

Alnwick Wildlife Group



Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna

www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

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NEWSLETTER 173 FEBRUARY 2016

Review of January 2015

NEXT MEETING:

WEDNESDAY 24TH MARCH 2016.

SPEAKER: DEREK ROBESON

Natural Flood Management in the Borders - a strategy for the future.

Derek has spoken to Alnwick Wildlife Group for in the past. He is an excellent speaker with some superb photographs. Derek lives in Kelso and works for the Tweed Forum and is a good friend of Laurie Campbell. Derek will integrate wildlife and landscape photographs into projects with which he has been involved.

NAME THAT OWL

Members who were present at the December or January meetings may like to know that the owl, kindly made and donated by Joyce Fairclough, was called PRUDENCE. She was won by Gordon Plews from Eglingham.

Please send sightings reports for January, no later than 6th March 2016 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.

A RINGERS YEAR

JAN 2016:

I managed to do a little ringing near home on New Year's Day and was pleased to recapture a Siskin originally ringed (as an adult) in 2013; and a Blackbird ringed in 2012. The Blabi has lived around the local area all this time but the Siskin has been off around the country and probably abroad. On the 8th three more 2013 Siskins turned up along with a Goldfinch of the same vintage. A 2013 Coal Tit turned up on the 9th along with a Blue Tit. At this point I went off with my son Hugh to join four others on a Ringing Expedition in South Africa. The weather was much improved – although not perhaps as hot as some would expect!

The focus of the trip was to trap and ring raptors in the Limpopo region of South Africa plus ringing local bush passerines in several different areas. However we started by visiting the roost site of Amur and Red Footed Falcons in the Show Ground of 'Newcastle' South Africa. It is here were *thousands* of these small falcons gather to roost after migrating south from Eastern Europe. This is part of a local long standing study of these beautiful birds (see photo.) I also had the privilege of ringing a Jackal Buzzard (see photos.) and a Black Chested Snake Eagle.

On returning home I discovered that I had missed the snow and ice but returned to *too much* wind and rain to do much bird ringing (or watching). However, returns from the BTO proved interesting with news that a Blue Tit we controlled at Howick Arboretum in October was actually ringed at Abbey St Bathans in the Scottish Borders six weeks before; an unusual movement for this species. Also a Redpoll I ringed near Lemmington Hall in June 2014 had been controlled by another ringer in Felton on the 10th January. Less happy news was the recovery dead of a Barn Owl hatched near Wooler in June but found dead near Budle Bay in January. This is the sort of easterly movement (towards the coast) often made by a young owl seeking food in bad weather.

With the winds around the end of the month there was a sudden influx of Siskins and Goldfinch to the Lemmington Hall area and many birds were attracted to Niger seed feeders. Those captured proved to be roughly 50% new and 50% retraps.

Anyway I am praying for some calm weather so I can get a lot of new nest boxes (large and small) put up before the end of February.

Phil Hanmer
A Ringer & Trainer
Natural History Society of Northumbria Ringing Group
(Hancock Museum)
E-mail: tytoalbas@btinternet.com



STEWCHAT...

2016 dawned cold, frosty and clear, a fine day, very much in contrast with the recent weather systems. However, things soon reverted back to normal, as on the 2nd there were F7 gales, rain and full cloud., These storms continued on and off for most of the month.

On New Year's Day a walk around the Howick patch turned up a couple of 'goodies', the first being an adult **Little Gull** with **Black headed Gulls** in a field near Seahouses Farm. I only record Little Gull very infrequently here, so one to start the year was most appreciated. Unfortunately I didn't have my camera so the event goes unrecorded, visually at least. The second thing of interest was not avian at all, but the first clump of **Snowdrops** was in flower in the village wood. They may have been my earliest record.



Figure 1: Snowdrops in flower on New Year's Day

The storms on the 2nd, drove two **Little Auks** close inshore at Craster where the southerly gale blew them north at a great speed! Continuing the flowering theme, **Winter Aconites** were open in Denwick Church Yard.

Apparently lightening does strike twice where birds are concerned or even three times, as further **Little Gulls** were seen on 3rd and three on 4th off Craster!

The wintering **Chiffchaff** was seen again several times during the month, increasing to two birds on 23rd.

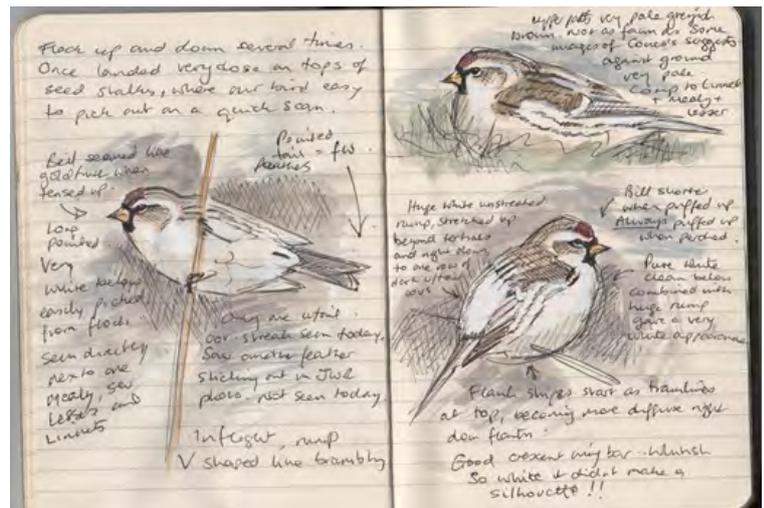
The undoubted bird highlight of the month anywhere in the county was found by my friend John Rutter during the first week. The first winter **Coues Arctic Redpoll** eventually settled into a routine that afforded many visitors some good views as it fed in a field near Warkworth Golf Course with 30 other Redpolls. I was

lucky to see it on 5 occasions over subsequent Sundays, and the bird is still present during mid-February as I write.

This is the first **Arctic Redpoll** we have seen since John and myself found two others during February and March 1996, and I believe the first in Northumberland since then too!



Figure 2 and 3: Coues Arctic Redpoll, Birling, Warkworth



A large flock of finches fed in seedy stubble at Howick all month. The seedy stubble itself a very rare thing nowadays as most stubble is cleansed free of any food for wild birds due to herbicides and pesticides used during the growing season. The flock was made up of **250+ Linnet, 50+ Chaffinch, 7 Brambling, 3+ Redpolls, 1 Twite** and odd **Yellowhammers** and **Reed Buntings**.

A walk along the heughs north at Craster on 17th had 2 **Willow Tits** and a **Treecreeper** while down in the harbour were a couple of **Rock Pipits** and a **Purple Sandpiper**. On 20th a **Kingfisher** fed from rocks along the shore at Howick Haven.

Stewart Sexton

PLANT CORNER

The modern attitude to plant recording, particularly in relation to trees, is to count them as recordable even when they have obviously been deliberately planted. Trees are long-lived and may often out-live the plantations, gardens or parks where they were put. In many cases there is also the chance that they will self-seed and therefore become naturalised.

So it was that in early February, in the midst of fearsome storm Henry, I spent a day with a colleague, Bill, in Chillingham Park in search of conifers. I hadn't realised that there is a publicly-accessible permissive path around, inside the park, waymarked as the Forest Walk. We parked by the chapel and were immediately met by enormous Giant Sequoia trees or Wellingtonias (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*). Their very thick spongy bark is their defence against forest fires in their native California and Oregon.

From there we walked clockwise, initially recording just the common plantation trees; Scots and Lodgepole Pine, Norway and Sitka Spruce, European and Hybrid Larch, Douglas Fir and Western Hemlock. The path rises steadily so that at its easternmost point you are high up on Ros Castle, 250m above the starting point. In the howling gale it wasn't easy to stand up.

The path then wound down again to lower ground, during which we had good if distant views of the wild cattle, and we came to an area near Chillingham Castle marked on the OS map as Yaxes Plantation. This turned out to be like a small arboretum. Sadly storm Henry and its predecessors this winter have felled many trees in the Park and this rather special area was no exception, but there were plenty of trees still available to be identified.



Hondo Spruce with needles on 'pegs'



Hondo Spruce cone

The first to catch our attention was clearly a spruce. All spruces (genus *Picea*) have needles that grow from small woody 'pegs' on the twigs. This tree also had spruce-like cones, although they were much smaller than those of the Sitka or Norway species. Reference to the book identified it as Hondo Spruce (*Picea jezoensis*) from the central mountains of Japan.



Close by was another Japanese forest tree, the Hijio (*Thujopsis dolabrata*) with very distinctive leaves and small cones (shown above).

Next came a big cedar, Deodar (*Cedrus deodara*). All true cedars of the genus *Cedrus* have clusters of needles a bit like those of larch, but they grow on small stubby side shoots and, crucially, remain evergreen unlike the deciduous larch. Deodar, like Cedar of Lebanon and Atlantic Cedar, is not uncommon in parks and large gardens.



Deodar needles

There were several good specimens of Western Red Cedar (*Thuja plicata*), showing the small yellow male cones at the ends of the twigs as shown in the photo below.



All so far so good. But then we came across several Firs. The diagnostic feature of the genus *Abies* is that the needles attach to the twigs with what look like small sucker pads. The two photos below show the foliage of two of these firs. We eventually made some tentative suggestions as to species, but certainty wasn't helped by the fact that my suggestions were different to Bill's. We shall return at the end of the month to have another look. In the photos below, the twig on the left shows very well the sucker pads at the attachment points of the needles, while the right hand twig has very distinctive up-swept needles.

Richard Poppleton



Fir species 1 showing sucker-like attachment pads



Fir species 2 with upturned needles

MEETING OF WEDNESDAY 22ND JANUARY 2016

An audience of 33 gathered to hear Dan Gordon tell us about some of the stored exhibits in the Great North Museum in Newcastle. Dan is Keeper of Collections at the museum.

Marmaduke Tunstall (pictured right) was an avid collector of natural history artefacts in the late 1700s. He was mainly an ornithologist and published the first major bird book in Britain. Tunstall died in 1790 and his collection was acquired by an Antiquary called



George Allan. In 1822 it was bought by The Newcastle Society and formed the basis for the formation of the Natural History Society of Northumberland, Durham and Newcastle upon Tyne Museum. In 1878 the Hancock Museum was built at Barrass Bridge by Albany and John Hancock (pictured right). Both Hancock brothers were keen naturalists and John was a taxidermist specialising in dramatic tableaux, recreating scenes from real life.



By 2006 the Hancock Museum (soon to become the Great North Museum) was stuffed to bursting with stored materials and they made a successful bid to the National Lottery to enable a proper basement storage facility to be created. The catalogue has about 300,000 entries, but some are multiple exhibits so there may in all be half a million individual items.

There are more than 3000 mounted birds, including the last Capercaillie shot in England. A Great Auk from the 1780s is probably the oldest surviving specimen and may be the only one from Britain and a Great Auk egg and bones were found in a cave deposit at Marsden on the Durham coast. There are also 8000 bird skins. These are easier to store and retain all the relevant research features. It is such a shame that studying birds at that time meant shooting them first.

The egg collection exceeds 5000. It used to be thought that the shape of a Guillemot egg prevented it from rolling off nesting ledges, but research using the eggs from this collection have disproved that theory and no-one can now explain their pyriform shape. There are very rare Montagu's Harrier eggs and the only known British nest and eggs of a Wood Sandpiper from Prestwick Carr near Newcastle

The mammalian exhibits range from hundreds of skins if mice from Africa to lions, tigers and other big game trophies. The Osteology collection exceeds 3000 and includes an Aurochs skull from a North East aggregate quarry and parts of a Sperm Whale skull accidentally trawled up by a Hartlepool skipper in 2011.

The pressed plant specimens exceed 40,000 and there is an 'economic botany' section whose contents are still relevant for medical and pharmacy students trying to understand the origins of many modern drugs and medicines.

Molluscs range from a 15kg Giant Clam to a whole case of minute mud snails. The 40,000+ Insect collection includes moths, butterflies, beetles and cockroaches. Many small creatures such as spiders become very fragile when dry so they are preserved in alcohol in the Spirit Collection.

Richard



What is PondNet?

PondNet is a national volunteer survey network collecting information about trends in pond quality and pond species, including uncommon plants and animals.

The network is being rolled out, county by county, over the next three years, so that by 2018 it covers all of England and Wales.

Make a difference

The aim is to provide much needed information that will tell us the extent to which freshwater biodiversity is under threat, and will help to guide the direction of freshwater policy.



Join a volunteer network to monitor ponds and the species they support

We are recruiting and training PondNet amphibian surveyors now!!!!

Amphibian survey techniques training sessions are being held in the following Northern counties:

CUMBRIA : Saturday 19th March 2016 (Carlisle area) & Sunday 20th March 2016 (Arnside area)

EAST RIDING OF YORKSHIRE : Saturday 9th April 2016

LANCASHIRE : Sunday 10th April 2016

NORTHUMBERLAND : Saturday 16th April 2016

TYNE & WEAR : Sunday 17th April 2016

Contact your regional officer (details below) for more details and to book a place!



Toad and Frog



eDNA survey for great crested newt



Night torching survey for great crested newt

Selecting a site to survey:

Amphibian surveys are based on a survey of all ponds in a 1km grid square to confirm presence/absence:

- You can choose one of our pre-selected survey sites. We arrange landowner permissions and once you've signed up, we'll send you a survey pack with all the information and survey forms you need to carry out the survey.
- If you can't find a site that suits, choose your own square, and using the standardised survey forms add it to the PondNet network.
- Afterwards, enter your data online or return your completed survey forms to us.

Contact

Anne Heathcote: Regional Project Officer Northern England
E: aheathcote@freshwaterhabitats.org.uk

PondNet is one of three projects within Freshwater Habitats Trust's People, Ponds and Water Project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund

Visit the webpage for more information: www.freshwaterhabitats.org.uk/projects/pondnet

MICRO-MOTHS – INCURVARIIDAE

This is a small group of 25 species many of which have been recorded in Northumberland. Some have larvae that feed in the buds and stems of shrubby plants such as Raspberry, Bramble and Rose, while others initially mine the leaves of trees or herbaceous plants before they cut out a case to live in, fall to the ground and thereafter feed on dead leaves. In both cases, this makes this group difficult to breed. Most are usually recorded as the adult moth. In many of the species, especially the Adela group, the male moths have very long antenna and display lekking behaviour in late spring and early summer, sometimes with twenty or more hovering in mid-air when a female is nearby.

Phylloporia bistrigella is a small species with a wingspan of 7-9 mm. The larvae mine Birch leaves before eating dead leaves on the ground from a case.



The Raspberry Moth, *Lampronia corticella* is slightly bigger at 9-12 mm. The larvae feed in the buds of Raspberry, but fortunately seems to prefer the wild variety.



Adela reaumurella has a wingspan of 14-18 mm, but the antenna of the males can be up to 28 mm in length. Although the larvae feed exclusively on leaf litter, the adults sometimes fly in large groups around the lower branches of trees such as Oak at about head height.



Nemophora degeerella has a wingspan of 17-23 mm and has even longer antenna at about 40-50 mm. The larvae are believed to initially feed in Bluebell flowers before eating leaf litter. This species also displays lekking behaviour, but generally lower down, over brambles or bracken for example.



Alan Fairclough.

WHAT WILDLIFE TO LOOK FOR IN MARCH

As I write this, we are in a period of cold weather with snow, sleet and rain. This period of unsettled weather has produced a large number of sightings of barn owls hunting in daylight. Jill and the kids regularly see birds on their way to schools in Belford, Wooler and Alnwick. It is a long time since, I have seen so many barn owls in such a short period of time in different places. I suspect that a large number of these birds are local breeders that have had to venture out in search of prey as the weather during the night has been too poor to hunt. Others will be last year's youngsters that have been kicked out of their parent's territories and a small number will be migrants from other parts of the UK. Hopefully, as the weather improves and sunrise gets earlier we will see less of this enigmatic species.

SPECIES OF THE MONTH: THE PRIMROSE *PRIMULA VULGARIS*

The primrose forms part of the characteristic ground flora of native broad-leaved woodlands, old hedge banks, dis-used railways lines, scrub and sand dunes. They can be found from Lindisfarne to the wooded valleys of the Cheviots. Everyone, will have their favourite spot where they can go and admire the resplendent yellow flowers and delicate scent on a warm spring day. Their name derives from the Medieval Latin meaning first rose – even though it is not related to the rose family.



Thrum flower

Primroses are perennials and their leaf rosettes can be seen in most months of the year. Primrose produces bisexual flowers of two types: pin and thrum. Even though both types of flowers contain both types of reproductive organs, male and female parts are not equally prominent. In the pin type of flowers, style (female reproductive organ) is exposed, while stamens (male reproductive organs) are located below. In the thrum type of flowers, stamens are prominent, while style is located deeply inside the flower. Pin-to-pin and thrum-to-thrum pollination is ineffective. This was one of the very earliest bits of genetics that I remember learning at school.

An unusual morphology of the primrose flowers ensures cross-pollination (flowers cannot perform self-pollination). Insects with long tongues (such as butterflies) or proboscis (such as the bee fly) collect pollen from one flower and transfer it on the style of another flower when they land on the primrose to feed on nectar.

Hopefully, the weather will improve and the first spring migrants will arrive by the end of March.

Jack Daw.



Pin flower

SIGHTINGS JANUARY 2016

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BIRDS	
Red-throated Diver	2 at Stag Rocks on 31 st 2 off Stag Rocks on 19 th 1 off Newton Links on 29 th
Whooper Swan	3 at Warkworth on 10 th 36 at Birling Carrs on 24 th
Pink-footed Goose	4000-5000 at Milfield Plain on 13 th
Brent Goose	200+ at Holy Island on 30 th
Gadwall	2 at Branton Ponds on 23 rd
Pochard	3 males at Branton Ponds on 25 th
Scaup	1 at Widdrington Lake on 10 th
Goldeneye	10+ at Branton Ponds on 3 rd
Goosander	3 at Branton Ponds on 7 th
Long-tailed Duck	12+ at Stag Rocks on 31 st 3 off Stag Rocks on 19 th
Common Scoter	40+ at Stag Rocks on 31 st
Black Scoter	1 at Stag Rocks on 31 st
Hen Harrier	1 near Lowick on 7 th
Merlin	1 at Warkworth on 24 th
Common Buzzard	3 in Hulne Park on 3 rd
Goshawk	1 at Smeafield on 4 th
Woodcock	2 at Milfield Plain on 13 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 20 th 1 at Smeafield on 1 st
Common Snipe	5 at Milfield Plain on 13 th 24 at Branton Ponds on 23 rd
Lapwing	400+ at Hedgeley on 2 nd 160 at Milfield Plain on 13 th 220 at Branton Ponds on 24 th 250 at Smeafield on 21 st
Golden Plover	Large flock over Alnmouth Beach on 1 st 15 at Milfield Plain on 13 th
Ringed Plover	12 at Buston Links on 8 th
Sanderling	85 at Buston Links on 8 th
Purple Sandpiper	30 at Stag Rocks on 19 th
Green Sandpiper	6-8 at Milfield Plain on 13 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 25 th
Greenshank	2 at Milfield Plain on 13 th
Black-tailed Godwit	1 at Cresswell Pond on 10 th
Long-billed Dowitcher	1 still at Cresswell Pond on 24 th
Ruff	1 at Cresswell Pond on 24 th
Kittiwake	2 at Branton Ponds on 23 rd
Little Gull	5 at Boulmer on 6 th 1 at Howick on 1 st 3 at Craster on 7 th 6 at Newbiggin on 10 th
Mediterranean Gull	4 at Newbiggin on 10 th
Common Guillemot	1 at Stag Rocks on 31 st
Razorbill	10+ at Stag Rocks on 31 st
Little Auk	2 at Craster on 7 th 2 at Newbiggin on 10 th
Stock Dove	7 at Howick on 23 rd 3 near Ros Castle on 23 rd
Tawny Owl	1 in Alnwick on 25 th
Barn Owl	1 at Branton Ponds on 6 th 1 at Wooler on 7 th 1 at Milfield Plain on 13 th 1 at Warkworth on 24 th 1 near Hipsburn on 24 th 2 at Branton Ponds on 28 th 1 at Yearle from 7 th to 31 st 1 near Hulne Park on 7 th 1 at New Bewick on 7 th 2 near Lilburn Station on 31 st 1 at Branton Middlesteads on 31 st 1 at Threestoneburn on 31 st 1 at Hedgeley on 31 st
Kingfisher	1 on River Aln on 1 st
Dipper	1 on Aln on 1 st also birds singing on Wooler Water on 7 th 1 in Harthope Valley on 11 th
Grey Wagtail	1 on River Aln on 1 st
Black Redstart	1 at Alnmouth Dunes on 23 rd
Stonechat	1 at Stag Rocks on 19 th
Fieldfare	30+ near Ros Castle on 23 rd 50+ at Branton Ponds on 23 rd 40 at Smeafield on 15 th

Redwing	6 at Branton Ponds on 14 th
Chiffchaff	1 at Howick on 23 rd and a second bird on 24 th
Willow Tit	1 near Hedgeley on 16 th 2 at Craster on 17 th
Marsh Tit	1 at Spindlestone on 31 st
Nuthatch	2 at Spindlestone on 31 st
Brambling	1 at Branton on 14 th 2 at Howick on 23 rd 1 at Yearle on 1 st and 14 th
Hawfinch	1 heard at Ellingham Churchyard
Tree Sparrow	14 at Branton on 11 th
Lesser Redpoll	12 at Birling Carrs on 24 th 2 at Branton Ponds on 25 th
Mealy Redpoll	At least 2 at Birling Carrs on 24 th
Coues Arctic Redpoll	1 at Birling Carrs from 10 th
Linnet	100 at Stag Rocks on 19 th
Twite	30-40 near Warkworth on 11 th
Yellowhammer	30+ at Branton Ponds on 1 st
Snow Bunting	10 at Budle Point on 31 st
MAMMALS	
Stoat	2 in ermine at Branton Ponds on 3 rd and on 23 rd
Roe Deer	1 at Branton Ponds on 3 rd and 3 on 7 th
Otter	1 found dead at roadside between Bamburgh and Seahouses on 5 th prints found in snow at Branton Ponds on 14 th
Red Squirrel	1 at Branton Ponds on 26 th
PLANTS	
Gorse	In flower at Wooler on 7 th
FUNGI	
Jelly Ear	At Branton Ponds on 7 th
Yellow Brain	At Branton Ponds on 7 th
INVERTEBRATES	
Early Moth	1 at Branton on 16 th
RAINFALL	193mm
OBSERVERS	G&R Bell, I&K Davison, J&N Dods, G Dodds, M Hall, P Jobson, V Knox, E Panton, R&J Poppleton, S Reay, A Russel-Wills, J Rutter, S Sexton, B Welch, S Williams.