

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

Email: redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

NEWSLETTER 232 JANUARY 2021

REVIEW OF NOVEMBER 2021

VIRAL MEANDERINGS (10)

[Do, please, be aware that this article was written about three weeks before you are seeing it. So, some of the content will already seem dated given the pace of change at the moment.]

A new year, new plans, new hopes, new horizons – or perhaps not! If anything, our position, as a country, seems worse now than it was in March. Then, at least, we went into the first lockdown with the assumption, or at least the hope, that everything would be under control by the summer at the latest. What a dreadful false hope that turned out to be. Now we have a situation with this new more infectious variant, where there is no discernible end in sight. Yes, of course we've got the vaccines, but how long it will take to give the injections to all who are eligible, and how many of us need to achieve what we hope will be immunity for it to be possible to open society up once more, is not at all clear, at least to me.

A friend told us today that, as someone in her mid-80s, she is booked to have her first vaccination in the first week of January. I wished her luck and said I was assuming she would be booking her attendance at a major rave some time in mid-February. I suspect, however, that even if in her case the word rave means a family outing to a National Trust tea room, the chance of coming up against groups of selfish, mask-less, non-social-distancing, anti-vaxxers and conspiracy theorists will make her think again no matter what security the vaccine might provide. In addition to which it now seems likely that her second jab will be three months away rather than the three weeks she'd been promised.

Then there's the Brexit "deal", but let's not even go there!

There's a school of thought that says wildlife has been one of the big winners from Covid's effects on humanity. With us locked safely indoors, wild plants and animals have been able to go about their business comparatively free from our direct and indirect interference. The Little Tern colony at Blakeney Point in Norfolk had its best breeding success for 25 years, free from human and canine disturbance. Unfortunately, our Arctic Tern colony at the Long Nanny, south of Beadnell, not only hasn't benefited but has had a dreadful year in which not a single chick was fledged, compared with 400 in 2019. This appears to have been due to a combination of weather, tides, predators and the lack of protection normally offered by National Trust wardens. The much more precarious Little Terns did manage to raise six youngsters.



Not a sight from 2020 at the Long Nanny

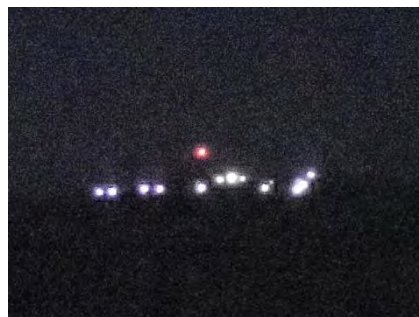
Recently, Isobella Tree, the owner of the Knepp Estate in West Sussex and author of the very successful *Wilding: the Return to Nature of a British Farm*, has warned that the large numbers of Britons visiting their home countryside are likely to have significant disturbance effects on native animals and plants. Some of these 'new' country visitors have little knowledge of how and how not to behave in rural environments. Even those who



do know and who try to do the right things will find that the combination of excess numbers and the need to maintain social distancing will inevitably lead to unintended wildlife disturbance.

From our home front windows, which overlook grazing and crop fields at Titlington Mount, we see one group of organisms that seem to be having a bonanza year. The Jackdaws and (mostly) Rooks are currently forming a flock of at least 300 birds which obviously find the wide field margins and the game-cover crop areas to be an excellent source of food. When disturbed they rise as a mass from the ground and the visual effect is very impressive even though they don't flock in quite as close and coordinated a way as some waders. Some of these birds may well be winter migrants

from continental Europe who haven't heard that Brexit has ended freedom of movement.



I'd also like to use our newsletter to thank the Ministry of Defence for potentially saving us money. As well as the 'rook fields' our front windows look south east towards Alnwick, but we can't see the town because the Brizlee Wood ridge in Hulne Park, about 4 miles away, gets in the way. This year the MoD has rebuilt an updated version of the Brizlee 'golf ball' early warning station and they have very thoughtfully put a red navigation warning light on top of the dome, which the old dome didn't have. Surrounding the dome are residential quarters for the MoD staff and the whole site has street lights. When we look across at Brizlee after dark it is now looking like a

necklace of yellow-white sparkling lights with the red beacon like a cherry on top. We shall never need to buy outdoor Christmas lights again! My poor photo was taken in bad visibility with a camera that lacks a big zoom lens, but you can probably see the effect.

Meanwhile, in the garden, "while the cat's away the mice will play". In our case I'm the cat and the mice are our resident voles. In the winter we rarely see them, but as soon as you look at the lawn their tracks are soon evident, radiating outwards from the edges of the shrub beds. The photograph shows that they clearly use the dwarf conifers as good shelter for their burrows, but then make rather obvious forays out through the surface layers of the turf. At least they are not as destructive as the rabbits which seem to get in no matter what efforts we make to fence them out.



Richard

NEW YEAR PLANT HUNT RESULTS

As of today (10th Jan) the BSBI website shows that 1,172 plant lists have been submitted across the UK and Ireland, with 707 different species found and 20,713 unique plant records. What is interesting is that this is 374 lists more than have been sent in any previous year, with 74 more species and nearly 6,000 more unique records. The effects of Covid restrictions and people's need to find diverting activities, presumably.

Fortunately the snow that hit us on the night of 7th/8th January didn't arrive a week earlier or we'd probably have ended up with no lists being submitted from North Northumberland. As it is, the BSBI website shows seven lists submitted by AWG members, with Felton being the hotspot. There were various other lists sent in from North Northumberland, but as far as I can see none appear to have been done by AWG people.

Chris & Hazel Metherell sent in three lists with 40, 25 & 16 species respectively, all from the Felton patch; Andrew & Meg Keeble sent in a Felton area list with 30; George Dodds did one from Glanton with 22; Gill Sanders sent a list of 8 from the Beal area; Richard & Jane Poppleton found 11 species in their Titlington Mount area.

A quick scan of lists generally shows that those which included urban or even village areas all produced many more records than those in deeply rural patches. A good example is that one of the top-scoring lists in the country came from a surgeon at Wansbeck Hospital who found 67 species between the hospital and the coast at Newbiggin, while the same chap spent time at Alnham and only found four species with flowers.

The list of the nationally most frequently found species is shown below. The number in the second column shows how many lists in which each occurred.

FREQUENT PLANTS

1	804	<i>Bellis perennis</i>	Daisy
2	767	<i>Senecio vulgaris</i>	Groundsel
3	666	<i>Taraxacum agg.</i>	Dandelion
4	609	<i>Poa annua</i>	Annual Meadow-grass
5	547	<i>Sonchus oleraceus</i>	Smooth Sow-thistle
6	523	<i>Capsella bursa-pastoris</i>	Shepherd's-purse
7	487	<i>Lamium purpureum</i>	Red Dead-nettle
8	450	<i>Euphorbia peplus</i>	Petty Spurge
9	444	<i>Lamium album</i>	White Dead-nettle
10	436	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>	Yarrow
11	428	<i>Ulex europaeus</i>	Gorse
12	402	<i>Anthriscus sylvestris</i>	Cow Parsley
13	395	<i>Heracleum sphondylium</i>	Hogweed
14	392	<i>Stellaria media</i>	Common Chickweed
15	337	<i>Cymbalaria muralis</i>	Ivy-leaved Toadflax
16	324	<i>Veronica persica</i>	Common Field-speedwell
17	314	<i>Geranium robertianum</i>	Herb-Robert
18	278	<i>Senecio jacobaea</i>	Common Ragwort
19	276	<i>Lapsana communis</i>	Nipplewort
20	262	<i>Rubus fruticosus agg.</i>	Bramble

On the following two pages I've extracted the information that applies to our AWG members, so you can see what people found. If there are any AWG lists that I've missed (and we have members significantly further south), then please accept my apologies. Many thanks to those who did take part in what is beginning to become a valuable database which in time will show the way common (and less common) species are reacting to climate change in terms of their flowering periods.

Richard

<u>NYPH RESULTS 2021</u>								
		Felton	Felton	Felton	Felton	Glanton	Beal	Tit'ton
		Village	Village	West	& area	& area	area	area
		C&HM	C&HM	C&HM	A&MK	GD	GS	R&JP
Annual Meadow-grass	<i>Poa annua</i>	■	■	■	■	■		■
Autumn Hawkbit	<i>Scorzoneroide autumnalis</i>				■			
Barren Strawberry	<i>Potentilla sterilis</i>	■						
Bramble	<i>Rubus fruticosus</i>	■						■
Broad-leaved Dock	<i>Rumex obtusifolius</i>			■				
Bush Vetch	<i>Vicia sepium</i>			■				
Charlock	<i>Sinapis arvensis</i>	■		■				
Cleavers	<i>Galium aparine</i>	■	■					
Climbing Corydalis	<i>Ceratocapnos claviculata</i>							■
Cock's-foot	<i>Dactylis glomerata</i>					■		
Common Chickweed	<i>Stellaria media</i>	■			■	■		
Common Field Speedwell	<i>Veronica persica</i>	■			■	■		■
Common Fumitory	<i>Fumaria officinalis</i>	■			■			
Common Ivy	<i>Hedera helix</i>	■		■		■		
Common Ragwort	<i>Jacobaea vulgaris</i>	■			■			
Cow Parsley	<i>Anthriscus sylvestris</i>	■			■	■		
Creeping Comfrey	<i>Symphytum grandiflorum</i>	■	■					
Daisy	<i>Bellis perennis</i>	■	■	■	■	■		■
Dandelion	<i>Taraxacum agg.</i>	■			■	■		
Darwin's Barberry	<i>Berberis darwinii</i>			■				
Dog's Mercury	<i>Mercurialis perennis</i>			■				
Druce's Crane's-bill	<i>Geranium x oxonianum</i>			■				
False Oat-grass	<i>Arrhenatherum elatius</i>			■	■			
Feverfew	<i>Tanacetum parthenium</i>	■	■			■		
Fox-and-cubs	<i>Pilosella aurantiaca</i>	■						
Garlic Mustard	<i>Alliaria petiolata</i>			■	■			
Gorse	<i>Ulex europaeus</i>	■		■	■	■	■	■
Green Alkanet	<i>Pentaglottis sempervirens</i>			■	■			
Groundsel	<i>Senecio vulgaris</i>	■	■	■	■	■	■	
Hairy Bitter-cress	<i>Cardamine hirsuta</i>	■	■	■				
Hairy Tare	<i>Vicia hirsuta</i>				■			
Hazel	<i>Corylus avellana</i>	■			■			
Hedge Mustard	<i>Sisymbrium officinale</i>				■			
Herb-robert	<i>Geranium robertianum</i>			■				
Hogweed	<i>Heracleum sphondylium</i>	■		■	■	■	■	■
Ivy-leaved Toadflax	<i>Cymbalaria muralis</i>	■	■		■	■		

Lesser Periwinkle	<i>Vinca minor</i>	■			■			
Lesser Stitchwort	<i>Stellaria graminea</i>	■						
Nipplewort	<i>Lapsana communis</i>	■	■			■		
Oxeye Daisy	<i>Leucanthemum vulgare</i>	■		■				
Perennial Sow-thistle	<i>Sonchus arvensis</i>					■	■	
Petty Spurge	<i>Euphorbia peplus</i>	■	■		■	■		
Pineappleweed	<i>Matricaria discoidea</i>	■			■	■		■
Prickly Sow-thistle	<i>Sonchus asper</i>							■
Primrose	<i>Primula vulgaris</i>	■						
Red Campion	<i>Silene dioica</i>	■		■	■	■	■	
Red Dead-nettle	<i>Lamium purpureum</i>	■	■		■		■	
Russian Comfrey	<i>Symphytum x uplandicum</i>			■				
Scentless Mayweed	<i>Tripleurospermum inodorum</i>	■			■	■		
Shepherd's-purse	<i>Capsella bursa-pastoris</i>	■	■	■	■			
Silver Ragwort	<i>Senecio cineraria</i>	■	■					
Smooth Sow-thistle	<i>Sonchus oleraceus</i>	■	■					
Snowdrop	<i>Galanthus nivalis</i>				■		■	
Spotted Dead-nettle	<i>Lamium maculatum</i>			■				
Thale Cress	<i>Arabidopsis thaliana</i>	■	■		■			
Trailing Bellflower	<i>Campanula poscharskyana</i>	■		■				
Wavy Bitter-cress	<i>Cardamine flexuosa</i>					■		
White Dead-nettle	<i>Lamium album</i>	■		■	■	■		■
Wild Angelica	<i>Angelica sylvestris</i>	■	■					
Wood Avens	<i>Geum urbanum</i>	■		■		■		
Yarrow	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>				■		■	■
TOTALS		40	16	25	30	22	8	11

Angus Lunn's name is well known in Northumbrian wildlife circles. Among many other claims to fame he was the leading proponent for the preservation of the Kielder Forest Mires – immensely valuable bogs in the forest whose future was threatened by the then intentions of the Forestry Commission to plant over them and destroy their unique vegetation. He also wrote the New Naturalist Series volume on Northumberland in 2004. During 2020, as a member of the Natural History Society of Northumbria Botany Group, he has produced a series of short, diverting articles on botanical matters and, most recently, on aspects of local geology. He has very kindly given his permission for AWG to use this fascinating piece about Ross Links in our Newsletter.

Ross Links juts out into the North Sea between Fenham Flats and Budle Bay. It is (or rather was) a rather complicated, and quite fascinating, sandy area, made up of three distinct sections.



Firstly, and seawards, there is a classic prograding (building out to sea) dune system. Rows of parallel dunes have prograded successively seawards so that the oldest ones are inland. It's believed that this has happened since the 17th century, which was the depths of the Little Ice Age (14th to 19th centuries – see box below). During this time the climate was stormy as well as colder and wetter, and, with a shallow North Sea offshore, strong easterly winds shifted huge quantities of sand landward at low tides. This was a copious source for the dunes, so that ridge after ridge was built up. The process appears to be continuing, with embryo dunes now being stabilised by *Leymus arenarius* (Lyme-grass). Until fairly recently there were 14 successive ridges.

Like other Northumberland dune systems, comminuted shells have made these dunes calcareous, and they have a typical Northumberland dune flora, with *Astragalus danicus* (Purple Milk Vetch), *Geranium sanguineum* (Bloody Crane's-bill) and *Rosa spinosissima* (Burnet Rose).

Secondly, behind the dunes, is a fragment of the original beach, now isolated from the sea by the dune system. It has the same calcareous sands, and is (was) gently undulating.

It was also in the 17th century, during a great storm, that the Culbin Sands overwhelmed farmlands and settlement on the Moray Coast east of Nairn. And there is even evidence of a small glacier reforming then in a Cairngorm corrie.

*The **Little Ice Age** has been ascribed variously to*

(1) greatly increased volcanic activity, injecting dust and aerosols into the stratosphere and so blocking sunlight;

(2) decreased solar luminosity during a solar cycle;

(3) orbital forcing – the variation in solar radiation due to perturbations in the Earth's orbit. The Little Ice Age could be part of the long term descent to the next Ice Age, now fended off by our greenhouse gas emissions.

(4) inherent variation in the climate system (but we like consequences to have causes)

(5) re-establishment of forests in Europe and the Americas after the Black Death here and introduced infectious diseases in the Americas substantially reduced populations, sequestering CO₂. (Covid19 without the NHS and vaccines.)



The parallel dune ridges

The third section, now much altered, was another gently rolling area of sand, inland of, and adjacent too, the first two sections. The sand, however, is quite different. Instead of the grains being rounded, like wind-blown dune sand, they are angular. Instead of being more or less homogeneous in size, they are of various dimensions. The two properties together make them more compact and allowed them to support vertical faces in blow outs (the faces were used by sand martins for their burrows). And unlike the dune sands they are not calcareous, having no shell fragments, and are browner in colour. They also contain some abraded stones. They are in fact of glacial origin, deposited by glacial meltwater.

It is not known exactly in what environment they were deposited, but they seem to fit into a pattern. Geological maps show a discontinuous zone of extensive sand and gravel deposits extending along the Northumberland coast, usually a few kilometres inland, but at Ross impinging on the present coastline (and fortuitously being adjacent to the dune sands). The likely explanation is that, during the retreat phase of the last glaciation, there was a time when a lobe of glacier ice, nourished in Scotland, occupied the area of the North Sea offshore and spread a short distance westwards into Northumberland. Here, at a suture zone, it was confluent with an inland ice sheet, nourished in the west. When, during retreat, the two ice masses bifurcated there was an ice-free zone

between them. Meltwater flowed into it, depositing extensive spreads of sand and gravel, for example around Alnwick, Felton and Morpeth. The Ross glacial sands, just north of the diagram, fit into that pattern.

Their vegetation was quite different from the dune area and the ancient beach – it was probably unique in Britain as a type of coastal heathland. It consisted of dwarf shrub heath, bracken and acidic grassland, with species such as *Calluna vulgaris* (Ling Heather), *Erica cinerea* (Bell Heather), *Avenella flexuosa* (Wavy Hair-grass) and *Danthonia decumbens* (Heath Grass). In damper areas were *Nardus stricta* (Mat-grass) and *Molinia caerulea* (Purple Moor-grass) grassland, with *Carex nigra* (Common Sedge) and *Juncus squarrosus* (Heath Rush). These are vegetation types very familiar to us in our moorlands. (All the species can still be found, hanging on, at Ross). The sandy soils were heavily podzolised, with bases and iron compounds washed down the soil profile, and in some areas the podzol was reburied under blowing glacial sand.

A **podzol** is an infertile acidic soil characterised by a white or grey subsurface layer resembling ash, from which minerals have been leached into a lower dark-coloured stratum.

Because there were blowouts the glacial sand area was scarred and broken. The blowouts were caused partly by rabbits, but also by shellfire. During the war a gunnery range was established on the glacial sands with a target miniature railway. Shell bursts disrupted the vegetation, and diversified the habitat. Some of the hollows were extensive, and some were deep enough to reach a lower, calcareous horizon, probably due to seepage from the dune sands to the east. One was called the 'Pyrola hollow'. The *Pyrola* (Wintergreen) never flowered, so was not identified as to species, but it grew with *Salix repens* (Creeping Willow) and *Erica tetralix* (Cross-leaved Heath).

The overall result at Ross was a botanical cornucopia, now much degraded after agricultural reclamation of the glacial sand area, flattening of the inner dunes, and shelter belt establishment. The habitat was much better able to withstand shellfire than modern agriculture.



Blowouts in glacial sand – with botanists! (1974)

Angus Lunn

THREE COLOURFUL WINTER FUNGI

While out in the countryside taking your permitted exercise as a gentle stroll, rather than anything more strenuous, it is good to have something to look out for in the woodland edges and hedges. Here are three colourful fungi seen and photographed recently in the woodland above Felton Mill by the edge of the track up to the church. They are all apparently 'common' or even 'very common'. They are easily recognised by their names:- **Yellow Brain**, **Coral Spot** and **Hairy Curtain Crust**.

YELLOW BRAIN (*Tremella mesenterica*) 2-10cm across.

Found on dead branches or deciduous trees. Bright yellow, shapeless, floppy, gelatinous lobes and folds coming from a single base. When dry it shrivels up and becomes hard and orange. It is a parasite on *Peniophora* fungi which are already attached to the wood and sometimes not visible. It can be found all year but especially in late Autumn.

CORAL SPOT (*Nectria cinnabarina*) to 0.4cm across.

Found on dead or decaying branches of deciduous trees. Begins as soft coral pink cushion-like pustules which become brownish red with tiny nipple-like projections. There are no stems – the spots grow straight from the wood.

HAIRY CURTAIN CRUST (*Stereum hirsutum*) to 3cm height.

Found on stumps, logs, and branches of deciduous trees. Tough leathery brackets with distinct upper and lower surfaces and an undulating, lobed or fan shape. Often grows in tiered groups. The wavy margins are paler than the base which is attached entirely to the wood substrate. Upper surface – ochre to grey and hairy; Lower surface – bright yellow to brown and smooth. It can be found all year throughout Europe.

I am not an expert mycologist but these have been identified by descriptions and photos in the following four paperback reference books:-

Collins Wild Guide to Mushrooms and Toadstools (1996)

Collins complete Guide to British Mushrooms and Toadstools (2009)

Roger Phillips: Mushrooms (2006) – excellent photos and text.

Collins Fungi Guide by Stefan Buczacki (2012) – very comprehensive but illustrations not so helpful.

Meg Keeble



Yellow Brain



Coral Spot



Hairy Curtain Crust



Upper surface



Lower surface

I've written before about trees in winter versions of Plant Corner, but the other day while Jane and I were walking by the River Breamish at Low Hedgeley we particularly noticed some of the old White Willows *Salix alba* growing in the haughs near the river.



These trees have had difficult lives as flooding events and stormy conditions have done their best to dislodge them. But they've survived and when you see them in leaf in the summer you realise they are still quite healthy despite their rather shattered and contorted main trunks.

That got me thinking about the death of trees and the rather rhetorical question "when is a dead tree not a dead tree?" I have no doubt that whole academic papers could be, or perhaps have been, written to address the implications of this question, but this is an AWG newsletter, not an academic journal, so I'm more concerned with the sort of visual evidence one can come across that emphasises the resilience of trees, particularly to physical damage of the sort that has resulted in the contortions of these willows.

Pollarding, either artificially by humans or naturally when a tree gets snapped off in high winds, results in the loss of the parts of the tree that normally suppress and control much of the growth lower down. Most trees operate a system of apical dominance where plant hormones from the terminal buds higher up the plants prevent lateral buds from developing. Remove the dominance and you can get an explosion of growth from buds just below the break. When this happens just once in a tree's life you can get the sort of odd growth shapes shown by this Oak (next page) at Shepherd's Law, about half a mile from our house.



Coppicing is much the same but involves severing the trunk much lower down and is far more often due to human causes than natural ones. This Sycamore (right) is by the farm road to Titlington Mount where we live. It must have been coppiced quite a long time ago – possibly 30 years or so – and the multi-stemmed result is quite striking. Coppicing is usually deliberate and is done on a cycle which can be as short as 3 years for willow or poplar up to 20 years for Sweet Chestnut. The poles that are harvested are generally used for various agricultural purposes or as a crop for biomass to feed power stations or heating systems. This particular sycamore is likely to have been cut down because it was overgrowing the road, but then the resulting trunks have been allowed to grow on.



Far more drastic is the effect of wind-blow during storms when a tree is blown over and its, surprisingly shallow, root plate is ripped from the ground. That surely is the death knell for the tree. And yet, providing as little as 20% of the roots remain in the ground, the tree will often not die. As well as apical dominance, one of the other effects of plant hormones is to control things like the direction of growth of roots and shoots. Shoots normally display positive phototropism (growing towards light) and negative geotropism (growing against the pull of gravity), while roots do the opposite. In the case of a still-living wind-blown tree the tropic effects result in the upward growth of the side shoots and branches which may become substantial and tree-like in their own right. An excellent and extreme example is seen in this fallen Beech in a section of broad-leaved woodland on the edge of Beanley Plantation. It must have been blown down many years ago and has produced an impressive line of upright trunks which are still depending on the roots of the parent tree for their water and mineral supplies. The second photo shows the old exposed root plate of the fallen tree.



All the trees I've shown so far have been broad-leaved. Conifers are markedly less good at regenerating themselves from near-death experiences. However, Shepherd's Law has an interesting Scots Pine which demonstrates well that a broken branch, providing it still has a good enough connection to its parent trunk, can survive and thrive quite well. In this case it has been able to use its contact with the ground to prevent it breaking away entirely and the positive phototropic response is clearly seen in the way the outer end of the branch with the foliage has turned upward towards the light. Contrary to what you might assume, the branch has not rooted at the point it is in contact with the ground (conifers are not good at doing that), and the bare soil around the branch is just the effect of sheep using it as a rubbing post and for shelter.



Sometimes conifers can just die off without being physically damaged, maybe from the effects of disease or root damage or waterlogging, and they don't usually tend to show any real ability to regenerate. But hang on! What about this one? It's a dead Scots Pine, also at Shepherd's Law, that seems to be sprouting a new trunk from the wreckage of the old one. Until, that is, you look closely and see that the new shoot is actually a Birch that has taken root in the decaying trunk of the pine.



Happy New Year all. I wonder if it will be an improvement on 2020? You might think that is an easy one to answer, but for the birder in Northumberland 2020 was the best year on memory for rare and scarce birds in the county and luckily for us most of the best finds were up here in the north. However such things seem a bit frivolous at this time of doom and gloom, so the main thing we have to look forward to is getting this vaccine so we can return to some type of pre Covid normality. That would be great.

As I mentioned last month, the start of a new year is the time for planning ahead and setting goals for the coming 12 months. In January 2020 I set myself about 8 good wildlife targets and failed on all but one! The reason behind that was because it wasn't possible to get out and about to places to look for the species I had planned to find. Never mind, they will keep for another day.

With this 2020 failure in mind, 2021 plans will be a much more local and modest affair. They say plan for the worst and hope for the best, well, that is my mantra for this year. If things do improve in the summer and we may be lucky enough to get out more, then the goal posts will be moved. In the mean time I will be concentrating on the area I can easily walk to around my home in Howick and will enjoy watching the wildlife I know, and keep looking for some that I don't.

Since the last News Letter there have been one or two things of interest locally.

On 20th December, a wander around Boulmer on a bright, frosty day turned up Barn Owl, 4 Whooper Swans, many wintering shore waders and a nice Little Egret flew along in front of the village. These lovely graceful small herons are still quite scarce on this stretch of coast. The highlight of this visit was a Black throated Diver showing well in the Boulmer Haven on a rising tide. Over many years of observation I have found that Black throated is the scarcest of the three regular wintering divers and certainly one of the most mis-identified even tripping up experienced birders, so it is always good to get a nice view of one.



Figure 1: Black throated Diver in Boulmer Haven. Note the grey, cobra like nape and thick S shaped neck plus the white thigh patch.

Back at Howick, the Hooded Crow remained into the New Year between Seahouses Farm and the Village and often there will be one or two Mediterranean Gulls in the same fields with Black headed Gulls walking around. Over the Christmas holidays I have kept a close eye on Howick Pond, trying to make a visit every day. There are few birds there usually but the turnover is interesting to monitor. There have been up to 31 Teal, 9 Tufted Ducks, 7 Little Grebes and a Kingfisher on most days, though since the water levels have risen and turned a muddy brown it seems to have moved on to the coastal rock pools for feeding.

The first of January begins the local watching with a new vigour. The list begins again. It is now that every day common birds take on a new significance adding to the diversity day by day.

The raised water levels have made coast fields very damp here and it must bring invertebrates to the surface as there has been a large number of birds feeding. In the last two weeks up to 229 Curlew, 200+ Golden Plover, 20+ Redshank, 61 Lapwing as well as Starlings, Jackdaws, Rooks and Black headed Gulls have all been in the same field. 11 Stock Doves together was a nice count for here too.

Along Howick Lane and in the village wood up to 60+ Chaffinches, 7+ Yellowhammers, 30+ Siskin, 30+ Linnets, Treecreeper and several Long tailed Tits have been present.

A very cold spell on 9th, down to -4 degrees by 8am found a few Fieldfares in the wood beside our garden, fleeing to the coast from harsher weather inland.

On Sunday 10th, for the first time this year I ventured down to Boulmer, on foot. During these lockdown restrictions I have decided not to drive anywhere unless it's for essentials such as food shopping. The 6 miles round trip walk to Boulmer will have done me more good than driving there anyway.

Just beyond the haven, a Red necked Grebe was a nice find, sitting on a flat calm sea. It swam south first then took flight out of sight around Seaton Point. It may have landed in with the 200+ Wigeon on the sea there. The Little Egret was still present at Longhoughton Steel and the common shore waders were all new for the year.

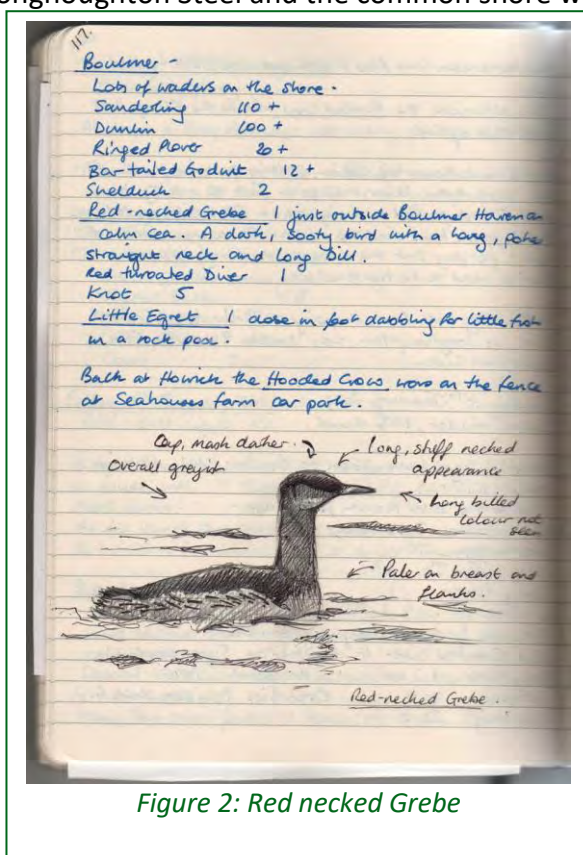


Figure 2: Red necked Grebe

Now the days begin to lengthen, the first Snowdrops and Aconites are in flower and it won't be long until a Song Thrush starts singing. There are already Great Tits in song and Great spotted Woodpeckers drumming here, but it's still a good few weeks until we have spring. The forecast for late January shows the possibility of a 'Beast from the East' type scenario bringing very cold weather to the north and east. If this happens, there could be a few birds arriving from the continent to escape a freeze. I have never seen a Smew at Howick... [fingers crossed]...

December's weather was very similar to that of November's. For those living on higher ground there were a few mornings when the ground was white with either frost or snow. The coldest weather saved itself for the new year. On the whole, there was a chill to the air as most of the wind direction's emanated out of the north. Several periods of heavy rainfall resulted in flooded roads and saturated fields.

I did not manage to add to the 249 species that I have recorded in our backyard in 2020. It has been a thoroughly enjoyable experience. The highlights have been recording the different species of invertebrate especially the Hoverflies (14 species), realising that the pavement on the north side of the house is a great place for plants and discovering the best places to find creepy crawlies. Lessons for 2021 will be to:

1. grow a greater diversity of flowering plants that extend the potential for feeding invertebrates.
2. fix the moth trap
3. try other methods of attracting species to the backyard.

There were a few more species added to the North Bellshill list. These included several species of fern with the highlight being **Polypody** (found growing on the north side of a drystone wall). Other plants found include Common star-wort, **Common whitebeam** and **Parsley-piert agg.** The office window attracted a few moths including 9 on the 11th December consisting of four species: **Winter moth**, **Northern winter moth**, **Pine carpet** and an **Angle shades** – who says you need a moth trap! I have now recorded 206 species in 2 months. Hopefully, a few more members will try recording the species in their garden, park or on their daily exercise route in 2021.



Figure 1: Polypody



Figure 2: Angle shades

Crossword answers from the December edition.

Across: 3. Heath, 5. Redshank, 7. House martin, 8. Holly blue, 9. Juniper, 11. Marmalade, 13. Nipplewort, 14. White tailed, 18. Eel grass, 19. Moth.

Down: 1. Tadpole, 2. Hard fern, 3. Hawfinch, 4. Tormentil, 6. Wood ear, 7. *Holcus lanatus*, 10. Brent, 12. Ash, 15. Apus, 16. Drone, 17. Hedgehog.

Hopefully this kept people entertained for a short time.

*Stay safe.
Jack Daw*

A RINGERS YEAR (WILLOW TITS, MARSH TITS AND THE SHENANIGANS OF SWANS!)

DEC 2020: Within the limitations imposed by the Pandemic and the weather; the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) has asked ringers to take part in a pilot winter ringing initiative by undertaking ringing at the same site over at least six sessions this winter. The idea is to generate survival trends, age ratios; and test site fidelity. There is particular concern at present about declining numbers of finches and our rarer tits (Willow & Marsh) and the winter site, near Longhorsley, that I have used for the last few years lends itself to this study.

We actually started towards the end of November and on an exceptionally dull day caught 61 birds (56 new and 5 retraps). Within the new birds there were 2 juvenile Marsh Tits and an adult Willow Tit; confirming that the Marsh Tits had bred close-by. There were also Tree Sparrows, Blue Tit, Great Tit, 2 juvenile Nuthatch, Bullfinch, Goldcrest, Coal Tit, Dunnock, Treecreeper and Robin. All the retraps were of interest (as this was the first session at the site since last winter) and the first was a Willow Tit first ringed on the 2/2/18; there was also a Blue Tit from Dec 2018, a Nuthatch from Dec 2019, a Great Tit from Dec 2019 and finally a Coal Tit from 3/1/20 (the last previous session at the site). The next session at the very end of November caught us 40 birds (30 new and 10 retraps). Chaffinch was added as a new species and another new juvenile Marsh Tit was captured. Turning to the retraps the very first bird was a Willow Tit originally ringed on the 1/12/19; there was also a Coal Tit, a Great Tit both from December 2018; a Blue Tit from Dec 2019 and another from November 2018. All this retrap information helps the BTO build a picture of the survival of our passerine birds.

The next session, in December, captured 50 birds (36 new and 14 retraps) although no new species were added it was becoming apparent that we were catching a higher proportion of 'adult birds' than juveniles of the year. This might indicate that nest productivity was poor this year (although there was no particular evidence of this from our own nest ringing) or that juveniles did not survive the summer and autumn as well as usual. Again some of the retraps proved interesting with two Coal Tits from November 2018, a Blue Tit from Dec 2018 and another from Dec 2019. There was a Coal Tit from Dec 2018 and also three Blue Tits and a Great Tit. Finally there was a Dunnock from Dec 2019. Another session squeezed in between the rain-clouds captured 43 birds (29 new and 14 retraps) and the new birds added both Goldfinch and Siskin to the different species. Included in the retraps was a Willow Tit not seen since 1/12/19; as well as Blue Tits from Feb. 2018 & Dec 2018; and a Great Tit from Dec 2019. If the weather permits we will persevere with this study as the winter continues (see *attached picture of a Willow Tit and a Marsh Tit at this site*).

Finally, I wanted to update you on the '**Howick**' Mute Swans were some strange shenanigans seem to be going on; which we are only able to follow because these swans are regularly ringed and have large (relatively easy to read coloured darvick rings). Back in 2014 Female ZJX was on the arboretum pool with Male ZJP for the first time. They did attempt to breed but all 6 cygnets were likely taken by a Mink although they were much more successful in several subsequent years; most recently they raised 6 cygnets in 2019. In 2020 Fem ZJX and Male ZJP were present most of the year although they did not nest. Fem ZJX is now 17 years old; *its not known for certain how old the male is as he was not ringed until he was already an adult in 2014*. The pair left the pool in September 2020.

However, on the 10/11/20 the Male ZJP was back on the pool with female swan ZJT -who is his daughter from 2017 (see pict.). They were still present on the 16th November when the normal female ZJX tried to join them on the water but was repelled and was forced to stay up on the Bank in the pond field (see pict.). There was another dispute on the 27th *and eventually the usual proper pair were back on the water together on the 28th* but by the 30th there were again no swans present.

On the 20th December the possibly incestuous pair Fem ZJT (see picture of her coloured ring) and Male ZJP were back together on the water and accepted some duck food. Visited the pool for a Christmas Day Walk early on the 25th there were no swans present. However, meeting another birder later in the afternoon we learnt that a single swan had landed on the pool. Acting on this tip-off we visited the pool again on our way back and indeed found a swan. After bribery with one round of white bread (and rather more floating duck food pellets) we read her ring number as ZJX - the original proper female!

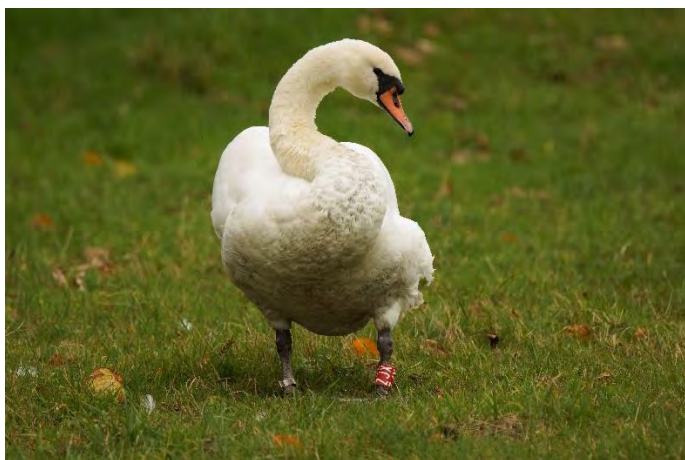
Half an hour later back at the car-park we were overflown by a single swan (we presume this was the same adult female (ZJX) and trying not to anthropomorphise too much we presume the female is looking for her mate (ZJP). Except he has gone off with a 'younger model' (i.e. his daughter).

We await further developments; by the way it is all right to feed adult swans some bread but not cygnets. This is because bread swells up in the stomach of a juvenile swan making it think its 'full-up' when it is really in need of some proper food.

In the current Pandemic situation, it's difficult to take on any new trainees or encourage observers, to ringing sessions but hopefully things will improve as 2021 progresses.

Best Regards and Happy New Year

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



Fen ZIX on bank



Daughter ring ZJT



Daughter ZJT and Father ZJP



Marsh Tit



Willow Tit

SIGHTINGS DECEMBER 2020

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver	17 past Boulmer on 6 th 8 past Longhoughton Steel on 6 th
Little Grebe	5 at Howick on 20 th and 6 on 29 th
Great-crested Grebe	1 at Branton Ponds on 5 th
Little Egret	2 at Hedgeley Lakes on 2 nd 3 at Branton Ponds on 16 th and 2 on 26 th 3 at Holy Island causeway on 18 th
Grey Heron	1 at Howick on 29 th 1 at Stag Rocks on 21 st
Mute Swan	Up to 3 at Howick from 20 th to 29 th
Brent Goose	Many at Holy Island causeway on 18 th
Pink-footed Goose	2000 at Doddington on 16 th
Mallard	98 at Branton Ponds on 28 th
Shoveler	2 at Branton Ponds on 5 th and 1 on 20 th 40 at Budle Bay on 21 st 1 at Monks House Pool on 21 st
Teal	26 at Howick on 20 th and 29 th 16 at Monks House Pool on 21 st
Wigeon	225 at Branton Ponds on 5 th
Gadwall	5 at Monks House Pool on 21 st
Tufted Duck	18 Branton Ponds on 14 th 6 at Howick on 29 th 1 at Monks House Pool on 21 st
Goldeneye	5 at Branton Ponds on 14 th and 10 on 28 th
Pochard	1 at Branton Ponds on 14 th
Common Scoter	1 off Stag Rocks on 21 st
Long-tailed Duck	1 past Longhoughton Steel on 6 th
Red-breasted Merganser	2 off Stag Rocks on 21 st
Common Buzzard	1-2 at Yearle all month
Kestrel	2 at Chatton on 21 st 1 at Yearle on 21 st
Sparrowhawk	1 at Yearle on 6 th , 11 th and 30 th
Peregrine	2 at Doddington on 16 th
Grey Partridge	2 at Howick on 16 th
Coot	70 at Branton Ponds on 28 th
Golden Plover	72 at Longhoughton Steel on 6 th
Grey Plover	8 at Seaton Point on 13 th
Dunlin	244 at Boulmer on 6 th
Knot	8 at Longhoughton Steel on 6 th 15 at Seaton Point on 13 th
Turnstone	15 at Stag Rocks on 21 st
Oystercatcher	2 at Branton Ponds on 20 th 9 at Stag Rocks on 21 st
Bar-tailed Godwit	18 at Boulmer on 6 th 200 at Holy Island causeway on 18 th
Curlew	83+ at Longhoughton Steel on 6 th 39 at Branton Ponds on 5 th
Redshank	2 at Hedgeley Lakes on 2 nd 30 at Stag Rocks on 21 st
Green Sandpiper	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 2 nd and 1 on 31 st
Purple Sandpiper	1 at Boulmer on 6 th 2 at Longhoughton Steel on 6 th 13 at Seaton Point on 13 th 120 at Stag Rocks on 21 st
Grey Phalarope	1 at Cullernose on 5 th
Herring Gull	400+ at Branton Ponds on 20 th
Collared Dove	16 at Branton on 25 th
Barn Owl	1 at Howick on 19 th
Kingfisher	1 at Branton Ponds on 25 th 1 at Seaton Point on 13 th
Great-spotted Woodpecker	2 at Yearle all month
Water Pipit	2 at Druridge Pools on 8 th
Grey Wagtail	1 at Warkworth on 16 th
Long-tailed Tit	16 at Howick on 20 th 15 at Yearle on 11 th
Marsh Tit	3 at East Linden on 18 th
Willow Tit	1 at Branton Ponds on 5 th 3 at East Linden on 18 th

Treecreeper	1 at Branton Ponds on 5 th
Tree Sparrow	1 at Yearle on 6 th
Lesser Redpoll	12 at Branton Ponds on 20 th
Common Redpoll	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 2 nd
Twite	45 at Guile Point on 19 th
FUNGI	
Earth Tongue	In the Fawdon Hills on 12 th
MAMMALS	
Dolphin sp	Several off Howick on 15 th
Bottle-nosed Dolphin	10 off Howick on 15 th
Stoat	1 in full ermine near Branton on 28 th
OBSERVERS	G&R Bell, I&K Davison, G Dodds, K Griffin, P&A Hanmer,
	A Keeble, J Rutter, S Sexton.

Please send sightings reports for January, no later than 6th February 2021 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