

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

Email: redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

NEWSLETTER 259 APRIL 2023 REVIEW OF MARCH 2023



APRIL SPEAKER:

On 26th April our Chairman, George Dodds will talk to us about some of the vast range of species he has found during his lunchtime forays around the North Northumberland farm where he now has his office. As of the February Newsletter his list total had reached 632, so he has plenty of choice about those he will include in his talk.

MAY SPEAKER:

On 31st May our final meeting of this season will be addressed by Steve Lowe. Steve used to work for Northumberland Wildlife Trust but these days he is with the Northumberland Rivers Trust and he will back up David Attenborough's and Paul Whitehouse's recent TV comments on the national river situation by "*Grumbling about the state of Northumberland's Rivers*".

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Please send sightings reports for April, no later than 6th May 2023 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

This meeting attracted an amazing audience of 72. If this continues we may have to start booking the Great Hall at the Castle! George began with a couple of plant specimens for his show-and-tell – both of woody plants that come into flower early. Cherry Plum *Prunus cerasifera* looks very like Blackthorn *P. spinosa*, but it flowers earlier and the plant has no thorns. It is not uncommon in our area in hedgerows and as planted specimens on farms. Wych Elm *Ulmus glabra* is far less susceptible to Dutch Elm disease than the other Elm species and so is likely to be the elm you will see in hedges and woodland these days.



Cherry Plum



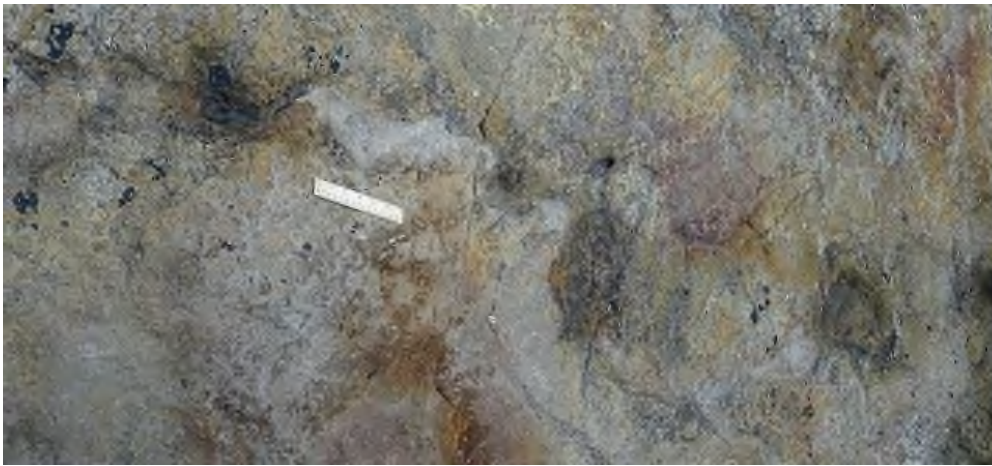
Wych Elm

John Steele then gave his presentation *The Weird and Wonderful Beasts of our Coasts*. John worked for many years as a ranger for the National Park, but he said that ever since his childhood, when holidays were often spent at Boulmer, he has really wanted to be a marine biologist.

The coastline, from the upper splash zone down to the low tide line is a very harsh environment for animals. They must cope with the salinity, with the twice-daily effects of the tides and the consequent temperature changes and the physical pounding of the waves. He began in the splash zone which is rarely reached by even the highest tides. The fact that the rocks are usually covered by a tough growth of lichens provides some grazing opportunities for invertebrates. One animal which is usually present, but is rarely seen during the day, is the Sea Slater (📷 right) which is like a large (3cm long) version of a woodlouse. It is nocturnal and moves very quickly, unlike its terrestrial cousins, and has startlingly large black eyes.



Not all of John's 'wonderful beasts' still exist and on the shore at Howick can be found trace fossils – the imprints of the bodies of animals which have not themselves fossilised. There are the tracks of large marine worms from the Carboniferous, and the footprints of a huge amphibian (📷 below) which were only discovered in the late 1980s. However, there is a genuine Triassic survivor still to be found running around on the upper shore – the Bristletail (📷 left) which is like a marine silverfish (often found in older houses).



Many of John's finds on the open beach are the remains of dead animals washed up by the tides. Among the images he showed were Sea Potatoes – whose rigid exoskeleton (test) is often washed up but with the dense covering of yellowish spines normally entirely rubbed off, and Sea Urchins, which have, in life, a set of internal mouthparts with five rays of spiny 'teeth' called an Aristotle's Lantern, which is used to scrape algae and lichens off rocks;



Sea Potato



Aristotle's Lantern ('teeth' at the top)

Perhaps more excitingly there are the strandings of larger animals. Quite often after storms one can find dead Lion's-mane Jellyfish. In death they don't look very attractive, forming a large darkish red jelly-like puddle on the sand, but in life they have a body that is often 0.5m across or even larger and below, trailing in the water, they have 65 or so long stinging tentacles that can give severe stings to humans. Another strange phenomenon after easterly storms is the appearance on beaches on our coast of Dead Man's Fingers, which are the dead skeletons of the marine colonial coral *Alcyonium digitatum*.

In December 1991 John saw a stranded Blue Shark on Alnmouth beach (📷 right – not of the Alnmouth shark). These medium-sized sharks migrate with the Gulf Stream across the Atlantic from the Caribbean and then normally down the west coast of Africa before returning to the West Indies. This specimen, for some reason, came round the top of Scotland and down our coast before stranding on the beach. Blue Sharks have six rows of teeth that are constantly being replaced from behind.



Two years later a Minkie Whale came ashore and died on the Lindisfarne north shore. At 30 feet long, this krill feeder takes in mouthfuls of water and forces it out through the baleen plates in the sides of its mouth, trapping the masses of tiny krill. Then, to top them all, John has seen just two Leatherback

Turtles on our coasts in 60 years. One of these weighed over 500kg and it now graces the wall in the Great North Museum

at the Hancock. It feeds on jellyfish and follows a very similar migration pattern to that of the Blue Shark – so once again it isn't clear what can have brought these animals round Scotland into the North Sea.

Other shore animals are the familiar lug-worms in their J-shaped tubes in the sand, so often dug as bait by sea fishing enthusiasts and the little shrimp-like Amphipods, which are the commonest of all shore animals, especially on muddy shores and estuaries and a favourite of wading birds. The group includes the sand-hoppers which are so common in decaying seaweed higher up the shore. Some amphipods are tiny at <4mm, while others can be up to 20mm.

John then moved on to rock pools and their inhabitants. Three small fish which are sometimes found are the Shanny (a species of Blenny), the 2-spotted Goby and the Long-spined Sea Scorpion. The shanny is very well camouflaged but if you do spot one you'll see that it seems to 'walk' along the bottom of the rock pool using its pectoral fins. John used to have marine aquaria at home and he could attract and feed these shannies with bits of bacon. The Goby, with its sometimes quite startling blue marks on the sides of the breeding males, has its pelvic fins joined to form a sucker to enable it to cling to rocks in the pool. The Sea Scorpion, a rather scary-looking beast, has three or four spines on its gill cover which it uses for defence. Photos of these three fish are shown below, Shanny left, Goby centre, Sea Scorpion right.



The list of invertebrates in the rock pools is extensive. John showed a range of Crustaceans, including various crabs and prawns which are free-living, and barnacles which are fixed to the surface – either of rocks or of other organisms, like the crabs. Although the adult stages of these crustaceans are very different, the small free swimming larvae are all extremely similar and hard to tell apart.

Limpets vary considerably in size and shape depending on a combination of age, degree of wave exposure and the substrate to which they are attached. It is tempting to think limpets are entirely sedentary, but they will move at night in search of food and then return to the particular 'home scar' on the rock to which their shell shape is adapted. Some limpets have been shown to travel as far as 30m in a night.

Particular little details of some of the animals that John described stand out. Chitons are small molluscs that move slowly around grazing the surfaces of rocks and larger seaweeds. They are sometimes called Coat-of-Mail shells and they come in a range of sizes and colours (📷 right).



The large family that includes Anemones are armed with stinging cells called nematocysts. Some Sea Slugs have the ability to eat Anemone-like hydroids without triggering the stings and they are then able to transfer those stinging cells through their own bodies to their surfaces where they can use the stings in their own defence. The anatomy of anemones is such that they have just a single body opening that serves as a mouth, an anus and a reproductive opening. In 1999 John found a Stalked Jellyfish (closely related to anemones) called *Craterolophus convolvulus* at Craster which was the first record of the species in Northumberland for more than 130 years.

Another group of animals usually found in rock pools are the various starfish species. They all share a common feature in the presence of numerous small 'tube feet' on their undersides. These very flexible structures work by adaptation of the hydraulic water vascular system that maintains the whole body shape which lacks any rigid skeleton. The tube feet are used both to allow the animals to move along the substrate but also to trap and move food from the further ends of the tentacles to the central mouth. Visually the most interesting are the Brittle Stars (📷 next page left) whose central disc and very long flexible arms are covered by spines.

The Nudibranchs, or sea slugs, come in a wide variety of shapes and colours, even in our waters. A particular example is the Sea Lemon (📷 next page right) which is one of the commonest ones to be found in rock pools. They are usually about 6cm long (but can reach 12cm) and they are carnivorous – eating the living parts of encrusting sponges.



Among longer, thinner animals is the Worm Pipe-fish. Resembling Sea Horses, they share the habit that, after the eggs have been laid, the male adult carries them all around with him until they hatch. Even longer are the Paddle Worms and the Bootlace Worms. The former are very obviously segmented and each segment has two appendages called parapods which are flattened into minute paddles to enable the animals to move very quickly in the water. There are several species, some of which can reach 30cm long. The Bootlace Worms, on the other hand, are slimy animals living in the bottom mud or silt of bigger pools and which amazingly can get to 10m long, with the record apparently being an animal measured at 30m.



Worm Pipefish



Bootlace Worm (this is all one animal)

John has only once seen a living Cuttlefish. These are Cephalopods related to squid and octopus, and some of them have a distinctive internal shell or 'cuttlebone' which is often found washed up on sandy beaches – as well as in budgerigar cages!

Lobsters are familiar to all who enjoy seafood but those seen in restaurants are small in comparison to the British record of 1.2m from tail to claw tip and possibly of more than 20 years of age; a real monster of the deep!

John's final comment was that he hopes the current effects of humans on the planet will not result in the whole earth retreating to the situation that existed at the start of Triassic. About 250 million years ago the largest of all the earth's known extinction events occurred, largely caused by a vast increase in carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and the accompanying global warming and acidification of the oceans. It is estimated (by Wikipedia!) that as well as an enormous loss of terrestrial species, 81% of all marine species died out.

In our area Branton Ponds Reserve near Powburn is a very well recognised site for adders – a species which is nationally in decline. However, damp woodland is not the only habitat where these snakes can be found and Peter Wilson, one of our members, took this nice photo of a well-marked male Adder on Alnwick Moor on 7th April. Despite first impressions this is not a black and white shot – as you can see from a few green blades of grass.



ACTIVITIES & NEWS

Middleton North Farm

Some of our members got involved a few years ago on visits to Charlie Bennett's farm at Middleton North near Scots Gap. Charlie then gave a talk to AWG about the changes he was planning to the farm management that would vastly benefit wildlife. The farm includes a section of the long-abandoned Wannee railway line and a short section of the upper part of the River Wansbeck, as well as fields seeded to encourage pollinators and managed as traditional hay meadows.

On Saturday 8th July there is to be a bioblitz day, involving people from the Natural History Society of Northumbria and from other interested organisations – in other words, not a public free-for-all, but a day for those with wildlife interest and awareness. It would be good if AWG could have a presence on that day.

The full organisational details will be published in our newsletter in June (or possibly in May if details are available in time), but we shall be asked to 'book in' the number of people who would hope to attend from AWG. So, if you think this could be of interest to you, please pencil it in to your diary and **let Richard know (01665 578346 or ripoppleton@outlook.com)**. The sooner the better, please.

Northumberland Estates Bird Surveys (NEBS)

Quite a number of AWG members are now involved in our bird survey efforts for Northumberland Estates. Every year Jim Clark produces a NEBS Report for the Estates analysing the results. The latest report can now be found on the Archive page of our website www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk. Our grateful thanks are due to Jim for all the time and effort he puts into this, which amongst other things attracts significant donations from the Estates to our funds. Any feedback you could give Jim about the presentation of the reports or the significance of the data would be much appreciated.

A Flora of the Alnwick Area

It is now more than 40 years since Richard Thompson published his *Flora of Alnwick District* based mostly on his own surveys carried out during the previous ten years. So his data are now around 50 years old and there are various ways in which such a publication could be improved. Chris Metherell, a member of AWG and the Botanical Recorder for North Northumberland, has suggested that it might well be time to try to produce a modern version of an Alnwick Area Flora and that the exercise might be a joint one between AWG, the Natural History Society of Northumbria (NHSN) and the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI).

Chris's idea is that a meeting could be set up to discuss this idea, involving him as the BSBI representative, James Common from NHSN and several AWG members. Richard Poppleton has a number of AWG people in mind, but there are probably a number more who hide their botanical interest and expertise under bushels (or even bushes!). So in the next few weeks he'd like to draw up a list of possible participants who might like to attend a meeting – without making any further commitments at this stage. If you think you might like to be part of this, do please drop Richard an email or a phone call to let him know (**01665 578346** or rjpoppleton@outlook.com) as soon as possible.

One of the delights of spring comes with the appearance of members of the Primulaceae. In the wider countryside, many of these are wild primroses, although if you get anywhere close to human habitation there will almost always be some clumps that are hortals – escapees from cultivation.

As well as *Primula vulgaris*, you can also look out for *P. veris* Cowslip, and even *P. elatior* Oxlip. Identifying these three species isn't too hard. Even when they aren't in flower, the leaves of primroses taper gradually from the main blade down to the base of the leaf stalk which is right down by the ground. Cowslips and oxlips have leaf blades which constrict quite suddenly so that the lower half of the leaf stalk has only a narrow strip of blade each side.

When the flowers appear, the primrose has separate flowers arising from the centre of the leaf rosette, each with its own flower stalk. The other two have a strong flower stalk (called the scape) with the flowers forming an umbel at the top. The cowslip flowers are less pale than in oxlip and often slightly smaller, but the two key things to look for are that each petal has an orange spot at the base of each petal on the inner surface, which oxlips lack. In addition the oxlip umbels tend to be very one-sided with the flowers all nodding on one side, while cowslips have the flowers more evenly distributed round the top of the scape. In the photos below I must admit that the cowslips do seem to have their flowers more one-sided than they ought to be, but not as markedly so as the oxlips



Primrose bank by the railway at



Cowslips with orange marks in petal bases



Oxlips with one-sided flower clusters
Lamberton

That, of course, is all very well, but often in or near gardens you'll find plants which are a cross between primrose and cowslip, often called False Oxlip *Primula vulgaris* x *P. veris* = *P. polyantha*. They look very like true oxlips, but the flower clusters are not one-sided. I could tell you to get out into the countryside to find all these species and the hybrid, but in reality you need to be in East Anglia to have a decent chance of coming across wild oxlips. Having said that, there have been quite a few records of the hybrid in North Northumberland, although the extreme scarcity of the oxlip parent may well suggest that most if not all of these are of garden origin.

In Northumberland there have only ever been eight records of oxlip outside gardens and the one near where I live, in the Hedgeley Hall woodland, has not been recorded since 1984 and I couldn't find any specimens when I searched carefully about three years ago. So you will have to be content with finding garden specimens and checking carefully for 'one-sidedness' in the flower clusters to see if it's the species or the hybrid. The Woodland Trust website tells me that oxlips like growing on/in cow dung, so there's a possible April to May project for

you. Find some rough grassland or woodland edges in limey soil where cows have been grazing and who knows? And if you do find any please report the find to me or Chris Methereil or even just to iRecord.

Dedicated readers of the Plant Corner articles (and perhaps there are some) may recall that last early spring Jane and I went to Lemmington Wood, just north of the Alnwick Moor road, to try to find the big display of native Daffodils that Carolyn Brewster had alerted us to. Unfortunately the effects of Storm Arwen and its successors had felled so many big tree across the old railway line, which is the access route, that we couldn't reach the daffs. So this year we tried again.

The daffodils *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* were present in large numbers and were starting to flower well, although the best patches were down a steep bank below the northern edge of the line. I took one or two shots of individual clumps, but couldn't get a convincing image of the major swathes. Just to remind you, the native daffodil has distinctly pale outer tepals and a medium-sized trumpet of a rather deeper yellow. Knowing whether apparently wild daffs are truly wild or are introduced 'wild-type' is beyond my botanical competence, but these look truly wild.



One advantage of going into a wood, particularly in the spring when you really can 'tell the wood from the trees', is that if you keep your eyes open you can spot all sorts of other interesting things that you hadn't realised you were looking for.

One of the first things we spotted were quite a number of still-standing specimens of *Abies amabilis* The Pacific Silver Fir which I wrote about last year because so many of these fallen big trees were the ones blocking the track and which I hadn't been familiar with before. The key distinguishing feature is the large number of smallish horizontal resin-filled warts on the bark.



Bark of Pacific Silver Fir with warts



The alga *Trentepohlia* on bark

Then we noticed several birch trees that looked as though the trunks had been painted or sprayed orange. A closer look showed that this was a covering of an orange alga. Checking the reference books back at home it was clear that this is one of the species of *Trentepohlia* which grows on the north-facing sides of many birch trunks – not exclusively on birch, but commonly so. It is supposedly a filamentous alga, although without a lens you'd be hard put to see filaments. Whether its north-facing growth is because it can't stand brighter light or because it needs the damper conditions out of the sun, or perhaps a combination of the two, wasn't clear to me from the books I consulted. The orange colour is caused by carotene, the same pigment as in carrots, which masks the normal green of the chlorophyll.



Then, among the thick layers of leaf litter at the sides of the track, we spotted something else colourful. Scarlet Elfcup fungi *Sarcoscypha austriaca* (or were they Ruby Elf cups *S. coccinea*?) are not uncommon, but finding colourful fungi in March is a pleasant surprise. I couldn't tell which of the two species we'd found because you need to look at the spores microscopically to know which is which.

The final thing we saw was a species that was also in flower on Stewart's walk at Howick in late March. Once you get further into April, the woodland floor begins to brighten up in that period

before the tree canopies start to block out the light. Much of Lemmington Wood is coniferous, so the ground flora tends to be rather limited, but those parts with plenty of deciduous trees do allow some early-flowering plants to take their chance, as well as the traditional bulbous perennials like snowdrops, daffodils and bluebells that rather out-compete everything else. The species we spotted was Opposite-leaved Golden Saxifrage *Chrysosplenium oppositifolium*. It needs reliably wet ground, but when conditions are right it can form quite extensive patches of acid-yellow flowers in rather bright green foliage.

There are two species, of which the opposite-leaved one is certainly the most common in our area, but it's always worth checking around to see if there are any Alternate-leaved plants, *C. alternifolium*, because they can sometimes be found growing together which is true on the verges of Titlington Lane and in some of the woodland at Hedgeley Hall (which I found when looking for Oxlip plants). The alternate-leaved one is a rather more robust plant with slightly larger darker green leaves which can sometimes help you to spot it in what is otherwise a sea of the opposite-leaved species.



Opposite-leaved Golden Saxifrage (ignore the Soft Rush leaf!)



Alternate-leaved Golden Saxifrage

Richard

This month I will be talking about two new species that I came across over the last two weeks. Both are only very recent colonists to the UK with one a lot more controversial than the other.

CONTINENTAL INVADERS.

FIRSTLY, HORNETS IN THE VEG.

In recent years, if you are interested in natural history there is no doubt you will have seen some hysterical information regarding the arrival of Asian Hornets into the UK. If you've seen some of the tabloid pieces, these killer aliens are just about everywhere taking over and destroying our natural ecosystems, a bit like the invasions of giant killer spiders every autumn. You would be forgiven for having an image of the old 50s film 'Them!' in mind when seeing such nonsense.

The worst thing about the dodgy publicity is that now, every summer, someone sees and reports an invasion of Asian Hornets into their garden when the insect they have just seen, flattened with the newspaper or drowned in fly killer is a harmless native Wasp or worse, a declining European Hornet. Asian Hornets, despite what the Mirror or Mail would have you believe are still very rare in the UK with only a few sightings per year (23 in total since 2016) almost all confined to the south of England.

This brings me to events of last Tuesday 4th April. I was at work when Jane rang from her work place near Felton to tell me they had captured an Asian Hornet from a box of cauliflowers delivered from France and she had sent me a photo. While there are better insect pics, the specimen on show in an empty clear plastic strawberry container was indeed an **Asian Hornet *Vespa velutina***.

In the last 20 years, numbers of this insect have ballooned on the near continent so it is expected that eventually they will get established in the UK but, hopefully, we can keep them out by being vigilant. It is a Government notifiable invasive species in the UK. After all, they originate from the far east and southern Asia and have no place in western Europe where they can have a big effect on the numbers of native bees and other insects.

It seemed like this one in the container was the first for the north of England, so I had to pop along for a look. The invader was now in the chiller to keep it calm while awaiting its fate (freezer). It was carefully extracted for no more than a minute so I could take a record shot. I was surprised to see not some vile deadly beast but a really smart hymenopteran, slightly smaller than our native Hornet, but still quite a unit, it adopted a go-faster racing pose and was decked out in mostly black with yellow socks and some orange on the stinging end. Very nice.

After it was frozen the next day a chap drove all the way up from Wakefield to collect the specimen for 'verification'. He said the vegetable company would be contacted and given advice on measures to prevent the importation of non native pest species into the country.

I confess to feeling a bit sorry for it...



Figure 1: Asian Hornet nr Felton.

SECONDLY, HOTHOUSE SPIDERS.

Periodically I mention some of my dabbles in Spider hunting. That's maybe too proactive. Mostly the spiders just leap out in front of me so a photo is taken and I try to identify it. Some reckon that there are only about 10 species that can be identified from images but whilst there are only a small percentage that can be identified in this way it's certainly more than ten. Even with my amateurish attempts I have still managed about 50 on the list. Fair enough, they are 50 of the most distinctive species, but surely I've not mis-id'd 40 of them.

When they first caught my attention a couple of years back I bought the 'Wildguides' Spider book where a few really distinctive spiders caught my eye. One creature was described in the observation tips as '*this unusually shaped arachnid appears to be restricted to Hothouses and Garden Centres*'. Bizarre that some wildlife can be 'endemic' to Garden Centres I thought.

With this in mind, it was a species to keep in my back pocket for those often banal visits to the local garden centre where I might find one in among the conservatory cane chairs and padded knee trays. Then I promptly forgot about it. Until Sunday.

I took Peggy out for her last bedtime stroll around 11.30pm. When we came in I dried her feet and unclipped her harness in the porch. The ceiling is low here, and I had been followed in by a moth so I scanned around for it, possibly settled. There were a couple of resident small spiders (*Zygiella xnotata*) around the windows but on the top was a faint web with something stuck in it. I couldn't make it out, but it was tiny and was maybe a bird seed husk blown in or a shed skin of one of the *Zygiellas*?

I gently touched it.

It moved.

As I watched it illuminated by head torch its identity soon dawned on me. It was a **Garden Centre Spider** ***Uloborus plumipes***!

The Spider Recording Scheme website notes - Not formally included on the British checklist although recorded in England in the early 1990s in three widely separated localities - Liverpool, Southampton and Reading. The species is now extremely common in greenhouses in the Reading area and is increasingly being recorded further afield. The spider has been found in every garden centre searched in Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Bedfordshire, Suffolk, Hertfordshire and Kent and it has recently been found in a Leicester garden centre where it was fairly common within several of their heated glasshouses .

The camera and flash were hurriedly sought and images taken. I can't be sure how a hothouse endemic came to live in our bitterly cold porch but suspect last week's visit to Stanton Nurseries for some garden plants might be the source.

It seems that this could be the first for VC68 if not Northumberland so it has been iRecorded. Its amazing how we can travel all over looking for various rarities and a smart, unusual lifer is living at home with us...

The moth took a back seat but after the spider photo shoot was over, a nice Early Thorn was caught on the kitchen wall and released...



Figure 2: Early Thorn



Figure 3: Uloborus plumipes The Garden Centre Spider



Stewart Sexton, Howick

MARCH 2023. With the weather having turned more wintery it's going to be interesting to see how this affects the bird nesting season which is quickly approaching. Meanwhile we now have some owl boxes around Linden Hall Golf Course; it would perhaps be over optimistic to think they will be used this year, but we do expect them to be used in a few years time.

With the weather preventing the use of Mist Nets recently my colleague Hilary tried using some 'Potter' traps in her Longframlington Garden and captured two birds that only occasionally visit garden feeders. These were two male Reed Buntings (see photo. attached). Determining the age of reed buntings can be difficult but in the case of one of these birds an examination of its wing coverts reveals several pale retained juvenile Greater Coverts, indicating that this bird was a juvenile hatched in 2022 (see wing photo attached). Another bird captured was the common resident garden bird the Dunnock; a member of the Accentor family (*and definitely not a sparrow*). This particular Dunnock is living (apparently successfully) with a badly deformed bill (see photo).

This month we did our annual check of all the 'tawny-duck boxes' in the Breamish Valley. We do this ahead of the goldeneye duck breeding season to check that all the boxes have survived the winter (trees not blown down or ended up in the river). Sometimes we have to add a fresh deep layer of wood shavings (which the ducks particularly like). We did find some woodland that was still suffering from damage following Storm Arwen; and in a damaged box we located a very sleepy less than 12 month old female Barn Owl (see photo.). These boxes are probably too small for a Barn Owl to 'nest in' but as a roost site they are probably very snug. In another box we also found the first female Tawny Owl having claimed a nest site for this year. Traditionally in a group of three boxes its not unusual for a tawny to occupy the box it wants and for the other two near-by boxes to be occupied by Goldeneye; this does serve to protect the ducks from predatory Stoats!

Despite having only captured a handful of Siskins near home this year; a female bird I controlled on the 9th March turned out to be three years old and originally ringed at Peebles in the Scottish Borders. A few years ago I regularly captured birds travelling either to or from this part of the borders (these days it's a rare occurrence).

Ringling at home on the 17th I recaptured a pair of Blackbirds. The male was six years old while the female was only hatched last year. Later that day we visited a possible Dipper site near Rothbury and found a nice new (not quite finished) nest of damp green moss under a small bridge over a burn; built on a wooden shelf I installed a few years ago. Nearby there is an open fronted nest box that Grey Wagtails regularly use as a nest site. The pair of dippers had also stuffed some wet moss in this box; it may put the Grey Wagtails off using it but we left it to the birds to sort out themselves!

Meanwhile I can report that a project has been launched in Longhorsley to try and restore some Swift nesting places that have been lost in recent years to building renovations. The idea is to make and/or purchase swift boxes and erect these on suitable buildings in and around the village and monitor the results. Recently the Coquetdale Group of the Northumberland Wildlife Trust has agreed to adopt this project to give it the formal support it needs to apply for some grant funding.

Best Regards

Phil Hanmer S Ringer/Trainer; Natural History Society of Northumbria Ringing Group (Hancock Museum).

E-mail: tytoalbas@btinternet.com



Dunnock Beak



Sleepy Barn owl



Reed Bunting ♂



Reed Bunting wing

The early part of March the higher ground received snow, but it did not linger. March was cold and at times very wet. Although there has been little flooding, many fields are saturated. Wind was from the west and north helping to keep daytime temperature low. There were several periods of gale force winds

GLANTON

During March the dawn chorus gathered momentum. **Song thrushes** are often one of the earliest birds to start singing in the morning. An interesting research paper showed that Song thrush males had preferred times to sing; some in the morning some in the evening and others late into the night. Therefore the Song thrush singing in the morning in your garden may not be the same birds as the one singing in the evening! A **Stock dove** has been singing all month – this is a potentially a rare breeder in the parish. The first **Chiffchaff** was heard on the 19th March and joined by at least two other in the following week.

The first **Oystercatcher** of the season was heard passing overhead on the 4th March. Bird remained throughout the month except when there was snow on the ground. A pair of **Lapwing** were displaying on a field of eaten off Kale on 13th March but these appear to have moved off. The pair of **Curlew** have remained for most of the month.

Migration has been steady. An adult **Mediterranean gull** joined a gathering of gulls on the 7th March. 30 **Greylag geese** flew north on the 8th March. On the same day there were flocks of 210+ **Fieldfare** and 32 **Lapwing**. A **Black-tailed godwit** was heard flying north on the evening of the 24th March. As yet, the annual movement of **Meadow pipits** has failed to materialise.

The first Primrose flowers appeared on the 5th March. There has been a good show of **Lesser celandine** and **Common dog violets** in some of the roadside verges. **Cherry plum** and **Gooseberry** were early to flowering in the hedges. There was a movement of **Common toads** on the 18th March despite the only known ponds being in gardens!

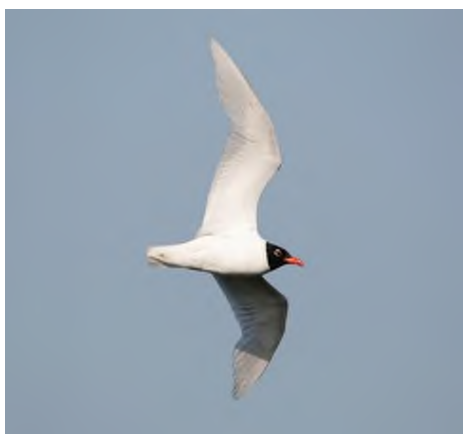


Figure 1: Mediterranean gull (adult)



Figure 2: Common fox-spider

THE OFFICE

The list of species currently stands at 637 (Birds 93, Mammals 15, Amphibians 2, Invertebrates 136, Bryophytes 42, Lichens and fungi 76 & Plants 273).

Cool weather prevented Spring from taking hold and this had a knock on effect on my lunch time wanderings at the office. The only species that was added in March was the **Common fox-spider** *Alopecosa pulverulenta*.

ELSEWHERE

A visit to a farm in mid Northumberland produced two piles of **Barn owl** feathers within 300m of each other – both probably killed by a **Goshawk**. I have also been told that **Buzzards** will also hunt Barn owls but one of the bundles was in scrub and would suggest the former predator!

Another tale that came to light was a **Kestrel** that hunts **Feral pigeons** near Embleton. The farmer has footage of the Kestrel taking the pigeons out of the air! This is far from normal behaviour and if there had not been footage, I would have questioned the identification of the raptor.

As I write this article, the first **Swallow** has arrived in Glanton. Hopefully the weather will improve and we can enjoy Spring's wildlife spectacles.

Jack Daw.

SIGHTINGS MARCH 2023

BIRDS	
Red-throated Diver	8 at Howick on 19 th
Great-crested Grebe	2 at Branton Ponds on 5 th 1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 15 th
Little Egret	1 at Alnmouth on 5 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 11 th
Whooper Swan	47 at Howick on 19 th 72 at Craster on 19 th 30 at Branton Ponds on 20 th 140 at Longbridge Ends on 20 th 10 over Glanton on 23 rd 12 at Monks House Pool on 23 rd 64 at Stag Rocks on 23 rd 4 at Branton Ponds on 28 th
Pink-footed Goose	60 over Howick on 18 th 350+ at Craster on 19 th
White-fronted Goose	1 at Hauxley on 14 th
Bean Goose	3 of the form <i>serrirostris</i> at East Chevington on 18 th
Barnacle Goose	1 at Branton Ponds on 30 th
Shelduck	7 at Branton Ponds on 5 th
Shoveler	1 at Branton Ponds on 31 st
Pintail	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 21 st
Goldeneye	15 at Branton Ponds on 5 th
Osprey	1 at Branton Ponds on 26 th
Red Kite	1 at Wooler Common on 21 st
Marsh Harrier	1 at East Chevington on 18 th
Sparrowhawk	1 at Howick on 18 th
Merlin	1 at Overthwarts on 15 th
Grey Partridge	2 at Greenrigg on 5 th
Woodcock	1 at Greenrigg on 5 th
Lapwing	40+ at Glanton on 5 th
Oystercatcher	88 at Branton Ponds on 5 th
Avocet	14 at Cresswell Pond on 18 th
Purple Sandpiper	9 at Craster on 19 th
Black-tailed Godwit	1 over Glanton on 28 th
Curlew	60 near Roddam on 2 nd
Lesser Black-backed Gull	2 at Debdon on 12 th
Mediterranean Gull	1 at Glanton on 7 th
Stock Dove	1 at Howick on 19 th
Tawny Owl	1 at Ingram on 2 nd 1 at Branton Ponds on 22 nd
Barn Owl	1 near Roddam on 2 nd 1 at Felton on 4 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 10 th 1 in Branton on 18 th
Alpine Swift	1 over Bamburgh Castle on 17 th
Kingfisher	1 at Branton Ponds on 1 st
Sand Martin	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 18 th 7 at Branton Ponds on 18 th 1 near Howick on 19 th
Grey Wagtail	2 at Alnmouth on 5 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 6 th
Dipper	2 at Craggside on 17 th
Redwing	6 at Branton Ponds on 9 th 20+ at Hedgeley Lakes on 16 th 40+ near Hedgeley on 22 nd
Fieldfare	210+ at Glanton on 8 th
Cetti's Warbler	4 at East Chevington on 18 th
Chiffchaff	2 at Alnmouth on 5 th 5 at Branton Ponds on 18 th 1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 18 th 4 at Howick on 18 th 1 at Glanton on 19 th 2 near Howick on 19 th 2 at Howick on 19 th 28 at Branton Ponds on 31 st
Marsh Tit	1 at Howick on 18 th
Willow Tit	2 at Greenrigg on 5 th 1 at Hauxley on 14 th
Long-tailed Tit	20 at Howick on 18 th
Great Grey Shrike	1 at Harwood Forest on 19 th
Raven	2 at Debdon on 12 th 5 at Wooler Common on 21 st
Siskin	10+ at Debdon on 12 th 3 at Lemmington Hall on 20 th
Crossbill	3 at Debdon on 12 th 20+ at Harwood Forest on 19 th

Yellowhammer	20+ at Branton Ponds on 15 th
Reed Bunting	A pair in a garden in Longframlington on 8 th
INSECTS	
Small Tortoiseshell	1 at Branton on 17 th
Shoulder Stripe	1 at Howick on 25 th 1 at Branton on 28 th
Brindled Pug	7 at Howick on 25 th
Chestnut	6 at Howick on 25 th
Red Chestnut	6 at Howick on 25 th
Pine Beauty	1 at Howick on 25 th
Small Quaker	4 at Howick on 25 th
Tree Bumblebee	1 at Branton on 19 th
White-tailed Bumblebee	1 at Branton Ponds on 30 th
PLANTS	
Coltsfoot	At Harwood Forest on 19 th
Wood Anemone	In Crawley Dene on 22 nd
AMPHIBIANS	
Frog	Frogspawn near Blaerwearie on 4 th
REPTILES	
Adder	2 at Branton Ponds on 1 st and 3 on 5 th with 5 on 11 th
MAMMALS	
Pipistrelle Bat	1 roosting at Branton Ponds on 1 st
Stoat	1 at Branton Ponds in full ermine on several dates during month.
Hedgehog	1 at Branton on 21 st
Bottle-nosed Dolphin	8+ off Cullernose on 25 th
OBSERVERS	I&K Davison, T&J Dean, G Dodds, H Gostelow-Drury, M Eaton,
	A Hall, P&A Hanmer, A Keeble, J Rutter, G Sample, S Sexton,
	P Wilson.



2023 WALKS etc.



Here are the first four planned walks for this summer season. All details are included in each walk description. If the weather looks bad and you want to check if a walk is going ahead, please work on the assumption that things have to be pretty awful for us to cancel, but if necessary ring Richard on 01665 578346 before 8.30 on the day.

Saturday 13th May

Beanley Moors

Richard & Jane Poppleton

Meet at **10.00 am** in the Titlington Mount Farm parking area on the left just beyond the main farm house. For SatNav the farm is at NE66 2EA. We last tried this walk 5 years ago but it was so wet that we gave up half way through. Expect moorland birds (probably including Cuckoo) and plants – plus medieval and Romano-British remains and cup-and-ring rock carvings. Ups and downs, but none too severe. May be muddy underfoot in parts, so choose suitable footwear. Distance between 3 and 5 miles depending on the weather and the route we choose on the day. Back at cars by 1.00pm
Park at Grid Ref NU 1001 1624 OS Landranger 81; Explorer 332

Sunday 4th June

Embleton Quarry

Stewart Sexton & Richard Poppleton

Members of the Embleton Quarry management group will be giving us a talk in the autumn, but this is a chance to experience this excellent nature reserve for yourself. Meet at 10.00am in the big layby on the east side of the B1339 at the north end of the village. As an old quarry there will be wet parts, so choose suitable footwear. If it's hot, insect repellent might be sensible. There's a pond in part of the quarry, so there should be a good range of birds and plants. Binoculars and a plant field guide would be a good idea if you have them
Park at Grid Ref NU 230 229 OS Landranger 75; Explorer 332

Saturday 1st July

College Valley

George Dodds & Ian & Keith Davison

This is an all-day trip and, **uniquely, we shall have to limit numbers, so if you wish to come, please email or phone Richard 01665 578346 or rjpoppleton@outlook.com by Sunday 18th June. Max numbers will be 15 including the leaders, so it will have to be "first come first served"**.
Meet at the Hethpool, Northumberland National Park car park by 10:30 am. A smaller number of cars will be taken up the valley. Stout boots highly recommended. Please bring lunch, fluids and dress for the weather. Sun cream and a hat will be required if it is to be hot and insect repellent would be useful. We'd expect to be back at the car park by 4.00pm. Distance will be variable – perhaps up to 5 or 6 miles and quite strenuous. We'll particularly be seeking out rock rose sites in the hope of finding Northern Brown Argus butterflies.
Park at Grid Ref NT8938 2802. OS Landranger 74. Explorer 339

Sunday 30th July

Low Hedgeley Lakes and River Breamish

Ian & Keith Davison

Meet at Low Hedgeley Car Park at 10.00am by the bird hide on the Powburn to Beanley road. This will be high summer, so choose insect repellent and sun screen as you think fit. Long trousers probably better than shorts/skirts in view of possible ticks. Birds, Insects, Plants. Total distance about 3 miles (all flat). Back at the cars by 1.00pm.
Park at Grid Ref NU 066 173 OS Landranger 81; Explorer 332