

# Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna

www.alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk

Email: redsquirrel@alnwickwildlifegroup.co.uk



## NEWSLETTER 265 OCTOBER 2023

### REVIEW OF SEPTEMBER 2023

#### OCTOBER SPEAKER

Most of our talks are based on Northumbrian wildlife, so it is refreshing, occasionally, for us to look further afield. Our members, Phil & Julie Burns, have been lucky enough to spend time about as far away from Alnwick as it's possible to get without falling off the edge of the world! They will talk to us about "*The Fauna & Flora of Aotearoa (New Zealand)*".

#### NOVEMBER SPEAKER

On 29<sup>th</sup> November our speakers will be Margaret Watchorn, Kevin Redgrave and Dr Terry Howells who will be showing us '*Embleton Quarry – The past and present*'. We will see how this site and its wildlife have developed over the years. Some members may have visited this great little reserve on a Mothing Evening or on a Plant Hunt this year.

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Red Footed Falcon  
Picture by Gordon Plews

**Please send sightings reports** for October, no later than 6th November 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

## SUBSCRIPTIONS REMINDER

The 2023/24 subs have been due from the start of September.

Thanks to those who have already paid. **But there are still more than 60 to come**

Our normal rates, which apply to new members, are £10 single, £17.50 for two or more at the same address. **BUT for all existing members we shall continue to apply reduced rates - £6 single, £10 for two or more at the same address.**

Either bring cheques (to Alnwick Wildlife Group) or cash to the October meeting or post to:  
Richard Poppleton, Greystone Cottage, Titlington Mount, Alnwick NE66 2EA

If you would prefer to pay by BACS (and we should prefer it if possible), our bank details are:  
Alnwick Wildlife Group      BARCLAYS Acc No 40553131 Sort Code 20-58-17

Please, if you choose to pay electronically, use your name as the reference and drop me an email ([rjpoppleton@outlook.com](mailto:rjpoppleton@outlook.com)) to say you've paid, or I shan't know until our next statement arrives – our account doesn't allow me on-line access.

### DEAR ALNICK WILDLIFE GROUP MEMBERS,

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At Alnwick Town Council we hold regular Environmental Advisory Group Meetings and are looking for people from wider interested parties in Alnwick to be involved. We currently have members from Alnwick Area Friends of the Earth as well as Alnwick Civic Society and if anyone is interested in being involved from Alnwick Wildlife Group they would be very welcome. This would involve coming to bimonthly meetings and acting as a member of a group which advises the town council of their actions.

Current projects we are involved in include the Alnwick and Denwick Neighbourhood Plan refresh as well as looking to develop future wildlife sites. One of these is the old Thomas Percy Woodland in Alnwick which has been acquired by Alnwick Town Council through an asset transfer. There is also grant funding available which may be used for wildlife projects inside the Alnwick parish boundary. If anyone is interested please contact me and I'll ask for you to be added to a mailing list for when our meetings are (they are normally held in the Lindisfarne centre Alnwick).

Peter Edge  
Alnwick Town Councillor.

Members can contact Cllr Edge directly at [peteredge@outlook.com](mailto:peteredge@outlook.com)

## THE BIG SEAWEED SEARCH

The Big Seaweed Search is a joint project between the Natural History Museum and the Marine Conservation Society. It is the first of its kind in the UK.

Climate change is affecting our oceans and as a result causing some seaweed species to move or change how they grow as they adapt to shifting conditions in the water. The Big Seaweed Search is tracking and recording these changes around the coast so that the impact of environmental changes can be understood, and can be used to protect our seas and seaweeds for the future.

While there are 650 species of seaweeds found around the UK, the project is only concentrating on 14 of them. These 14 species were chosen because they are good indicator species. That is species whose presence, absence or abundance reflect a specific environmental factor. The species have been split into 3 main groups to highlight the environmental changes they indicate.

### 1. *Rising sea temperatures*

UK sea temperatures have risen by 2 degrees centigrade in the past 40 years. Research suggests that cold water seaweeds are moving further north and the range of warm water species is expanding. (dabberlocks, sugar kelp, serrated wrack, bladderwrack, knotted wrack, spiral wrack, channelled wrack and thongweed)

### 2. *The arrival and spread of non-native species.*

Non-native species have found their way to the UK, mostly due to human activity, and settled here. They can outcompete other native species for food, light or space. (wireweed, wakama, harponweed and bonnemaison's hook weed)

### 3. *Ocean Acidification*

The sea is becoming more acidic as it absorbs increasing amounts of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere. Lots of ocean species like seaweeds struggle to grow in these conditions. (coral weed and calcified crusts)

### How can we take part?

The survey itself will only take about an hour. It will be necessary to find a suitable beach with a 5 metre wide strip of seaweed running from the top of the shore down to the sea. It can be difficult to identify seaweeds. David and I would like to suggest a group survey to start and we will provide photo ID guides, recording forms and a camera. We do hope you will be interested in being involved with this worthwhile project. Surveys have been undertaken around the UK coast, however the highest number have been carried out in the south west of England and few in the north east.

Denise Metcalfe

### EDITOR'S NOTE:

*AWG members Denise Metcalfe and David Thomson have suggested this project as one that could be interesting for AWG members. As soon as we can organize a trial survey, we shall send out details. In the meantime anyone who wants to forge ahead and do one or more surveys can look at the details on the Natural History Museum website [Big Seaweed Search | Natural History Museum \(nhm.ac.uk\)](https://www.nhm.ac.uk/big-seaweed-search) which tells you more about the methodology, the target species and how to report your results.*



It is always nice to see a new bird, but especially so if it is only 7 miles from home, which is what happened on 19th September.

The previous evening we received a phone call from Alan, one of our birding friends, to say that another acquaintance had found an unusual falcon on the moor north of Eglington on the track to Hagdon. He was sure it was a Red-footed Falcon, so the next day when the rain finally stopped we parked in Eglington and walked the 1½ miles to the moor with Alan.

On reaching the highest point we noted a raptor sitting on a pole. Even at 200 metres it looked interesting. Unfortunately, at that moment four Carrion Crows flew over and began to chase it further away. We need not have worried because once they had given up the bird flew back in our direction and began to hunt within 50 metres of where we were standing.

First we had to rule out any confusion species but soon realised we were looking at a gorgeous juvenile Red-footed Falcon and for the next two hours we were treated to a wonderful aerial display as it cut through the air effortlessly, hovered like a Kestrel and ran about on the ground grabbing insects, specifically large beetles which it took to the nearest pole to eat.

A few more birders arrived plus a local dog walker who said he had seen it 2 days earlier but didn't know what it was. What a bird! What a day, made even better when Newcastle got a draw at the San Siro. Happy Days!

*Ian and Keith Davison*





After brief introductions, eleven of us set off from Barter Books at 10.00am. It had been decided that we take the least steep route out of town via Prudhoe Street, The Dunterns, Stoneyhills and across Alnwick Golf Course to emerge on the Rugley road.



David Turnbull, our leader, stopped at various points to talk about varying subjects including dry-stone walls, wayside plants and finger posts. Reaching Rugley Ford we stood on the footbridge noting Water Avens (📷left), Sweet Woodruff (📷right) and other plants that had mostly finished flowering.



We climbed the road up to the point where it goes over the old, dismantled Alnwick to Cornhill railway. We then followed the railway which, with a bit of luck and negotiation, will become a Greenway in the future.

Approaching Alnwick on this route does emphasise the extent of the new housing at the south end of town. The walk ended at Alnwick Town junior football pitches at 12.30pm.

David Turnbull

*P.S. I thought that readers would like to know that a pair of Night Herons were seen on the River Tweed near Cornhill-on-Tweed about a year ago.*

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## A HISTORICAL REPORT FROM A FIELD TRIP (C. 50 YEARS AGO) IN CUMBRIA FROM NEWTON RIGG COLLEGE, PENRITH

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After a considerable drive in our minibus we arrived at a small private lake in South Cumbria. Looking out of the minibus window I saw something, of perhaps 90cm in length, rise out of the water. It had no hair or fins and it looked rather snake-like (like a dancing cobra rearing up).



I shouted to the rest of the people on the bus “look at that!” but few took any notice, although one other person did see it. It submerged after about five seconds, sinking down whence it had emerged, without moving forward.

I called out to our lecturer, who incidentally was the owner of the lake, and she smiled and said “things have been seen here before”. I can only describe what I saw as a replica of the object or, perhaps, the most famous picture of the Loch Ness Monster taken, I think, in the 1920s, which looks rather like an

elephant’s trunk.

David Turnbull

*Editor’s Note: Just goes to show what can be seen if you keep your eyes open! The image is of Nessie, not what David saw.*

George welcomed 42 to the first meeting of the new season, including three visitors and one new member, John Turner from Alnwick. We started, as usual, with our brief AGM. There were three items of note:

- Stewart Sexton was confirmed as the new Secretary, taking over from Richard Poppleton
- All other committee posts and members were willing to stand again and were confirmed by the meeting, although Richard wanted it to be known that he'd also like to give up being Treasurer, so volunteers would be welcomed, as would contact from anyone else who might be interested in joining the committee
- The accounts for 2022 were presented and showed a year-end balance of £4302.73. There were no questions.

George then produced a Barn Owl pellet containing a remarkably undamaged Field Vole skeleton; a Shag skull, plus another from a midden on the Orkneys which could have been 2000 or more years old, but apart from some staining and some scratching where meat had been removed, looked much the same as the modern one. He also commented that his 'find of the year' had been the colony of Grey Wolf Spiders *Arctosa cinerea* that an AWG walk on the Breamish river gravels had discovered and which has been reported on in past newsletters.

**Steve Kirtley**, the Butterfly Recorder for Northumbria, then gave his talk on *Butterfly recording in NE England: changes & challenges*. He had driven up from his home in Darlington to be with us.

He first talked about the different methods of recording sightings, stressing that using on-line systems like iRecord or iNaturalist are very helpful to him because they make it easier for him to make decisions on the verifications of submissions. His position as the area's butterfly recorder comes from his appointment to that role by the North East branch of Butterfly Conservation. He also said that if you are sending records from the field by phone to please do so at the point where the sighting has been made rather than when you get back to your car, so the GPS coordinates are accurate for the place you've actually seen the butterfly.

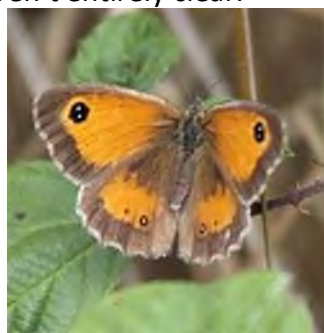
There are 58 or 59 species of butterfly in the UK; some resident and some migrant. This late summer and early autumn have shown a real explosion of numbers of Red Admirals, even if some of the other large species haven't had a good year. Comma, Painted Lady and Small Tortoiseshell have been scarce and Green-veined White has been showing a major decline for reasons that aren't entirely clear.



Speckled Wood



Brimstone



Gatekeeper



Silver-washed Fritillary

Particular species of note have been:

- The remarkable spread of Speckled Wood in recent years
- A similar spread of Small Skipper since the 1990s
- The hoped-for spread of Essex Skipper. This is hard to tell from the Small Skipper unless you can see the black undersides of the antennae tips
- Holly Blue is currently showing a major increase of sightings in the North East, increasingly in gardens
- Brimstones can turn up anywhere, but they do need Buckthorn or Purging Buckthorn as food plants for their caterpillars, and these two shrubs are not common in Northumberland,

- The problems of dealing with supposed sightings of Northern Brown Argus as opposed to Brown Argus. The latter is moving north and can use both Rock Rose and Geranium species as food plants, and it is moving into the very similar Northern species in its upland Rock Rose habitats
- Silver-washed Fritillary was first found at Winyards in Co. Durham in 2015 and has since appeared at Castle Eden Dene, so should be looked out for
- Gatekeeper is the second most common butterfly in the country in the 2023 survey season, but for us, while it has been known to have crossed the Tees it hasn't been found yet in Northumberland
- Purple Emperor has to be searched for in the tree canopy, but can occasionally be found on the ground where it seeks sources of minerals in animal dung.

Steve then moved on to a second presentation that concentrated on the Duke of Burgundy Fritillary. This small, rare butterfly needs Primrose and Cowslip in places where they won't dry out in droughts. It is known to have been seen in North Yorkshire and might move north in the future.



**Duke of Burgundy Fritillary – top and under-wing views**

The males perform lekking behaviour and then sit around waiting to ambush passing females. When the eggs are laid on the *Primula* leaves the caterpillars eat the soft tissue between the veins and then they drop off to pupate in deep patches of moss. There is currently conservation work happening in areas of limestone grassland to improve the habitat for the species.

I want to talk this month about hedges. From a landowner's point of view a hedge perhaps has two purposes – it marks field boundaries and it prevents stock animals from straying from their allocated grazing. In North Northumberland, which traditionally has not been particularly well-wooded, hedges are more likely to be deliberately planted rather than remaining as remnants of natural woodland.



For a hedge to be much use as a stock-proof boundary, it either needs to be allowed to do a lot of bushy growing, rarely trimmed at the sides, or it needs to have been layed. Hedge laying is both expensive in terms of labour and depends on the availability of skilled professionals. It's hard enough these days to find good reliable dry-stone-wallers and hedge-layers are even rarer. Some landowners are reluctant to allow hedges to grow 'untidily', preferring to have their hedges seen as neat evidence of good husbandry, and they are also reluctant to lose strips along the sides of their fields which reduces the area available to plant crops. As a result far too many hedges are leggy and lacking density and width at the base. Instead the stock-proofing is achieved by adding wire fences.



[A newly laid hedge in winter](#)

As a walker in the countryside it is a breath of fresh air when one comes across a really good dense hedge with all the benefits that provides for birds and other wildlife. Some of the lane-side hedges at East Chevington that we admired on an AWG walk last year are a case in point. However, from the point of view of this Plant Corner, I want to dwell on the question "what's in your local hedges?", and by 'what', in this context, I mean what shrub species.



Apart from satisfying your wish to know what you are looking at, the other advantage is that it potentially enables you to estimate the age of a hedge. The process to follow in aging a hedge is set out in the box below, courtesy of the Woodland.co website.

- First measure out a 30 metre length of hedge.
- Work along the hedge systematically recording each woody species.
- Repeat this process with two or three different 30 metre sections of hedge.
- Calculate how many woody species on average you find in the 30m lengths of your hedge.
- Generally speaking, a new species is added every hundred years.

I admit to having some issues with this process. I can see that it may well work with genuinely old hedges, although even with those one is warned to allow some latitude of a couple of hundred years each side of the result your calculation seems to have given! However, with more recently planted hedges which often contain a deliberate mix of species, it can't possibly be a valid way of estimating age. I could show you a section of hedge near us which, on the species numbers calculation would seem to be 500 years old, but which I know was planted about twenty years ago. There is also the question of what you include in your count as a shrub. What about bramble, for example?

It can often be the case that in the autumn there are quite long stretches of local hedgerows which lack any brilliant displays of berries. That's not to say there are no berries, but many of the shrubs have either had their fruits trimmed (or sometimes viciously flayed) off, or the arriving winter thrushes have already eaten them, or even that neighbouring shrubs that have been putting on vigorous late summer growth are concealing those that are fruiting.

The photos below show a couple of lengths of local hedgerow, both of which contain multiple species of woody plants.



Neither section of hedge is manicured or pretty, but it soothes my soul to be able to walk along past hedges like these and be reasonably sure I know what's in them. As with many of our hedges the constituent species have not arrived naturally, but they represent those plants in the hedge-planting mix that have survived and competed well.



From these photos it would be quite unfair to ask readers to try to say what's present, so we shall need some close-ups of sections of the hedge to stand any chance. I've also cheated a bit with some of the close-up photos because not all are from the hedge sections above, but all are from hedges within a mile or so of them.

This first one, on the left, has typically lobed leaves, characteristic of members of the Maple *Acer* genus and this one, which is often used in our local hedges, is Field Maple *A. campestre*.

Then there are these two species which at first glance can look almost the same. If you look closely, however, you will see that the right hand image shows leaves with much more clearly-defined ridged veins and usually a rather yellower-green colour. The plant on the left is Beech *Fagus sylvatica*, while the right hand image shows Hornbeam *Carpinus betulus*. Hornbeam is not a common fully-grown tree in Northumberland, but increasingly it is included in hegerow planting mixes.







Then there are sections of hedge that have mixtures of species. The picture on the left has fairly obvious Gorse *Ulex europaea* at top and right; Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* left and centre, and you may be able to make out some of the hawthorn berries; a Dog Rose *Rosa canina* right in the middle (with a rosehip) in front of some of the hawthorn; and finally some branches of Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* down the right hand side, some of it mixed in with the gorse. You can ignore the bracken and the grasses because they are not shrubs and are not really part of the hedge.

So, in four photos we've got seven hedgerow species. In the last newsletter I said a bit about the two species of Privet and the photo below shows that our hedge has some of the Wild Privet *Ligustrum vulgare* with its rather narrow leaves and some berries that aren't yet fully ripe.



Many hedges also incorporate true hedgerow trees. Sometimes these are specimens that have been planted at the same time as the rest of the hedge but have deliberately been avoided by the hedge trimming regime so that they already overtop the other species. At other times they are new stems that have sprouted from the felled trunk of a previous fully-grown tree, as is the case with the Ash *Fraxinus excelsior* in the top picture on the next page. Sadly this is a tree that had had Ash Dieback disease and the apparently healthy bushy growth rather flatters to deceive because it is unlikely that this tree will survive to any size before the disease kills it off. Note the bramble stem growing through the hawthorn on the left – should we count that as a hedgerow shrub or not?





Finally there are two shrubs which would grow into small trees if they were allowed and which look superficially rather similar. On the left is Elder *Sambucus nigra* which at this time of year has a range of leaf colours ranging from yellowish to pink, before they fall, and bunches of glossy black berries.

Then below is the visual star of the show for this hedge. If it weren't for the fruits one might mistake it for an elder. The leaves are quite similar, but the berries are unique among British trees – with the almost salmon pink

bracts and the central orange berry. This is the Spindle Tree *Euonymus europaeus* and I'm really not sure why it has been included in the shrub mix for this hedge. There are several of them at intervals along one section of the hedge and I suppose you need to admit that they do provide variation and startling interest.



Richard



Hi readers, last month's piece about the very rare, tropical seabird, the Brown Booby may have been a little bit niche, so this time there will be some variety.

Starting at the beginning of September, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> we had a sunny visit up to Corby Woods. This pine plantation is not named on the OS map but it is SE of Lemmington Crossroads. Sometimes referred to as Lemmington Wood, that site is actually on the opposite side ( north) of the main road.

At the 'new' pond we were disappointed to see that someone has attempted to carry out drainage here. I am at a loss why, as this is a purpose built pond and is in no danger of flooding anywhere else? Luckily the attempts so far seem to have only dropped the water bay a few inches as the overflow channel seems to run up hill.

This is always a good place for insects and other invertebrates on a mild day between spring and autumn. Today we had a few nice dragonflies and damselflies with **4+ Black Darter, 4+ Common Hawker and 4 Emerald Damselfly**. Other odds and ends included **2 Larch Ladybird**, a lot of the larvae of the **Sawfly Euura pavid**a on trackside willows, **2 Wall Brown, 10+ Red Admiral and 6+ Peacock** butterflies.



Figure 1: Larch Ladybird, quite plain things.

Small birds were in post breeding flocks. There were dozens of **Chiffchaffs**, **1 female Redstart**, **2 Spotted Flycatchers**, **1 Treecreeper** and **12+ Crossbills** while **2 Ravens** flew over, calling.

A new fungi for me here was **Spotted Toughshank**, common but previously overlooked.



**Figure 2: Spotted Toughshank**

On 12th I called in to see a nice **Great White Egret** on the R Aln just up from the Duchess Bridge at Alnmouth. This bird is still around this week while another was at Hauxley and Druridge. They used to be rare in the county but in recent years there are more and more records of this new coloniser from Eastern European Wetlands.

While here 3 **Little Egrets** gave a nice comparison against their much taller relative.

From the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 29<sup>th</sup> we were on holiday to Suffolk facing glorious summer style weather while up here was cool, windy and wet. Before I say more about Suffolk, as painful as it may be, I must mention a very rare visitor to our patch while we were away. An immature **Red footed Falcon** spent 10 days on moorland north of Eglington giving great views to many visitors over its stay. It showed no feat, much to the delight of photographers, and could often be seen perching only a few yards away as it fed on dragonflies and dung beetles. This lovely visitor will have been born in Russia or Eastern Europe. Needless to say, I have no images, as it left the very day I returned home!

Back to our Suffolk trip, I will only mention the excellent moth trapping we had that was notable for the migrant species taken that I have never seen up here.

Migrants included **3 Convolvulus Hawk moths**, **2 Scarce Bordered Straw**, **1 *Palpita vitealis***, **2 Hoary Footman**, **20 Delicate** and best of all a real tongue twister ***Diasemiopsis ramburialis***. This latter is a rare moth in the UK with only 7 previous Suffolk records.





**Figure 3: Clockwise, Delicate, *Diasemiopsis ramburialis*, *Palpita vitrealis* and a pair of *Convolvulus* Hawk moths.**

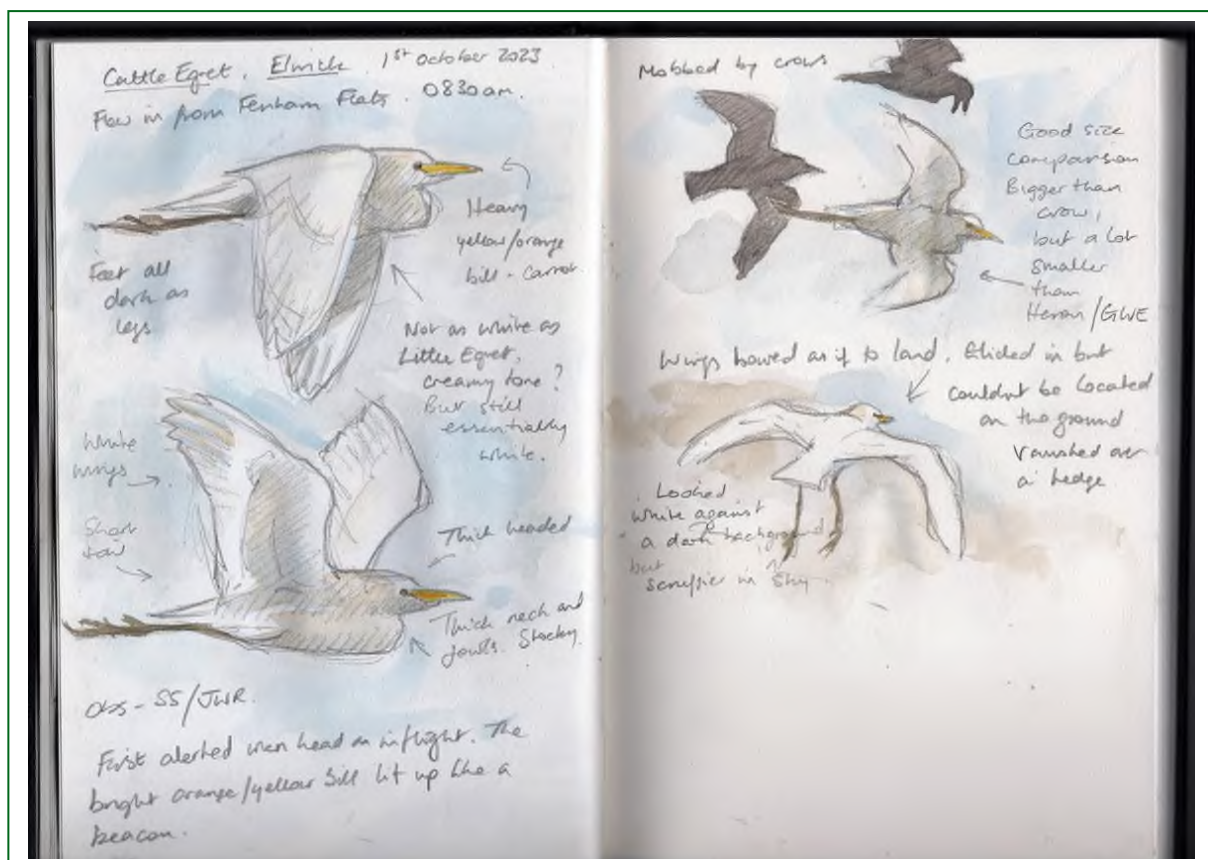
Back home after missing out on Red footed Falcon, another rare bird arrived. On the 1st October we went to see the **Red breasted Goose**, likely the first wild bird since the 1800s in Northumberland, arrived with Brent Geese from the high arctic. It then spent the next few days with 2000 Barnacle Geese on Lindisfarne reserve, coming into fields at Elwick to feed. What a stunner it was too. While we were looking for this we chanced upon another rare bird in the county, when a **Cattle Egret** flew right past us and away south! Luckily, it was also seen at Swinhoe, Druridge and Blyth over the next few days. Not a bad morning out!

By 7<sup>th</sup> October the weather had changed. A steady NE wind with heavy rain for most of two days grounded many migrant birds along the coast. At Howick it was raining thrushes with **2700+ Redwings**, **50+ Fieldfares**, a **dozen Chiffchaffs** and rarest of all, an immature male **Siberian Stonechat** viewable from our kitchen window! The next day saw more thrush arrivals plus we saw **Ring Ouzel**, **2 Short Eared Owls**, **6+ Brambling** and many **Goldcrests**.

These days of mass migration are adrenaline pumping for the coastal birder. Now we are into October, let's hope we can get another re run before it all comes to a close in mid November....



Figure 4: Red breasted and Barnacle Geese, Elswick and below Cattle Egret at the same site.



Stewart Sexton, Howick



The aftereffects of Storm Arwen are still apparent to many of us that live in the countryside with partially cleared woodlands on our doorstep and even some that are still a jungle of fallen trees making the woods all but impenetrable. In one wood up the Breamish Valley we had assumed two boxes had been lost entirely. However, regaining access to this site recently revealed a pleasant surprise. Not only had one box survived intact but it had definitely been used by a Goldeneye duck in 2023 (*with three unhatched eggs being left behind in a box lined with duck feathers and small bits of hatched eggshell*). Checking three boxes at this location and revisiting all the other data on the usage of these boxes along the valley means I have to revise my earlier figures. So, there were fourteen nesting attempts by Goldeneye between April – June (the same as in 2022), 11 of which were successful (also the same as 2022). Although arguably an additional nesting attempt took place in a box that was subsequently taken over by a Tawny Owl as two cold duck eggs were found when the box was cleaned out in September! This was the 'usual situation' of an owl taking possession of a box that it considered was its property; a situation we had sought to mitigate by erecting two additional boxes near this location at Hedgeley a few years ago. However, due to Storm Arwen damage these boxes were both lost and it's been impossible to replace them. As already reported a couple of months ago a fascinating reversal of this 'usual situation' occurred at another location west of the A697. Here a duck started nesting and laid 7 eggs; then an owl attempted a take-over (*and we even captured and ringed it*). Then the duck came back apparently chased the owl away and laid some more eggs and actually evicted one of the owl's eggs! This female Goldeneye [FH79908] had first nested at this same location in 2022.

Four brand new adults were ringed and eight retrapped. Of the retraps two had been first ringed back in 2017 and so are probably 8 yrs. old. Three clutches were not incubated; at least one having been the victim of egg dumping with 16 cold eggs being found in the box. This is still the only regular colony of Goldeneye Ducks in England & Wales. There were also three successful Tawny Owl nests.

The exciting event of this month, for my trainees, has been their introduction to the sometimes 'wet' activity of ringing families of Mute Swans! The resident male swan at Howick is easily recognizable by his colourful darvic or plastic ring ZJP (white letters on a red background). He has been at Howick since 2014 and acquired his present mate in 2021 (now ZKA). She was ringed as a cygnet in 2018 at Herrington Country Park so we know exactly how old she is. This pair first bred in 2022 raising two young. This year they originally had four young but lost one a few months ago. On the 1/9/23 we gathered at Howick and Alison and the Head Gardener (Robert Jamieson) enticed all the swans up onto the bank with the offer of grain and duck pellets. Everyone had been briefed to catch the young birds as a priority; because once these are caught the adults do tend to be so inquisitive that they will come very close to see what is happening that they are more easily captured by the stronger members of the ringing team! So, everyone was shown how to put first a 'permanent' metal ring on one leg and then the larger brightly coloured darvic on the other. We took some biometrics and noted particularly that the cygnets weighed: 7.25kg (ZKB); 7.0kg (ZKC); and 6.5kg (ZKF) almost certainly a female. We were able to put a darvic on the female (in addition to the metal she already carried) so she is now much more recognizable as ZKA and found she weighed 9.0kg. Finally capturing Male ZJP he weighed in at a heavy 12.75kg! All the swans were rapidly released and within a few minutes were coming back to accept food (see photos).

Some of the same team gathered at South Linden on the 5/9/23. Here a rather laid-back male swan (ZKH) and an unusually dominant (not to say feisty) female (VAH) have taken up residence. They raised two cygnets this year which weighed 6kg (ZKR) probably a male; and 4.5kg (ZKT) female. The most interesting fact here is that we can tell from ringing that female VAH is 19 yrs old, having been originally ringed at Tynemouth in January 2005. This is a great age for a breeding female swan (see photo).

Finally, we were invited down to ring more swans at a Nature Reserve in Morpeth. Here we were able to ring 4 cygnets out of 5 (*one just got away*) at 5.75kg (ZKI); 4.0kg (ZKJ); 2.25kg (ZKL); and at 4.25kg (ZKN). We also caught the female and added a darvic (ZK6) to her metal ring that told us she was ringed in March 2019 at

Woodhorn; she weighed 10.25kg. We did not catch the male but we do know from his existing rings that he was ringed in July 2017 at Annitsford Pond (see photo).

I have labored the point of the colorful darvic rings because we really would like your help in tracking these swans (*Infact any darvic ringed swan*). Please if you see a swan with a plastic ring on just make a note of the letters or numbers and their colours and tell me where you saw it.

Still dodging the unsettled weather (and getting worse weather forecasts) we have continued to ring at Howick Arboretum. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of September we ringed 75 birds (46 new and 29 retraps). The retraps included a 9 year old female chaffinch that we ringed at the same site in 2014! The highlight of the new birds was a Lesser Whitethroat that was on its first migration south. They migrate south via Northern Italy and then apparently down to winter in Sudan, Chad and Ethiopia. We captured another new Garden Warbler the same day perhaps on its way to Ghana or Nigeria. There were also a number of Chiffchaffs, Blackcaps, and our rather more sedentary local tits. One of the Chiffchaffs stayed around in a low tree for several minutes after being ringed enabling me to take its picture (see photo.) Gathering again on the 2/9/23 for a rather quieter morning we only captured 26 birds (17 new and 9 retraps) but again including several Blackcaps which love to feed on the berries in the Arboretum. On the 8/9/23 we were back up to 60 birds (40 new and 20 retraps) with the new birds including Blackcaps, Chiffchaffs. Notably some of the Blackcaps were carrying a lot of stored fat, indicating their preparations to migrate south to the Mediterranean and North Africa. On the 9<sup>th</sup> we captured 39 birds (29 new and 10 retraps) including a retrapped Goldcrest, first ringed in 2022 as an adult. This is actually quite unusual because the proportion of young (hatched in the current year) goldcrests in the population is always huge relative to older birds. Included in the new birds were a lot more goldcrest (indicating an influx of migrants from the north and east) Blackcaps, and yet another Garden Warbler.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> we were up to 75 birds again (55 new and 20 retraps) including yet another 9 yr old Chaffinch (Howick chaffs live a long time). The new birds included an influx of Blackbirds (coming to eat berries) and migrating Blackcaps. The 22<sup>nd</sup> yielded 52 birds (42 new and 10 retraps) including travelling Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs both moving south. Finally, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> we caught 50 birds (33 new and 17 retraps). Notably Bullfinches (something of a Howick specialty in the winter) seemed to have moved into the ringing site to hunt the bushes for nice berries (see pict.). There were also Goldcrests (coming in) and Blackcaps and Chiffchaff (going out). I have added a good **photo** of a male and female Blackcap, both young birds but showing their proper adult colours. Finally, on the 30<sup>th</sup> we were able to ring again and captured 53 birds (43 new and 10 retraps). There was still no sign of significant migration from Scandinavia (of Thrushes for example) but there were a lot of Goldcrest, Chiffchaff and Blackcap moving through Howick.

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)*





**BLACKCAP FEMALE (LEFT) MALE (RIGHT)**



**BULLFINCH MALE**



**CHIFFCHAFF**



**SWAN RINGING HOWICK**



**SWAN RINGING HOWICK**



**SWAN RINGING HOWICK**



**SWANS MORPETH**



**SWANS SOUTH LINDEN**



The weather for the month was warm with wet spells. Storm Agnes did not materialise at the end of the month. Winds were a mixed bag with easterlies providing good sea-watching conditions on the coast.

### GLANTON

The last **Swallow**, in the village, was seen on the 2<sup>nd</sup> October (juvenile). The previous week there had been movements with parties (up to 35) of Swallows recorded most mornings, the previous week. **House martins** seemed to leave a little earlier with the last birds seen in the village on the 22<sup>nd</sup> September. These departure dates seem early as both species have been seen into October in the village in previous years. A good breeding season probably prompted an early departure.

If Swallows and House martins left early, **Chiffchaffs** and some **Willow warblers** had not left by early October. I counted more than 12 Chiffchaffs at Glanton Pyke on the 30<sup>th</sup> September and there were still single birds into the second week of the month.

The first **Pink-footed geese** of the winter were noted flying north on the 14<sup>th</sup> September. Passage of **Meadow pipits** and **Skylarks** were regular until about mid-September.

As with most places, there has been large numbers of **Red admiral butterflies**. **Bramble** fruits and **Ivy** flowers appeared to be the main feeding preferences. A **Wall brown** was recorded on the 11<sup>th</sup> September.

Darker evenings has meant an opportunity to observe feeding bats. A number bats, mostly **Pipistrelles**, have been watched feeding on midges and small moths. I am always bemused by the fact that these bats will feed in wind speeds over force 5, in rain and at temperatures below 5°C. Added to that there are not many 'feeding corridors'. This seems different to what the literature tells us.



Figure 5: Dung roundhead on buried horse dung found in pasture at North Bellshill.

### THE OFFICE

The list of species has moved onto 692 (Birds 94, Mammals 15, Amphibians & Reptiles 4, Invertebrates 161, Plants 293, Bryophytes 42, Fungi and Lichens 83) and 700 is a possibility by the end of the year.



The most interesting feature of the last month is that the damage from Storm Arwen has eventually been cleared. I am not sure what is worse, looking at a blown over conifer woodland or the rut marks and devastation left aft the clearance work. The importance to me will be to see the change in plant species as pioneers (**Heath ragwort** etc.) take charge on the bare ground to be replaced by ruderals (Brambles etc.).

It is also noticeable that mycelium network has been broken. There are very few fruiting bodies of fungi in the area of clearance. Hopefully, in time the network will repair itself and some of the species that I have seen in the past (e.g. **Stinkhorn**) will return.

New species for the list include several species of **Leaf miner fly** found on **Lesser burdock** and **Hogweed**, as well as the evidence of the **Bedegaur gall wasp**.

Hopefully, there will be an Indian summer to enjoy the beautiful autumn colours.



**Figure 6: Bedegaur gall on Dog rose – thought this would have been on the list before now!**

*Jack Daw.*

## SIGHTINGS SEPTEMBER 2023

BIRDS	
Red-throated Diver	6 at Boulmer on 1 <sup>st</sup> 2 past Cullernose on 4 <sup>th</sup> 2 off Newbiggin on 6 <sup>th</sup>
Great-crested Grebe	1 at Branton Ponds on 27 <sup>th</sup>
Great Shearwater	1 off Boulmer on 13 <sup>th</sup>
Balearic Shearwater	1 past Newbiggin on 6 <sup>th</sup>
Manx Shearwater	1 past Cullernose on 4 <sup>th</sup> 9 past Newbiggin on 6 <sup>th</sup>
Sooty Shearwater	3 past Cullernose on 4 <sup>th</sup>
Cormorant	7 at Branton Ponds on 27 <sup>th</sup>
Great-white Egret	1 at Boulmer on 18 <sup>th</sup>
Whooper Swan	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 23 <sup>rd</sup> 11 at Craster on 23 <sup>rd</sup>
Brent Goose	12 at Craster on 16 <sup>th</sup> 50 at Budle Bay on 21 <sup>st</sup>
Barnacle Goose	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 30 <sup>th</sup> 300+ near Elwick on 28 <sup>th</sup>
Pink-footed Goose	200 over Howick on 22 <sup>nd</sup> Several skeins over Glanton on 23 <sup>rd</sup>
Red-breasted Goose	1 near Elwick on 28 <sup>th</sup>
Gadwall	27 at Branton Ponds on 29 <sup>th</sup>
Goldeneye	7 at Branton Ponds on 27 <sup>th</sup>
Goosander	3 at Newton Haven on 14 <sup>th</sup> 4 at Felton Bridge on 16 <sup>th</sup> 66 at Branton Ponds on 29 <sup>th</sup>
Velvet Scoter	3 at Dunstanburgh on 16 <sup>th</sup>
Merlin	1 at Craster on 19 <sup>th</sup>
Peregrine	1 at Cullernose on 8 <sup>th</sup>
Red-footed Falcon	1 juvenile on Eglington Moor on 19 <sup>th</sup> and still there until end of month.
Marsh Harrier	1 at East Chevington on 12 <sup>th</sup> and again on 29 <sup>th</sup>
Common Snipe	14 at Branton Ponds on 21 <sup>st</sup>
Purple Sandpiper	1 near Cullernose on 12 <sup>th</sup>
Common Sandpiper	1 at Hedgeley Lakes on 23 <sup>rd</sup>
Green Sandpiper	1 over Branton on 13 <sup>th</sup>
Spotted Redshank	1 at East Chevington on 12 <sup>th</sup>
Whimbrel	5 at Boulmer on 1 <sup>st</sup>
Greenshank	2 at Budle Bay on 21 <sup>st</sup>
Great Skua	1 past Newbiggin on 6 <sup>th</sup>
Arctic Skua	1 past Cullernose on 4 <sup>th</sup> and 2 on 12 <sup>th</sup>
Lesser Black-backed Gull	65 at Branton Ponds on 27 <sup>th</sup>
Black Tern	1 at Boulmer on 1 <sup>st</sup>
Black Guillemot	1 past Newbiggin on 6 <sup>th</sup>
Tawny Owl	5+ around Branton all month
Barn Owl	1 at Branton on 11 <sup>th</sup>
Kingfisher	1 at Newton Pond on 9 <sup>th</sup> 1 at Branton Ponds on 20 <sup>th</sup> and on 27 <sup>th</sup>
Skylark	42 at Hedgeley Lakes on 30 <sup>th</sup>
Grey Wagtail	3 at Felton Bridge on 6 <sup>th</sup> and 4 on 15 <sup>th</sup>
Wheatear	5 at Boulmer on 1 <sup>st</sup> 1 on Simonside on 21 <sup>st</sup>
Redstart	6 in Lemmington Bank Wood on 5 <sup>th</sup>
Redwing	2 at Glanton on 29 <sup>th</sup>
Garden Warbler	1 at Howick on 1 <sup>st</sup>
Blackcap	7 at Howick on 30 <sup>th</sup>
Lesser Whitethroat	1 at Howick on 1 <sup>st</sup>
Chiffchaff	6+ in Branton on 11 <sup>th</sup> 200 at Howick Ringing Station on 22 <sup>nd</sup> 5 at Glanton on 29 <sup>th</sup>

Goldcrest	1 at Howick on 9 <sup>th</sup> 1000 at Howick Ringing Station on 30 <sup>th</sup>
Willow Tit	1 at Branton Ponds on 29 <sup>th</sup>
Pied Flycatcher	1 at Holy Island on 17 <sup>th</sup>
Raven	1 at Howick on 10 <sup>th</sup> and 22 <sup>nd</sup>
Linnet	30 at Newton Scrape on 14 <sup>th</sup>
Crossbill	3 in Lemmington Bank Wood on 5 <sup>th</sup> 4 at Branton Middlesteads on 17 <sup>th</sup> 8 at Hedgeley Lakes on 23 <sup>rd</sup>
Yellowhammer	15+ near Branton on 27 <sup>th</sup>
Reed Bunting	4 near Branton on 27 <sup>th</sup>
<b>INVERTEBRATES</b>	
Great Diving Beetle	1 at Branton Ponds on 26 <sup>th</sup>
Emerald Damselfly	Many in Lemmington Bank Wood on 5 <sup>th</sup>
Common Hawker	3 in Lemmington Bank Wood on 5 <sup>th</sup> 3 on Simonside on 21 <sup>st</sup> 1 at Branton Ponds on 29 <sup>th</sup>
Southern Hawker	1 in Lemmington Bank Wood on 5 <sup>th</sup>
Black Darter	12+ including 2 mating pairs in Lemmington Bank Wood on 5 <sup>th</sup> 1 on Simonside on 21 <sup>st</sup>
Common Darter	3 at Branton Ponds on 29 <sup>th</sup>
Holly Blue	1 at Felton on 5 <sup>th</sup>
Comma	1 in Branton on 29 <sup>th</sup>
Red Admiral	24 in Branton on 21 <sup>st</sup>
Silver Y	2 in Branton on 26 <sup>th</sup>
Setaceous Hebrew Character	3 at Branton on 9 <sup>th</sup>
Svenssons Copper Underwing	3 at Branton on 9 <sup>th</sup>
Black Rustic	1 at Branton on 9 <sup>th</sup>
<b>PLANTS</b>	
Thorn Apple	1 plant in Branton.
<b>MAMMALS</b>	
Weasel	1 at Craster on 14 <sup>th</sup>
Roe Deer	3 at Felton on 6 <sup>th</sup>
Bottle-nosed Dolphin	6 at Dunstanburgh on 11 <sup>th</sup> 13 at Craster on 28 <sup>th</sup>
Harbour Porpoise	2 at Dunstanburgh on 28 <sup>th</sup>
<b>OBSERVERS</b>	I&K Davison, G Dodds, M&J Drage, M Eaton, A Hall,
	P&A Hanmer, A Keeble, J Rutter, S Sexton.

All meetings begin at 7.30 pm in the upstairs room at St James's Church Hall on Pottergate in Alnwick

**Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> September 2023**

Butterfly recording in NE England: changes & challenges

Stephen Kirtley

**Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> October 2023**

The Fauna & Flora of Aotearoa (New Zealand)

Phil & Julie Burns

**Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> November 2023**

Embleton Quarry – past and present

Margaret Watchorn, Kevin Redgrave & Dr Terry Howells

**Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> December 2022 (Christmas Meeting)**

Adventures in the Hen Hole. Rambles in one of Northumberland's botanical jewels

Chris Metherell

**Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> January 2024**

Grey Squirrel Control for Red Squirrel Conservation

Ian Lakey (Lower Coquetdale Red Squirrels)

**Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> February 2024**

Amphibians & Reptiles of Northumberland and some Natterjack Toads

Yvette Martin

**Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> March 2024**

'Chips with everything' - the making of a nature reserve.

Peter Matthewson

**Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> April 2024**

'Til death do us part? - the love-life of the Bullfinch

Chris Wright

**Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> May 2024**

First Steps with Eight Legs - An Introduction to Spiders and Harvestmen

Ian Beddison



## 2023/24 WINTER WALKS etc.

We've now had the last of our scheduled summer walks and this is the first of a few winter events. 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 or Stewart on 07944 072423 before 8.30 on the day.

**Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> November      Brandon/Reaveley in the Breamish Valley      Richard Poppleton**

Meet at Brandon at 10.00am. This is a 5-mile walk from Brandon farm round Heddon Hill with its ancient cultivation terraces and across country to Reaveley Greens farm. Then down the minor road between Roddam and Ingram and back via Reaveley farm and a short section of the valley road. This is hilly country, so expect some ups and downs. The route may vary once it has been pre-walked! Wildlife interest will be whatever we spot. You may decide you want to bring some lunch because we are unlikely to be back at the cars before 1.00pm.

Stout boots and clothing to match the weather forecast. Binoculars would be useful.

Park at the Brandon end of the footbridge over the Breamish at Grid Ref NU 0406 1699

OS Landranger      81      Explorer: East edge of OL16 / West edge of 332

**Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> December Embleton Dunstan Steads to Low Newton      Stewart Sexton**

Meet at Dunstan Steads at end of lane at 10am. There is a large layby with plenty of car parking just before the golf course. Note this is **not** the Embleton Golf Club lane, it's the one to the south of that. Access via minor road at South end of Embleton Village.

Walking mainly level but may be wet in places, so wear appropriate footwear and clothing. We will walk across the Golf Course and north along the beach to Low Newton and return via low Newton scrapes and pool then south by the links. Around 3 miles. 2 to 3 hours.

In December we will look for winter coastal birds, such as sea duck and shorebirds, on the pools there should be some wildfowl. There may also be some plants in the dunes worth a look plus anything else we may come across. Please bring binoculars.

Car Park is at Grid Ref NU 244 223      OS Landranger 75      Explorer 332

**Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> January      New Year Plant Hunt at Warkworth      Richard Poppleton**

This is our now-traditional New Year Plant Hunt (NYPH) walk. The aim is to record as many species as possible showing at least some flower(s). The data we collect are sent in to the BSBI to add to their country-wide recording effort. This New Year we shall have a second visit to Warkworth. If we park in the beach car park we can walk down to the dunes and north along the seaward side of the golf course, then inland and back to the village to try our luck in the pavement cracks and garden walls. Choose walking gear appropriate for the weather, the dune footpath and mud.

Meet at **10.00 am** in the free beach car park at NU 2543 0636. Estimated timing 10.00 am to 1.00 pm

OS Landranger 81      Explorer 332