

Alnwick Wildlife Group



Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna

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Review of January 2014 NEWSLETTER 149

NEXT MEETING: WEDNESDAY 26TH MARCH 2014

SPEAKER: RON MCCOMBE - NORTHUMBRIAN WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY.

This will be an excellent talk by a local wildlife photographer with a big reputation. Ron was Scottish wildlife photographer in 2010 and there should be some of the best photographs of the season. Previous talks have been superb.

What to look for in March

Rain continues to fall but at least it is not quite as wet as further south. It is interesting to note that spring appears to be on its way; large flocks of lapwing are making their way inland, adders are starting to appear and frogs and toads are more visible.

A tip for looking for amphibians at this time of year is to watch where the grey herons are feeding. In the Till Valley and elsewhere, grey herons can often be found standing in the strangest of places and this is often a sign that the frog and toads are on the move. Many of these sites areas are not visited, by the grey herons outside the 'amphibian' season. Another animal that takes advantage of the abundance of amphibians is the otter. Some of these animals deliberately go back to amphibian 'spawning' pools and gorge themselves. The tell-tale signs are 'skinned' remains of frogs and their gelatinous egg casing lying at the side of a pond. It is worth checking any body of water which is suitable for breeding amphibians – or follow the herons!

March will see a noticeable increase in bird song. Many of our commonest birds are in full song by the middle of the month. This is a great time to go out into the woodland and try to learn bird song. I was hopeless at identifying bird song until I was in my late teens. I had tried using tapes, cd's and the calls from books but it was very never successful – I became more and more confused. I decided to change tack and instead of just using my ears, I went looking for the bird. This association of the bird and the song made a huge difference and I quickly memorised the avian choristers that make up our dawn chorus. Where ever I can I still use this method today – home or abroad e.g. hawfinch singing in Cumbria last year or Scops owl calling in France.

If the weather is warm and sunny and the willow catkins come into flower then the first of the queen bumblebees will start to appear. This period can be fraught with hazards – caught out in cold snowy shower can be her downfall. Yellow dotted in the black torpid bodies of bumblebees can be a common site.

By the middle to the end of the month, the first of the summer migrants will have arrived. Wheatears will be in the hills along with an early ring ouzel, sand martins will be hunting riparian corridors and Sandwich terns will be off Stag Rocks at Bamburgh.

Hopefully, the weather will improve and we can get out and enjoy the best of early spring.

Jack Daw

PLANT CORNER

I know late February is still a bit early for most flowers to start appearing, but it's only a month or so before proper spring will arrive (I hope).

Some species adopt the strategy, in woodland, of completing their flowering cycle before the tree canopy shades them out – like bluebells, wood sorrel and wood anemones. Others do something similar even if they are growing in open grassland and one of these is **Barren Strawberry** (*Potentilla sterilis*). As the name suggests, these plants do not produce succulent, edible fruit and not only are they a different species from true strawberries, they are in a different genus and so are more closely related to plants like Tormentil (*P. erecta*) and Creeping Cinquefoil (*P. reptans*) than to strawberries in the genus *Fragaria*.

We will all have a mental picture of what strawberry plants look like because of our familiarity with **Garden Strawberry** (*Fragaria x ananassa*) and mostly we would recognise a smaller version of that hybrid species growing in the wild. Some people assume that fruiting plants in the wild are just poor specimens of Garden Strawberry, but they are actually a species in their own right, **Wild Strawberry** (*Fragaria vesca*). Wild Strawberry fruit are often regarded as having a better flavour than their cultivated cousins, but because they are so small they don't represent a viable crop.

This month's Plant Corner will attempt to distinguish between these three species so that you can tell them apart when you find them.

Garden Strawberry is large and develops long runners (or stolons) that enable the plants to spread sideways to where the runners touch the ground and root from the leaf nodes. But if you were to find a garden escape specimen that was a rather small plant you can look for the glabrous (hairless) upper surfaces of the leaflets; the fact that the terminal leaflet in each cluster of three has a rounded base and the fact that the small achenes ('pips') are buried in the surface of the swollen red fruit, rather than projecting proud of the surface.

Wild Strawberry is a much smaller plant altogether with much shorter runners and leaves with slightly hairy upper surfaces and surface achenes on the fruit. The main problem is to tell Wild Strawberry apart from Barren Strawberry when they are at the flowering stage before any fruit are produced.

For this you need to look with some care at the leaves. At the tip of each leaf is a central tooth. In the Wild species this tooth is as long as or longer than the two teeth either side of it, while in the Barren Strawberry the terminal tooth is shorter than those on either side. In addition the white petals of Barren Strawberry are short, no longer than the sepals, and have distinct gaps between them in which you can see the green sepals. The Wild Strawberry flowers have petals longer than the sepals and with sides that meet or overlap.

Armed with this information you should be able to become confident about knowing which type of strawberry plant you've found in the countryside.



- A. Garden Strawberry leaves showing glossy glabrous surfaces.
- B. Wild Strawberry leaves showing terminal tooth longer than the ones either side.
- C. Barren Strawberry leaves showing terminal tooth shorter than the ones on either side.



- D. Wild strawberry flowers showing overlapping petals
- E. Wild Strawberry fruit with achenes on the outside of the red swollen receptacle
- F. Barren Strawberry flowers showing the gaps between the petals.

Please send sightings reports for February, no later than 6th March 2014 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 Blog!

No, not Frog! Blog!!

Hi all!

Just a quick reminder that the AWG Blog –

www.alnwickwildlifegroup.blogspot.com

is a great complimentary website to go along with the Alnwick Wildlife Group site in an informal way. A 'blog' (short for web log) is just a diary type website with posts published and displayed along a timeline. The most recent thing being the first item you see at the top, getting older the further you scroll down.

Members are welcome to submit any sightings, articles, comments or photos, drawings, paintings etc for inclusion. No need to be apprehensive, it is there for the use of everyone whether you have been an intrepid explorer to the Amazon or you take photos of wildflowers around your garden, please send me your info!

If you are unsure what to send, you can even hand me something written on paper at one of our indoor meetings and I'll get it on there for you. Easy. 500 words or one sentence, all will be welcome.

If you are happy to write and email via your computer, just email submissions to me at stewchat@btinternet.com.



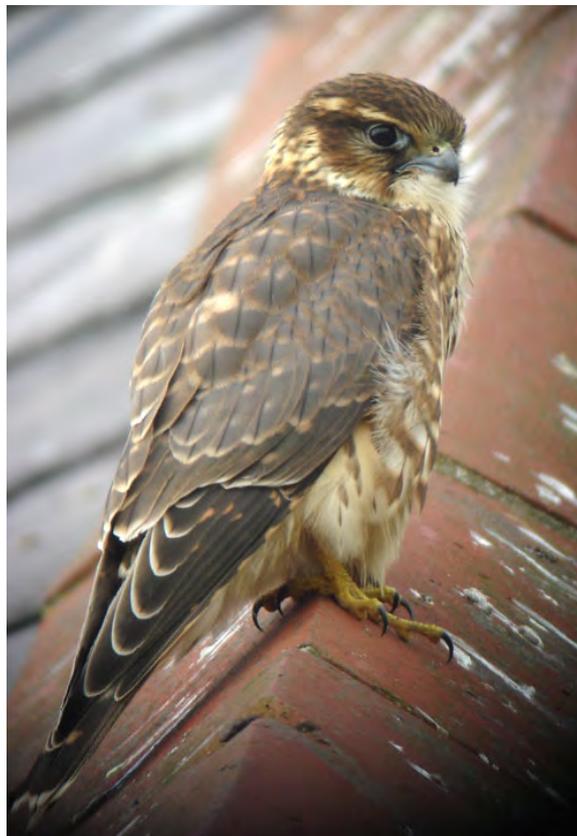
Stewart Sexton, Howick

Stewchat...

What a strange month January has been. No snow in the lowlands and scarcely even a frost, just wet and windy dull days.

Around Howick, some of the older trees have taken a battering, including one nice old, ivy covered, Ash in the copse next to our garden that was split into three pieces during one particularly fierce storm. I took some shelter in here in the aftermath, mainly because our dog will not walk out when the rain is coming down at 45 degrees, and in the short visit my only Woodcock of this winter flushed out into the teeth of the wind.

One species that has become quite scarce in winter in recent years is the Merlin. They used to be a bird you could expect to provide an exciting highlight on most coastal days in the field, especially in the run up to Christmas, but now, I struggle to get a sighting. Bearing this in mind, it was a pleasant surprise to have an immature male Merlin dash right over my head while I was doing some garden pruning. The garden birds fell silent with only some ventriloquial 'seeps' to show that there was any life at all. I hope I can get another view of him before this winter is out.



Imm male Merlin

Later, on the same day as the Merlin, a familiar call in the wood along by our village lane end gave away the presence of a wintering Chiffchaff feeding in and out of the Ivy, cladding a roadside tree.

Walks between local storms continued to provide some interest with species such as the Snow Bunting that flew north, low, over Seahouses Farm, Grey Partridges starting their territorial calling, and up beside the Hips Heugh, a dancing flock of Goldfinches and Linnets were a delight to the eye.



Goldfinch flock

Other wildlife was quite scarce, but a couple of moth species, Mottled Umber and Pale Brindled Beauty seemed attracted to the glow of my 'hi-viz' night time dog walking coat and a Stoat dashed over the road in front of the car.



Left, Pale Brindled Beauty, Right, Mottled Umber

Although the nights have been mild enough for some winter moth trapping, the wind and rain lashing down made it seem hardly worthwhile. I've not had it lit since the 30th November, a very long sabbatical indeed! As I write, it is February and the days are lengthening. I'm sure that soon, I can sneak the trap on hoping to get an early species or two such as Spring Usher or Dark Chestnut. I'll be pleased when it happens.

In the meantime, my new camera has been getting some practice despite of the low light levels, and I am very pleased with my results...



Dunnock.



Turnstone

Stewart Sexton, Howick.

Meeting of Wednesday 29th January 2014

With 36 members and visitors present, George produced an ash twig with fruits and speculated that perhaps only bullfinches eat them. But it was suggested that red squirrels do so too. He then showed a small, but probably adult, rabbit skull in very good condition.

The speaker was **John Almond**, Chairman of the Alnwick and District Natural History Society, who spoke about *British Islands*. There are 369 of them with the majority round the Scottish coast and these later are mostly accessible by Caledonian McBrayne ferries, using Oban as a base.

John first gave a flavour of the physical features of some islands, both natural and man-made. These range from coastal arches and sea stacks and the famous 'ringing stone' on the Atlantic shore of Tiree to the stone circles and stone-age huts of Orkney.



Lismore, John's favourite island, has its ruined castle; Islay has Celtic crosses, distilleries and the round church at Bowmore; Orkney has the Italian Chapel built by Italian prisoners of war and Mull has the coloured houses on the harbour at Tobermory. The main street in Castlebay on Barra was the set for Whisky Galore. Industrial activity includes quarrying, lime production and peat digging.



He then picked out some of the island wildlife highlights. Botanically there are the marvellous snowdrops at Bridgend on Islay, masses of sea pinks on Holy Island, orchids on Lismore, rhododendrons on Lundy and flag irises in the wetter areas on many islands – a habitat which attracts corncrakes. On Welney Island there is a big lesser black-backed gull colony and several Scottish islands have arctic and great skua nesting areas and in all these cases you are likely to be attacked if you get too close. There are sea eagles on Rum and choughs and the famous wintering geese on Islay. Mammals include the eponymous ponies on Shetland and Icelandic ponies on Rum which are used to carry hunters during the annual red deer culls. Otters are numerous on Mull. Hedgehogs are still a problem in parts of the Uists, while the presence of roe deer and hares on Islay raises questions about how they got there. Common and grey seal colonies are a feature of many island coasts.



John recommended St Mary's Island for wintering waders, Coquet Island for the roseate terns and the Farnes for their amazing breeding bird colonies as well as for the seals. Holy Island has excellent botanical interest, sadly including the invasive alien pirri-pirri bur.

He finished with comments about his expeditions to Bass Rock where the size of the bird colonies means there is very limited access. If you do pay the exorbitant fee to be taken there you are left for six hours in a very small area to contemplate and photograph gannets. Then there was St Kilda where at the third attempt he managed to get ashore from the small boat that had taken seven hours in very rough seas to reach the island from Leverburgh in South Harris.



	SIGHTINGS JANUARY 2014
BIRDS	
Red Throated Diver	3 at Berwick on 1 st 12+ off Stag Rocks on 4 th and 6 th also 10 on 16 th
Black Throated Diver	1 off Stag Rocks on 4 th and 6 th also 1 on 23 rd
Great Northern Diver	2 at Stag Rocks on 6 th
Little Grebe	4 at Cresswell Pond on 5 th 1 at Hauxley on 5 th
Slavonian Grebe	1 at Hauxley on 5 th 2 at Elwick on 17 th 1 at Guile Point on 19 th
Gannet	50+ at Berwick on 1 st
Cormorant	100+ at Berwick on 1 st
Shag	30+ at Berwick on 1 st
Glossy Ibis	1 near Lynemouth on 19 th and 22 nd
Little Egret	1 at Budle Bay on 7 th
Greylag Goose	460 at Chesterhill on 17 th
Brent Goose	135(Pale Bellied) at Chesterhill on 17 th 119 at Fenham Flats on 19 th (including 4 Dark Bellied) 750 near Elwick on 24 th 6 at Alnmouth on 31 st
Pink-foot Goose	150 at Cresswell Pond on 22 nd 1700 near Elwick on 24 th
Bean Goose	3 of the Tundra race at Buston Links on 25 th
Barnacle Goose	250 at Harpers Heugh on 4 th 160+ at Chesterhill on 17 th 1 near Elwick on 24 th 240 at Ross Farm on 25 th 200 at Budle Bay on 16 th
White Fronted Goose	3 at Woodhorn on 5 th 1 near Elwick on 24 th
Gadwall	1 on Branton Ponds on 8 th
Mallard	40 at Berwick on 1 st 40+ at Elwick on 17 th
Scaup	1 at Newton Pool on 30 th
Shoveler	2 at Druridge Pools on 22 nd
Pintail	Several at Druridge Pools on 22 nd
Goldeneye	4 at Hedgeley Ponds on 22 nd
Green Winged Teal	1 at Druridge Pools on 19 th and 22 nd
Common Teal	500 near New Bewick on 5 th
Goosander	3 at Berwick on 1 st
Red Breasted Merganser	3 at Berwick on 1 st 3 at Stag Rocks on 6 th 4 at Elwick on 17 th 2 at Guile Point on 19 th 2 at Alnmouth on 9 th
Long Tailed Duck	1 at Berwick on River Tweed on 1 st 20+ off Stag Rocks on 4 th 6+ at Elwick on 17 th 17 at Guile Point on 19 th
Common Scoter	300+ at Budle Point on 6 th 200 off Stag Rocks on 27 th and 400 on 16 th
Velvet Scoter	5+ at Budle Point on 6 th
Eider	380 at Fenham Flats on 19 th
Wigeon	250 at Cresswell Pond on 5 th 80+ at Bradford Kaims on 6 th

Shelduck	2 at Branton Ponds on 17 th 320 at Fenham Flats on 19 th
Pochard	2 at Branton Ponds on 7 th
Common Buzzard	2 at Ross Farm on 25 th
Hen Harrier	1 near Seahouses on 1 st 1 North Northumberland on 22 nd
Sparrowhawk	1 at Swarland on 19 th
Peregrine	1 near Powburn on 11 th 1 at Elwick on 17 th 1 at Monks House Pool on 16 th 2 at Harehope Farm on 19 th
Grey Partridge	8 at Branton on 17 th 1 at Elwick on 17 th 9 at Ross Farm on 25 th 2 at Hemscott Farm on 28 th 18 at Fieldhouse on 17 th 16 at Ratcheugh on 30 th
Water Rail	1 at Hauxley on 5 th
Woodcock	14 at Ross Farm on 25 th
Lapwing	120+ at Seahouses on 6 th
Grey Plover	52 at Fenham Flats on 19 th 2 at Alnmouth on 9 th
Oystercatcher	290 at Fenham Flats on 19 th
Curlew	264 at Elwick on 17 th
Dunlin	182 at Fenham Flats on 19 th
Knot	1320 at Fenham Flats on 19 th
Purple Sandpiper	15 at Stag Rocks on 4 th and 30+ on 6 th 7 at Seahouses on 6 th
Green Sandpiper	1 on River Breamish on 8 th
Turnstone	10 at Stag Rocks on 6 th
Grey Phalarope	1 at Stag Rocks on 6 th and 26 th
Little Gull	1 at Druridge Pools on 19 th
Mediterranean Gull	2 at Newbiggin on 5 th 1 at Stag Rocks on 23 rd
Kittiwake	1 off Stag Rocks on 27 th
Sandwich Tern	1 at Stag Rocks on 19 th
Little Auk	2 at Berwick on 1 st
Barn Owl	1 between Alnwick and Craster on 2 nd 1 near Alnwick on 24 th
Tawny Owl	1 near Branton on 8 th
Long Eared Owl	1 at Ross Farm on 25 th
Kingfisher	2 at Branton Ponds all month 1 at Stag Rocks on 27 th
Dipper	Several on River Breamish on 8 th
Redwing	100 at Old Swarland Hall Farm on 12 th 30 at Harehope Hillend on 29 th
Lesser Whitethroat	1 at Tynemouth on 12 th
Willow Tit	1 at Branton Ponds from 25 th 1 at Harehope Hillend all month
Marsh Tit	2 near Hedgeley on 15 th
Long Tailed Tit	5 at Harehope Hillend on 26 th

Nuthatch	1 near Powburn on 11 th
Treecreeper	Several near Hedgeley on 12 th 2 at Harehope Hillend on 26 th
Raven	1 near Old Bewick on 12 th and 24 th
Tree Sparrow	70 at Elwick on 24 th 12+ at Ross Farm on 25 th 17 at Ratcheugh on 30 th
Brambling	1 at Branton on 17 th
Linnet	15 at Bamburgh on 4 th 60+ at Elwick on 24 th 40+ at Ross Farm on 25 th 100 at Bamburgh G.C. On 16 th 76 at Ratcheugh on 30 th
Twite	12 at Stag Rocks on 6 th
Bullfinch	2 at Branton Ponds on 3 rd
Goldfinch	30 at Elwick on 24 th
Siskin	8 at Smeafields on 8 th and 6 on 17 th
Snow Bunting	2 at Guile Point on 19 th
Yellowhammer	34 at Elwick on 17 th 50 at Titlington Mount on 17 th 6 at Swarland on 26 th
MAMMALS	
Roe Deer	4 near River Breamish on 3 rd
Fox	1 at Fenham Flats on 19 th
Porpoise	2 off Stag Rock on 26 th
Red Squirrel	1 at Spindlestone North Hide on 11 th
RAINFALL	95.4mm
OBSERVERS	W Banks, G&R Bell, J&E Clark, I&K Davison, G Dodds,
	A Keeble, M McMahon, J Panton, R&J Poppleton, S Reay, S Sexton.