Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna

www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk Email: redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

Newsletter 178 July 2016

Review of June 2016

MEETINGS:

Wednesday 28th Sept **Save our Magnificent Meadows.** **Speaker: Naomi Waite**

Final planned walk of the summer

Don't forget that on Saturday 6th August David Turnbull is leading a walk in Alnwick town – "The Flora and Fauna of Alnwick". Meet at 11.00am at the main cemetery entrance on South Road. The walk will be a little over two hours to cover about 3 miles, so it won't be a route march and there will be plenty of time to see some of the wildlife of the town that so many people pass by without thinking. Boots and appropriate clothing for the weather forecast on the day.

Please send sightings reports for July, no later than 6th August 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.

AWG welcomes contributions for the newsletter and items for inclusion should be submitted by the 12th of the month to redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

A Ringers Year

June 2016:

This month has been dominated by Barn Owls but it does not look like it's going to be a particularly good year for them. The rather poor and erratic spring (and now summer) weather is making life hard for this much loved bird (which is - let's be honest at the northern edge of its breeding range). Normally most pairs have well grown young by now and we have ringed many 'owlets' but this year most pairs still have eggs or very small young. There is no very obvious shortage of food – indeed several females have been observed asleep on their eggs surrounded by a 'larder' of voles and mice, supplied by the male bird. It will be the end of July or even August before I can really calculate occupancy and productivity. However, retrapping of adults has producing some more interesting outcomes. This includes a female found near Whittingham that was ringed as an owlet in its nest near Craster in 2014 (indicating some evidence of birds moving inland to occupy areas were owls are scarce after previous bad winters); a male with two young at Lee Moor which was originally ringed in its nest at Lesbury in May 2012 (part of an early brood); another bird from the same Lesbury nest is raising three young in a box near Boulmer that was only put up in February this year! Finally there is a female with two small young near Wingates that was originally ringed (as a breeding adult) in June 2008. Its originally home was in a box in a barn that collapsed in a snowy winter. This bird must be at least 11 years old; a very good age for a Barn Owl. I usually find a few Kestrel's nesting in purpose built boxes or owl boxes - but this year I am only aware of three and I suspect one of these has had the young kestrels stolen from it (that film of the novel 'Kes' has unfortunately a lot to answer for.

The strangest occurrence of this Barn Owl monitoring season was the discovery of a very alert but still down-covered Tawny Owl in a box near Middleton (the extreme south of my study area) on the 26th June. This is extremely late in the year to find a young tawny owlet and also in a box somewhat short of tree cover!

I did monitor the small breeding passerine birds (Tits, Tree Sparrows etc.) at my usual sites near Powburn, Longhorsley and Doxford; with trainees working for their BTO pulli ringing endorsement. I will calculate the occupancy rates when I get time to put the information into the BTO's database but it has not been a particularly good year. Again the weather pushed everything into June (instead of May) and some broods of tits just perished in their nests. The only bright point was the finding of three Redstart nests on the same farm near Longhorsley.

While continuing to work on the Barn Owls I will be opening up the Howick Arboretum Ringing Station from July which will continue on most Saturday (from the 16th) mornings – and at least one weekday morning – until October. If you want to come along and learn something or just take pictures you are very welcome; just look for us on the edge of the Howick car park (before 12:00 noon) or get in touch to check days/dates.

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

Plant Corner

I'll start with an amendment. In the June Plant Corner I said that Spring Vetch only flowered in April and May, but in fact during the Branton bio-blitz on 3rd July we found some still in flower. So much for what the books say – or perhaps it's a measure of how damp and cool our spring and early summer has been so that many plants have been held back in their normal flowering timings.

I want to concentrate this month on small grasses, partly because we found a good one at Branton and partly because I saw one that was new to me for the first time at Brada Quarry in late June.

The classic small grass is probably **Annual Meadow-grass** *(Poa annua)*. It can be tempting to assume

that any small leafy-looking grass on paths and tracks is this species, but you need to look at what you've found a bit more carefully to be sure it's not a small, trampled plant of other grass species. All *Poa* grasses have leaves with what are described as 'boat-shaped' or 'hooded' ends. But do be aware that this genus has been (semi-jokingly) described as "a genus of 500 identical species". Fortunately British Meadow-grass species aren't nearly as impossible as that implies.

Poa annua can often be picked out because of the general appearance of its flowering heads and the fact that many of its leaves have transverse wrinkles. You can see both of these in the photos. Despite its small size it has its uses because it often appears very quickly on bare soil and helps to stabilise the soil before other larger plants can get a hold.

Silver Hair-grass

Next there are two species of Hair-grass. **Silver Hair-grass** *(Aira caryophyllea)*, seen in the upper photo, and **Early Hair-grass** *(Aira praecox)*, in the lower one, are often referred to as delicate annuals.

Early Hair-grass

They rarely grow to more than 20 or 30 cm high and, as the name suggests their leaves are very narrow and hair-like. You tend to find them growing on very thin soil over the surface of rocks on acidic and sandy soils, although A. *caryophyllea*, perhaps because it is a bit taller, can cope with short turf. The individual plants of both species can be very small and easily overlooked unless you are specifically seeking them out. In a few places I have seen them growing together and then you can more easily see how they differ, particularly in the appearance of the flower heads.

I did look for both at Branton in July, but failed to spot either of them. You'd expect one or both to be there because the conditions look about right. However, one small grass that was at Branton has the fascinating name **Squirreltail Fescue** *(Vulpia bromoides)*. It is so called because each of the groups of florets in the flowering spike has long quite stiff hairs (called awns), so the whole effect is a little bit like a minute squirrel's tail if you employ a bit of imagination. It grows on

quite bare stony or gravelly substrates and even in the wall tops of walls. When we found it at Branton it was getting towards the end of its life and mostly you only knew there was a grass there at all if you spotted the brownish mature flower heads, only about 5cm high.

Squirreltail Fescue

The photos show a fresh plant in its typical habitat and one of the squirreltail flowering spikes.

The last species was the best for me. Brada Quarry is south of Budle Bay in a Whin Sill outcropping. For a long time the top of the quarry, which has quite a high and rather crumbling quarry face, has been a SSSI. Because it is whin sill rock the substrates are basic rather than acidic and the flora is relatively unusual for North Northumberland. The quarry floor has, for many years, been an open area used, or misused, by inappropriate activities such as youths with motorbikes. Now it is being developed with holiday chalets and the owners are intending to allow the back of the area against the quarry walls to become a semi-managed nature area.

We got permission to survey the SSSI and to go into the quarry floor area where, among other interesting botanical things, we found **Fern Grass** *(Catapodium rigidum)*. A bit like the Fescue, it wasn't easy to spot, but once you had your eye in there was a reasonable amount of it. You can see from the photo why it is called **Fern Grass**, but you have to remember that it is only about 10cm high, although the books say it can get to more than twice that. I'd never seen it before, but now, whenever I'm in an area of basic rocky soils, I shall try to find more of it. Swan's Flora says it is most often to be seen in the whin sill areas at or inland of our North Northumberland coastal strip.

Fern Grass

Richard Poppleton

Branton Ponds Bioblitz

A bioblitz is a group activity in which the aim is to find and record the maximum number of organisms in a particular area on a particular day or days. Inevitably the range of organisms that can be covered depends on the numbers and range of expertise of those taking part.

In early July AWG carried out a bioblitz at the Branton Ponds nature reserve west of Powburn. The aggregates company, Cemex, created the reserve at least 20 years ago as part of their agreement to be allowed to extract gravel from this area beside the River Breamish. Recently John Carr-Ellison from the Hedgeley Estate acquired the reserve from Cemex and he has involved a number of AWG members in a small group to advise him on the best management of the site. For any good management regime for a wildlife site, you need to know what's actually there, so we agreed to carry out as much surveying as we could cope with and this bioblitz was a major part of that.

Poplar Hawk Moth

Elephant Hawk Moth

On Saturday night, 2nd July, Stewart Sexton and Alan Fairclough arrived on site with five moth traps and a generator to power the lights. Almost as soon as the lights had been switched on at about 10.30 the traps began attracting moths. Meanwhile Keith Davison, Gill Sanders and Richard Poppleton sallied forth around the ponds with the AWG bat detector. The few bats detected seemed to be Pipistrelles and, despite our rather amateur efforts at interpreting what the detector was showing, it seemed probable that we had both Common Pipistrelles and Soprano Pipistrelles which transmit their echo-location sounds at different frequencies.

Coronet

Stewart and Ian Davison stayed on site all night with the moth traps and at 9.00am on the Sunday several of us turned up to see what had been caught. The most startling were the Hawk Moths. There were about ten of the very large grey Poplar Hawk Moths and a couple of the amazingly coloured Elephant Hawk Moths. From a lepidoterist's point of view many of the smaller moths were more interesting and one moth, a Coronet, was a particularly good find. It has only been recorded four times before in North Northumberland and not since 1997.

The overall total was an excellent 362 moths of 75 different species. It really helps that Stewart and Alan have such expertise with moth identification, and Keith and Ian are no slouches either.

Then at 10.00am a decent-sized group joined Keith (who had come third on the 20 mile Chevy Chase route the day before and was feeling somewhat tired!) on a bird walk. They recorded 49 species on the reserve and then went on down the Breamish to make a full morning of it. Richard led a seven-strong plant hunting group. The total number of species identified was 155 and when these are put together with the species recorded in May we have a list of 196. Not at all bad for a small site and there may be more to come later in the summer.

As people did their surveying any other species noticed were recorded, although, apart from the butterflies and dragon/damselflies, these were very casual records. Stewart had recently bought various collecting nets

for AWG and it was a pity that we weren't able to put these to use on this occasion. But there's a limit to what one can achieve on a single day. Mick McMahon took this great photo of a Small Copper on a Fox-and-Cubs flower head.

All in all it was a successful effort. 16 AWG members got involved, plus one or two other people from the North Northumberland Bird Club and all seemed to have enjoyed their day.

Many thanks to all who came along. Do remember that the survey effort at Branton is on-going and anyone else who wants to contribute is very welcome to visit the site to see what they can find. ALL records are helpful. If you go to Branton and end up with a list of things, please don't keep the records to yourself, but send them to:

Richard (rich.titlington@btinternet.com or Richard Poppleton, Greystone Cottage, Titlington Mount, Alnwick NE66 2EA).

Stewchat

Hello all, long time no see! Sorry about the writer's block of late, but things have been a bit busy at Howick over the last couple of months what with work commitments and two lots of holidays to fit in.

This year looks like its setting up to be the worst wettest summer we've had in a while (if that can be possible over recent years). We scarcely get two consecutive days without rain at some point. This is really frustrating when your interest lies in things entomological during the bird free summer months!

I must also admit to having some serious lack of motivation after having a fantastic two weeks bird watching at various migration hotspots around the Great Lakes of North America in May. Even our trip to Suffolk in June was mainly spent in relaxation mode after the all-out birding onslaught of the previous month.

Figure 1: Summer Tanager from Michigan, USA.

So I hope to get things back to normal for the start of the Autumn migration here in August.

Figure 2: Swallowtail from Strumpshaw Fen, Norfolk.

So back at home, I have done a little moth trapping in the garden plus and nice overnight visit to Branton Pits. Here we caught 362 moths of 75 species which is an excellent total in a cool wet summer. The best of this bunch was a Coronet, which was only the 5th record for North Northumberland. Funnily enough, a second one was caught by Ian and Keith Davison later in the week.

Figure 3: The Coronet, taken at Branton.

On a rare sunny day we enjoyed a nice morning with some scarce butterflies near Debdon Plantation next to Cragside. The Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary is very sparsely distributed in the county, favouring the bogs and mosses over Kielder way rather than our patch. At first we struggled but as soon as the sun popped out the fritillaries took to the wing. We ended up with 12+ seen right next to the main road down into Rothbury. While trying to take some photos I was lucky enough to find my first Northumberland Slow Worm too.

Figure 4: Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary, male.

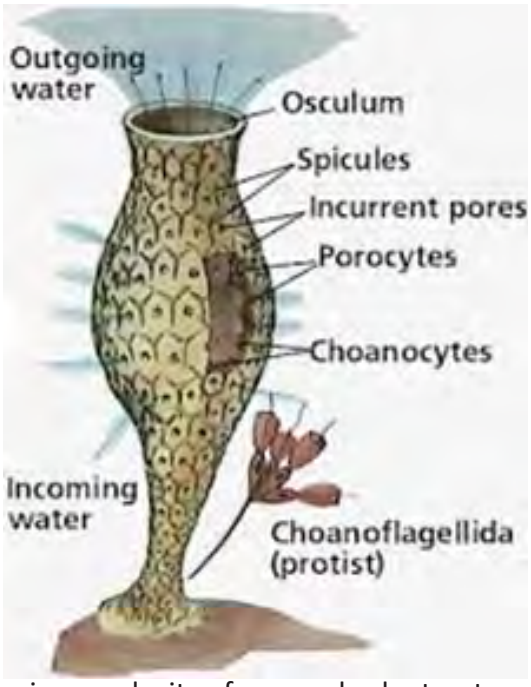
Stewart Sexton, Howick.

Invertebrate Corner

Sponges:

Sponges are sedentary, filter-feeding animals that range in height from a few millimetres to 1 or 2 metres. Body shape ranges from cups, fans, tubes and barrels to crusts (see photos below).

Sponges belong to the primitive Phylum of invertebrates known as the **Porifera** (pore-bearing organisms) – which refers to the numerous perforations on their body surface. These holes are of two types: smaller and very abundant ostia, through which food-particles and oxygen-bearing water enter the body; and larger oscula, through which the water exits. Internal cells bearing whip-like flagella beat to create the current that circulates the water. These, together with flat, surface cells represent the two most common cell types in the sponge body.



Increase in complexity of sponge body structure is only possible by out-pushings of the body wall. However, increasing complexity limits the ability of oxygen and food to reach deeper cells, restricting growth. It is thought that this structural condition limited the evolutionary development of sponges early in their history (sponges arose around 580 million years ago, in the Precambrian Era). However, despite remaining in a primitive condition, sponges have radiated into many forms, with current estimates being in the region of 8,000 species.

All sponges are aquatic. Most species are marine, with only around 150 species living in fresh water (photo below left). Most sponges are sessile, typically living firmly attached (and sometimes taking the shape of) submerged objects. Some species are capable of boring into rock substrates, whereas others live on soft sediments at great depths (> 1,000 m). They live in all the major oceans, including tropical and polar regions. Although most sponge groups are cosmopolitan, some are more abundant in certain localities. For example,

glass sponges (Class Hexactinellida; see photo of silica skeleton below middle) are the dominant sponges in Antarctic waters, whereas calcareous sponges (Class Calcarea; below right) are more common in shallow coastal waters.

Some sponges are highly coloured (blue-green, green, red, or brown), due to pigments contained in some of their cells. However, in others the colour comes from symbiotic algae. In many sponges, structural strength of the body wall is enhanced by the incorporation of inert materials. These are typically either spicules of silica or calcium carbonate (see photo below), or spongin – a protein uniquely found in sponges. Possession and shape of these materials form the basis of classification of sponge species.

As sponges are primitive animals, their biological processes tend to be relatively uncomplicated. For example, there is no digestive tract, nor is there an excretory system – with products of digestion simply expelled through the oscula. Neither are there any respiratory systems – with the acquisition of oxygen and the removal of carbon dioxide being functions of

individual cells. There is no evidence of the presence of nerve cells in sponges.

There are no special organs for reproduction. Sex cells are generally derived from modified structural cells. Most sponges are hermaphrodites - that is they possess both male and female gametes - with ova and sperm being produced at different times in any one individual to prevent self-fertilization (inbreeding). Some species liberate fertilized eggs, while others incubate their larvae. Some sponges reproduce asexually, with the formation of gemmules being one method that allows survival of the sponge through adverse conditions – particularly in species which live in freshwater ponds that periodically dry up (see photo below of a gemmule protected by an outer-layer of spicules).

Sponges also have high regenerative powers and young sponges will develop from accidental fragmentation of the adult body. As an extreme example of these powers, sponges have been ground up and passed through a sieve in the laboratory only to be found, several hours later, re-constructing themselves into a new sponge.

For many centuries (since at least Roman times) sponges been harvested for commercial purposes - as their pore-filled bodies provide high water absoption and retention, properties useful in a variety of household activities. More recently, this has been

replaced by the development of synthetic sponges – but bathroom loofahs still fetch a premium price (see photos below).

Although their exact origin is uncertain, there can be little doubt that sponges diverged early from the main line of invertebrate evolution and have given rise to no other members of the Animal Kingdom - they are considered by most biologists to be a dead-end phylum. However, their importance in marine ecosystems is unparalleled. For example, on tropical coral reefs, they have a reef-cleaning function - achieving a water filtration capacity of more than 50,000 times their own volume in a day.

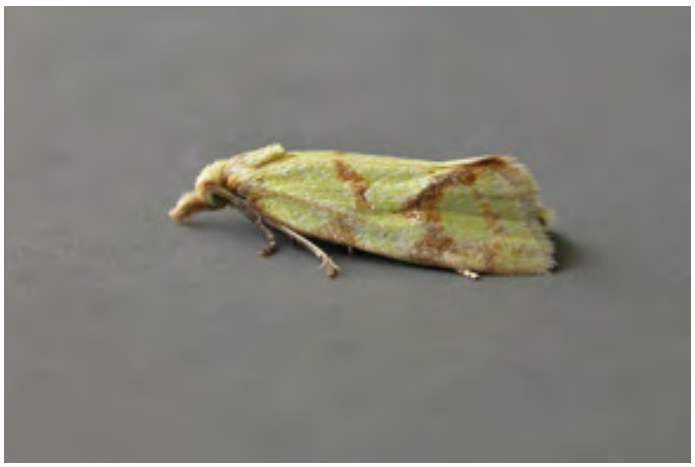
Dudley Williams
Newton on the Moor

Micro-moths – Tortricidae - Cochylidae

The Tortricidae are a very large group comprising about 360 British species, so it will take me some months to do them justice. I will start the Cochylidae; a genus with 47 British species, of which only 16 have been recorded in Northumberland. The larvae of many of them feed in the flowers and/or seedheads of specific plants, with a few feeding inside the stems. Most fly on warm afternoons and evenings with some coming to light traps. They are quite lethargic fliers and can sometimes be found resting on their food-plants. Four of the commoner examples are shown below.

Eupoecilia angustana (Wingspan 10-15 mm)
Relatively common: May – July
Usually on Yarrow or Plantains

Agapeta zoegana (Wingspan 15-23 mm)
Common (mainly coastal): May – September
On Knapweeds and Small Scabious



Agapeta hamana (Wingspan 15-25 mm)
Common: June – August
On Thistles

Aethes rubigana (Wingspan 15-19 mm)
Fairly common: June – August
On Greater Burdock.

Alan Fairclough

What wildlife to look for in June 2016

So far the summer weather has been a little disappointing. Overcast, wet and occasionally cold conditions have prevailed. Since the last newsletter there is not a lot to report. Male Quail have been heard calling in both the College Valley and on the coast near Elwick. Green Sandpipers (2) were again on the River Glen near Ewart and Bottle-nosed Dolphins (2-3) were seen off Boulmer on the 10th July.

In the House Martin nest at 5 Front Street, Glanton, the first brood has almost fledged. There is a lot of chattering from the youngsters and the window ledge is filling up with guano! It is hoped that the pair will again try a second brood. Interestingly, there have been some large southerly movements of young Sand Martins and Swallows on the coast in the last week.

Species of the month: The Buntings

As I write this article, the breeding season is coming to an end. There is one family of birds where the breeding season will continue well into August. These are the Buntings: Yellowhammer and Reed bunting.

In the past Corn Bunting would have been on this list but this species is all but extinct in Northumberland. This has been recognised by the County Bird Recorder (Northumberland & Tyneside Bird Club) as a full description and where possible photographs are required to get this species accepted. This is a sad and quick demise for a species that was seen as a pest in the 1940's!

Yellowhammer

The Yellowhammer is a relatively common bird of our farmland, although numbers are in decline even in Northumberland. It is a bird of arable margins where there are hedges, grassland where there are hedges or Gorse and can be found on the upland fringe. Nesting studies by the RSPB and the BTO have shown that early in the season pairs nest close to the ground. Often these nests are unsuccessful. Later in the season as hedges and scrub come into leaf they nest higher in the bush thus increasing the success rate of the chicks to fledging. Throughout most of the year adults eat mainly seeds and small berries. In the breeding season, the diet changes to insects especially Grasshopper, Crickets and Craneflies. The abundance of these insects is another reason for successful fledging.

Reed Bunting

The black headed male is a common bird of reed fringed wetlands and ditches. They can also be found in areas of rushes which are very wet. Recently this species has taken to nesting in oilseed rape. Males will sing/ hold territory well into August. The brown female is less distinguishable but can be seen close to the nest site if you are patient. Studies have shown that over 50% of chicks are not fathered by the pair male but are the result of adulterous liaisons – this is the highest recorded rate in any species! Throughout the year, seeds are generally taken. A good supply of large Insects are very important for healthy chicks.

Hopefully, the sun will appear as the school holidays start.

Jackdaw

SIGHTINGS JUNE 2016	
BIRDS	
Grey Heron	Nest with 3 young on 30th at Branton Ponds
Brent Goose	4 Pale Bellied at Fenham Flats on 5th
Canada Goose	30 over Smeafield on 8th
Shoveler	3 at Branton Ponds on 2nd
Eider	59 at Fenham Flats including 4 females with 9 chicks on 5th
Hobby	1 at Heighley Gate on 22nd
Osprey	1 at Fenham Flats on 5th
Quail	At Smeafield on 28th 1 in College Valley on 30th
Woodcock	2 at Beanley Woods on 18th
Bar-tailed Godwit	127 at Fenham Flats on 5th
Lesser Black-backed Gull	31 at Branton Ponds on 2nd
Herring Gull	28 at Branton Ponds on 2nd
Little Tern	3 at Guile Point on 5th
Arctic Tern	72 at Guile Point on 5th
Sandwich Tern	5 at Guile Point on 5th
Guillemot	1 at Guile Point on 5th
Short-eared Owl	1 at Fenham le Moor on 3rd
Barn Owl	1 at Branton Ponds on 3rd 1 at Scremerston roundabout on 3rd
Tawny Owl	2+ at Branton Ponds on 3rd
Nightjar	2 at Beanley Woods on 18th
Kingfisher	3 at Branton Ponds on 3rd 1 at Fleetham on 26th
Whinchat	1 near Branton on 25th 2 in College Valley on 30th
Common Whitethroat	Several young birds at Branton Ponds on 22nd
Spotted Flycatcher	1 at Branton on 22nd
Common Crossbill	3+ in College Valley on 30th
REPTILES	
Adder	2 at Branton Ponds on 26th 14 at Branton Ponds on 30th
Slow Worm	1 at Branton Ponds on 30th
MAMMALS	
Badger	1 at Hedgeley on 2nd
Red Squirrel	1 at Branton on 7th and again on 9th 1 in Branton garden on 8th and 2 on 22nd
Grey Squirrel	1 at Old Felton on 8th
Roe Deer	2 young still with spots at Branton on 28th
Hedgehog	1 at Bamburgh on 2nd
Common Pipistrelle	Several at Branton Ponds on 3rd
Soprano Pipistrelle	2 at Branton Ponds on 3rd
Otter	2 at Branton Ponds on 7th
INVERTEBRATES	
Orange Tip	1 at Branton Ponds on 2nd
Large Skipper	1 at Branton Ponds on 23rd
Red Admiral	1 at Branton Ponds on 4th

Small Tortoishell	3 at Smeafield on 7th
Wall	2 at Fenham Flats on 5th
Painted Lady	20+ at Fenham Flats on 5th 1 at Bamburgh on 23rd
Dark-green Fritillary	1 at Fenham Flats on 5th
Meadow Brown	1 at Branton Ponds on 22nd
Small Heath	Several at Fenham Flats on 5th
Micropterix aruncella	2 at Branton Ponds on 30th
Nemophora degeerella	7 at Branton Ponds on 30th
Small Argent & Sable	1 in College Valley on 19th
Poplar Hawkmoth	2 at Branton on 3rd and on 15th
Elephant Hawkmoth	2 at Branton on 25th
Small Elephant Hawkmoth	1 at Branton on 15th
Shark	1 at Branton on 21st
Common Swift	1 at Branton on 3rd
Small Angleshades	1 at Branton on 3rd
Diamondback moth	11 at Branton on 3rd and 34 on 7th
Mother of Pearl	1 at Branton on 7th
Peppered Moth	3 at Branton on 7th
Clouded Silver	1 at Branton on 7th
Lunar Thorn	2 at Branton on 7th
Bordered White	1 at Branton on 7th
Scalloped Hazel	1 at Branton on 7th
Campion	1 at Branton on 7th
Scorched Wing	1 at Branton on 7th
Ghost moth	1 at Branton on 10th and on 25th
Pale Prominent	1 at Branton on 8th
Four-spotted Chaser	1 at Alnwick Moor on 3rd
Large-red Damselfly	Several at Alnwick Moor on 4th
Zebra Spider	1 at Branton on 10th
Longhorn Beetle	1 (probably Rhagium bifasciatum) at Alnwick Moor on 4th
PLANTS	
Heath Bedstraw	In College Valley on 30th
Mouse-eared Hawkweed	In College Valley on 30th
Pignut	In College Valey on 30th
RAINFALL	86 mm
OBSERVERS	I&K Davison, G Dodds, S Fallaw, P Jobson, S Reay, D Taylor, D Walker.