

# Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



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## NEWSLETTER 234 MARCH 2021 REVIEW OF FEBRUARY 2021

### VIRAL MEANDERINGS (12)

Who would have guessed, when I wrote the first of these Viral Meandering pieces for last April's newsletter, that they would still be going a year later. I seem to recall that in the first lockdown which started on 23<sup>rd</sup> March



my key moan was the lack of access to barbers. And here we are again – wild and unkempt – or at least I am. You may have seen in the news the Merino Ram in Tasmania that had escaped shearing for five successive years (📷 left). That's how I shall feel by mid-April when, in theory, hair-cutting opportunities may be allowed to re-commence.

It also seems to me that we are still in a position of deep uncertainty. We have a Prime Minister who, at one and the same time, suggests that decisions

should be guided by the data and not by calendar dates and then produces a 'road-map' that quotes some fairly specific dates for different stages in our emergence from lockdown. (I've done quite a bit of self-censorship here, because I was tempted to give further opinions about Boris and his team, but then thought I'd better not). What will actually happen remains to be seen.

Despite the worry that the road-map dates may change, our committee has decided to assume that we shall be free to restart our meetings at St James's in September and also that we should publish a programme of walks starting in mid-May. You will find both of those lists elsewhere in this newsletter and we very much hope that members will want to get the dates into diaries and support AWG when things do restart.

As I write this on 1<sup>st</sup> March we've had some extraordinary weather patterns during February. After more than a week when temperatures, day and night, stayed significantly below zero, with a record -23°C in Braemar one night, we rapidly moved to a fortnight of very spring-like conditions. There's always a danger that once into March one gets lulled into a false sense of security. Remember 2018? The 'beast from the east' storm hit us on 22<sup>nd</sup> February and didn't release its grip until 5<sup>th</sup> March (as Wikipedia reminds me) and even then we had a brief repetition on the weekend of 18/19<sup>th</sup> March. At the moment the BBC weather forecast, which is willing to look two weeks ahead, shows nothing too horrible on the horizon at least until mid-month, but the weather is a bit like the virus – who knows what the future may hold?

One effect of the very mild sunny weather in the last week in February has been that some wildlife thinks it is spring. On 26<sup>th</sup> Feb we had our first bumblebee queen (a white-tailed *Bombus lucorum*) on the garden heathers. On the following day, when Jane and I were in Beanley village, we were not only delighted with the brilliant display of Snowdrops (📷 next page), but we also saw that there were quite a few honeybees taking nectar from the flowers. I failed to get a photo to prove that; the bees just wouldn't stay still enough. Just outside the village there is a row of bee hives, I think belonging to Peter Sogorski, who lives near Shawdon Hall. They were full of noisy activity and were clearly the source of the foraging bees on the snowdrops. I don't think I've consciously noticed pollinating insects on snowdrops before, although I know that seed dispersal is usually carried out by ants. You could equally argue that some foolish humans also thought, in that last week in February, that it was already spring. On 25/26<sup>th</sup> I was weeding ... weeding!!, and on 27<sup>th</sup> I actually cut the grass, or at least gave it a light topping. Must have been mad.



*Snowdrops at Beanley on 27th February*

In one of the newsletters last year I went on a bit about an annoying infestation of the clothes moth *Tineola bisselliella* that was eating some holes in the edges of our carpets. We think we've managed to get rid of them, but I was interested to hear on the radio that the National Trust has been having a rather more extreme problem with the same pest in some of their properties. Their solution had been to introduce a parasitic wasp which lays its eggs in the moth eggs so that the wasp larvae eat the developing moth larvae. The prospect of filling your house with nasty yellow and black stinging wasps sounds less than attractive, even in the interests of pest control, until you discover that *Trichogramma evanescens* is only 0.5mm long and looks rather more like a mini-ant than a wasp. In the absence of any moth eggs the wasps just die out and join the general household dust that is then vacuumed away. If our home problem were to return then this is a possible method of control that we might try.





*Trichogramma evanescens* laying eggs in moth eggs

[These wasps exhibit an extreme form of parasitism in which the host organism invariably dies by being eaten by the parasite. Such parasites are more correctly called parasitoids and one could claim that they are more like pure predators than parasites.]



At home at Titlington Mount we do know that spring is really here because we've started to hear the plaintive calls of Curlews in the valley of the Titlington Burn below us. We are fairly sure that each year we get one or two pairs breeding on our local moorland because, when they have young, the adult calls change to an alarm call if you inadvertently get too close to the young which will be scurrying about under the bracken and heather. It is always good to hear these birds return, just as it is with our regular Cuckoos towards the end of April.

In 2019 some of our AWG members got involved with a survey effort looking at the distribution of some of the larger foliose lichens on trees and shrubs in Northumberland. A small group of us had a particularly good look at these along the old railway line in Crawley Dene near Powburn. Last month, Janet Chubb and I were doing the Northumberland Estates bird survey on the Kimmer Lough site when she spotted a Hawthorn bush that looked as though it was already in full blossom. As we got closer it became clear that the 'blossom' was actually a tremendous growth of the common lichen *Evernia prunastri*. A couple of days later I went back, in a fairly heavy frost, and took the photos below.



*Evernia with bits of yellow Xanthoria parietina*



*Evernia with a lower piece of Hypogymnia physodes*

*Richard*



## 2021 WALKS



Your Committee has decided to put together a programme of walks for this season. We realise that to a certain extent this programme is still a hostage to fortune, but if the schedule announced by the government for the easing of Covid restrictions does happen as Boris Johnson has said, then by mid-May we ought to be in a position to restart activities. Anyone who wishes to come to a walk is welcome to do so and if any walk generates an unreasonably large number of participants, we'll deal with the need to split into sub-groups on the day. You'll notice that August is free – any offers???

### **SUNDAY 16<sup>th</sup> May** Chatton Park, to find the various rock carvings - Richard & Jane Poppleton

Chatton Park, north east of Chatton village, has some excellent rock carvings and offers a good moorland walk. We'll also encounter wildlife opportunities on the way. Max. c. 3 miles. Dress appropriately for Northumberland moorland and the weather. A camera will be useful for when we find the carvings. Meet at 10.30am in the roadside lay-by on the B6348 going east out of Chatton, just west of the Belford turn-off. OS Landranger 75. OS Explorer 340. Grid Ref NU 080 287

### **SUNDAY 23<sup>rd</sup> May** Boulmer headland - Stewart Sexton

Late May is often good for migrating waders and other birds. There should also be some interesting coastal plants. We shall walk from Seaton Point along the shore to Boulmer Village then on up to Longhoughton Steel. Return by similar route except following the coast path. This is 4.25 miles in total. If this is too far, there is an option to reduce it to 2.5 miles by returning from Boulmer Village and missing out Longhoughton Steel. Flat and quite easy walking. Wear appropriate footwear. Binoculars (and/or telescope) more or less a necessity. Meet at Seaton Point layby at 8.00am (**note the early start**). There are two laybys here so if one is full, park 200 m along the road west (towards Lesbury) in the layby adjacent to the golf course and walk back to the meet point. We should be back at the cars by 12.00 at the latest. OS Landranger 81. OS Explorer 332. Grid Ref NU 2614 1263

### **SATURDAY 12<sup>th</sup> June** Burradon Windyside Farm hay meadows – George Dodds

Burradon Windyside farm lies south of the hamlet of Burradon, north west of Thropton. The farm is approx. 66 ha and has a number of interesting habitats including 6 species-rich traditional hay meadows. These were created 12 years ago and are now used as a source of seed for restoration projects across Northumberland and beyond. The hay meadows are complemented by excellent hedgerow, dead wood habitats and Longhorn cattle. 2-3 miles with lots of stops to look at flowers and other wildlife. Walking boots should be sufficient but wellies and waterproofs will be required if wet. Meet at 10:30 am at the farm.

*Directions: Thropton B6341 to Warton. At Warton turn right and take the minor road to Burradon. The entrance to the farm is on the right, ½ mile south of Burradon. There is a rough track to the farm. For some it might be easier coming from Netherton. Netherton to Alwinton road. Take the first left once you are through Netherton. Follow your nose through the hamlet of Burradon. The farm entrance is on the left after sharp left and then sharp right bends.*

OS Landranger 81. OS Explorer OL16. Grid Ref: NT9877 0559

### **SUNDAY 20<sup>th</sup> June** East Chevington coast and reserve – Ian & Keith Davison & Richard Poppleton

A walk of c. 2 miles and lasting up to 4 hours to look at the Flora and Fauna of this wonderful coastal reserve. Most on good tracks but stout shoes are recommended and due to the timings a light snack may be needed. Bring binoculars and a telescope would be useful as some of the bird may be distant. Meet at 10.30.

*Directions: Follow A1068 south of Amble and take 1st left approx. half a mile past entrance to Druridge Country Park, follow rough track to its conclusion. Park without obstructing gates.*

OS Landranger 81. OS Explorer 340. Grid Ref NZ 270 984



## WALKS (contd.)

**SATURDAY 3<sup>rd</sup> July** Road verge survey, south of Wark-on-Tweed – Janet Chubb & Richard Poppleton

This area of farmland has particularly wide and flower-rich road verges. Janet is keen to get a full species list and this will be a good chance for us to practise plant identification skills. The trip could extend into the afternoon for those who want to stay on, but the option of finishing at lunchtime will be OK. If you are staying, bring lunch. Bring a plant field guide and a hand lens if you have them. Meet at 10.30 – *details of meet point are still to be confirmed*. Distance not great, but meandering, as many botanical walks are.

OS Landranger 74. OS Explorer 339 (west sheet). Grid Ref NT 817 365

**SUNDAY 18<sup>th</sup> July** Ratten Row/Alnwick Moor circular – David Turnbull

From Ratten Row near the Hulne Park gates, the walk goes up past the allotments on to Alnwick Moor; across to the Rugley Road and back into the town via the golf course. Distance c. 3 miles. David says there could be time to stop for a coffee. Meet at 10.30 on Ratten Row (park on the left as you approach Hulne Park).

OS Landranger 81. OS Explorer 332. Grid Ref NU 180 137

**SATURDAY 11<sup>th</sup> Sept** Craster/Dunstanburgh circular – Michael & June Drage

Through the Arnold Reserve, along the heughs, up to the castle and back via shoreline. Plants, birds, geology, seashore, maybe dolphins etc. Meet at Craster main car park at 10.30am. Pay and display (no mobile signal so best to bring coins). Distance approx 3 miles. Easy walking but can be muddy after rain so boots advisable.

Binoculars useful and you may want a camera to capture the cetaceans if they appear.

OS Landranger 75 & 81 split the route, but it's all on OS Explorer 332. Grid Ref NU 257 197

## AWG SPEAKER PROGRAMME for 2021/22

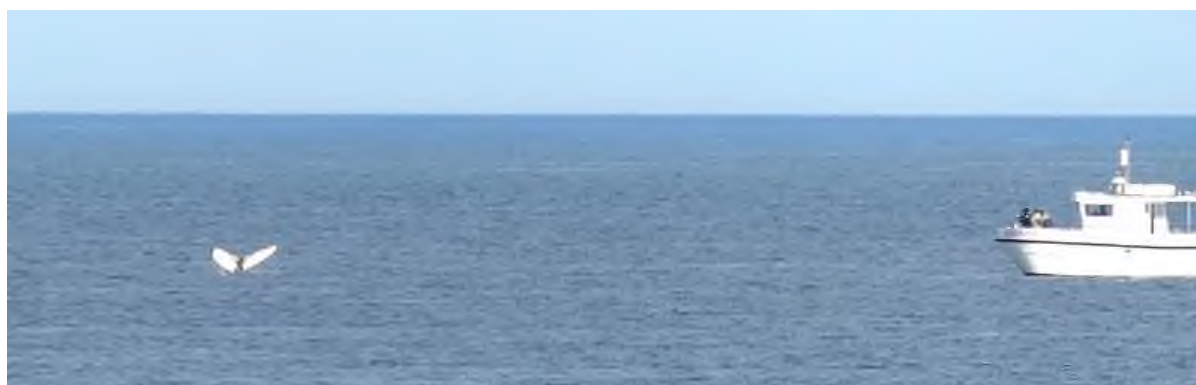
2021	SPEAKER	Topic
29 <sup>th</sup> September	Louise Hislop	An Introduction to Bees
27 <sup>th</sup> October	Michael Drage	Madagascar – Paradise Lost
24 <sup>th</sup> November	Dr Gordon Port	Everything you wanted to know about Slugs & Snails, but were afraid to ask
15 <sup>th</sup> December	Oliver and Kevin Wharf	Northumberland's sky at night in December. Plus Christmas Quiz and Nibbles!
<b>2022</b>		
26 <sup>th</sup> January	Tom Cadwallender	Paddington gets the bird – Birding darkest Peru
23 <sup>rd</sup> February	Graham Sorrie	Morpeth Swift Conservation
30 <sup>th</sup> March	Liz Clark	Small, spiky and seriously endangered – the world of the Northumbrian Hedgehog Rescue Trust
27 <sup>th</sup> April	Philip Hanmer	The butterflies and natural history of the Cirque du Gavarnie, French Pyrenees
25 <sup>th</sup> May	Dr Vivien Kent	Making Otters Count – the use of citizen science to monitor otter populations

We've been watching a Humpback Whale and Dolphins from the Craster Observatory (aka our bedroom window). The whale is the left-hand image with a dolphin on the right.



We first saw the humpback whale off Cullernose Point on 1st Feb (the day after it was originally reported at Howick) and again on 11th. Since 24th it appeared daily off Craster, where it seemed to come closer, following the deeper water at the edge of the whinstone shelf, sometimes accompanied by seals and dolphins. On the 27th it was close enough to be photographed from the Craster Observatory, along with two bottlenosed dolphins. We see dolphin and porpoise fairly often but this is a second whale species (minke previously) for the House List!

The three shots below were taken from the coast path on Feb 28. They show the deep-dive sequence, first the spouting, followed by back/fin and finally the tail fluke, with a convenient Serenity boat shown on the third image to give scale. We have only seen the one humpback, although other people have claimed two.



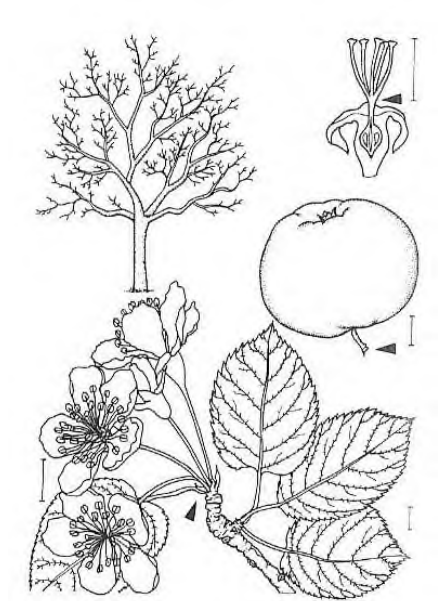
*Mike & June Drage*

*P.S. On 5<sup>th</sup> March there was a report of a dead whale floating south distantly off Craster, entangled in lobster gear. It was still there off Dunstanburgh on 7<sup>th</sup> March and was being inspected by a coastguard boat.*

I've said on more than one occasion in the past that, when one is writing monthly pieces like this, it is easy to spend the time describing past sightings and events and more difficult to time an article so that it deals with things that members can look out for in the weeks following the receipt of the newsletter. With luck I can do the latter this month.

You will get this newsletter in the second half of March and by that time there will be the possibility of starting to see some of the blossom on roadside and field trees in the family Rosaceae. We are talking here about four main genera commonly (except for the pears) found in the wild: *Prunus* (plums, cherries etc), *Malus* (apples), *Pyrus* (pears) and *Crataegus* (hawthorns).

The Rosaceae boasts a range of flowering trees and shrubs. In addition to the Brambles *Rubus* spp. (Swan's *Flora of Northumberland* lists 31 bramble species) and the range of wild rose species, we have Rowan and the various Whitebeams and Service-trees, all from the genus *Sorbus*, plus the *Cotoneaster* species and a few of the bushy *Spiraea* species. Plus, of course, the four genera listed above.



When you find a roadside or hedgerow flowering tree or shrub in the spring, your first problem is deciding which genus it belongs to. Because they are all in the rose family, the fact that they have five sepals, five petals and many stamens doesn't help with the genus. The simplest thing to do, initially, is to try to find the ovary at the centre of the flower. If it is standing proud on top of the head of the stalk (the receptacle) then you definitely do not have an apple or pear. In those two genera the ovary is inferior, which means in effect that it is sunk into the top of the flower stalk, below the point at which the other flower parts are attached. The fruit which develops is a pome in which the true fruit is totally enclosed in the swollen receptacle. This arrangement can be seen in the diagram.

Later in this article I shall return to the issue of apples.

Pears have the same structure as apples, but in Northumberland it is not very likely that you will find a pear tree growing wild. There are only two species that could be relevant. The Wild Pear *Pyrus pyraster* has not been recorded in our county, while the Cultivated Pear *P. communis* has only 12 county records and all of those are almost definitely of planted trees or ones that have escaped from gardens. In fact, distinguishing an apple tree from a pear is not very easy at the flowering stage unless you can see that the female styles are fused together at their bases (apple) or not fused (pear). As soon as the fruit begin to develop it becomes easier to tell which is which.



Apple flowers

a hawthorn bush is not very likely to be confused with apples or pears. Firstly, the hawthorn flowers are individually much smaller and are in much tighter clusters and the whole bush (or small tree) is very spiny. Often it will still have a few remains of the previous year's dried up fruit to help you. Sometimes the greater difficulty with hawthorns is distinguishing them from Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*, because both often grow in the same hedgerows.

That then brings us to the *Prunus* species. I shall ignore ornamental trees such as Peach, Almond, and the various Japanese Cherries because they will all have been deliberately planted. Swan then lists eight species in Northumberland, of which only three are natives. Once you've dismissed Cherry Laurel *P. laurocerasus* and Portugese Laurel *P. lusitanica* from your list of suspects, on the



Hawthorn



grounds that they both have large leathery evergreen leaves and unspectacular flower clusters, one of the first things to remember is that the other six species don't all flower at the same time.

Often the very earliest is the Cherry Plum *Prunus cerasifera*. A few years ago I wrote a Plant Corner article that featured both Cherry Plum and Blackthorn *P. spinosa*. A while later Chris Metherell, our North Northumberland botanical recorder, asked me how I distinguished these two in the field – and of course I didn't really know other than that they both flower early, but the Cherry Plum earliest of all. It's not so bad if it's later in the year and they've both got fruits, but at the flowering stage it's not so easy. One good tip is to look closely at the flower clusters to see if there are yet any leaves. Blackthorn flowers before the leaves, while Cherry Plum has leaves already developing in the flower clusters. The Cherry Plum flowers are also individually larger, but that's only any use if you can see both together. Blackthorn is also a much more spiny plant, to the extent that if you are driving on a rural road where they've just been hedge trimming you should try to avoid the cuttings if you don't want a puncture. So, the probability is that if you see a *Prunus* shrub or small tree in good flower before the end of March, it will be one of these two.



*Cherry Plum (flowers with leaves)*



*Blackthorn (flowers before leaves)*

Of the remaining four, let's take first the Wild Plum *P. domestica*. The major problem here is that most field keys will tell you that: (a) they are probably not truly wild anywhere in Britain; (b) that the plants are very variable, not only in relation to their three acknowledged subspecies, which in English are Plum, Bullace (or Damson) and Greengage, but even within each of these subspecies; (c) that you really need fruits to stand any chance of an accurate diagnosis. I love the little passage in the Collins Wild Flower Guide which says "Because *Prunus domestica* is so variable, it is easily confused with *P. spinosa* and *P. cerasifera*. The best strategy is to assume that if a plant is clearly neither of these two species, then it must be a form of *P. domestica*". Makes me wonder why I'm trying to write this article! Answer – wait for some fruits! A few tips for sorting Plums from Cherry Plums are that the Plum is rarely spiny; its young twigs are usually hairy or downy and they are grey/brown in colour, while The Cherry Plum twigs are hairless and green or reddish-green; the Plums don't start flowering until several weeks after the Cherry Plums.



*Wild Plum*



*Bird Cherry*

Lastly there are the three Cherry species. Bird Cherry *P. padus* is fairly distinct, both in that it doesn't flower until May and its flowers are borne on quite long, sometimes erect, racemes, while those of the Wild Cherry (or Gean) *P. avium* and the Dwarf Cherry (often called the Sour Cherry) *P. cerasus* have them in fairly flat-topped umbels and the flowers normally appear in April. I personally think that Bird Cherry is one of the most attractive of woodland edge small flowering trees.

The Wild Cherry, despite its name, is often planted as a roadside tree. It is bigger in almost every respect than its Dwarf Cherry relative – more flowers per cluster, on longer flower stalks so that they stand out more from the foliage; taller trees, to more than 25m compared with only 8m; bigger leaves, 6-15cm long, compared with only 5-8cm. One little tip is to look at the point where the leaf stalk joins the leaf blade and if there is a pair of reddish glands, then the plant is most likely Wild Cherry. Talking about differences in the fruit is a bit pointless when so many of them are taken by thrushes and blackbirds before they are fully ripe.



*Wild Cherry*

One little point to remember is that many of these shrubs and trees have seeds that contain amygdalin, a chemical that can release cyanide during digestion if the seed is damaged. When I was a child I was sometimes warned that I shouldn't eat apple pips because I'd poison myself – a rule that differs from many 'old-wives-tales' in being true, although I suspect you'd have to eat an awful lot of them to do any real damage.

## The Wild vs Cultivated Apple debate

About three years ago I wrote a Plant Corner article about apples and tried to give the differences between Wild (Crab) Apples *Malus sylvestris* and Domestic Apples *Malus domestica* (note that for a number of years the domestic apple was given the name *M. pumila*, but then this century it reverted to its original name *M. domestica*).

Even armed with what I'd researched and written, I wasn't truly convinced that, in the field, I could be certain that what I was looking at was either Crab or Domestic or some hybrid between the two. Thus, it was interesting to read the first article in the February 2021 issue of British Wildlife entitled *Discovering Britain's truly Wild Apples*. The three researchers, who had noted some impressive old apple trees in ancient woodland, not only found it hard to decide whether these were native Wild Apples (the term they use for Crab Apples), but also failed to find any research publications on *Malus sylvestris* in the UK.

In a range of European countries hybrid *M. sylvestris* x *domestica* trees have been found to make up between 7% and 36% of 'wild' apple populations. However, they note that Wild Apples cannot be reliably distinguished from the hybrids solely on morphological characteristics, so they began to employ DNA analyses on their sample of 342 trees in an area from the Lake District to Inverness.

One of their findings is that the hybridisation with the Domestic Apple is actually threatening the survival of the Wild Apple. They make the comparison with the steady demise of the Scottish Wildcat because of hybridisation with domestic cats.

They showed that in our British woods, fields and hedgerows the apple trees seem to comprise:

- a. Wild (Crab) Apple trees: many self-sown but some, particularly in the lowlands, deliberately planted
- b. Many hybrid trees, especially in the lowlands in well-populated areas
- c. Feral Domestic Apple trees arising from discarded apple cores along roads and railways
- d. Planted alien Crab Apples of a range, mainly, of Asian species

The authors then presented a short table to enable you to tell whether an apple tree in the wild is a Wild Apple or a Feral Domestic Apple, even when the tree has no flowers. The table below is an adapted version of that table.

Characteristic	Wild Apple	Feral Domestic Apple
<i>Hairiness of leaf underside (with x10 hand lens)</i>	Leaf stalk and undersurface glabrous, or with a few sparse hairs on petiole, base of leaf margin, lowest part of leaf midrib and lower lateral veins near leaf base. Hairs stiff and spaced out.	Leaf stalk, veins and leaf surface with many felted hairs, especially the lower half of the blade nearest stalk. Hairs thin, downy and frequent.
<i>Leaf</i>	Leaves small: stalk + blade of largest lvs in typical whorl in July-Oct less than 10cm. Lvs stiff and somewhat shiny on both surfaces.	Leaves larger: stalk + blade of largest lvs in typical whorl in July-Oct more than 10cm. Lvs softer and often matt.
<i>Crown</i>	Densely branched & tangled, esp. when mature. Often with epicormic twigs unless browsed off.	More 'see-through', less complex and with some straighter branches.
<i>Apple size</i>	Small; usually less than 3cm (max 3.5cm) in horizontal diameter when mature. Usually green, green-yellow or with red tinges.	Larger (typically more than 4cm when mature. Variable colours but often with some red colouration.

They then add the point about the impossibility of being certain about hybrid trees without DNA analysis.

Nevertheless, it may be that armed with this table you would be able to have a go at checking any wild trees near you and accepting that anything that doesn't seem to fit either description properly is probably hybrid (the botanist's fallback position!).

*Richard*



At last I am back with a working computer! As I mentioned last time, the accident that resulted in the demise of our information technology has now been resolved, all be it at a cost.

This piece is going to begin with the bad news first, just to get it out of the way. Since the 31<sup>st</sup> January at least one, likely two, Humpback Whales have been a great spectacle off the Howick - Craster coast on and off until the 5<sup>th</sup> March when one was sadly found dead, floating in the sea off Dunstanburgh entangled in pot cables. It is very sad that these magnificent mammals often end up in this way when they enter inshore waters. My last sighting was on 28<sup>th</sup> February off Cullernose Point. I can just say how privileged I feel to have witnessed these animals so close to home, but I hope I don't see any more in the North Sea, for their own good.



*Figure 1: Thar she blows...*





Since last month the local species mentioned are still present in the village.



*Figure 2: Hooded Crow awaiting a treat in the village.*

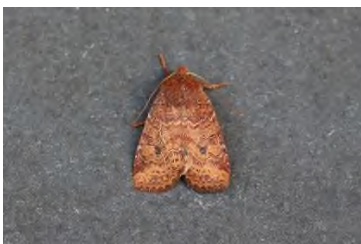
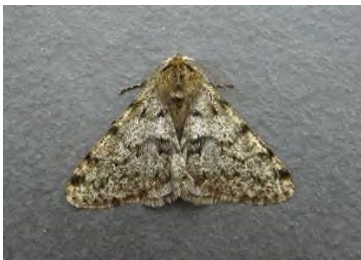


*Figure 3: Barn Owl*

The Hooded Crow has been a daily delight here. What swagger it has strutting across the village paddock after I've thrown out some breakfast scraps. It will eat anything left over and has enjoyed chips, bread, potato, tortillas, fat balls, duck eggs and pancakes so far. It will be a big miss when it moves on.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> Feb the crow had just been fed and I was about to walk away when a squealing call came from the tiny village pond – a Water Rail. They are scarce birds around here but annual in winter, its just they are very secretive and difficult to see, so I carefully crept around to the pond for a look. For once, luck was on my side, when a movement, very close in, on the bank in emerging vegetation caught my eye in time to see the rail skulking away, more like a rat than a bird. Despite attempts to 'stake it out' for a photograph in coming days, only glimpses were seen after that.

As the snow and cold abated a few moths finally made an appearance at the trap with the following –



Agonopterix heracliiana/ciliella (Agonopterix heracliiana agg.) 6  
 17.011 a moth (Ypsolopha ustella) 1  
 44.001 Many-plumed Moth (Alucita hexadactyla) 1  
 70.106 Winter Moth (Operophtera brumata) 1  
 70.245 March Moth (Alsophila aescularia) 2  
 70.247 Pale Brindled Beauty (Phigalia pilosaria) 4 left  
 70.255 Dotted Border (Agriopsis marginaria) 2  
 73.194 Chestnut (Conistra vaccinii) 4 left  
 73.195 Dark Chestnut (Conistra ligula) 2  
 73.210 Satellite (Eupsilia transversa) 1  
 73.242 Clouded Drab (Orthosia incerta) 1  
 73.249 Hebrew Character (Orthosia gothica) 6



As February came to a close, the garden Tree Sparrows became more active around the nest boxes. Before breeding begins in earnest, all 11 boxes were opened and cleaned of last year's nests. It was good to see that every one had been occupied and I'd like to think they all had a successful season in 2020.

On 1<sup>st</sup> March I had an unusual incident with our Barn Owl. While wheelbarrowing a load of manure into the garden, I noticed a large bird, head on, glide down from the back hedge into the field behind us. It soon dawned on me that it was a Buzzard, I assumed, dropping onto an unsuspecting vole in the grass. As it pitched in, I was surprised to see a Barn Owl leap out to the side narrowly missing the attack. Now whether the Buzzard was actually attacking the owl or trying to pirate a rodent it had caught I couldn't say, but the owl took fright and flew straight towards me. At the last second, it veered left, hovered over my moth trap, then dived headlong into a gap under a garden conifer.

This is very odd behaviour for the owl, so I stood quiet for two or three minutes then slowly went to look under the tree. The owl was sitting on our Hedgehog box, it saw me and flew out into the small wood beside the garden.

What was going on, I couldn't be sure, but the remains of a dead Barn Owl in the Long Walk, seen the day before, completely plucked and eaten by either a scavenger from the road or by some predator came to mind...

Now we are in mid March and spring is truly under way, I can't wait to see what excitement the next couple of months will bring. Hopefully I will be writing about the return of our Swallows next month...

*Stewart Sexton, Howick.*



*Figure 4: Before I end, here is the Kingfisher I couldn't show you last month due to technical difficulties.*

Another unsettled period of weather, started with a period of persistent rain and then snow and ice. Freezing cold days with bright blue skies produced fantastic snowy landscapes that were enhanced by stunning sunsets. The unsettled theme continued but then a period of warm weather and the thoughts turned to the start of Spring – certainly the **bumblebees** and **Adders** thought as much! Unfortunately, this period of good weather soon turned to cool and windy conditions. This was highlighted this morning with a fresh dusting of snow on the Cheviots.

I am continuing with my quest of finding new species in our backyard. January and February have produced very few new species despite using the 20x hand lens to scour the concrete and the walls of the house. There are no thoughts in trying to identify the numerous species of algae that seem to be present! **Curlew** and **Oystercatcher** have both been recorded in recent weeks as birds start returning from their winter haunts.

Fortunately, the site of the new office is a secluded spot and has been productive in both work and natural history. Since November 2020, 257 species (9 Mammals, 57 Birds, 1 Amphibian, 16 Invertebrates, 135 Plants, 28 Bryophytes and 9 fungi) have been recorded.



Figure 1: Green alkanet



Figure 2: Frizzled pincushion

The recording area is about 68 ha with a land use of arable, improved grassland and mixed woodland. **Green alkanet** and **Common whitlowgrass** have started flowering in the last 10 days and the leaves of Bluebells are now very prominent. Bryophytes of interest include **Overleaf peltia**, **Slender haircap** (a relatively rare species for this part of the county) and **Frizzled pincushion**. There is a lot of **Frog** spawn in the tiny woodland ponds and it will be interesting to see how/if the tadpoles develop. Recent birds of note have included **Grey partridge** and 2 fly-over **Ravens**. **Long-tailed tits** have been seen carrying nest material to a thicket of Blackthorn outside the office window. **Red squirrels** are very active on the crop of Scot's pine cones. Unfortunately, a **Grey squirrel** also appeared. It decided that life in the farm shed was much easier than looking for food in woodlands – it was seen to make several forays into the shed to pinch sheep cobs!

### BIODIVERSE FARMS

Over the years, I have walked many hectares of farmland as part of my job. Some farms just keep on producing the goods. Recently, I was on a farm in the Eglingham area carrying out a survey on their woodlands. The farm is comprised of woodland of various types, improved and unimproved grassland as well as a small amount of arable that includes wild bird cover. A two hour walk around produce 45 species of bird. The clients were well impressed. Wildbird cover held good numbers of **Reed buntings**, **Yellowhammers**, **Chaffinches** and **Goldfinches**. There were **Greylag goose** and **Teal** on the frozen ponds. Rough rushy fields held **Buzzard**, (7), **Kestrel** (2), **Meadow pipit** and **Skylark**. Improved pastures were being used by **Lapwings** and large numbers of **Redwings**, **Fieldfares** and **Woodpigeons**. The woodlands held the greatest diversity with many of the usual suspects being joined by **Woodcock**, **Treecreepers**, **Nuthatches** and **Jays**. The farmyard had good numbers of **Tree sparrows**, **House sparrows** and a **Pied wagtail**.

There were a number of common species that were not seen and a list of 54 species would be not out the question.

Spring is hopefully on its way and there will be plenty to find and admire even in the smallest of gardens.

Stay safe.

Jack Daw



## A RINGERS YEAR

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**FEB 2021:** With the weather turning very troublesome we only just managed to conduct the last session of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) winter ringing initiative (near Longhorsley) on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of Feb. However, we capture 17 new birds and 8 retraps; and the final bird caught was one of our target species – a new juvenile Willow Tit (see photo). After entering and submitting the data to the British Trust for Ornithology for their collation with all the other sites, and professional statistical analysis, I set about doing my own simplistic examination of the data and can report the following:

We operated nine sessions at the site from November to February catching 259 new birds of 18 species of which 116 were Blue Tits (46%). There were also 4 new Willow Tits (of which 3 were juveniles) and 3 new Marsh Tits (all juvenile); confirming that these two rare species had successfully bred locally to the site. Four of the 18 species were finches Bullfinch, Goldfinch, Chaffinch & Siskin) but totalling only 15 individual birds in all; indicating how low their numbers are relative to the 'tits'. It was apparent from the early sessions that the proportion of adult birds relative to juveniles was actually higher than we normally expect in winter (i.e. there were fewer juvenile birds around than is usual) and this was confirmed by the final figures which showed approx. 50% of the catch were adults. Clearly some thing about the weather and/or food supply later in 2020 suppressed the population of juvenile birds. There were also 41 adult birds retrapped from previous winter ringing sessions (2017-18; 2018-19; 2019-20). Again, heading the list was the Blue Tit (17) but they also included 1 Willow Tit from 2017-18; another from 2018-19; and two from 2019-20 but there were no adult Marsh Tits captured from earlier winter sessions.

At the extreme of the bad snow early in the month I noticed that we seemed to have rather more Blackbirds than was usual hunting around the garden for food; so, I set a Whoosh Net in the garden. A Whoosh Net is perhaps best described as a 'poor-mans cannon-net'; being powered by two long and strong rubber bungee cords (*rather than explosives*)! Once triggered it fires a 'square net' up in the air which then quickly falls-down over a patch of grass (and in this instance - snow). This catching-area having been earlier baited with bird seed (*and in this case a few apples*). The result was that over just two days I captured 14 new Blackbirds and 3 re-traps. The re-traps were all my local birds (two from 2019 and a juvenile from 2020) while most of the new birds showed dark smudgy-bills even though they were a mix of ages and sexes; indicating that they were probably of continental origin. The attached photo shows a detail of the local juvenile male blackbird wing with jet-black adult feathers near the body and much greyer juvenile (un-moulted) feathers on the right hand side of the wing; indicating that this is a juvenile bird hatched in 2020; which the ring number confirmed.

Wind prevented Mist-Netting over this period, but I baited the garden traps and captured an unusual 'Leucistic' Robin with *white feathers* under its throat, and in its right wing (having three primary coverts and the second primary flight feather also white); see photo attached. Also caught in a trap were some Redpoll; including a splendid retrapped male (see attached photo); who had been originally ringed on the 13/4/18; and recaptured again on the 20/12/19. Clearly the garden is on its migration route to and from further north; probably somewhere in Scotland.

The bad weather (first the excessive rain; followed by the snow) unfortunately makes it very difficult for Barn Owls to hunt and hence there are always casualties in these conditions; because of ringing we can identify the origins of some of these birds. One bird (GY14350) hatched at Lesbury in May 2020 was found dead at Alnmouth on the 3<sup>rd</sup> February; another ringed near Fallodon (GV55814) in May 2017 was found dead 29 kms away near Coupland (almost in Scotland) on the 17<sup>th</sup> Feb. Another hatched near Longhorsley (GY28016) in May 2020 was found dead near Brampton on the edge of Cumbria on the 18<sup>th</sup> having sought shelter in a Barn, having flown 65 kms. The biggest traveller was a bird ringed at Whittingham on the 30<sup>th</sup> June 2019 (in its nest) GV97807; found dead 86 kms away near Sedgefield, Co Durham on the 16<sup>th</sup> February. However, there was better news for a Barn Owl originally ringed in June 2020 near Netherwitton (GY20129) that was picked up injured by an observant Gritter Driver on the 29<sup>th</sup> January this year south of Haydon Bridge. He took it to a vet who treated it but then passed it onto a Wildlife Rescue Centre at Carrshield near Alston.

The 'Howick Swans' continue to entertain with the normal pair being missing for most of the month but three different birds turning up on Sunday 28<sup>th</sup>. One was very young (still having some grey 'cygnet' feathers) the other two, although White feathered, gave the impression of being young birds. Eventually one clearly showed



a leg and we read the Red Darvik ring lettering of ZLJ; this showed the bird to have been hatched and subsequently ringed at Howick on the 20/9/19. How long these birds will stay around we don't know; they did not give the impression of nesting this year.

We are continuing to undertake a limited amount of ringing under the provisions of the pandemic regulations that permit 'voluntary or charitable services to continue' these include Biodiversity Monitoring but its not sensible to take on any new trainees at present; hopefully things will change as 2021 progresses and we start ringing at Howick in July.

Best Regards

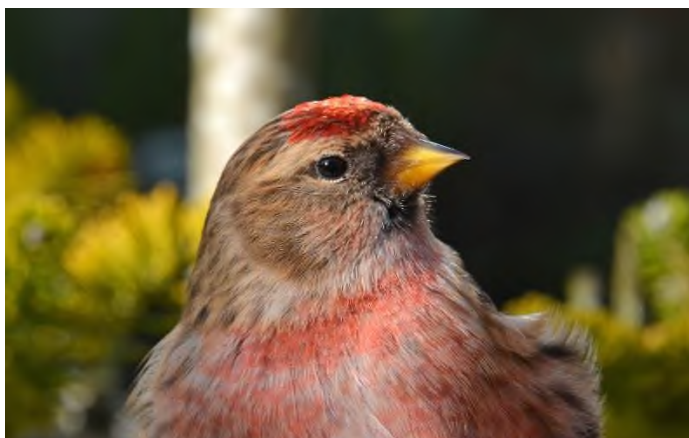
*Phil Hanmer S Ringer/Trainer; Natural History Society of Northumbria Ringing Group (Hancock Museum). E-mail: [tytoalbas@btinternet.com](mailto:tytoalbas@btinternet.com)*



*Juvenile Blackbird*



*Leucistic Robin*



*Redpoll*



*Willow tit*

## SIGHTINGS FEBRUARY 2021

BIRDS	
Little Grebe	2 at Howick on 28 <sup>th</sup>
Great-white Egret	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 23 <sup>rd</sup> and again on 24 <sup>th</sup>
Little Egret	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 16 <sup>th</sup> and 19 <sup>th</sup> and 2 on 20 <sup>th</sup>
Grey Heron	2 at Monks House Pool on 26 <sup>th</sup>
Mute Swan	3 at Howick on 28 <sup>th</sup>
Whooper Swan	4 over Branton on 19 <sup>th</sup> 11 at Dunstanburgh on 25 <sup>th</sup>
Brent Goose	30 off Cullernose on 1 <sup>st</sup>
Barnacle Goose	1 at Branton Ponds on 10 <sup>th</sup>
Canada Goose	A pair at Monks House Pool on 26 <sup>th</sup>
Pink-footed Goose	6000 at Budle Bay on 26 <sup>th</sup> 100+ over Alnwick on 27 <sup>th</sup>
Greylag Goose	80 over Broomford Lonnon on 22 <sup>nd</sup>
Teal	20 at Howick on 28 <sup>th</sup>
Tufted Duck	1 at Monks House Pool on 26 <sup>th</sup> 2 at Howick on 28 <sup>th</sup>
Pochard	1 at Branton Ponds on 19 <sup>th</sup>
Gadwall	1 at Monks House Pool on 26 <sup>th</sup>
Scaup	3 at Druridge Bay CP on 24 <sup>th</sup>
Goldeneye	11 at Branton Ponds on 19 <sup>th</sup> 1 at Monks House Pool on 26 <sup>th</sup>
Common Scoter	150 off Cullernose on 1 <sup>st</sup>
Red-breasted Merganser	3 at Stag Rocks on 26 <sup>th</sup> 2 at Druridge Bay CP on 24 <sup>th</sup>
Red Kite	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 24 <sup>th</sup>
Hen Harrier	1 near Dunstanburgh on 4 <sup>th</sup>
Marsh Harrier	1 at East Chevington on 26 <sup>th</sup>
Common Buzzard	5 over Branton on 8 <sup>th</sup> 2 at Broomford Lonnon on 22 <sup>nd</sup>
Sparrowhawk	1 at Yearle on 4 <sup>th</sup> and 22 <sup>nd</sup>
Grey Partridge	11 at Townfoot on 17 <sup>th</sup> 7 at Cullernose on 15 <sup>th</sup>
Coot	3 at Howick on 28 <sup>th</sup>
Common Snipe	3 at Branton Ponds on 10 <sup>th</sup> 9 at Alnwick Moor on 24 <sup>th</sup>
Woodcock	2 at Townfoot on 17 <sup>th</sup> 1 at Ulgham on 25 <sup>th</sup> 1 at Whinney Hill Farm on 27 <sup>th</sup> 1 at Low Steads on 1 <sup>st</sup> 1 at Craster on 8 <sup>th</sup>
Turnstone	40 at Stag Rocks on 26 <sup>th</sup>
Purple Sandpiper	60 at Stag Rocks on 26 <sup>th</sup>
Green Sandpiper	2 at Branton Ponds on 16 <sup>th</sup> 1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 19 <sup>th</sup> and 2 on 20 <sup>th</sup>
Curlew	110+ over Branton Ponds on 25 <sup>th</sup> 100 at Monks House Pool on 26 <sup>th</sup> 2 at Whinney Hill Farm on 27 <sup>th</sup>
Mediterranean Gull	1 at Amble Harbour on 11 <sup>th</sup>
Lesser Black-backed Gull	9 at Branton Ponds on 25 <sup>th</sup>
Razorbill	40 briefly at Dunstanburgh Cliffs on 25 <sup>th</sup>
Tawny Owl	1 heard at Yearle from 8 <sup>th</sup>
Barn Owl	1 at Branton Ponds on 10 <sup>th</sup> and again on 14 <sup>th</sup> 1 in Brizlee Wood on 24 <sup>th</sup>
Great-spotted Woodpecker	A pair at Yearle all month
Skylark	65+ in Breamish Valley on 27 <sup>th</sup> 3 at Townfoot on 17 <sup>th</sup> 3 near Longhorseley on 3 <sup>rd</sup> 5 at Ulgham on 25 <sup>th</sup>
Pied Wagtail	7 at Felton Sewerage Works on 22 <sup>nd</sup>
Dipper	1 on Yearle Burn on 6 <sup>th</sup>
Stonechat	8 at East Chevington on 26 <sup>th</sup>
Redwing	4 in Alnwick on 11 <sup>th</sup> and 14 <sup>th</sup>
Fieldfare	35+ over Branton on 16 <sup>th</sup> 40 at Overgrass on 28 <sup>th</sup>
Song Thrush	1 in Alnwick on 22 <sup>nd</sup>
Blackbird	15 at Yearle during snowy weather.

Blackcap	Male and female in an Alnwick garden all month
Goldcrest	1 in an Alnwick garden on 6 <sup>th</sup> 1 in Alnwick on 22 <sup>nd</sup>
Long-tailed Tit	A group in an Alnwick garden on 7 <sup>th</sup> several groups in Yearle all month, 12 at Howick on 28 <sup>th</sup>
Marsh Tit	2 at Whinney Hill Farm on 27 <sup>th</sup>
Willow Tit	1 at Boulmer on 26 <sup>th</sup>
Treecreeper	2 near Hedgeley Hall on 7 <sup>th</sup> 1 in Alnwick on 2 <sup>nd</sup>
Raven	2 over Alnwick Moor on 24 <sup>th</sup> 2 at Dunstanburgh on 4 <sup>th</sup> and 8 <sup>th</sup> 1 at Craster on 26 <sup>th</sup>
Bullfinch	12 at Branton Ponds on 19 <sup>th</sup> a pair in Wooler on 10 <sup>th</sup> 4 at Howick on 28 <sup>th</sup>
Siskin	2 at Branton Ponds on 9 <sup>th</sup> 1 in Alnwick on 26 <sup>th</sup> and 27 <sup>th</sup>
Lesser Redpoll	3 at Branton Ponds on 9 <sup>th</sup> 3 at Lemmington Hall on 9 <sup>th</sup>
Common Crossbill	7+ at Hedgeley Lakes on 23 <sup>rd</sup> 2 in Beanley Woods on 27 <sup>th</sup>
Yellowhammer	20+ near Whaupie House on 12 <sup>th</sup> 4 in Branton on 12 <sup>th</sup> 35 at Townfoot on 17 <sup>th</sup>
<b>MAMMALS</b>	
Otter	Tracks in snow at Branton Ponds on 10 <sup>th</sup> 1 dead at roadside near Brandon on 21 <sup>st</sup>
Roe Deer	11 at Brunton on 22 <sup>nd</sup> 3 at Broomford Lonnon on 22 <sup>nd</sup>
Red Deer	1 at Branton on 16 <sup>th</sup>
Brown Hare	1 at Broomford Lonnon on 22 <sup>nd</sup> 2 at Earle Hillside on 10 <sup>th</sup> 1 at Yearle on 27 <sup>th</sup> 8 at Townfoot on 17 <sup>th</sup> 24 near Boulmer on 26 <sup>th</sup>
Harbour Porpoise	2 off Cullernose on 22 <sup>nd</sup>
Bottle-nosed Dolphin	2 off Craster on 27 <sup>th</sup> and 28 <sup>th</sup>
Humpback Whale	1 off Howick on 1 <sup>st</sup> and 28 <sup>th</sup> also between Cullernose and Craster on 11 <sup>th</sup> and 24 <sup>th</sup> - 28 <sup>th</sup>
<b>REPTILES</b>	
Adder	1 at Branton Ponds on 16 <sup>th</sup> and 2 on 22 <sup>nd</sup> rising to a maximum of 7 by end of month.
<b>AMPHIBIANS</b>	
Frog	Frogspawn near Ingram on 21 <sup>st</sup> Frogspawn in Alnwick on 21 <sup>st</sup>
<b>INVERTEBRATES</b>	
Red-tailed Bumblebee	1 in Beanley Woods on 27 <sup>th</sup>
Tree Bumblebee	1 in Branton on 27 <sup>th</sup>
Buff-tailed Bumblebee	1 in Branton on 28 <sup>th</sup>
Red Admiral	1 near Boulmer on 26 <sup>th</sup>
<b>OBSERVERS</b>	
	G&R Bell, I&K Davison, G Dodds, M&J Drage, P&A Hanmer, P Jobson, A Keeble, D Taylor, R Wills.

**Please send sightings reports** for April, no later than 6th April 2021 to: Ian & Keith Davison, The Bungalow, Branton, Powburn, NE66 4LW or Tel: 01665 578 357 or email to [redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk](mailto: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](mailto:redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk)