

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

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NEWSLETTER 167 August 2015 Review of July 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!

FORD MOSS VISITS IN SEPTEMBER

Richard's recent email talked about two planned events at Ford Moss which will complete our survey efforts for 2015. The details are as follows:

MAMMALS

On Monday 7th September Veronica Carnell from the Northumbria Mammal Group will place some small mammal traps at Ford Moss. They will be baited but not set, so potential mammals will be able to get used to their presence and be attracted by the bait.

On the evening of Thursday 10th September Veronica will set the traps. Then at 9.00am on Friday 11th she will return to find, record, photograph and release any animals that are in the traps. They will have had plenty of food in the traps so no harm will have come to them.

Anyone who'd like to be present at the 'opening ceremony' is welcome. If you don't use email, please let Richard know that you intend to come (01665 578346) so he can contact you if there any last minute changes to arrangements.

MOTHS

Stewart is planning a third moth night on 12th September. If you want to take part you will need to be at Ford Moss around dusk armed with appropriate warm clothing; any food and drink you think you'll need and midge repellent. The end of the event will be some time in the early hours or whenever you decide to leave. Away from the moth traps it will be dark, so **bring a torch**. Be prepared for the fact that if the weather is unsuitable, Stewart may have to cancel at short notice.

Stewart has requested that, if you are interested in attending will you please email him at stewchat@btinternet.com or phone 01665 577801.

So if in doubt, check with him on stewchat@btinternet.com earlier in the day or ring (01665 577801).

Please send sightings reports for August, no later than 6th September 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 SEPTEMBER 2015

The summer seems to have passed quickly and the harvest is now starting to be gathered. The first migrants to leave were the **Swifts**, which left Glanton on the 9th/10 August (late by recent years). Something that I have noticed in the last 10 days (from the 13th August) is that there are warblers still in song. Last week both **Willow** and **Grasshopper warblers** were both in song on Beanley Moor even though these birds were part of a roving flock of mixed species (e.g. warblers, robins, pipits, finches etc.). Willow warblers have continued singing in the last week.

An achievement for early August, has been finding out what causes this aberration on **Soft Rush**. This is the second or third year that I have found this gall (fig 1). My understanding is that it is a **Tassle gall** which is caused by a species of **Jumping Plant Louse** (fig 2) that infects the stem of the Soft Rush.



Fig 1: Tassle gall



Fig 2: Jumping plant louse (pin head size)



Fig3: Flat fly
Crataerina hirundines

The **House Martins** 5 Front Street managed to fledge 3-4 young this year. For some reason the birds are not sitting on a second clutch. It may be that the nest has an infestation of parasites. Certainly, there have been one or two **Crataerina hirundines** (Flat flies – fig 3) found in the window sill. They are not very pleasant looking creatures and their hosts are House Martins and **Swallows**. Apparently, this Flat Fly is probably a female due to the reduced size of the wings and are virtually tied to their host!

September is a month of ripening fruit. The fruit can attract a host of species from butterflies, to warblers and rodents. The one species that most people do not enjoy are the wasps. There are seven species of British wasp. The commonest are the **Common** and **German Wasps**. For the most part, wasps are the gardener's friend. During the summer, they spend their days killing other insects



Fig 4: German wasp



Fig 5: Common wasp

to feed to their larvae in the nest. In return the larvae provide the adults with a sweet saliva. By September the queen has stopped laying eggs and the food incentive has gone. They now move onto the sweeter things. For those that like swatting their wasps why not have a quick look at their facial marking to determine the species.

German Wasp has three small dots (fig 4) and Common Wasp has a prominent dark 'anchor' mark between its eyes (fig 5).

I hope to see you all at the first evening meeting of the season on Wednesday 30th September at 7:30pm.

Jack Daw

INVERTEBRATE CORNER

CLUSTER FLIES:

Cluster flies belong to the Phylum *Arthropoda* and, within this, to the Class *Diptera* (the two-winged flies). They are a major pest in the urban environment and, in the Northeast of England, were particularly abundant last spring – these are the “dozy” flies that congregate in houses and conservatories in late winter.



Cluster flies (scientific name *Pollenia rudis*) thrive in urban areas that have large lawns, where the soil is rich in organic matter, and where earthworm populations are high. The reason for this is because the immature stages of *P. rudis* feed on earthworms.

The life cycle is as follows: Female flies lay their eggs in moist soil and, upon hatching, the first stage (instar) larva burrows into an earthworm's body where it develops as a parasite. After about 30 days, the larva vacates its host and pupates in the soil from where the adult emerges to the surface. There are usually three or four generations each year, with the last generation tending to become the most troublesome, as thousands of



adult flies attempt to overwinter in attics, wall spaces, and the peaks of open ceilings and conservatories. They enter homes through small openings along the eaves or under roof tiles, rather than through any open doors or windows (a legacy from their soil-burrowing behaviour). According to the temperature within a house, the flies move in and out of their resting crevices, often on a daily basis. In early spring, they begin to move towards windows, but in a sluggish fashion, and many die as their bodies run out of food reserves. Those that manage to escape to the outside, mate and begin their egg-laying in adjacent lawns.

Where the number of fly bodies is high, these may attract *Dermestes lardarius* – the dermestid beetle (see photographs of larva and adult), which feeds on these and other dead insects. Often, the beetle larvae spread to feed on other household materials and fabrics, causing further damage.

Dudley Williams Newton on the Moor



JUNE 2015: The peculiar weather we had this spring has continued to influence the nesting of this years birds. In simple terms there is no clear pattern to Barn Owl nesting this year – some birds started nesting very early – remember the few hot days we had just after Easter! Some birds seem to have been more affected by the cold and windy weather not really being able to hunt; these did not come into breeding condition at the normal time and had not laid eggs by June. At the same time I have missed at least four early nests and had to ring some rather large young owlets; one of which did ‘a hop skip and a jump’ across a field while I chased after it (it clearly thought it could fly but was not quite ready). Barn Owls can breed later in the year and I will be trying to check at least some boxes again in August. Recapturing adult birds during this process has produced some interesting facts: For example there is a pair of birds near Howick both at least 10 yrs old; a pair near Rock which are 5 yrs. A 5 yr old female at Fallodon with a barely 1 yr old mate. An adult female ringed as an owlet in a nest near Wooler in 2013 now has young herself near Edlingham. Owlets ringed near Allerdean and Rennington in 2014 now appear to be breeding (in different nests) a few miles over the Scottish border – having been re trapped (controlled) by a ringing colleague (Alan Kerr).

My monitoring of the small breeding passerines (tits, robins etc.) that use nest boxes has mostly come to an end. It’s been a late and poor season with much smaller broods than normal. I will report more when I have had time to collate the statistics properly. The Tree Sparrows that insist in nesting in an old wrecked box on the side of my house did succeed in raising their second brood (I ringed 4 on the 20/6/15) having lost the first. Being Tree Sparrows they will probably try for a third. The most interesting experience of this activity was an encounter with a pair of very cross Willow/Marsh Tits in a Wood near Longhorsley. They were not in any of the boxes I was checking with two trainees but clearly had a nest nearby! After taking photos and having a very cursory hunt for their nest we left them in peace. The photos have been the subject of much scrutiny and debate since to try and identify the exact species. Ringers can positively i.d. them in the hand but otherwise its always difficult – especially when they are not making the text book audio calls.

I will be starting my autumn (migration) ringing site at Howick Arboretum during July which will continue into October. This will generally be on a Saturday morning but may be moved by the weather and circumstances. Your welcome to come and watch/take pictures; just look for us by the picnic benches in the car park. Get in touch if wanting to check a day and times.

Phil Hanmer

A Ringer & Trainer

Natural History Society of Northumbria Ringing Group (Hancock Museum)

E-mail: tytoalbas@btinternet.com

A RINGERS YEAR

JULY 2015: As I write this note I am listening to the loud chirping of pulli (chick) Tree Sparrows in a box on the wall of our house. This is their third brood (although the first failed); I will be trying to ring them in the next day or two. However, most small passerine birds have actually finished nesting (tree sparrows are unusual). Most passerines don't moult until they have finished nesting and the last ringing session at Howick produced 13 adult birds moulting their flight feathers (out of 32). A quick analysis of the boxes monitored at Ingram this year showed only around a third of the boxes to be occupied and an average 'tit' brood of only four per nest. At the Breamish Caravan site the occupancy was slightly higher with broods of five per nest. These figures are all much lower than usual.

The number of Barn Owl pulli successfully ringed continued to creep up with two broods of three ringed on the first of the month; a single very large young bird ringed in a box never before used close to my home on the 3rd and another brood of two ringed on the 14th. I still have three nests to go back to early August. However, it does look like these may be the last, as my colleague Iain Robson kindly checked a number of nest sites while I was away this month and found no new eggs.

As a Bird Ringing Trainer I was asked this month to help out at the 'rounding-up' and ringing of some swans down in Yorkshire; and then to be a tutor on a BTO ringing course at Rye in East Sussex. It's a long way south to get to Rye but worth it to help aspiring ringers gain experience towards a permit including ringing some unusual birds like Grasshopper Warblers and Bearded Tits (see pic.). We also watched hundreds of Sand Martins and Swallows being chased around above their intended reedbed roost by a Hobby. Later we did ring quite a lot of the Sandmartins. They were then roosted overnight (see pic.) and released to continue their journey southwards the next morning.

I will be continuing to try and ring at least once a week at the autumn (migration) ringing site at Howick Arboretum until November. This will generally be on a Saturday morning but may be moved by the weather and circumstances. You're welcome to come along to learn/watch/take pictures; just look for us by the picnic benches in the car park. Get in touch if wanting to check a day and times.

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STEWCHAT

Hello again after last months absence. This was largely down to computer problems followed by BT broadband problems. It took a few weeks to get things resolved but now things are up and running smoothly.

Let's start by catching up with some Howick sightings from June. After a week away on holiday to Scotland early in the month we returned to a much milder Northumberland than the one we left after a cold spring. A pair of **Barn Owls** took up residence next to our garden, laying 4 eggs, but at the time of writing all has gone quiet and I fear they have failed, probably due to odd cold and wet spells.

During warmer spells my attention is often drawn to the insects that I come across around the garden and village environs. A small hebe shrub we have growing was laden with white flowers attracting good numbers of bumblebees of several species. Of interest, I noticed that the Red tailed Bumblebee did not visit hebe at all, much preferring our wildflower meadow patch that was filled with the yellow flowers of Cats Ear even though they were right next to each other. On the hebe we found **White tailed, Buff tailed, Tree, Common Carder and Early Bumblebees**, the latter a new species for me.



Figure 1: Early Bumblebee on Hebe flowers.



Figure 2: Red tailed Bumblebee covered in pollen.

It was shortly after observing the bees a lightning fast strike by a female **Sparrowhawk** brought excellent views as it took a juvenile Starling from my neighbour's conifers.

A wander around the village wood on the evening on 29th June found 12 male **Gold Swift** moths 'lekking' over long grass and bracken. This is a great sight to see as the moths emerge well before dark to carry out their mating display. They dance and wave at about 24 inches above the ground as they search for a female.

Into July and things gradually begin to quieten off. The manic activity of the breeding season is winding down and birds begin they're moult.

Our young **Swallows**, 5 of them fledged from our boiler shed nest on 16th, soon to be replaced in there by a brood of Wrens only a foot away!



Figure 3: Female Sparrowhawk with juv Starling



Figure 4: The newly fledged Swallows beg from mum.

A quick look at the sea from Craster on 18th provided some very un-seasonal excitement with a first summer **Glaucous Gull** out on the skeer. This bird should be in the arctic by now? Nearby were **Common Sandpiper, Goosander and Whimbrel**.

My route home from work passes the Coquet Estuary at Amble Braid every day. I have been keeping an eye on it a bit to try and find something interesting amongst the newly arrived or passage waders out on the mud. Best came on 23rd with a nice summer plumaged **Curlew Sandpiper** with 80+ **Dunlin**. Nearby competing for most colourful was a summer plumaged **Black tailed Godwit**.



Figure 5: Curlew Sandpiper with Dunlin. A quick sketch.

The month ended with another good sighting at Craster when a party of 12 **Bottle nosed Dolphins** fed very close in off shore



Figure 6: Bottle nosed Dolphin in the early sunlight.

Stewart Sexton, Howick.

MOTH MORNINGS

During the summer I have been running an open moth trap session every Saturday morning (bar two) at Howick Village Hall car park. A few regular attendees make great company as I count and identify the catch for the weekly garden moth scheme survey. There are opportunities to photograph any choice moths that appear but this can cause frustration as Mick McMahon can vouch for as two attempts at Elephant Hawkmoth pics have resulted in either a vibrating moth or even worse, it flying off. It's a case of keep trying on a cooler morning...

During August, there will still be some large catches, consisting mostly of the Yellow Underwing species, but you never know there could be a rare vagrant in there somewhere. It's a good time for Convolvulus Hawkmoth.

To give a recent example of the catch on 1st August we had 376 moths of 76 species. We had a great chat about the differences between Bright line brown eye and Brown line bright eye, two tongue twister names for two totally different looking moths!

If you would like to come along, please feel free to drop in. I start at 9am and it usually takes an hour or two depending on the catch size. The best thing about these sessions is that it is a complete surprise as to what we will catch. I don't open the traps until we are all together so it's just as exciting for me as it is for someone who may not have seen a moth trap before.

If for any reason I have to cancel, I will post on the [Alnwick Wildlife Group Blog](#) on Friday night. Or feel free to email me at stewchat@btinternet.com



MIGRANT MOTH NEWS

Members Philip and Vivien Boulton of Newton-on-the-Moor found this *Convolvulus* Hawk-moth in their garden on the 4th August. On average only one or two of this migrant are recorded in Northumberland each year; so a good find.



Alan Fairclough.

MOTH OF THE MONTH - SEPTEMBER

As we get into late summer and autumn, the 'Sallow' group of moths appear. So named because the larvae of the commoner species feed on willow or sallow, the commonest is actually called the Sallow (*Xanthia icteritia*). There are two common forms found in Northumberland; one almost plain yellow apart from a dark spot in the reniform stigmata and the other with variable amounts orange-brown overlaid



The Sallow

Although most of the group have a basically yellow background, the main confusion species is the Pink-barred Sallow, which has pinker markings, but can be most easily distinguished by its pink-brown head and front of the thorax (opposite).



Pink-barred Sallow

As well as being attracted to light, this group of moths (and many other autumn species) also feed at ivy flowers and over-ripe fruit. This gives moth recorders an opportunity to attract them with 'sugar' mixtures (e.g. treacle and cider) painted on tree-trunks, posts or wine-ropes.

Alan Fairclough.

PLANT CORNER

It often happens at this time of year when I'm deciding which plants to feature in Plant Corner that I think: "how can I never have included X or Y?". Then I think: "but it's too late now, they'll all be over". Looking through my check-list from past Plant Corners I find, amazingly, that I've never written anything specifically about thistles, and many thistles will still be very evident in late August, even if they've mostly gone to seed.

There are three common species of thistle in rough grassland and farm grazings and it doesn't take much observation to tell them apart. The biggest, bulkiest plant with the most vicious-looking spiny leaves is **Spear Thistle** (*Cirsium vulgare*). The flowers are big and bright purple (although Jane and I found a very pale pink flowered plant near our home in July). It is often seen in high summer how rich a food source they provide for many flies, bumblebees, butterflies and other insects. Later on the seeds often attract flocks of goldfinches.



Spear Thistle is also the most likely candidate for the 'Scottish Thistle'. At Holyrood House in Edinburgh, when the Queen visits each year, Cotton Thistles are planted. But it is hardly likely that they were the real Scottish Thistles because they scarcely grow wild in Scotland and most Scots will never have seen them. So Spear Thistle it has to be and the beautifully-shaped flower heads look absolutely right to be the national flower.



The **Creeping Thistle** (*C. arvense*) is less attractive. As the name suggests it has a creeping rootstock and often spreads into large colonies in rough grassland. Of course it shouldn't, because landowners are supposed to keep it under control. The Weeds Act of 1959 allows Authorities to require a landowner to take action because of the effect the plants can have on agricultural crops. Mind you, Spear Thistle is also a 'noxious weed' under the Act, although it spreads only by seed and so has less of a tendency to form big patches.

The photo of Creeping Thistle isn't mine (it's from the website www.british-wild-flowers.co.uk) and it does tend to give a rather flattering image of the plant.



This year seems to have been an excellent one for the third of the common thistles, **Marsh Thistle** (*C. palustre*). My photograph tries to show (not very successfully) the almost forest-like effect of these tall rather slim thistles in a rough pasture just along the track from our house. They favour wetter places than the other two common species and they have spiny wings up the stem. Often the whole plant has a rather dark, almost purple-green colour and the flowers are quite a dark purple –

unless, of course, you find some of the white-flowered variety which are reasonably common.

Because thistles are such common plants in our countryside they are quite a good place to start improving your botanical observation skills. Try to get to the point where you know which is which, and most importantly, why.



Richard

SIGHTINGS JULY 2015

BIRDS

Great Crested Grebe	Pair on Branton Ponds all month 2 at Fenham Flats on 19 th
Manx Shearwater	1 off Newton Point on 10 th 1 off Coquet Island on 21 st
Storm Petrel	1 off Newton Point on 29 th
Little Egret	1 at Fenham Flats on 19 th 1 at Budle Bay on 31 st
Grey Heron	5 at Hauxley on 29 th
Pink-foot Goose	1 at Fenham Flats on 13 th
Brent Goose	3 at Fenham Flats on 19 th
Shelduck	25 at Fenham Flats on 11 th
Red Breasted Merganser	200+ on sea near Lindisfarne Castle on 2 nd
Goosander	2 at Fenham Flats on 19 th
Eider	49 at Fenham Flats on 13 th
Peregrine	1 at Smeafield on 5 th
Sparrowhawk	1 at Smeafield on 10 th
Osprey	1 near Alnwick on 8 th
Grey Partridge	3 at Fenham Flats on 19 th
Ruff	3 at Hauxley on 29 th 5 at Newton Scrape on 29 th and 4 on 31 st
Curlew	205 at Fenham Flats on 11 th
Whimbrel	2 at Fenham Flats on 19 th
Curlew Sandpiper	1 at Amble on 23 rd
Common Sandpiper	6 at Branton Ponds on 8 th 11+ at Amble on 22 nd
Green Sandpiper	1 at Charlton Mires flash on 29 th
Dunlin	80+ at Amble on 23 rd
Black-tailed Godwit	1 at Amble on 23 rd
Greenshank	2 at Branton Ponds on 27 th 1 at Hauxley on 29 th 1 on Holy Island on 31 st
Glaucous Gull	1 at Craster on 19 th
Roseate Tern	100+ on Coquet Island on 21 st
Tawny Owl	1 at Branton Ponds on 9 th
Swift	8 over Fenham Flats on 11 th 20+ at Fenwick on 25 th
Kingfisher	2 on River Breamish on 1 st
Yellow Wagtail	2 near Chatton on 19 th
Redstart	1 near Prendwick on 30 th
Whinchat	3 in College Valley on 1 st several at Old Fawdon Hill on 30 th
Stonechat	A family of 4 at Newton links and a second family of 4 at Newton Scrape on 31 st
Common Whitethroat	Family group of 4 at Brandon Ford on 9 th
Chiffchaff	1 juvenile at Smeafield on 15 th
Spotted Flycatcher	Pair in Branton with young most of month 2 at Yearle on 28 th
Nuthatch	1 in Branton on 10 th
Bullfinch	1 at Smeafield on 8 th

REPTILES

Adder	1 in Harthope Valley on 19 th
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MAMMALS

Brown Hare	3 near Branton on 1 st 1 daily at Newton Lowsteads
Red Squirrel	1 at Branton on 4 th and 2 on 10 th and 3 on 27 th
Hedgehog	3 at Smeafield on 29 th and 1 on 31 st
Stoat	At Newton Lowsteads on 22 nd 1 at Yearle on 10 th
Otter	1 at Hauxley on 29 th
Pipistrelle	2 at Smeafield on 14 th

PLANTS

Quaking Grass	In College Valley on 1 st
Marsh Arrowgrass	In College Valley on 1 st
Dyers Greenweed	At Branton Ponds on 3 rd

Agrimony	Near Low Newton on 10 th
Bloody Cranesbill	At Low Newton on 10 th
Flowering Rush	At Branton Ponds on 15 th
Bee Orchid	3 at Long Nanny on 9 th
Pyramidal Orchid	Many at Long Nanny on 9 th
Hounds Tongue	2 at Long Nanny on 9 th
Common Centaury	At Buston Links on 10 th
Wild Pinks	At Buston Links on 10 th
Thyme	At Buston Links on 10 th
Vipers Bugloss	At Buston Links on 10 th
Common Valerian	At Buston Links on 10 th
INVERTEBRATES	
Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary	1 in College Valley on 1 st
Dark Green Fritillary	1 at Shepherds Law Moor on 26 th
Ringlet	Several at Branton Ponds on 1 st and many by 9 th 4 at Smeafield on 18 th
Meadow Brown	Many around Branton Ponds on 1 st 2 at Fenham Flats on 13 th and 5 on 19 th
Red Admiral	3 at Branton Ponds on 2 nd
Small Skipper	1 at Branton Ponds on 2 nd and 3 on 9 th
Speckled Wood	1 at Branton Ponds on 2 nd
Large Skipper	2 at Branton Ponds on 3 rd
Common Blue	1 in Bamburgh Dunes on 5 th many at Long Nanny on 9 th
Small Tortoiseshell	2 at Smeafield on 15 th
Chimney Sweep moth	Several at Brandon Ford on 1 st
Grass Emerald	Several near River Breamish on 1 st
Lesser Swallow Prominent	1 at Branton on 1 st
Hummingbird Hawkmoth	1 at Branton on 5 th
Elephant Hawkmoth	2 at Branton on 1 st 1 at Branton on 10 th
Poplar Hawkmoth	1 at Branton on 10 th
Large Yellow Underwing	1 at Smeafield on 26 th
Peach Blossom	1 at Branton on 1 st
Cinnabar moth	Several in Bamburgh Dunes on 5 th
Gold Spot	1 at Branton on 10 th
Clouded Magpie	A pair at Cawledge Burn Wood on 25 th the first for V.C. 68
Tawny-barred Angle	1 at Branton on 15 th
Yellow Shell	Many at Long Nanny on 9 th
Pyrausta despicata	1 at Howick on 24 th
Golden-ringed Dragonfly	4 on Titlington Burn on 30 th
Four-spotted Chaser	1 at Lemmington Banktop on 5 th
Banded Demoiselle	1 at Branton Ponds on 1 st
Common Blue Damselfly	Many at Branton Ponds all month
Blue-tailed Damselfly	Several at Branton Ponds all month
Large Red Damselfly	1 at Branton Ponds on 1 st
RAINFALL	77mm
OBSERVERS	G&R Bell, V&P Boulton, I&K Davison, G Dodds, J Dodds, A Gibson, P Jobson, J Panton, R&J Poppleton, D&M Roughton, S Reay, S Sexton, B Welch.