION AT HOWICK VILLAGE HALL

SATURDAY JUNE 27TH AT 9A.M.

Please join Stewart Sexton at this drop-in session which will last approximate 1 hour to see what has been caught overnight!

Please send sightings reports for June, no later than 6th July 2015 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 WILDLIFE TO LOOK FOR IN JULY 2015

We have now had a month of unseasonably cold weather especially at nights. This has seen both **ash** and **oak** finally come into leaf in the first weeks of June and the prolonged flowering in **primroses**, **cowslip**, **gorse** and **broom**. There has been a knock on effect on invertebrates and moth traps have been very quiet. Even the dawn chorus appears to be later this year, with many warblers still singing into the early afternoon. The **house martins** at 5 Front Street, Glanton appear to be either sitting on eggs or very young chicks. Elsewhere on the property, there are two **house sparrow** nests with chicks and a pair of **robins** fledged one nest. **Tree sparrows** have visited the backyard for the first time and **song thrushes** are regular at the moment, digging around in leaf litter and sampling the local water.

July sees the end of the bird breeding season but there is always plenty to see or find. Something that everyone can do is look for earthworms. There are 27 species of native earthworms with a number of other aliens being introduced accidentally. Most worm species eat dead plant material but little is known about their ecology despite a large amount of work being carried out on their effects in soil.



Britain's largest earthworm is the lob worm. Individuals can grow up to 35cm long. They live in deep vertical burrows and emerge at night to feed on fallen leaves and other decaying plant material. There can be 20 and 40 lob worms per m² in an average garden lawn.



The green worm has a wide distribution and can be very numerous in all but the most acid habitats. Green worms have two colour morphs; muddy greenish yellow and pale pink colour. It can reach lengths of 8cm and produces large ?



The rose-tipped worm is again widespread and found in the topsoil in most habitats. The adult 5 cm worm has a rosy pink or pale pink head and the saddle is usually orange. The area from the first segment to the saddle is largely pale.



The grey worm is extremely common and lives in horizontal burrows in the topsoil. It is relatively easy to identify due to the different shades of colour along its body – normally three different shades from head to tail.

Other common worms in the garden include; the brandling worm which is found in compost heaps and is generally dark red, the compost worm, chestnut worm, redhead worm, blue-grey worm and little tree worm.

Invertebrate hunting in your garden can be great fun. Why not try to discover how many worm species you have in your garden? Further information can be found at nhm.ac.uk and or the Earthworm Society.

*Good luck,
Jack Daw.*

Stewchat...



Figure 1: The Herald, a new species in the garden and what a looker!

Spring isn't turning out to be a very good one this year. Most days are cool and breezy though dry.

The Howick moth trap has been a bit slower in terms of numbers of species caught but not as bad as it looked on the day. May this year recorded a meagre 45 species in the garden, compared to 80 species during May 2014. This is the second worst May out of the last six years for number of species caught. Let's hope it picks up, with the weather, during the summer. Despite this, 3 new species for the garden were found during the month. It's always amazing to record new moths after 6 years of intensive trapping. They were **The Herald**, and two tiny 'micro's' – **Mompha rashkiella** and **Eriocrania subpurpurella**. That's easy for me to say!

On the bird front, spring migrants were now back in numbers. A nice male **Yellow Wagtail** just over our garden wall was a pleasing discovery during a spell of cold easterlies. The following day found a good number of **Blackcaps** arriving at Craster when 12 birds were around the Arnold reserve.

A day out at the Coquet Estuary at Warkworth on May Bank Holiday Monday had a nice variety of summer visitors, including **Ruff**, **Whimbrel**, **Black tailed Godwit** and **Greenshank** all in summer plumage while **Lesser Whitethroat** and **Garden Warbler** enlivened the car park. Back home at Howick in the afternoon my first **Sedge Warbler** and **Cuckoo** of the year were being very vocal. An unusual visitor arrived on Howick Pond on 13th - a male **Shoveler**, that was trying to be

a father to several **Mallard ducklings**. His bearings were way off...

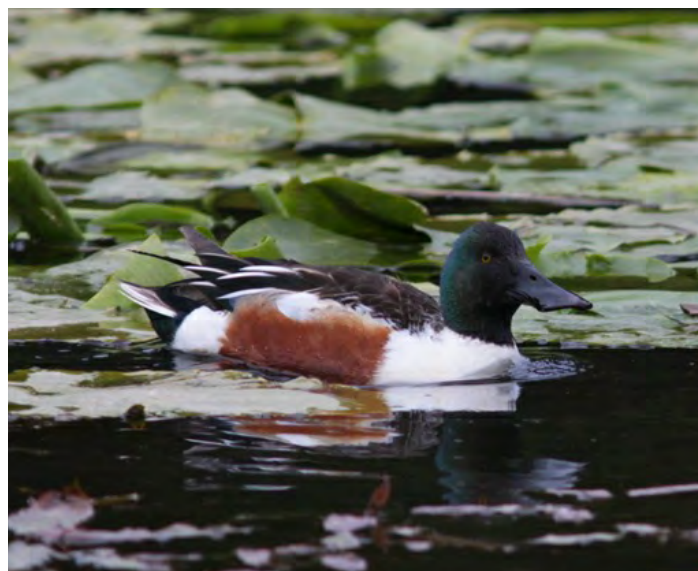


Figure 2: Shoveler drake.

On the mammal front a great count of 13 **Brown Hares** were in a field near us on 15th all just lying around sunning themselves.

Another day out, this time, inland to Yardhope Oaks. **Redstart**, **Tree Pipit** more **Cuckoos** and a couple of **Pied Flycatchers** were exciting finds on 17th.



Figure 3: Pied Flycatcher

Further afield on 26th, we went butterfly hunting just out of Northumberland, by all of 5 miles, up to Lamberton in the borders just off the A1. Our target – **Small Blue Butterfly**, a species not found in the county at all. Maybe one day it will move the few miles required to Berwick or Cocklawburn.

As it was breezy a bit we only saw a few but it was a pleasure to catch up with them again.



Figure 4: Small Blue Butterfly, Lamberton.

Other than the blues we also saw **Orange Tip, Small Heath, Small Tortoiseshell and Large White** while some interesting plants included **Rock Rose, Salad Burnet and Carline Thistle**. A pair of **Peregrines** seemed to be nesting nearby. It's a bit of a walk along the cliff tops but the scenery is stunning and the wildlife is well worth it.

Its nice, this month, to go out on a bang. I was at work when the news broke of a **Black-winged Pratincole** at Bothal Pond near Ashington. This is only the second for Northumberland and may even be the same individual that was seen for the first time last year. This lovely bird, looking like a mix of marsh tern and plover, should be hawking insects over the Russian steppe by now, but it was showing very well on the south edge of the pond as I arrived in a rush from the office.

I need not have panicked as it spent the next three days being visited by a stream of admirers from across the UK. I have only seen two of these before, one in Norfolk some years back and a brief fly by in Turkey even longer ago. It is a difficult species to catch up with even when on a foreign holiday.

So with that one under the belt I wonder what surprises summer will bring?

Stewart Sexton, Howick.



Figure 5: Black winged Pratincole field sketch.

MEETING OF WEDNESDAY 27TH MAY

George gave a publicity splash for the new Northumbrian Bird Atlas and then showed the audience of 33 the skull of a Sanderling with a tiny brain case and very long bill. The species lacks a backward-pointing hind toe, which helps its style of running up and down the beach.

Our speaker was **Iain Robson** who has worked as a full-time warden for the coastal AONB since 2003. He began with some details about the AONB. It was designated in 1958 and its remit covers beaches, islands, castles, geology, wildlife and visitors. The recent big increase in tourism needs to be managed. The prime AONB purpose is to enhance the natural beauty of the countryside. Britain has 46 of them, although the fate of those in Northern Ireland is in jeopardy because funding has been stopped by the N.I. Assembly. Our AONB has 2.5 staff and much of what happens is based on the development of successful partnership working with organisations, local groups and residents..



Iain then moved to the **Little Terns**, a species that he thinks may be even more stupid than Barn Owls. He posed a question: *“Should we bother to spend time, effort and money on these birds?”* We are right at the NW edge of the breeding range and in much of the rest of its worldwide range it is not a coastal breeder. Where the birds breed near fresh water they avoid the problems caused by tides. When they do choose coasts they seem to need a 360° range of vision, so they tend to nest well out on the open beach, leaving them vulnerable to tidal surges.

They build a nest scrape and lay 1 to 3 eggs which they incubate for 21 to 24 days. Normally they congregate in small colonies of less than 40 pairs – often only 2 to 5 pairs – which reduces risk of predation, especially

from Kestrels. But here they can often be found in colonies of more than 100 pairs. This is probably because there are few available sites protected from human interference and where conservation efforts help them. The UK population is c. 900 pairs (worldwide c. 400,000) and it is declining, especially in the south and east of England. The birds feed on small fish; sprats and sand eels in the UK, but in some parts of the world up to 90% of their food is insects.

Northumberland has the colony at the Long Nanny and a smaller one on Lindisfarne. They often form a pre-breeding roost on Inner Farne with >100 birds and after laying eggs the adults often return to Inner Farne at night. Globally Little Terns are not a conservation concern, but in the UK they are an Amber concern because of shrinkage of their breeding range. One Long Nanny bird is known to be at least 22 years old.

7 wardens are at the Long Nanny in the breeding period. Nest scrapes are moved on to fish boxes so they can be taken higher up the beach if the tide threatens and put back during the day. Occasionally wardens will take eggs into their hut to help incubate them. Unfortunately the beach level at the Long Nanny is dropping due to long-shore drift, making vulnerability to tides greater. Should the colony be moved? But where are there places free from people and dogs?

The EU has provided conservation funding of £2.5m, to increase wardening; to increase predator management; to provide more electric fencing. Floating nest platforms have been tried, but Avocets rapidly took them over. Decoys (made locally) have been tried at the Long Nanny to encourage the birds to use the salt flats behind the dunes rather than the beach, but without success. At Druridge Bay an area has been fenced off, but the terns have ignored it, but Ringed Plover have used it.

There was then a discussion about Iain's question and there seemed to be a general feeling that the money and effort were worth it for a native breeding species in Northumberland, especially where the efforts could be shown also to benefit other species.

A RINGERS YEAR

May 2015: The Spring weather has continued to play havoc with the nesting of many of our birds. Monitoring nesting Tawny Owls has been very disappointing with only one 'large' brood of 3 pulli being located and ringed. Tree Sparrows are usually very early breeders (and unlike most small passerines can have multiple broods into July) and they definitely started making their mad untidy nests in April and May but then the cold stopped many of them laying eggs or led to them to give up incubating their potential first broods. With luck they will catch up later in the year.

I usually ring many pulli (baby) Great Tits and Blue Tits at several sites in the county (a good training opportunity) in May but this year this will mostly be in June. However, Robins, Grey Wagtails, Pied Wagtails and Song Thrush have all nested successfully. I have a photo of the young Song Thrushes all begging for food a few seconds after they had been ringed!

Siskins are rarely ringed in the nest but I had prove they were nesting in high trees close to my home on the 4th May. An adult male brought his two very juvenile Siskin offspring (termed 3JJ's) to feed on Niger seed in our garden – the feeder was hanging inside a ringers cage trap and I was able to catch all three birds (so intent on feeding they failed to see my approach even though the trap was not actually set and they could have escaped very easily).

So June will be busy with the start of checking 100 odd Barn Owl boxes at the same time as going back to see how the Tits and Tree Sparrows have done.

Phil Hanmer

A Ringer & Trainer

Natural History Society of Northumbria Ringing Group
(Hancock Museum)



PLANT CORNER

Not all 'good' plants are showy and spectacular. In fact some of the botanically best ones are rather diminutive and grow in apparently unpromising gravelly, semi-bare soils.



In early June I was on the old railway line south east of Alnwick. The re-development of the Alnwick to Alnmouth line hasn't got far yet beyond the station works near East Cawledge Farm, but some effort has been made to scrape, level and widen a section of the line to prepare it for track-laying. The gravelly scrapings on the north side of the line revealed an excellent population of the delicate little **Small Toadflax** (*Chaenorhinum minus*).

Small Toadflax is a classic example of a species that spread enormously with the development of the railway network in Britain. Many rail tracks made use of the large amounts of ballast material brought by ships to our ports and which proved ideal for creating a stable bed for the rails. The ballast usually came from overseas and often included seeds of alien plants. When spread on the tracks this allowed species that like thin disturbed soils to flourish and spread.

Small Toadflax may in fact be native in southern England, but the principle of its spread still holds. Since the middle of the last century, as many branch lines were closed and the land reverted to farming use, this species has become much scarcer in Northumberland.

Several other toadflaxes in the British flora enjoyed the opportunities created by the railways. Neither the yellow **Common Toadflax** (*Linaria vulgaris*) nor **Purple Toadflax** (*Linaria purpurea*) are unique to

railways, but both are often found in the track-side habitats.



The flowers of all the toadflaxes are, in shape, like smaller versions of the common garden snapdragons (or *Antirrhinums*) to which they are closely related. Probably the easiest one to find in our Northumbrian towns and villages is **Ivy-leaved Toadflax** (*Cymbalaria muralis*). It usually grows on walls and can sometimes form quite extensive hanging patches. Yet this is another plant that was unknown in Northumberland until the mid 1800s and which spread and increased greatly in the 20th Century.



SURVEY NEWS

If you read your AWG newsletters with any concentration you will know that in addition to our regular bird surveys for Northumberland Estates, which Jim Clark organizes, we've become involved in three other pieces of work this year. So it seems appropriate to give a brief progress report on all three.

THOMAS PERCY WOODLAND



At the end of May Jane Panton, Alan and Margaret Goodall and myself spent a couple of hours in this small patch of woodland above the old Thomas Percy School site. Jane had been before in the winter and already had a list of birds, so we were able to use that as a starter.

At the end we had a list of 75 species of plant, 20 bird species and five insects (although we really weren't particularly looking for insects). Of course it was two of the insects that were perhaps the most special sightings. There was a Speckled Wood and two specimens of 14-spot Ladybird.

CAWLEDGE BURN

A small group visited this semi-natural ancient woodland site very early in the season at the end of April. Despite the timing and the fact that few species were yet in flower we still managed to record 72 plants. The bird life was rather unspectacular, although in the end we had 15 species.

On 3rd June I made a second visit with a group of botanically-minded companions and the plant total has now risen to 112. Perhaps the best plant was a small tree of Small-leaved Elm (*Ulmus minor*). Very few elms are now found in Northumberland that are not Wych Elms. The small-leaved species mostly succumbed to Dutch Elm Disease more than 30 years ago, so to find this one was very unexpected.

FORD MOSS

As I write this, tomorrow (7th June) will be the first of our two scheduled plant/lichen days. But we've had quite a few bird reports submitted and the total count currently stands at 49 species.

Otherwise so far the best sets of records have been for insects. Stewart Sexton's moth night brought more than 100 individuals of 33 species, while Alan Fairclough added another 13 species including a very special cased pupa of a micro-moth on Bog Myrtle which was the first record of this species for North Northumberland. Then Stephen Block from the Berwick Wildlife Group came up with a list of several aquatic insects, many still at the larval stage.

So, for all three sites we are making progress, but please remember that any and all records are valuable. So if you've got a bit of time to spare and fancy visiting one of our survey sites, your records will be welcomed. Send, please, to:

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

or by email to richard.pop@btinternet.com

SIGHTINGS MAY 2015

BIRDS

Great-crested Grebe	2 at Branton Ponds on 15 th
Manx Shearwater	57 off Boulmer on 20 th 3 flew north past Annstead on 23 rd
Little Egret	1 at Warkworth on 4 th
Shoveller	4 at Monks House Pool on 27 th
Tufted Duck	3 pairs at Monks House Pool on 27 th
Gadwall	2 at Monks House Pool on 27 th
Wigeon	1 at Monks House Pool on 30 th
Garganey	1 at Druridge Pools on 18 th 1 at Newton Scrape on 27 th
Shelduck	1 pair with 12 young at Branton Ponds on 20 th
Sparrowhawk	1 at Branton Ponds all month 1 at Smeafields on 7 th
Osprey	1 at The Hirsell on 7 th
Grey Partridge	1 at Branton Ponds on 31 st
Quail	1 at West Fenton on 15 th 1 at Smeafields on 15 th and 2 on 17 th
Water Rail	1 at Branton Ponds on 3 rd
Avocet	7 at Cresswell Pond on 18 th
Black-winged Pratincole	1 at Bothal Pond on 29 th
Oystercatcher	3 pairs in Harthope Valley on 7 th
Dunlin	120+ at Warkworth on 4 th
Little Ringed Plover	2 at Branton Ponds on 4 th
Ringed Plover	46+ at Warkworth on 4 th 172 at Fenham Flats on 17 th
Grey Plover	215 at Fenham Flats on 17 th
Common Sandpiper	2 pairs in Harthope Valley on 7 th
Black-tailed Godwit	1 at Warkworth on 4 th
Whimbrel	1 at Warkworth on 4 th 3 at Branton Ponds on 6 th 2 at Howick on 10 th 3 at Fenham Flats on 17 th
Greenshank	1 at Warkworth on 4 th 1 at Newton Scrape on 12 th
Ruff	1 male in summer plumage at Warkworth on 4 th
Lesser Yellowlegs	1 at Newton Scrape on 11 th and 12 th
Pectoral Sandpiper	1 at Newton Scrape on 12 th
Wood Sandpiper	1 at Newton Scrape on 12 th 1 at Cresswell Pond on 18 th 1 at Druridge Pools on 18 th
Iceland Gull	1 at QE 2 Lake Ashington on 22 nd
Lesser-black backed Gull	40 at Branton Ponds on 26 th
Sandwich Tern	68 at Guile Point on 17 th
Arctic Tern	Several hundred at Long Nanny on 16 th
Little Tern	1 past Low Newton on 12 th 35 at Long Nanny on 16 th 2 at Guile Point on 17 th
Cuckoo	3 at Beanley Moor on 1 st 1 at Holystone on 10 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 15 th 1 at Yearle on 15 th and 21 st 1 near Bamburgh Castle on 30 th
Barn Owl	1 at Warkworth on 4 th 1 at Branton on 14 th 2 at Yearle on 22 nd one was carrying food
Tawny Owl	1 at Yardhope Oaks on 17 th
Swift	1 at Warkworth on 4 th 1 at Glanton on 4 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 5 th and 3 on 6 th 3 at Seahouses from 27 th
Sand Martin	20 at Monks House Pool on 27 th

Tree Pipit	2 near Ros Castle on 8 th several at Holystone Woods on 10 th and 23 rd
Yellow Wagtail	1 at Howick on 3 rd 1 at Hoppen Kiln Flash on 4 th 2 at Low Newton on 12 th 1 at Low Newton scrape of the race thunbergi on 27 th and 28 th
Robin	1 juvenile in Branton on 7 th
Redstart	1 at Lilburn on 2 nd 2 at Sharperton Edge on 2 nd 1 at Eslington on 2 nd 1 on Holy Island on 4 th several at Holystone Woods on 10 th 1 at Yardhope Oaks on 17 th
Whinchat	1 near Ingram on 7 th
Wheatear	2 at Low Newton on 30 th
Reed Warbler	1 at Warkworth on 4 th 1 at Newton Pool on 12 th several at Cresswell Pond on 18 th
Garden Warbler	1 at Warkworth on 4 th 2 at Branton Ponds on 14 th 1 at Ford Moss on 30 th
Grasshopper Warbler	1 at Beanley Moor on 1 st
Blackcap	Many at Branton Ponds all month
Sedge Warbler	Several at Branton Ponds all month 2 at Warkworth on 4 th
Common Whitethroat	1 on Holy Island on 4 th 1 at Howick on 10 th 2 on Bewick Moor on 13 th
Lesser Whitethroat	1 at Warkworth on 4 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 28 th
Pied Flycatcher	2 at Yardhope Oaks on 17 th and 1 on 23 rd
Spotted Flycatcher	1 at Branton Ponds on 13 th 1 at Yardhope Oaks on 17 th several in Holystone Woods on 23 rd 1 at For Moss on 30 th
Marsh Tit	1 at Spindlestone on 4 th
Treecreeper	1 at Holystone Woods on 10 th and several on 23 rd
Raven	1 at Holystone on 2 nd
Linnet	100+ at Howick on 3 rd
Crossbill	1 at Holystone Woods on 10 th 1 at Yardhope Oaks on 17 th
MAMMALS	
Brown Hare	1 at Branton Ponds on 3 rd 2 at Ford Moss on 30 th
Otter	At Newton Pool on 4 th 1 at The Hirsell on 19 th
Red Squirrel	1 at Branton on 5 th and 21 st 1 near Hell's Path on Carey Burn on 20 th
Hedgehog	1 at Yearle on 24 th
Badger	1 at Bellshill on 8 th
PLANTS	
Cuckoo Flower	At Branton Ponds on 4 th
Meadow Saxifrage	In Roddam Dene on 26 th
Lousewort	At Ford Moss on 30 th
Climbing Corydalis	At Ford Moss on 30 th
Chickweed Wintergreen	At Bewick Moor on 29 th at Ford Moss on 30 th
INSECTS	
Muslin	1 at Howick on 4 th 5 at Ford Moss on 24 th
Oak-tree Pug	1 at Howick on 4 th
Brown-silver line	Several at Holystone on 23 rd
Epiblema scutulana	2 at Ford Moss on 24 th
White-spotted Pug	3 at Ford Moss on 24 th

Ochreous Pug	2 at Ford Moss on 24 th
Golden-rod Pug	2 at Ford Moss on 24 th
Common Heath	Many at Ford Moss on 30 th
Engrailed	1 at Ford Moss on 24 th
Streamer	1 at Ford Moss on 24 th
Nut-tree Tussock	2 at Ford Moss on 24 th
Common Swift	1 at Branton on 26 th
Emperor Moth	Several at Bewick Moor on 8 th
Orange Tip	1 at Yearle on 25 th 1 at Smeafields on 20 th
Speckled Wood	Several at Branton Ponds on 15 th
Green-veined White	1 at Branton Ponds on 13 th
Tree Bumblebee	1 at Howick on 10 th 1 at Yardhope Oaks on 23 rd
Blue-tailed Damselfly	1 at Branton Ponds on 25 th
Large-red Damselfly	1 at Roddam Dene on 26 th
Red and Black Frog hopper	2 at Branton Ponds on 30 th
Tiger Beetle	2 at Ford Moss on 30 th
FISH	
Eel	1 in burn at Smeafields
Rainfall	84mm
OBSERVERS	G & R Bell, L Capper, I & K Davison, G Dodds, A Gibson, S Reay, J Rutter, S Sexton, B Welch, Alnwick Wildlife Group walk.