

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

Email: redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

NEWSLETTER 258 MARCH 2023

REVIEW OF FEBRUARY 2022

March Speaker:

On 29th March our long-term AWG member, **John Steele**, will talk to us about some of the curiosities to be found on our sea shores. John was a Northumberland National Park Ranger and he had a major interest in the Barn Owls of the Park. But he is an expert all-round naturalist and is guaranteed to give us an entertaining presentation.

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.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

MEETING OF WEDNESDAY 22 ND FEBRUARY 2023	2
PLANT CORNER	5
STEWCHAT.	11
A WALK AROUND BRANTON PONDS – 12 TH FEBRUARY 2023	13
NATURE NEWS – FEBRUARY 2023	14
A RINGERS YEAR	15
SIGHTINGS FEBRUARY 2023	17
ALNICK WILDLIFE GROUP ACCOUNTS FOR 2022	22

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

Once again a very good audience (58) and we gained another seven new members. I usually manage to write something about George's show-and-tell items, but on this occasion I was too busy writing out receipt slips for our new members that I missed all of that – sorry!

Our speaker was Mark Eaton, recently retired as a senior officer with the RSPB who now lives in Alnwick. His topic was *The UK Rare Breeding Birds Panel*. This Panel is independent of the main bird conservation bodies – RSPB and BTO – but is jointly supported and funded by them and by the government. It was set up in 1972 and produces an annual report which supplies essential data on the status of our rare breeding species.

The reasons for monitoring breeding birds can be summarised as:

- **The need to set conservation priorities.** Unless you can prioritise you can't spend money and effort effectively. The 'birds of conservation concern (BCC)' system uses a traffic light system, plus a black category for species that are now considered extinct as breeding birds in the UK. The most recent issue of the BCC is edition 5 which was published in 2021. The red list has had Goldeneye, Smew, Purple Sandpiper and Montagu's Harrier added and six species have been moved from red to black in recent years. But not all is bad news. Redwing, Black Redstart and White-tailed Eagle have moved from red to amber.



Redwing



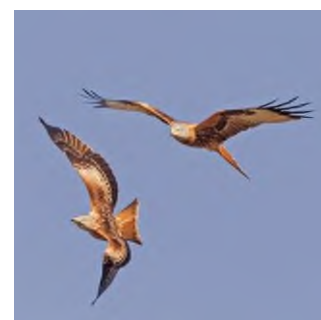
Black Redstart (male)



White-tailed Eagle (chick)

- **The need to measure how nature is doing in general.** Overall more species are declining than increasing, especially in the longer term. 224 species are in long-term decline.
- **The need to feed into current research.** For example, research has shown that Quail have been moving steadily north in the UK and Northumberland is now one of the best areas in the country for breeding pairs.
- **The need to advise on site conservation.** It is no use doing things which you think will improve the habitat if you don't know which species are the ones for whom you are making the efforts.
- **The need to measure the effectiveness of conservation efforts.** A good example of success has been seen with Red Kites (📷 right) which are no longer rare breeders, although it is less clear why they have been slower to expand from their, often urban and suburban, strongholds into more rural areas.

Volunteers are the key to monitoring efforts. The paid officers of RSPB and BTO can only achieve so much by way of monitoring coverage. Whether one is recording our most numerous breeding species – Wrens, with c. 13 million pairs, or Bluethroat with just a single confirmed breeding pair, one needs many eyes on the ground.



The Breeding Birds Survey covers species of least concern down to those with about 10,000 pairs. The Rare Breeding Birds Panel (RBBP) deals with species with fewer than 2000 breeding pairs – about 80 species in all – plus some 100 species that fall into the Occasional/potential breeders category. Some species are problematic. For example it is thought that Eider are severely declining, but because they often nest on distant uninhabited islands, getting accurate

figures can be difficult. For different reasons, Ptarmigan can be hard to survey because their habitat is in our mountains and the birds are well camouflaged in both winter and summer plumages.

Another category of breeding birds falls within the definition of the clumsily-named Statutory Conservation Agency and RSPB Annual Breeding Bird Scheme (SCARABBS). This is an ongoing programme of single-species surveys for conservation priority species not covered adequately by other schemes and involves about 30 species that are monitored in either 6 year or 12 year cycles. Common Scoter and Turtle Dove are surveyed every 12 years, while Capercaillie and Hen Harrier are done every six years. The Capercaillie surveys benefit from the fact that they can be done in the winter and their breeding numbers have reduced from more than 2000 pairs to fewer than 500 pairs in the last 30 years. For Turtle Dove the reduction is far more severe. In 1970 there were 125,000 pairs and now they are down to 2,100 pairs.



Of the list of rare breeders that the RBBP looks at, there are several categories:

- (a) *Less Scarce*: eg Little Egret at c. 1600 pairs and Shoveler at c. 1500.
- (b) *Scarce*: eg Pochard and Marsh Harrier.
- (c) *Very Scarce*: eg Black Redstart and Black-throated Diver.
- (d) *Vary rare*: Marsh Warbler and Red-backed Shrike, both with fewer than 30 pairs.

All annual reports from the RBBP can be accessed on-line via their website at www.rbbp.org.uk

It is important to stress that the RBBP does not itself collect data. Instead it collects data from other organisations and collates and analyses it. These data come in from a wide variety of sources from professional conservationists to the army of amateur birders. And anyone can provide important information by sending their quality sightings with evidence of breeding to the county bird recorders. In our case that would be Tim Dean at t.r.dean@btinternet.com or 01669 621460. It will be important for you to be able to say where you made the sighting(s) and also to define whether what you've observed is of possible breeding, probable breeding or confirmed breeding.

Amongst all the doom and gloom about species decline there is good news as well.

- Common Crane has been boosted by new arrivals from the continent and the well-established Norfolk Broads breeding area has been added to by the increasing populations on the Somerset Levels, and breeding has been confirmed as far north as Northern mainland Scotland.
- Black-winged Stilt has seen a big expansion in Europe and there have been increasing breeding attempts in the UK.
- Spoonbill are increasingly seen in Northumberland, although breeding here has yet to be confirmed.
- Red-necked Phalarope ought to be disappearing to the north as climate rise continues, but for reasons as yet unexplained it is actually increasing in the UK. It used to be assumed that the breeding pairs in Shetland were of Scandinavian origin, but it now seems that 'our' birds migrate here from the Pacific coast of South America.
- Goshawk seems to be increasing, possibly helped by releases/escapes from falconers.
- Mediterranean Gulls have a big colony in Langstone Harbour RSPB Reserve, but there seems no reason why they shouldn't spread.



Bad news about Red-backed Shrike which have almost disappeared as a UK breeder, but numbers do seem to be increasing in Belgium, so who knows. But Montagu’s Harrier has more or less gone.

Some species show large fluctuations annually. Quail (📷 above right) are moving north as breeders and Northumberland is becoming a hotspot, but there are big differences year-on-year. Similarly Bearded Tits suffer badly in hard winters.

Then, of course, there are always the oddities. The solitary American Black Tern at the Long Nanny seems to live in hope of finding a mate here, but is regularly attacked by the resident terns. A solitary Ring-billed Gull has spent 13 years in Scotland, but the Common Gulls hate it and its chances of breeding seem non-existent. Lots of Scandinavian Rock Pipits spend their winters on our coasts and if you see a bird here later than early April, keep an eye out for evidence that it might be attempting to breed.

Of course there is still a lot we don’t know about our rare breeding birds. Particularly birds of remote areas and birds with nocturnal habits are lacking data. However, during Covid restrictions Mark Eaton cycled around to check on every conifer plantation in the Alnwick general area and found no fewer than 10 nesting sites for Long-eared Owl (📷 below), which had previously been thought to be very rare here. So it is clear that you can seek out data that would make a real difference to the sum of knowledge of our breeding populations of a whole range of species.

Northumberland has 28 species that are on the RBBP lists, so perhaps some of our members might think about targeting one or more of these in the next few years.

Quail	Avocet	Goshawk	Willow Tit
Wigeon	Little-ringed Plover	Marsh Harrier	Bearded Tit
Garganey	Mediterranean Gull	Hen Harrier	Marsh Warbler
Shoveler	Little Tern	Long-eared Owl	Fieldfare
Pochard	Roseate Tern	Short-eared Owl	
Goldeneye	Bittern	Merlin	
Red-breasted Merganser	Little Egret	Hobby	
Black-necked Grebe	Osprey	Peregrine	

But do remember it is not the presence of these species that is relevant – otherwise birds like Wigeon and Fieldfare couldn’t possibly be in this list. It is breeding evidence that is needed.



If you are a reader of Private Eye you will know that in their letters pages they usually have a small selection under the heading of *Pedantry Corner*. These almost always consist of people writing in to make often nit-picking comments on the inaccuracy of things in the previous issue. I do recognise something of the pedant in myself and when someone looks at a conifer wood and says something about “all those fir trees”, when clearly they aren’t firs at all, my pedantic desire to correct them is hard to resist.

Thus, my question to our members is, ‘*can you tell the difference between the main conifer genera?*’ How do spruces differ from firs and from pines and from larches and from cedars and from cypresses? I’ve written before about conifer identification, but it’s still winter as I write this and March threatens to have some cold and even snowy weather, so a bit of winter revision is probably on the cards.

But first, a health warning about what follows. This is not a full-blown diagnostic article designed to make you an expert on conifers. It is simply a brief idea of how you can get to, or close to, the right genus so that you could then, if you chose, go to something like the Collins Tree Guide and at least know which part of the book to start from. And **I’m going to confine myself just to the foliage** because cones, which are often very helpful in making an identification, aren’t always present, or may be so high up on the tree that you can’t easily get at them.

Conifers are plants that don’t have true flowers and whose seeds are not enclosed in fruits - instead they are held, usually, in the angles of the woody or papery scales of the trees’ female cones. In addition, the leaves of conifers are needles, although with some of them the needles are very short and flattened and packed close together on the twigs. Some people sometimes assume that the other feature of conifers is that they are evergreen, but that’s not always true and you’ve only to think about Larches and about those strange Dawn Redwoods that line the main avenue in Hulne Park to know that some are definitely deciduous. Do remember that evergreen trees do still lose leaves – its just that they don’t lose them all at the same time in autumn.

In mid-February there were some gusty windy days and down the road from us a large conifer came down across the road outside Hedgeley Hall near Powburn. Undoubtedly this was a tree that had been weakened during last winter’s storms, but my question to myself was ‘what species?’. It had closely-packed short stiff needles, but the key fact was that each of the needles was growing from a short brown peg which stays on the twig when a needle falls. This character of needles borne on small pegs is very specific to the genus *Picea*, the Spruces, and it was then quite easy to check the various spruce species in Collins to confirm that the only one found in Britain with needles this short is *Picea orientalis*, the Oriental Spruce (the Americans seem to call it the Caucasian Spruce). The left-hand photo below shows the very short needles, while the right-hand one shows typical *Picea* needles with their brown pegs.



Up the hill from our daughter’s house near Bellingham is a tree that I first noticed several years ago. Its foliage, as you can see from the left-hand photo on the next page is quite startling and distinctive and immediately you

can tell from the length of the needles that this is a Pine *Pinus*. There are lots of different pines and one of the easiest ways to get closer to an answer about the species is to see whether the needles are growing in 2s, 3s or 5s. If you look carefully at the right-hand photo you can see this tree has them in clumps of 5. In addition, in comparison with the spruces, they don't grow on brown pegs but each cluster does have some rather flaky, papery small brown scales around the attachment point on the twig. There are only three species of 5-needled pines you are likely to come across in Britain and this one is the Bhutan Pine *Pinus wallichiana*.



Our only truly native pine is the Scots Pine *Pinus sylvestris*, which is a 2-needled species, as is the almost equally common, but not native Lodgepole Pine *P. contorta*. The photo on the right shows the needle clusters of a Scots Pine.



Next we come to the genus *Abies*, the Firs. Stace's *New Flora of the British Isles* lists seven species that you are likely to come across, although any predictions like that are null and void if you go into a specialist arboretum or a Botanic Garden like Edinburgh or Dawyck where there are all sorts of exotic species of conifers. Fortunately, most gardens of that sort do rather help out by labelling their specimen trees.



The key feature of the foliage of *Abies* spp. is that the needles are attached to the twigs by a pad, rather as if the needle has been pressed onto a small lump of plasticine on the twig as shown in the photo on the left. It is worth saying that often young trees or the lowest branches of older trees have needles that look a bit different from those higher up, but they will all have that pad-like attachment point.

The needles are usually longer and rather less rigid than those of the Spruces, but nothing like as long and flexible as the Pines. Many of the firs have these characteristic whitish lines on the lower surface of the needles which are the massed openings of the stomata – or 'breathing pores' – of the leaves. The commonest Fir species you are likely to find are the European Silver Fir *A. alba*, the Noble Fir *A. procera* and the Grand (or Giant) Fir *A. grandis*, although if you buy living Christmas trees you may well find that some of the most attractive specimens are the Caucasian Fir *A. nordmanniana*.

I'd better also say that you shouldn't be confused by the Hemlock-Spruces *Tsuga* spp. or by the Douglas Fir *Pseudotsuga menziesii*. Their English names illustrate the problem with avoiding the Latin names because *Tsuga* spp aren't Spruces and *Pseudotsuga menziesii* isn't a Fir. It's worth looking those up, which is fairly easy because

there is effectively only *Tsuga heterophylla* Western Hemlock-Spruce and the Douglas Fir to deal with, and both species are very common components of conifer plantations.

The needles of the hemlock (left-hand photo below) are quite short and quite soft and round-ended and if you look at them closely you can see that they come in a variety of sizes – hence the *heterophylla* part of the name. With the Douglas Fir I tend to think of the foliage as being rather undistinguished – medium length, softish needles – and despite what I’ve said about sticking to foliage characters there’s no doubt that your best confirmation of Douglas Fir identity is to look for cones, either on the tree or on the ground underneath it, to see the three-pronged bracts that stick out between the cone scales.



Western Hemlock



Douglas Fir



Douglas Fir cone

Larches and Cedars have needles that are remarkably similar. On long leading shoots they are often borne as single needles, but on the frequent short side shoots they grow in dense clusters of thin, flexible needles. Often books tend to say that the distinguishing feature is that the Larches *Larix spp.* are deciduous, while the Cedars *Cedrus spp.* are evergreen – which is OK in the winter, but in the growing season you’ll need to get hold of some needles and check to see whether they are flattened (Larches) or 3-5 angled (Cedars). You may need to cut a needle across and look at the cut surface with a lens to be sure. The photos below show how easy it can be to confuse these two genera just by trying to use the foliage on its own – so beware before jumping to conclusions and try to use other characters, like cones. But at least there are only three species of each in the UK, so reaching a correct conclusion may not be too difficult.



Larch



Cedar

All of which then leaves us with the range of conifers which have closely-packed, flattened ‘needles’. They are all in the family Cupressaceae which the books call the Juniper Family, although I wish they wouldn’t because the foliage of *Juniperus communis*, our common Juniper, and of *Taxus baccata*, the Yew are still quite recognisably needle-like and rather atypical of the majority of genera in the family. But it is important to include these two in this Plant Corner because, along with Scots Pine, they are the only truly native conifers in the British Isles.



Juniper



Yew

Juniper bushes have quite spiky-looking foliage and in fact it's not uncommon for people to mix up Gorse and Juniper in the field because at a distance they can look quite similar. Yew has rather soft needles which are characteristically in two lines, one either side of the twig and angled upwards to form a leafy groove along the shoot. Quite often both Juniper and Yew will have their 'berries' visible to help with the i.d. I put the word berries in inverted commas because, of course, as these are conifers they cannot be true fruit and even the ripe Yew berries can be seen to have a gap at the top so that the seeds aren't totally enclosed.

Rather than try to describe the foliage of the rest of the species in this big family I shall just leave you with a small gallery of some of the more common ones. You won't be surprised to hear that telling the first two apart in the field is far from easy and you usually have to look for other clues – and even then you won't always get the answer right.



Lawson's Cypress



Leyland Cypress



Western Red Cedar



Wellingtonia (Giant Redwood)



Coast Redwood

Then on to something totally different. This is the time of year when many gardens benefit from the early flowering of the Hellebores. Some of the big range of garden varieties can escape and become naturalised, but rarely far from their original gardens. However, there are two species that are genuinely found in wilder habitats and may even possibly be truly native in some places. I've mentioned before that Stinking Hellebore *Helleborus foetidus* can be found growing in some profusion in, as I understand it, one wild place in Northumberland. It's in woodland on the steep slope on the northern bank of the Tyne at Warden, just to the west of the bridge.

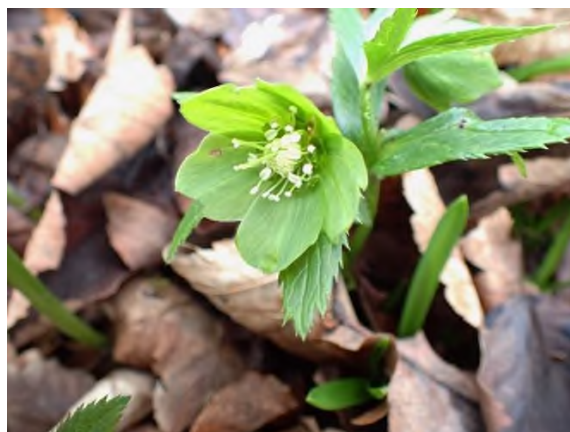
The other one, Green Hellebore *Helleborus viridis*, is far more elusive. You'll occasionally come across it as a garden escape, but the garden plant is quite a large thing and is subspecies *viridis*. The genuinely wild one is smaller in all its parts and is subspecies *occidentalis*. In 1863 it was recorded from a small area of wet haugh coppiced woodland by the River Wansbeck at Rivergreen Mill, west of Mitford, but by the time of Swan's *Flora of Northumberland* he records this site as "probably now extinct". In recent years it has been re-found at Rivergreen Mill and at the beginning of March Jane and I went to see if we could find it. Which we did, aided by notes from John Richards, the Botanical Recorder for South Northumberland. Botany can sometimes be a bit like a treasure hunt (if I were younger I might even say like a Pokemon hunt - whatever that is!) and the pleasure to be gained when/if you are successful is really fulfilling.



A big garden clump of Stinking Hellebore



Green Hellebore at Rivergreen Mill



Green Hellebore flower at Rivergreen Mill

Then I shall end with news of the publication, at last, of the BSBI's Plant Atlas 2020. There are a number of AWG, members who will have gone out to do surveys of some of the 2km² tetrads in Northumberland, and

maybe elsewhere as well, during the recording period from 2000 to 2020 and so will have made their small contributions to the 178,000 recording visits that have generated 26 million plant records.



The full publication is a 2-volume large-format hardback which retails at (gulp) £132, although if you buy from one of the specialist booksellers, or probably from Amazon, you can get it for less than £100. Even better, if you are a member of the BSBI you can get it at half price direct from the publishers. If my copy has arrived by then I may bring it to the March meeting so interested members can have a look.

For all those who think they might be interested, but certainly don't want to cough up large sums for a publication they aren't sure would suit them, you can go to the BSBI Website www.bsbi.org.uk and on the first screen that appears select the bar that says "GO TO PLANTATLAS2020". Then at the Plant Atlas 2020 Home page choose the link near the bottom of the screen that says "download main findings for Britain in English" (or you could choose the option in Welsh) and this will give you a free 34-page summary which includes some fascinating details of species that have increased, that have declined and that are close to or have actually become extinct in Britain. ENJOY!! as they tend to say in fast food outlets and cafes these days.

Richard

The past month has been quite cold and breezy with some rain and even snow spells. Despite this, one or two wildlife bits and pieces have been found, although, maybe not on the level of the latest Attenbrough TV offering, but we play the hand we are dealt...

One nice spectacle was the large **Starling** roost at Alnwick Grit Depot on Lionheart industrial estate. On our mid February visit there were 5000+ birds giving some display in a cold strong wind, sometimes we feared they would crash into something as they zoomed around while being blown off course.



Figure 1: Starling Roost

On 20th February a spider on our bedroom wall turned out to be new for here, a **Cellar Spider *Pholcus phalangoides***. This is a common species further south and in some areas of Northumberland too, but this was our first. They are predators of other spiders so it might need some monitoring.

Barn Owls have been noticeable by their absence here at Howick over the last year since the village back field was put under the plough. For no good reason I might add, an emerging, diverse, flower meadow was coming into its own over the last decade, now, it's a sad mix of sorry looking beans and rape, with no Barn Owls until 21st when one was seen perched in a roadside tree along Howick lane.

On the 26th February a fresh NE wind tempted us to have a seawatch from Howick Bathing House. For the time of year, it was surprisingly good with **3 Great Northern Divers, 23 Red throated Divers, 1 Manx Shearwater**, 35 Common Scoter, **1 Velvet Scoter**, 1 Purple Sandpiper, 3 Shelduck and a scattering of auks Gannets and Kittiwakes. A **Harbour Porpoise** was seen, my first for a while, I assumed the Bottle nosed Dolphins had driven them away. Nearby 93 Curlews were in the coast fields.



Figure 2: Cellar Spider, Howick

Maybe the most unexpected find under the weather conditions were two very early **Chiffchaffs** at Alnmouth waterworks on 5th March. One bird was in full song, probably a week earlier than the usual first arrivals. Also around Alnmouth on that day were **Barnacle Goose, Little Egret and Goosander**.

After Alnmouth we walked the disused railway line at Greenrigg where a pair of **Willow Tits** were seen. This is a good spot for these nationally declining birds. Another was seen in February at Birling Carrs caravan site.

Around Howick, our wintering **Water Rail** was still seen on occasion throughout the month , particularly when the burn water level was low, and a female **Kingfisher** was present at the pond.

Further signs of early migration were noted on 7th when 5 **Whooper Swans** flew low North over the village and on the 14th a nice adult summer plumaged **Mediterranean Gull** flew low south across the village with 50 Black headed Gulls. The first one this year.

More unusually was a new breeding record for Howick. Have you ever seen a one-nest Rookery? Well, now we have one here. It'll be interesting to see how residents react when the colony builds...



Figure 3: Willow Tit, Greenrigg



Figure 4: Mediterranean Gull over Howick.

Stewart Sexton, Howick.

A WALK AROUND BRANTON PONDS – 12TH FEBRUARY 2023

18 members met at this well established site for a general wildlife walk. Unusually a number of attendees had never visited Branton, so it was a well-timed visit.

The weather being overcast and cool meant that the expected Adders remained hidden and bird activity was relatively quiet, the best bird being the Raven that flew overhead calling before we had left the carpark.

Along the way we discussed the male catkins and related female parts of Hazel and Alder trees, birds included Goosander, Goldeneye, Shelduck, Cormorant (including one possibly of the "continental" race), Wigeon, Teal and Gadwall. On the water's edge Oystercatcher called noisily and Grey Heron were already booking their nesting sites. In the trees small groups of Long-tailed Tit and Bullfinch fed.

After a couple of hours walking around members left, hopefully with a better understanding of the site and the wildlife to be seen even on a quiet day in February. Thanks to Jane Poppleton for the photos.



Keith Davison

February's weather was fairly typical for the time of year. It was generally cold but with some very mild interludes. Winds stayed in the west for the early part of the month and then moved around to the north and east.

If you were fortunate with clear skies, the Northern lights could be seen on at least one night.

Glanton

The highlight of the month was the appearance of 3 **Waxwings** outside the Memorial hall in the village. They spent their time feeding on a small **Cotoneaster** bush where the remaining berries were low to the ground. At times several of the birds could not be seen as they were tucked away in the bush. This was new behaviour that I had not seen before. They were seen until mid-morning but then disappeared. The following day they could not be found but were again seen on the third day as I stepped outside the house! This time, they were sitting in an **Ash** with a group of **Starling** before flying off to gardens in the north west of the village. The birds were not seen again. Waxwings are not a new bird for the house list as they have been seen on three previous occasions.

By the end of the month, **Curlew** and **Oystercatchers** were holding territories within the parish. **Brown hares** were starting to box and further **Hedgehogs** were seen. A few more queen **Buff-tailed bumblebees** were also on the wing

Four **Roe deer** were seen at first light on the 12th February – an uncommon site in the parish. An immature male **Peregrine** was seen on the 16th and up to 4 **Ravens** were seen on and off throughout the month.

Sweet violets and the first **Primroses** were in flower by the end of the month.



Figure 5: Waxwing



Figure 2: Jelly ear

The Office

The list of species currently stands at 636 (Birds 93, Mammals 15, Amphibians 2, Invertebrates 135, Bryophytes 42, Lichens and fungi 76 & Plants 273). Recent additions include the Crocus **Crocus tommasinianus**, **Pleated snowdrop** and **Hart's tongue fern**. Hopefully, some warmer weather will bring additions to the list.

Elsewhere

A couple of notable natural history sightings have occurred in the last few weeks. The first was introduced by a noisy Raven at a site in the north of the County. The Raven was making a racket but I could not locate it until it appeared relatively low down jostling with an immature female **Goshawk**. Each bird took turns at diving and chasing before the Goshawk got fed up and moved off quickly into trees.

A further notable sighting was find large clumps of fresh **Jelly ear** *Auricularia auricula-judae* (Figure 2) growing on mature **Elder** near Fenham le Moor. Interestingly, this fungi appeared to be only growing on the oldest of the Elder.

Hopefully Spring is on its way. By the time you receive the next newsletter the first **Swallows** may have arrived!!

Jack Daw.

FEB 2023. Despite unhelpful weather it has been possible to get out and about this month to put up some new small boxes in a woodland near Longhorsley; plus boxes for Tawny Owls. We have also got some Barn Owl boxes up and surveyed a number of new sites. We are rapidly running out of time to put any more up, not because you can't put new boxes up anytime (you really can) but because I and my assistants will soon have to turn our attention to monitoring the spring breeding season.

A little late in the Barn Owl breeding season last year, we were invited to check a nest box west of Rothbury and on the 18/7/22 we had found four nearly fledged young owls in this box but no sign of the adults. Returning to the same site on the 6th Feb this year, ostensibly to check on the safety of the box itself, we found a pair of healthy adult owls in residence. The male was a bird of 4 or 5 yrs old weighing 340g, while the female was only 3 yrs old and weighed 360g (See photos attached). The weight of the female is insufficient to lay eggs but she has got time between now and April to get up to something over 400g. Meanwhile returns from the British Trust for Ornithology tell us of two casualties from last years young owls. One hatched (out of three) from Warkworth was found dead near Alnmouth on the 8th February and another from Fontburn (out of five) was killed on the A1 near Morpeth on the 1st. There was also an owl that was in its third year from near Craster; that was found dead inland near Rennington in November. This was notable as one of the many offspring of my 'Dumfries Owl' that had nested in that area until she was 10 years old; sadly now lost herself.

Early in the month I was invited to visit a private Nature Reserve that's been created very close to Morpeth. It's called 'Clarke's Bog' and is well worth a visit if you get the opportunity. Having seen a number of such creations over the years I really do have to say this is excellent; so often you find such sites to be disappointing consisting of little more than a field or perhaps a block of woodland. As the RSPB has proved you really do have to move soil and create new habitats if it's to be meaningful. As part of the ongoing monitoring of this site a bird ringing programme has been started and some of my C Ringers has become involved in this.

One of my C Ringers has just used her relatively new permit to seek some proper warmer weather in The Gambia, at the Kartong Bird Observatory; which is now operating again after being shut down by Covid for the last few years. Birds ringed on the first day included Pied Kingfisher and Senegal Coucal (see photos.). This observatory is pioneering some genuine new research and science education in West Africa.

I concluded my contribution to the BTO's Winter Ringing Initiative on the 14th Feb, by ringing with two nets in the garden for three hours. In total I did all eight sessions; at approximately two week intervals and captured a total of 272 birds from thirteen species. These were:

Blackbird, Blue Tit, Coal Tit, Dunnock, Goldfinch, Great Tit, House Sparrow, Long Tailed Tit, Nuthatch, Redpoll, Robin, Tree Sparrow and Wren. For anyone who still thinks that Robin they see in their garden in the Winter is always the same bird perhaps I should tell you that I ringed 17 new robins over the eight sessions! There were also notable recaptures including a Blue Tit from 2019, a Coal Tit from 2018, a Tree Sparrow from 2018; and a controlled Redpoll that was first ringed at Waxham in Norfolk on the 12/10/20 as an adult male.

Ringing at one of Hilary's sites in a woodland near Longframlington on a cold and slightly damp morning proved interesting as we caught a rare Marsh Tit; and we retrapped a resident Treecreeper (now an adult) (see photos). This wood is a regenerated birch woodland which is damp in places and logically should have resident Willow Tits (that need damp rotten wood in which to nest). However, as far as we can tell the only rare tits are their close relatives the marsh tit.

I have now prototyped my new Swift boxes based on researching all the multivarious designs you can find on the internet and produced a box that you can make for about #15.00. I have drawn up a plan of this which is available and I hope to get posted on some Web-Sites soon. Meanwhile anyone wanting a copy urgently is invited to e-mail me. Swifts are late migrants so it's not too late to put a box up – although realistically you may have to wait at least a year for it to be taken up.

Recently published in Birds in Northumbria 2021 (Annual Report of the Northumberland and Tyneside Bird Club) is my paper on '*Clangers in space and time – Goldeneye in Northumberland and their travels*'. For a copy go to the Clubs Website for details. It contains lots of interesting reports and papers.

Best Regards,

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

E-mail: tytoalbas@btinternet.com



Female Barn Owl



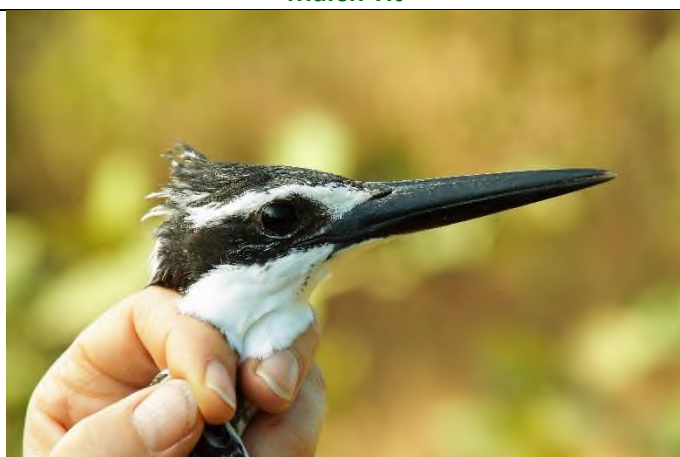
Male Barn Owl



Marsh Tit



Tree Creeper



Pied Kingfisher [The Gambia]



Senegal Coucal [The Gambia]

SIGHTINGS FEBRUARY 2023

BIRDS	
Great-northern Diver	3 at Howick on 26 th
Red-throated Diver	6 off Stag Rocks on 13 th 23 at Howick on 26 th
Great-crested Grebe	17 at Birling Carrs on 12 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 23 rd 3 at Widdrington Moor Lake on 15 th
Red-necked Grebe	1 off Stag Rocks on 6 th and 13 th
Slavonian Grebe	5 off Ross Sands on 6 th 1 off Stag Rocks on 13 th
Manx Shearwater	1 at Howick on 26 th
Gannet	40+ at Howick on 26 th
Great-white Egret	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 6 th
Little Egret	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 19 th and again on 23 rd
Whooper Swan	13 at Branton Ponds on 10 th 62 at Birling Carrs on 12 th 5 at Chevington Moor on 2 nd 18 at Low Newton on 3 rd and 21 on 15 th 20 at Shortridge Hall on 28 th
Pochard	13 at Bothal Pond on 2 nd
Pintail	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 8 th and again on 19 th
Shelduck	2 pairs at Branton Ponds on 3 rd
Green-winged Teal	1 at Colt Crag Reservoir on 5 th
Long-tailed Duck	3 off Ross Sands on 6 th 8 off Stag Rocks on 13 th
Velvet Scoter	1 at Howick on 26 th
Common Scoter	400+ off Stag Rocks on 13 th 4 at Birling Carrs on 12 th 35 at Howick on 26 th
Black Scoter	1 off Stag Rocks on 13 th
Goosander	4 at Felton on 12 th
Red-breasted Merganser	2 at Alnmouth on 12 th
Peregrine	1 over Glanton on 16 th 1 at Cresswell Pond on 21 st
Kestrel	2 at Lemmington Hall on 25 th
Marsh Harrier	1 at East Chevington on 4 th 1 at Widdrington Moor Lake on 15 th
Hen Harrier	2 at Widdrington Moor Lake on 15 th
Common Buzzard	12+ near Eglington on 2 nd
Goshawk	1 over Hedgeley Lakes on 26 th sparring with a Raven.
Grey Partridge	2 at Birling Carrs on 12 th
Water Rail	1 at Alnmouth on 12 th
Avocet	4 at Cresswell Pond on 21 st
Oystercatcher	33 at Branton Ponds on 14 th
Ringed Plover	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 8 th and 4 on 23 rd 18 at Alnmouth on 12 th
Grey Plover	20 at Boulmer on 5 th
Lapwing	200+ at Alnmouth on 12 th
Purple Sandpiper	8 at Craster Harbour on 24 th
Redshank	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 19 th
Spotted Redshank	1 at Bothal Pond on 2 nd
Curlew	24 at Branton Ponds on 3 rd 1 on territory at Glanton on 18 th
Black-tailed Godwit	1 at Alnmouth on 12 th 1 at Fenham Flats on 18 th
Mediterranean Gull	1 at Alnmouth on 12 th 1 at Howick Burn Mouth on 19 th
Lesser Black-backed Gull	1 at Glanton on 20 th
Barn Owl	2 near Rothbury on 6 th
Kingfisher	1 at Felton on 12 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 19 th
Water Pipit	1 at Fenham Flats on 18 th
Waxwing	3 at Glanton on 9 th
Dipper	2 at Felton on 12 th 2 on River Breamish on 26 th

Marsh Tit	1 near Longframlington on 27 th
Willow Tit	1 at Birling Carrs on 12 th 1 at Branton Ponds on 20 th 1 at East Linden on 26 th 1 at Howick on 19 th
Treecreeper	1 at The Braid, Amble on 6 th
Raven	2 near Eglington on 2 nd 2 near Shepherds Law on 6 th 1 at Harwood Forest on 7 th 1 over Branton Ponds on 12 th 4 briefly over Glanton on 20 th 4 near Beanley on 23 rd 9 briefly at Middleton Craggs on 23 rd 2 ver Branton on 24 th 1 over Hedgeley Lakes on 26 th sparring with a Goshawk. 1 at Howick on 19 th
Crossbill	3 at Colt Crag Reservoir on 5 th 2 at Shepherds Law on 6 th 25+ at Harwood Forest on 7 th
Brambling	1 at Felton on 4 th
Lesser Redpoll	2 at East Linden on 26 th
Linnet	220+ near Shepherds Law on 6 th 100+ at Birling Carrs on 12 th
Twite	40+ at Holy Island on 11 th
Snow Bunting	11 at Chibburn Mouth on 28 th
INSECTS	
Acleris cristana	1 at Howick on 12 th
Dotted Border	3 at Howick on 12 th
Pale Brindled Beauty	8 at Howick on 12 th
Chestnut	18 at Howick on 12 th
Buff-tailed Bumblebee	1 at Branton Ponds on 21 st
PLANTS	
Mistletoe	Near Warkworth on 12 th
MAMMALS	
Otter	1 at Branton Ponds on 6 th and 19 th 1 at East Chevington on 4 th
Harbour Porpoise	1 at Dunstanburgh on 1 st 1 at Craster on 16 th 1 at Howick on 26 th
Bottle-nosed Dolphin	6 at Stag Rocks on 6 th
Stoat	1 at Dunstanburgh on 3 rd 1 in ermine at Cockhall near Eglington on 16 th
REPTILES	
Adder	2 at Branton on 3 rd the earliest there by 5 days. 3 at Branton on 11 th
OBSERVERS	M Carr, I&K Davison, T Dean, G Dodds, M&J Drage, K Griffin, P&A Hanmer, A Keeble, J Rutter, S Sexton.



2022/23 WINTER WALKS



We've finally got round to sorting walks for March and April, details of which are below. By the March or April newsletters we ought to have some walks organised for the spring/summer season so do keep an eye out for those. Our thanks are due to all who have organised walks this winter and we should be very grateful if any other members would be willing to identify and lead some outings for the summer, so please email details to

rijpoppleton@outlook.com if you can. You don't need to know about all the wildlife – just the route!

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 25th March

A Howick Circuit

Stewart

Largely flat walking with some muddy paths so suitable footwear required. 3 miles. I can book the Village Hall for an hour on return for loos or people to catch up, eat their lunch, have tea or whatever? The route will start off inland with fields, woodland etc. Then down to the coast and south back to Howick.

Weather permitting, I'll put a battery moth trap in the Village Wood to check on the way through. Should be some

Spring flowers with the likes of Marsh Marigold, Lungwort, Primrose, etc. Maybe some early Bees, with Hairy Footed Flower Bee as well as Bumblebees. Chance of an early hoverfly too. Woodland birds singing, Woodpecker drumming, Buzzard, Jay, Nuthatch. Chiffchaffs often back by then. Raven possible. Roe Deer, Brown Hare maybe.

Down to the coast with Fulmars and Kittiwakes back at the cliffs.

9am to lunchtime (N.B. early start). Park at Howick Village Hall Car Park at NU 2566 1780
OS Landranger 81 Explorer 332

Saturday 15th April

Aln Valley Railway (exploratory visit)

Richard

This will be a walk from the Lionheart HQ of the railway along the length of the line and into the section beyond Greenrigg Halt which is yet to be developed, and back again. We'll be led by Michael Proctor, chairman of AVR. All level walking. Total distance c. 3 miles. We'll be looking at and informally recording whatever wildlife we notice.

Meet in the AVR car park at 10.00am. At the south end of town take the exit from the roundabout as though to go south on the A1, but immediately under the bridge turn right as though towards Shilbottle and then turn left, following the brown signs to the railway. Binoculars could be useful for Spring birds. Walking boots are a necessity (we ought to wear safety boots, but AVR is willing to let us use walking boots. If you arrive wearing light trainers or flip-flops you may well not be allowed to take part!). Back at the cars by 1.00pm.

Car park at NU 200 120

OS Landranger 81

Explorer 332

NOTE: We are hoping our first list of late spring and summer walks will be ready to go into the April Newsletter, so do please keep an eye open for those.

The 2021 figures are shown in BLUE

I have examined the record of Income and Expenditure presented to me, including an explanation of the activities of the Group. I believe this summary to be an accurate record of the special activities of the Group.

Name: _____

Date: _____

G. W. Williams
GRAMHAM WILSON
10 February 2000

NOTES

1. The total of £812.50 is only £19 higher than that for 2021 despite the increase in membership described below. However, a further £41 in late membership fees was banked too late to appear in the current accounts and it will appear as a credit in the 2023 accounts

By the end of 2022 the membership total was 149, eight higher than at the previous year's end. The subscription sums have remained unchanged at £10 (single) or £17.50 (two or more at the same address) but with these sums reduced to £6 and £10 respectively for existing members by way of our thanks for the loyalty of our membership. The subscription year remains as 1st September to 31st August each year.

2. As meetings have resumed in 2022 following the Covid disruption there have been comparatively few non-member paying visitors attending – hence this rather small sum of £10
3. Due to the pandemic Mannings of Alnwick were not asked to make their traditional donation of £50 in either 2020 or 2021. In 2022, however, we are very grateful that their sponsorship has been resumed.
4. In the 2021 accounts it was stated that donations from Northumberland Estates were expected to increase to £1200 in recognition of an increase in the number of bird survey sites that are included in the AWG programme. This prediction has proved correct.
5. This sum consists mostly of members who deliberately over-paid their subscriptions or did so accidentally but then agreed to donate the excess rather than taking a refund.
6. In some years the different contract lengths of 1, 2 or 3 years for our domain name licence and for the website hosting and the Adobe backup system happen to coincide. When that happens, as in 2022, the amount we pay will be greater than in years when they don't
7. We paid the Hall nothing in 2021, so the figure for 2022 includes the cost of the three meetings at the end of 2021, plus our hire costs for the whole of 2022. The Hall has announced an inevitable increase in hire fees for 2023, caused by the increase in energy costs, although it is expected that the Hall committee intends to hold the increase down to as little as possible. Thus, we expect a higher hire bill in 2023.
8. The purchase of stamps and envelopes tends to be irregular. In 2022 it happened that increased printing costs coincided with a large purchase of stamps in advance of an increase in their cost, plus the need to replenish our stock of envelopes
9. No donations have been made this year. In early 2023 the committee intends to offer several donations to local wildlife-related groups and projects. These will show in next year's accounts.
10. The end-of-year balance of £4,302.73 is a very healthy sum for an organisation of our size and type, and it is this that has led the committee to think about making donations in 2023.

*Richard Poppleton
February 2023*