

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

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NEWSLETTER 208 JANUARY 2019

Review of December 2018

WEDNESDAY 27TH FEBRUARY 2019 - GEORGE CULLEY AND WATER MEADOWS IN NORTHUMBERLAND.

A LOST HABITAT TYPE FOR THE COUNTY?

SPEAKER: STEVE PULLAN

Steve Pullan has been Natural England's lead advisor for Northern England and the Borders, working with farmers and landowners on the most advantageous ways of managing their land both for production and for wildlife. Now semi-retired, Steve has been developing his interest in the Cullen brothers who, amongst other things, developed schemes to make good productive use of water meadows in cattle farming. One of their many schemes was in the Till flood plain north east of Wooler, and so has local relevance.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Remember that subs are due NOW. Still no increase - £10 single, £17.50 for two or more at the same address. BUT Reduced rates continue to apply for existing members for 2019 (£6 and £10). Cheques to Alnwick Wildlife Group and bring cheques or cash to meetings in January or February or post to:
Richard Poppleton, Greystone Cottage, Titlington Mount, Alnwick NE66 2EA

If you would prefer to pay by BACS, our bank details are:
Alnwick Wildlife Group BARCLAYS Acc No 40553131 Sort Code 20-58-17

Please, if you choose to pay electronically, use your name as the reference and drop me an email to say you've paid, or I shan't know until our next statement arrives.

Please send sightings reports for September, no later than 6th February 2019 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

DEC 2018: The uncharacteristically mild (and often damp) weather had led to some poor conditions for ringing but we did manage a short session near my home on the 1st of December processing 3 retraps; and 13 new birds including a new Nuthatch (hatched this year). The 14th was a much more successful session with 19 retraps and 40 new birds. The first bird captured was a Blue Tit but it proved more interesting than usual as it had previously been ringed as a pulli in its bird box nest at Lemmington Hall on the 26/5/18; the number of such retraps we get is very low due to the high mortality in very young tits soon after they leave the nest. The species recorded during this session were: Great Tit, Blue Tit, Coal Tit, Black Bird (one of the very few juveniles about this year), Tree Sparrow, Bullfinch, Robin, Goldfinch and Long Tailed Tit. Saturday 22nd generated 23 new birds and 8 retraps; particularly notable was a retrapped Siskin first seen and ringed on the 17/2/17 (as an adult). This male clearly bred locally in 2017 being retrapped on the 31/3/17 and the 20/5/17; it's at least 3 yrs old and is a beautiful bird with its black head and green and yellow feathers (see picture). It's probably been somewhere else in the UK or abroad in recent months but as no one else recaptured and read its ring number we can't say where this was. Five birds entered 'open' traps on the 26th and were all so intent on feeding that I easily sneaked up on them; they included another Siskin (an adult female ringed back on the 4/3/17) and 4 Long Tailed Tits. In fact a flock of 20 or so Long Tailed Tits seem to be regularly visiting our garden, particularly around 15:30 in the afternoon! One of these tits is clearly a slow learner (or does not mind being regularly captured in return for free food) as it was captured again on the 27th and 28th.

Sunday ringing at the Willow/Marsh Tit site near Longhorsley has continued with 33 new birds and 9 retraps recorded on the 2nd. These included a Marsh Tit last seen on the 26/1/18 and an entirely new one which we ringed and aged as a juvenile (suggesting that it was hatched close to this site). There was also an obvious pair of Greenfinch together with other tits and some House Sparrows. On the 9th we captured 21 new birds and 12 retraps. The retraps included a Willow Tit with another two new ones (but no Marsh Tits this week). There was a pair of Nuthatch (with a male showing reddish feathers on its flanks) and several Tree Sparrows and finally a very splendid looking male Greenfinch (see picture for comparison with the smaller and less stocky Siskin). The 16th generated 29 new birds and 18 retraps including 2 retrap Willow Tits; another pair of Greenfinch and two Blackbirds. The 23rd was very much 'House Sparrow day' with 14 ringed out of 20 new birds; plus 23 retraps. There was also two retrapped Willow Tit and a Marsh Tit. One of these Willow Tit (APB7718) was first ringed on the 26/1/18 and provoked great discussion about its 'species' which was a set of conversations re-run on the 23rd. I would even go so far as to speculate it is a hybrid! Don't let any birdwatcher tell you that these species are always easy to tell apart. Squeezing in an extra session on the 27th which included my son (now working as a Research Ecologist at the BTO) we failed to capture any Willow/Marsh Tits and had to settle for three Long Tailed Tits. In the hand these birds show little fear and are especially calm if they can still hear their fellows singing (which they do even from inside a bird bag while waiting to be processed) see attached photo.

The 24/12/18 took us to the other Willow Tit site at Craster. 36 new birds were captured plus 2 retraps; the retraps were a Great Tit first ringed on the 29/3/16 and a Willow Tit from the 8/4/16 (see attached picture). The Rare Birds Breeding Panel and RSPB are organising a national survey for Willow Tits (and Marsh Tits) in 2019 and 2020 and if anyone reading this is interested in participating (principally from February – April) then please get in touch and I can provide you with contact information for the organisers.

Finally can I recommend that anyone interested in birds should get hold of the recently published: "2017 Birds in Northumbria" published by the Northumberland & Tyneside Bird Club (details on their web-site).

Anyone interesting in ringing is invited to get in touch.

Phil Hanmer 'A' Ringer/Trainer Natural History Society of Northumbria Ringing Group (Hancock Museum)
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Greenfinch



Longtailed Tit



Siskin



Willow Tit

WALKS

WINTER TWIGS WALK

After the last newsletter Sheila March and Mora Rolley suggested that we could have a winter twigs walk to practise our identification skills when trees and shrubs aren't in leaf. So we'll give it a go in late February.

The date is Saturday 23rd February at 10.30am

DETAILS: We'll use Branton Ponds as the area to visit because there is a good range of trees and there's the added attraction of winter wildfowl on the ponds. We'll meet at 10.30am in the small car park through the uninviting metal gate off the Powburn to Branton road at Grid Reference NU 049 165.

At the moment things are pleasantly dry underfoot but this site does get quite muddy if there's been rain, so choose footwear and clothing appropriately. If you have a winter twigs identification guide, do bring it and a pruning knife or small pair of secateurs might prove less destructive when taking samples than ripping twigs off with your hands. And don't forget binoculars for twigs you can't reach and for the birds.

Total distance about 1.5 miles and we'll aim to be back at the cars by 12.30 at the latest. On the day I'll be on 07870 425224 if you need to check that it's still on and in case you can't find the car park.

Richard

We had 37 members and visitors at our Christmas meeting, including a new member from Alnwick – Nicci Forshaw. George made the sad announcement of the death from cancer of Will Anderson who, with his partner Pat, had been a member since 2011.

In view of the Christmas nibbles and the quiz George deliberately hadn't brought any show-and-tell specimens so we moved directly to our speaker, Janet Simkin. Janet is an expert lichenologist, botanist and ecologist and her topic was *Northumbrian Whin Grasslands and the Sill roof*.

Whinstone is a volcanic rock that outcrops in a curving narrow band from the Roman Wall to Holy Island. It has extruded through softer sandstone and so, as weathering has occurred, this very hard dense rock has become exposed. The whin is so hard and heavy that until modern machinery became available for quarrying it was very rarely extracted and used. In modern times it has become the rock of choice for roadstone. Its other feature that is very significant for the vegetation that grows on it is that it is very basic (as opposed to acidic), with some areas having an alkaline pH as high as 8.3. Because it is exposed the soils on the whin are often thin and nutrient poor, making this a hard environment for plants and animals.

Despite the last comment the whin soils can become quite species-rich because coarse grasses and scrub can't get a hold and so there is a lack of competition for the smaller more delicate plants. More than 370 species have so far been recorded from whin soils and although none of them are unique to whin – many are also found on calcium-rich carboniferous soils – they include a number of national rarities. In Northumberland the following species are found only on the Whin Sill: upright chickweed, heath pearlwort, spring cinquefoil, rough clover, spiguel, chives (photo left), spring squill (photo right), angular Solomon's-seal and three species of hawkweeds.



Surveying the flora of whin grasslands is not easy. Broad surveys that list all the species found in an area aren't very helpful because within a whin grassland there will be patches of other rock with more acidic soils. As the whin has become exposed it has often formed cuestas which have sharp cliff edges on their scarp slopes and grasslands used for grazing on their gently sloping dip slopes. These cuestas are seen very starkly along sections of the Roman Wall where the steep scarps face north and the dips lie between the wall, built on the scarp edge, and the military road to the south. The same scarp effects are seen along parts of the North Northumberland coast where often castles have been built on the very stable whin with the cliff edges giving protection on the seaward side. Dunstanburgh and Lindisfarne are good examples of this.

It is important to make clear that whin grassland is unique to Northumberland and it is highly variable. The four main habitat types are: ledges and crevices in the scarp edges; grazed dip slopes; wet flushed whin slabs; abandoned quarry floors. In total there are only about 300 hectares of whin grassland that remain comparatively unspoiled by aggressive agricultural practices, and only 100ha of these are in really good condition.

The dip slopes are often disappointingly poor for plant variety because of over-grazing over a long period, but within the grassland here there will often be wet whin slabs very close to the surface which aren't grazed because there's almost no grass and which support unusual small plants and lichens.

Nearer the coast the grazing pressure has been less and there can be a very good flora. On the Heugh on Holy Island several uncommon small clovers thrive. In one m² quadrat here not long ago there were no fewer than nine species of clover (*Trifolium*). Closer to the sea there are uncommon spleenwort ferns and a most unusual salt-tolerant lichen, *Anaptychia ciliaris* ssp *mamillata* seen in the photo with some bits of an orange *Xanthoria* lichen.



In abandoned quarries the plant succession is interesting. Initially the exposed rock on the quarry floor is very alkaline, so no grasses grow, but as a thin soil builds up with the help of mosses and lichens Cudweeds *Filago* spp and St John's-worts *Hypericum* spp appear and become dominant as is well seen at Kyoie Quarry. The particular dominant species vary from quarry to quarry, but the whole process of transition from bare rock to eventual whin grassland requires a slow lowering of the pH of the soil and takes many decades. The tops of the quarries in places like Brada, near Seahouses, have plenty of exposed bare rock which often shows glacial striations and because they are often drier than the quarry floors they support different species.

The Sill is the new Northumberland National Park Visitors' Centre which opened in July 2017. Janet was talked into trying to create a whin grassland roof – a thing that has never been done before, but which the Park Authority felt would be the most appropriate form of green roof, given the location of The Sill at Once Brewed by the Roman Wall. Some of the challenges were that it would have public access and so needed to be attractively species-rich; it needed to be very low maintenance; and there was no budget available!

They began by creating some trial plots and it soon became clear that the substrate used had to be weed-free. So what they used was a mixture of soil from Swinburn Quarry plus whinstone chippings plus composted bark to provide some humus. This mixture was done on the ground with a tractor bucket, but since the actual site was on a roof there was no access for big machinery and anyway the weight might well have been a problem, so all the spreading of the 500 tonnes had to be done by hand.



Part of the Sill roof as seen at an early stage in 2017. The coir matting can clearly be seen in the planted areas.

All the seed used was collected from the wild. Coir matting was laid down before the soil was added to give some protection to the young plants. Many of the plants were initially raised from seed off site – mostly in Janet's garden – and were then planted as plugs. Attempts to sow seed directly weren't very successful, but all the vegetation benefited enormously from the addition of fungal mycorrhizal powder. Early growth problems showed that the substrate was particularly lacking in mineral nutrients, particularly phosphorus, so some artificial NPK fertiliser was added. There were also problems of the substrate becoming quickly too alkaline as the acids from the composted bark leached out.

The downside of the NPK fertiliser addition was that there was now rather too much nitrogen, so more lush grass growth was seen than had been hoped for and the whole roof had to be mowed in October 2017.

Then there was the weather in 2018. The 'beast from the east' left things looking bad, but by May/June it had recovered and was excellent. That was when the drought began! Getting enough water on to the roof was a real problem because it all had to be pumped up, but although everything looked parched in the summer of 2018, the autumn rains then came and the plants soon perked up. However it then became clear that the most drought resistant species was white clover and this had spread and was threatening to become a big problem. Attempts to hand-weed it proved impossible, so it then had to be strimmed and raked off.

The development of this unique roof habitat will continue to evolve, but already there are species that will clearly be successful, and the population of maiden pink (photo) is already the largest in Northumberland.



After Janet's talk we had our Christmas nibbles (grateful thanks to all who brought things) and then George's Christmas Quiz. It was all based on information that had appeared in our 2018 Newsletters. All I will say about it is that the group I was in didn't win, so by definition the quiz can't have been fair. But thanks George, as ever, for setting the questions and putting up with abusive repartee from some of the contestants.

Richard

You may, I hope, remember that in the December Newsletter I tried to encourage AWG members to take part in the New Year Plant Hunt exercise under the auspices of the BSBI.

I recorded two local lists, one from Titlington Mount Farm where we live and one from the Branton and Low Hedgeley Ponds by Powburn. On 30th December Jane and I went up to the St Boswell's area in the Borders and I made a short additional list around the Smailholm Tower area (if you haven't been to the tower it's worth a visit even if interior of the tower itself isn't open in the winter months). Here are my results.

Titlington Mount	Branton & Low Hedgeley	Smailholm Tower
Red Deadnettle	Gorse	Gorse
Common Chickweed	Common Chickweed	White Deadnettle
Groundsel	Groundsel	Common Chickweed
Gorse	Annual Meadow Grass	Annual Meadow Grass
Annual Meadow-grass	Common Field Speedwell	Cultivated Oat
Phacelia	Red Deadnettle	Wood Sage
Common Field-speedwell	Common Nettle	Daisy
Corn Spurrey	Pineappleweed	Mountain Pansy
Shepherd's Purse	Creeping Buttercup	Common Whitlowgrass
Daisy	Hazel	
White Deadnettle	Broom	
Yarrow	Daisy	
Hogweed	Dandelion	
Common Stork's-bill	Field Pansy	
Climbing Corydalis	Musk Mallow	
Red Campion	Grey Willow	
Dandelion		



Probably, for me, the best plant was the Mountain Pansy *Viola lutea* at Smailholm. There are plenty of specimens in the summer at this site, but to find one with a diminutive flower open at the end of December was excellent. I hadn't taken a camera with me (!) so the image on the left isn't mine.

I'm pleased to say that Jane and I weren't the only AWG members who submitted lists. Andrew and Meg Keeble did one in Felton and an area to the north of the village. Chris and Hazel Metherell also did a Felton list. Given the differences between their two lists they clearly didn't follow the same route.

The Felton Lists

ANDREW & MEG			
Common Fumitory	Groundsel	Com. Field-speedwell	Wild Turnip
Hazel	Red Dead-nettle	Red Campion	Hedge Mustard
Petty Spurge	White Dead-nettle	Red Valerian	Wood Avens
Annual Meadow-grass	Dandelion	Feverfew	Gorse
Common Ivy	Common Chickweed	Yarrow	Hairy Bitter-cress
Daisy	Shepherd's-purse	Bramble	
Pineappleweed	Thale Cress	Smooth Sow-thistle	

CHRIS & HAZEL			
Petty Spurge	Common Ragwort	Smooth Sow-thistle	Hogweed
Marsh Ragwort	Yarrow	Gorse	Com. Field-speedwell
Annual Meadow-grass	Shepherd's-purse	Hazel	Tuberous Comfrey
Sun Spurge	Common Chickweed	Lesser Periwinkle	Field Forget-me-not
Ivy-leaved Speedwell	Daisy	Common Nettle	Pineappleweed
Smooth Hawk's-beard	Red Dead-nettle	Red Campion	Trailing Bellflower
Dandelion	Ivy-leaved Toadflax	Spotted Dead-nettle	
White Dead-nettle	Hairy Bitter-cress	Common Ivy	

On the BSBI website they update all the records as they come in. The deadline for sending in records is 6th January, but as of today (5th January) at 4.00pm the results looked like this:

632 lists received

600 species recorded

12,636 unique records sent

Frequent plants (Numbers of lists that have included this species)

- 1 [*Bellis perennis*](#) Daisy (492)
- 2 [*Senecio vulgaris*](#) Groundsel (440)
- 3 [*Taraxacum agg.*](#) Dandelion (433)
- 4 [*Poa annua*](#) Annual Meadow-grass (396)
- 5 [*Stellaria media*](#) Common Chickweed (341)
- 6 [*Capsella bursa-pastoris*](#) Shepherd's-purse (339)
- 7 [*Lamium purpureum*](#) Red Dead-nettle (336)
- 8 [*Sonchus oleraceus*](#) Smooth Sow-thistle (295)
- 9 [*Euphorbia peplus*](#) Petty Spurge (294)
- 10 [*Achillea millefolium*](#) Yarrow (279)
- 11 [*Veronica persica*](#) Common Field-speedwell (266)
- 12 [*Ulex europaeus*](#) Gorse (254)

- 13 [Lamium album](#) **White Dead-nettle** (248)
- 14 [Geranium robertianum](#) **Herb-Robert** (229)
- 15 [Senecio jacobaea](#) **Common Ragwort** (178)
- 16 [Dactylis glomerata](#) **Cock's-foot** (174)
- 17 [Cymbalaria muralis](#) **Ivy-leaved Toadflax** (168)
- 18 [Rubus agg.](#) **Bramble** (167)
- 19 [Corylus avellana](#) **Hazel** (163)
- 20 [Heracleum sphondylium](#) **Hogweed** (162)

Longest lists

For quite a while the longest list in Britain and Ireland was the 74 species recorded by the Somerset Rare Plants Group. But then on New Years Day that was totally eclipsed by a list from Swanage in Dorset of no fewer than 120 species.

In this context my two local lists of 16 and 17 species, which at the time I thought were reasonable, seem rather pathetic, but then we're in inland Northumberland and most of the big lists are from much further south and are lowland and coastal. Having said that I notice that the second biggest list this year was made in the Billy Mill and coast road area of North Shields where 89 species were listed. Anyway I personally think making this sort of exercise competitive rather defeats the object, which ought just to be about getting people out and searching and identifying.



Common Whitlowgrass



Common Stork's-bill

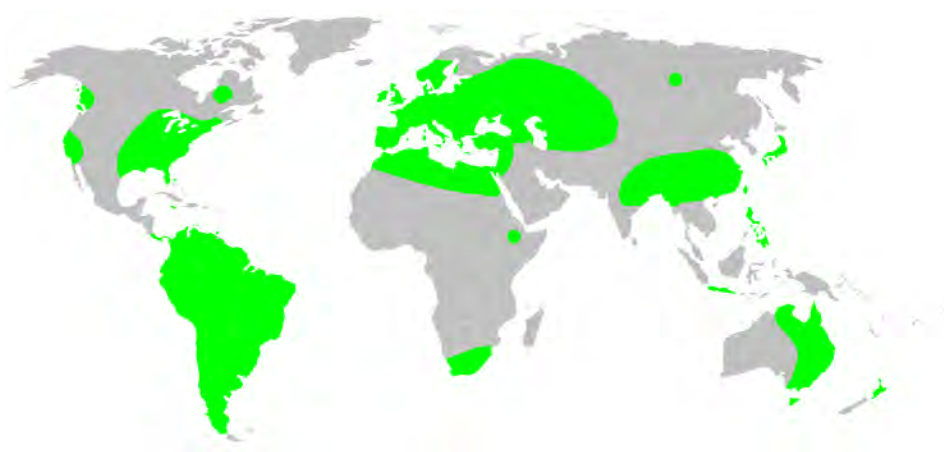
Richard

PHOLCIDAE:

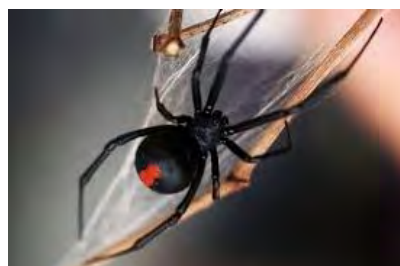
We've all seen them, tucked away high up against the cornice in the corner of a room, just out of reach of our feather dusters. They hang upside-down, patiently, in untidy and sparsely-threaded webs awaiting unsuspecting prey (see below, left). They are fragile arachnids belonging to the family Pholcidae. Pholcids are known by a number of common names, such as Daddy Long-legs Spiders and Cellar Spiders, and are often confused with other 'leggy' invertebrates, particularly harvestmen (Opiliones; see below, middle) and craneflies (Diptera; see below right).



Pholcid species range from 2 to 10 mm in body length, with legs up to 50 mm, and are found on all continents except for Antarctica (see map below). They are typically found in cool, dry places, such as attics (see below) and their northerly distribution, in the U.K. for example, is linked to the availability of frost-free buildings.



Pholcids feed on pretty much any prey that becomes entangled in their web threads, for example, flies, woodlice and other spiders. Their long legs allow them to subdue dangerous prey, by keeping their bodies out of harm's way, and can flick sticky threads from a distance. Prey is injected with venom and then wrapped in silk for storage. In Australia, Pholcids are encouraged as they often kill Redback Spiders (see below) that have entered houses. Mating involves the typically cautious approach of the male followed by drumming his identity on her web. Once laid the eggs are gathered up, wrapped in silk strands and held between the female's jaws (see below, left). After the young spiderlings hatch they remain around the mother's web (see below, right), but as they grow they move away to avoid cannibalism. Adults live for around 1 to 3 years.





There are around 320 species, worldwide. The most common species in the U.K. is *Pholcus phalangioides* which is sometimes also known as the Skull Spider because the cephalothorax (fused head-thorax region) is skull-shaped (see below).



*Dudley Williams
Newton on the Moor*

As we move towards the depths of winter my botanical thoughts have turned to trees, prompted by two particular events.

The first was a day spent in Kyloe Woods in early December, with a colleague, looking for less-usual conifers. The original plantings at Kyloe were by C J Leyland of Haggerston Castle in the early years of the 20th Century, although some of the largest Wellingtonias, Douglas Firs and other trees look older than 110 years. Bill Burlton and I had particularly gone to see if we could get to an area at the top of some imposing cliffs near the northern boundary of the wood. On an earlier visit someone had said that the trees along the cliff edge might be *Pinus aristata* or *P. longaeva* Bristlecone Pines. If so these would be significantly unusual trees for Northumberland.

On the way up, whilst scrabbling around among some big *Abies procera* Noble Fir specimens we came across a tall 3-needled pine (needles in bunches of three rather than the twos that you find in Scots, Corsican and Lodgepole species). You may be able to see from the photo that the cones are sharply-spined and the needles are long. Subsequent investigation showed it was *Pinus ponderosa* Ponderosa Pine. This is a species from the Western Rocky Mountains in the USA, but was not uncommonly planted in big estate gardens once specimens first reached Britain in the 1820s. We hadn't seen one in Kyloe before, so score 1 for unusual conifers.



Pinus ponderosa

Identifying conifers when you have big trees where none of the foliage is even remotely within reach often relies on finding fallen cones or sprigs of foliage. The danger is that in a mixed-species wood it is easy to find all sorts of things on the ground that don't belong to the tree you are standing under. In the case of the Ponderosa Pine there were bits of Douglas Fir, Scots Pine, Corsican Pine and Noble Fir to confuse us, even though using binoculars it was clear that our target tree was none of these.

As an aside, a local landowner had asked Bill and myself to look at some of the conifers on his land. One particular specimen had defeated us and we needed cones to give us a better chance of an identification, but there were none on the ground and the ones on the tree were all a long way up. Bill, jokingly, suggested that one way to get some cones down would be with a shotgun. The landowner took this as a serious suggestion and a few weeks later announced that he had used up a lot of cartridges, but had finally managed to get a cone to fall. All in the interests of science you appreciate!



Pinus mugo

Back to Kyloe, we eventually managed to get to the cliff top where there was a large Bronze Age (?) fort, but also quite a few of these pines, some reasonably tall trees and some quite stunted, but all seemingly the same species. With the aid of the books we had taken with us we were happy to agree an identification of *Pinus mugo* Mountain Pine which is native to mountainous areas from Spain to the Balkans. The key identification feature was the cones which almost look as though the cone scales are attached back-to-front. In the photo the attachment point of the cone is at the top and the scales seem to be pointing backwards rather than forwards. I won't bore you with the issue of which subspecies they were. Score 2 for unusual conifers.

Having found our way back down the cliffs without killing ourselves we walked round some of the rather labyrinthine paths in Kyloe until we came to the area where there are extensive craggy outcrops which are well known and well used by rock climbers. On the opposite side of the track to the crags were three trees from a most unusual species. *Sciadopitys verticillata* Japanese Umbrella Pine is a rare example of a single species family. The Sciadopitaceae has only this one genus which itself has just the single species. The trees, which are rare and endangered in Japan, look rather untidy and when you look at the needles they are in pairs but each pair is fused along their full length. Score 3 for unusual

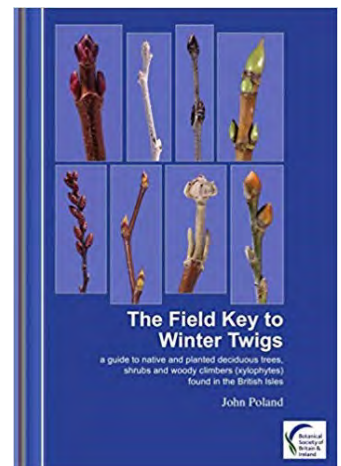
conifers. The photos of this species are below. The whole tree is one of the ones at Kyloe, but my on-the-spot photos of the foliage didn't come out very well, so the right hand shot is from Google images and you can see where the 'umbrella pine' name came from.



Japanese Umbrella Pine

At the start of this piece I said there were two events that had prompted my focus to turn to trees. The second is the long-awaited (at least in the botanical world) publication of a book called "*The Field Guide to Winter Twigs*" by John Poland. It covers the identification of over 400 trees, shrubs and woody climbing plants in Britain. Every native and naturalised species, subspecies and often variety is included, plus many of the introduced planted species from all over the temperate world.

This is not a pictorial guide, although there are excellent colour photographs of the winter twigs of 317 of the species, plus large numbers of amazingly detailed line drawings of almost every plant dealt with. But most specifically this is a proper botanical key and the whole thing is slim and lightweight enough to take with you on your winter walks. So if in one hand you are clutching the winter twig you've collected and in the other you have this field guide you ought to be able to work through the key to come up with a correct identification. Providing, that is, you have a third hand to hold your hand lens and a fourth to turn to the glossary for the interpretation of some of the botanical terminology.



Richard

Happy New Year! Maybe a little bit late, but I ended my last column with Merry Christmas, so it seemed a fitting way to begin 2019.

We began 2019 in a small cabin in the village of Insh, Speyside. As my birthday falls in this period, we used to visit the Spey valley most years but this is our first trip here since 2010 after that winter's arctic temperatures and snowfall forced an impromptu evacuation from our holiday house. The house owner advised, in a concerned manner, that if he 'didn't dig us out now, and that wind gets up, we might be there til April!' Needless to say, we left, on New Years Day for a frozen, hair-raising ride back home.

Most winter visits to the Cairngorm National Park involve some scenic snow and ice, but 2019 was unbelievably mild with day temperatures up to 11 degrees. This is 28 degrees warmer than that fateful week in 2010. I'll leave it to you to work that out.

There was no snow, even on Cairngorm itself save for small white patches in north facing corries. I've seen similar amounts here in June. The mildness made sure wildlife was even more elusive, though we still managed to see a few of that Scottish speciality, the Crested Tit, with a few Red Squirrels and Red Deer for good measure. A 200 strong flock of Redpolls and Siskins was nice but we couldn't find a single wild flower for the New Year Plant Hunt.



Figure 1: Can you find the Crested Tit?

We returned home on 2nd January, to a dry dull week. On the 3rd I spent the morning walking around Howick trying to see how many species of bird I could find. The decent weather helped to make the total a very reasonable 61 species all less than 1km from the front door. Highlights included only my second patch Red-necked Grebe, a Ringed Plover that is barely annual on my rocky piece of coast and 20+ Crossbills in the village wood.



Figure 2: Red necked Grebe on the sea.

On Sunday 6th January myself and JWR visited three sites to catch up with some good birds that have been around for a little while. First stop was at Newham Hall where 4 Taiga Bean Geese were soon located, luckily, separate from the 2000 Pink footed Geese in the next field. These larger birds are rarer than the other species, the Tundra Bean Goose and were my first for almost 30 years.

Next stop, Widdrington Moor Lake for a female or 'redhead' Smew that showed well but distantly across the water. From here our final destination was Alnmouth South Side, or Buston Links. A small group of 4 Shorelarks have been wintering here. With another two birds up at the Long Nanny, Shorelarks are now arguably much easier to see in recent years than Lapland Buntings that used to winter in similar habitats.



Figure 3: Taiga Bean Geese, Newham Hall



Figure 4: Shorelarks, Buston Saltmarsh.

On 13th January, a walk around Seaton Point, Boulmer was bright and windy. An adult male Peregrine hunted the shore spooking many waders on a couple of occasions. There were 18 Bar tailed Godwit, Grey Plover, 80 Dunlin, 15 Sanderling 13 Ringed Plover, 3 Purple Sandpiper and 20 Turnstones. A flock of Pipits on the weedy beach included Rock, Meadow and Water Pipits.



Figure 5: Water Pipit, Seaton Point.

Stewart Sexton, Howick.

The weather has been relatively quiet over the Christmas period. Periods of settled weather gave opportunities to look for sea-duck, grebes and divers on the sea especially off Cheswick, Ross and Alnmouth/Buston. A trip to Amble resulted in calling into the salt-marsh at Buston Links to look for **Shorelarks**. At first the birds were elusive but eventually they were found and excellent views were had by all. What surprised me was the lack of Pipits and Skylarks.

New Year was spent in Lincolnshire. This is a county of contrasts with the most compelling part being the salt-marshes and the neighbouring farmland. A trip to Donna Nook was not to see the breeding **Grey Seals** but to walk to the north along the sea-walls around Pye Hall. This area has been opened up allowing the sea access to the farmland – tractor wheel ruts can still be seen! It is a fantastic area for bird watching. **Little Egrets** and **Skylarks** were extremely common. **Teal** and **Wigeon** could be found along the river channels and **Shoveler** on the scrapes. Flocks of **Twite** fed on the salt-marsh along with **Water Pipits** and **Scandinavian Rock Pipits**. The abundance of passerines and waders attracted **Merlin**, **Peregrine**, **Short-eared Owls** (3+), **Hen Harrier** (female) and a **Rough-legged Buzzard**. It is a great shame that Northumberland does not have this vision for habitat creation.

I tried and failed at creating a flowering plant list over the New Year. The best I could come up with was Gorse and Daisy. Further south, Lincolnshire produced **Rough Hawkbit**, **Shepherd's Purse**, **Ribwort Plantain** and **Self-heal** in an hours walk around Covenham Reservoir.

Species to look for in February: Woodcock

Known as the 'Snipe of the woods', this is an elusive, wading bird found mainly in woodlands. It is a thick-bodied, pigeon-sized bird with a long bill. Its beautiful brown plumage provides almost perfect camouflage when it is on the ground, motionless in leaf litter. Rarely seen on the ground it is the rufous rump that is most striking when the bird is flushed into flight.



This is a crepuscular wader, most active at dawn and dusk. It feeds by probing its bill into damp ground, eating mainly earthworms and beetles. A good time to see this species is in the evening when there is the last glimmer of light as birds move from woodland to feeding areas.

Woodcock is a widespread breeding bird in Britain and Ireland that is adapted to both deciduous and coniferous forest. In autumn there is an influx from the Continent, outnumbering the British and Irish population 5 to 1. During winter, it is estimated that

up to 1.5 million individuals may be present in Britain and Ireland; mostly originating from northern Europe and western Russia.

During periods of very cold weather, Woodcock can visit gardens in towns and villages.

Happy searching. Jack Daw

FOSSILS ON ALNMOUTH BEACH.

A few days before Christmas we went for a walk on Alnmouth beach. A large area of bedrock was exposed and we noticed a nest of fossils embedded in the surface. The rock at this point was like a mudstone and very friable, so the fossils were easily prised out. The first photo shows the cleaned fossils, which after research, appeared to be Crinoids, marine animals sometimes called sea-lilies because of their resemblance to a plant or flower.

Crinoids have an array of branching arms around the top of a globe-shaped, cup-like structure containing the main body of the animal, which is often attached to the sea floor by a stem. The second photo, taken from the internet, shows a complete fossil Crinoid.

The rocks at Alnmouth belong to the Stainmore formation of the Namurian stage of the mid-Carboniferous period, between 313 and 326 million years ago. These were formed in low-lying sedimentary basins and include limestones, mudstones and sandstones.

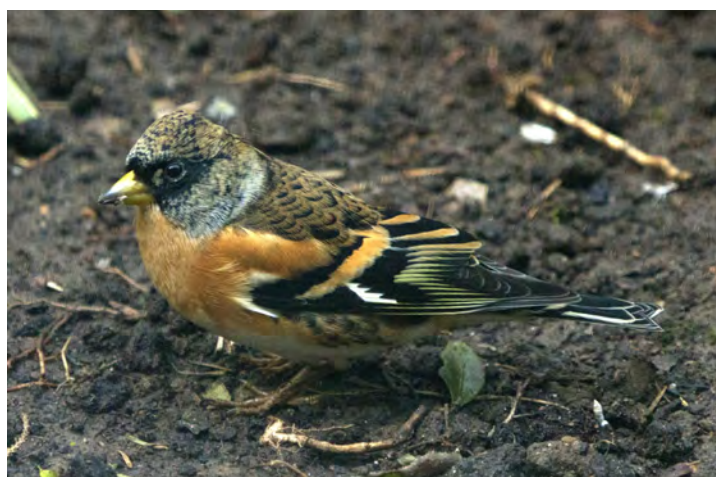
In the absence of birdlife or botanical interest, the Northumberland coast offers a good opportunity to locate fossils at your feet.

Acknowledgements are due to Wikipedia and Google for help with research.

Andrew and Meg Keeble



Picture below goes with Garden Finches



Brambling

Various members of the Finch family are very much regarded as garden birds these days, having successfully adapted to the modern world from their forest dwelling origins.

Probably the most numerous to be found on local bird feeders are the **Goldfinch** and the **Chaffinch**.

Goldfinches, for whatever reason, seem to be bucking the depressing trend of declining songbird numbers, and it is not unusual to have them present throughout the year.

The lookalike adult birds are unmistakable with their vertically patterned heads in red, white and black, augmented by a striking yellow panel on black wings. Their song is perhaps best described as cheerful tinkling!

In their more natural habitat, it is a winter treat to come across a family group acrobatically eating the seeds of wildflowers like teasels and thistles.

Statistically an even more numerous bird is the Chaffinch, which can be extraordinarily confiding. The adults are quite dissimilar in looks with the male taking the plaudits for its wide range of colour tones, which include pink, blue, black, white, green and reddish brown! Surprisingly the overall effect does not come over as gaudy but, on the contrary as soft and subdued.

The male's song is central to the bird's cheerful persona, starting in late winter and often continuing until the end of summer. It is perhaps best described as energetic and very repetitious rather than musical. At the height of the breeding season, a male will sing about 6 times a minute and up to 3000 times per day!

As winter progresses there is always the possibility that another, much more uncommon, member of the finch family will be found on your garden feeders. This is the **Brambling**, which is sometimes referred to as the "northern Chaffinch". In certain years these birds migrate south from Scandinavia in very large numbers and often join Chaffinch flocks here. The size of the migration depends very much on the continued availability of food supplies in their home territory. In winter they rely very heavily upon seeds, principally beech mast, and when this crop fails, large-scale evacuation takes place.

Superficially, the two species are very similar in looks, particularly females and juveniles. Closer inspection, however, should enable you to recognise that whereas the Chaffinch has a predominantly pink hue, the Brambling, which we are only likely to see in non-breeding plumage, is a brindled orange. Another key distinguishing feature is the Brambling has a large white patch on its rump, particularly noticeable, as it flies away!

So examine your Chaffinches carefully and you might have the pleasure of finding a Brambling or two in their midst.

Mick McMahon



Gold Finch



Chaffinch Male

SIGHTINGS DECEMBER 2018

BIRDS	
White-billed Diver	1 off Stag Rocks on 2 nd
Great-northern Diver	4 at Cheswick on 2 nd
Red-throated Diver	17+ at Cheswick on 2 nd
Little Grebe	2 at Felton Bridge on 30 th
Slavonian Grebe	7 at Fenham Flats on 9 th
Little Egret	1 at Branton Ponds on 9 th 1 at Monks House Pool on 4 th
Grey Heron	2 at Howick Pool on 25 th
Whooper Swan	25 at Cheswick on 2 nd 3 at Fenham Flats on 9 th 13 at Budle Bay on 4 th 17 at Hartburn on 20 th
Greylag Goose	1000 at Newton Pool on 4 th
Barnacle Goose	2000 at Harpers Heugh on 4 th
Bean Goose (Taiga)	4 at Newham on 30 th
Scaup	4 at Fenham Flats on 9 th
Goldeneye	30 at Howick Burn-mouth on 25 th
Pintail	1 at Branton Ponds on 21 st
Shoveler	1 at Branton Ponds on 3 rd and again on 21 st 30 at Budle Bay on 31 st
Pochard	1 at Branton Ponds on 2 nd and 2 on 3 rd
Gadwall	21 at Hedgeley Lakes on 9 th
Eider	10 at Howick Burn-mouth on 25 th
Goosander	17 at Branton Ponds on 9 th 1 on River Wansbeck at Morpeth on 19 th
Sparrowhawk	1 at Yearle on 11 th and 23 rd
Merlin	1 near Elsdon on 29 th 1 at Yearle on 15 th 1 near Wooperton on 19 th
Peregrine	1 near Blawearie on 22 nd 1 in Harwood Forest on 27 th
Jack Snipe	1 at Branton Ponds on 2 nd 1 near Blawearie on 22 nd
Common Snipe	21+ at Branton Ponds on 3 rd
Purple Sandpiper	150+ at Stag Rocks on 2 nd
Green Sandpiper	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 3 rd and again on 4 th
Ruff	1 at Newton Scrape on 6 th
Curlew	32 at Hedgeley Lakes on 4 th and 22 on 9 th 600 at Smeafield on 11 th 40 at Howick Burn-mouth on 25 th
Black-tailed Godwit	2 at Fenham Flats on 9 th
Redshank	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 4 th and again on 9 th 4 at Howick Burn-mouth on 25 th
Oystercatcher	30 at Howick Burn-mouth on 25 th
Bonaparte's Gull	1 off Bamburgh on 2 nd
Stock Dove	1 at Branton Ponds on 9 th
Woodpigeon	500+ in Hulne Park on 6 th
Barn Owl	1 at Branton Ponds all month 1 in Branton on 7 th 1 near Percy's Cross on 30 th
Short-eared Owl	Several on Holy Island all month
Kingfisher	1+ at Branton Ponds all month
Dipper	1 at Felton Bridge on 30 th
Waxwing	1 at Felton on 10 th
Stonechat	2 at Howick Burn-mouth on 25 th
Mistle Thrush	6 at Smeafield on 24 th
Blackbird	14 at Smeafield on 1 st
Redwing	70 at Smeafield on 5 th
Chiffchaff	1 at Branton Ponds on 2 nd
Great Tit	12 at Howick Pool on 25 th
Long-tailed Tit	18 at Lemmington Hall on 26 th 16 at Howick Pool on 25 th
Marsh Tit	2 at East Linden on 2 nd
Willow Tit	1 at Branton Ponds on 17 th 2 at Craster on 24 th

Nuthatch	1 at Yearle on 2 nd
Raven	2 near Blawearie on 22 nd
Red-backed Shrike	1 at Newbiggin on 3 rd
Common Crossbill	27 in Harwood Forest on 27 th
Linnet	50 at Felton on 30 th
Snow Bunting	1 at Cheswick on 2 nd
MAMMALS	
Grey Squirrel	1 at Lemmington Bank on 4 th
Pipistrelle sp	1 in Branton on 6 th
Roe Deer	1 at Battle Bridge on 3 rd 1 in dunes south of Bamburgh on 24 th
Fallow Deer	9 in Hulne Park on 6 th
Stoat	1 in partial ermine at Branton Ponds on 15 th and 1 in full ermine on 22 nd 1 at Snipe House on 3 rd
Fox	1 south of Bamburgh Castle on 24 th
FUNGI	
Moor Club	In Hulne Park on 6 th
INVERTEBRATES	
Mottled Umber	2 at Branton on 11 th
RAINFALL	41 mm
OBSERVERS	G&R Bell, I&K Davison, S Dawson, G Dodds, P Hanmer, A Keeble,
	M McMahon, S Reay, J Rutter, S Sexton.