

LONGHIRST WILDLIFE & COMMUNITY TRUST

NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2022

Welcome to the third issue of the Longhirst Wildlife & Community Trust newsletter! In this issue Woodruff Wood tell us about the three rare species they are championing in their own wood and how we can all help on our own 'patches'; an article all about homes for wildlife; all about solitary bees and hoverflies, both great pollinators in the garden and what the honey bees are up to at the moment. Read on!

Red Squirrels, Willow Tits & White-letter Hairstreaks

Woodruff Wood

Nestled in the corner of Longhirst, Woodruff Wood is home to three wildlife rarities which we think are worthy of special attention. They are a mammal, the red squirrel; a bird, the willow tit and a butterfly, the white-letter hairstreak. All have suffered from a major decline in numbers in recent years and are classified as priority species. They need as much help as possible in order to ensure their survival – and here we give you a taste of what we are doing – and what you too can do to help.

The Red Squirrel



Most of you will be aware that we are lucky enough to have red squirrels living in our parish – but it is not all plain sailing. Numbers of reds are low and they are constantly under threat from the presence of non-native, invasive grey squirrels which pass on the deadly squirrelpox virus. A few years ago we witnessed first-hand the effects of squirrelpox: it is an awful disease and has the potential to wipe out our resident reds in a matter of two weeks.

Where are we now?

We start from a good place. Many local people already support red squirrel conservation and without their hard work and dedication it is more than likely that we would no longer have reds in Longhirst. We monitor the presence of both reds

and greys in the village and surrounds in order to keep an accurate, up-to-date picture of the squirrel population – and armed with this knowledge we implement a culling programme to remove grey squirrels. This involves either trapping or shooting grey squirrels – and it is not a task undertaken lightly by those who do it. It is currently our only option if we are to save our reds.

What can we all do?

- Report sightings of both red and grey squirrels to Morpeth & District Red Squirrels (MADRS) by emailing sightings@madredsquirrels.com or telephoning/texting the Squirrel Hotline on 07570 897979. Please include accurate details of location.
- If you have regular sightings of a grey squirrel in your garden, please consider allowing a humane live trap to be placed on your property. This can be arranged/discussed by contacting MADRS (help is provided).

The Willow Tit



This charming but easily overlooked member of the tit family is in real trouble:

- There has been a 94% decline of willow tits since 1970 (according to The State of the UK's Birds 2020 report).
- It is the second fastest declining UK bird species (after the turtle dove).
- It is at real risk of extinction.

A possible reason for its decline is deteriorating habitat quality. They like damp, young woodland – and this type of habitat is often short-lived as they are prone to drying out and developing into mature woodland. Scrubby areas including the edge of woodland and along linear features such as hedgerows, railway lines – and in our situation, the Old Haul Road which runs between Longhirst and Ulgham, are ideal haunts. Nesting holes are excavated in soft, rotten tree stumps.

At Woodruff Wood we are confident that 3-4 breeding pairs are occupying territories this year. Though they are highly sedentary, staying close to their breeding site all year round, we do know that they also visit garden feeders and have the potential to show up anywhere in the village. Indeed we hope they are breeding elsewhere; not just in our wood.

What we are doing

- We are planting/retaining shrub and tree species favoured by willow tits. These include elder, birch, alder and willow.
- We leave standing dead wood where safe to do so. Willow tits will use tall stumps (1 to 2.5m high with a diameter of 10 to 20cm) as nesting sites.
- An annual survey of willow tits in the wood allows us to monitor their progress.

White-letter Hairstreak



The white-letter hairstreak can be too easily missed. This predominantly brown butterfly with a touch of orange and a white W-shaped streak on its wings flies around the tops of wych elm trees. Occasionally it will drop down to nectar on flowers such as bramble and angelica. It has suffered from a huge 93% decline in numbers since the outbreak of Dutch Elm disease back in the 1970's.

Woodruff Wood is home to a small population of white-letter hairstreaks. They live on a single big wych elm tree – and this makes them extremely vulnerable. Our woodland management plan has incorporated the planting of lots more wych elms – both next to our big wych elm and further afield - and this is now starting to pay dividends. Last summer, the hairstreaks were observed flying between different trees.

What we can all do

- Look out for white-letter hairstreaks elsewhere in the village. To do this search out wych elms and look up! As a rule, adults are out flying in July (perhaps late June and early August too) on warm, calm, sunny days.
- Submit sightings to Butterfly Conservation – see the Spring edition of the newsletter for details or go to: <https://butterfly-conservation.org/butterflies/recording-and-monitoring>
- Plant a wych elm where suitable.

April and May are the busiest time for beekeepers; hive health inspections, catching up with equipment repair that should have been done in the winter, removing spring honey and dealing with swarms.

In preference to other sources of nectar, Honeybees love Oilseed Rape and this year has seen a massive increase in the area covered by the crop. Apparently, this is because not so much is being grown down south. So we have seen the 'supers' (top boxes on the hives used to store the honey) filling up. This is great except that if left in the hive, the honey sets like concrete and is not easily extracted, so it needs to be removed as soon as possible after the Rape has finished flowering.



Swarm

Swarming is the natural way Honeybees reproduce. When the time is right, the queen will fly to a new location together with half the bees in the hive; these will be the teenagers, full of energy and capable of outfitting a new home when they arrive; building new honeycomb in which honey and pollen will be stored, and in which over a thousand eggs a day will be laid by the queen. They will leave behind many queen cells in the original hive, with at least one of the cells sealed, timed to hatch eight days after swarming. Only one of the queen cells will be allowed to hatch and after about 3 – 4 weeks, the new queen will have mated and started laying, resulting in a doubling of egg laying capacity from the original colony.



Queen cells

For the beekeeper, losing half a colony of bees reduces the overall capacity of the apiary. We prevent this by creating an artificial swarm, removing the queen and some bees, and putting them into another hive. However, the bees have a mind of their own and despite best efforts, some colonies will still swarm. So at this time of year, you will often see beekeepers collecting swarms and re-housing them in their apiaries. A gain for beekeepers and peace of mind for people living near the swarms. Swarming will continue for the next few weeks before the bees and beekeepers focus on honey production, when we find out if our efforts in managing the bees have been fruitful.

Homes for wildlife

Pauline Gilbertson



In late April my intrepid handyman borrowed an extra-long ladder and installed my new Swift nesting box at the top of my house. Three days later it was occupied, not by Swifts but by House Sparrows! I'm told that Swifts may well evict the squatters but even if they don't, at least the box is being put to good use.

Then on 12 May I was excited to see that "my" pair of House Martins had survived their long journey back from sub-Saharan Africa to Longhirst Village and were busy examining old nest sites under the eaves of my house. Last year's nest fell down over the winter and only its outline, and that of an even older nest, survives. But within a day the pair of Martins had started applying sticky blobs of wet mud to the old nest sites.



I was surprised that they didn't appear to have agreed on which one to use; were they starting to rebuild both nests? But no, just the one was taking shape. Then, after seeing four birds at once, I realised that I had not one but two pairs of active House Martins fighting for the same nest site! Happily they resolved the argument

and one pair headed down the village to Stable Close where they have re-purposed a former Swallow's nest. 'My' pair had four chicks last year, all of which successfully fledged. It's humbling to think how much work these small birds need to do to achieve a nest in time to lay and incubate eggs and raise their chicks before the family heads back to Africa in the autumn.



This spring I put up a new Blue Tit nesting box as well as an open-fronted one which is supposed to be attractive to Robins and Wrens. The latter has not yet been occupied, but the new Blue Tit box has been taken over by Tree Sparrows.



The alpaca wool I provided as nesting material has all been collected so I'm hoping that the nests will be superbly comfortable. Last May my old Blue Tit nesting box was occupied by Tree Bumblebees, which was lovely – they were no trouble and only stayed a few weeks before disappearing as abruptly as they arrived.



So, what we hope for when we put up nesting boxes doesn't always deliver as expected (at Hauxley a red squirrel has recently taken over a Tawny Owl nest box for her drey), but in my view, as long as the boxes are occupied by *something*, they are serving a useful purpose.

If you'd like to tell us about your own garden wildlife experiences for a future newsletter, we would be very pleased to hear from you.

A helping hand for pollinators - and hedgehogs

Richard Tordoff

Hoverflies



For those people (of which there are many) who do not like the thought of being stung, remember that helping the world of pollination is an important consideration.

Perhaps you might consider trying to encourage hoverflies in your garden. Hoverflies get their name from their ability to hover in mid-air. Many hoverflies

mimic wasps, honey-bees or bumble-bees with stripes, bands and markings of black and yellow. However, hoverflies do not bite or sting. Flies, including hoverflies, are an essential part of a healthy garden. Adult hoverflies are pollinators and the larvae of most species are predators or help recycle organic matter (detritivores).

About half of British hoverflies are aphid predators as larvae and are as important as ladybirds in reducing populations of aphids. They can also prey on other sap-sucking garden insects such as leafhoppers, whiteflies and scale insects. Tolerating the presence of aphids and other prey on some plants will provide a food source for hoverflies and can help promote a natural balance in the garden. Some species rely on dead wood so creating a log pile can support them as well as a wide range of animals in the garden. Drone flies and some other hoverflies like stagnant water rich in organic material; creating a [hoverfly lagoon](#) will support these animals. I have not gone into too much detail here, but they are fascinating creatures and worthy of a bit more research.

Solitary bees

Often overlooked in favour of their furrier and larger cousins, solitary bees in fact make up over 90% of bee species found in Britain. Over 100 bee species have been recorded from the North East: 19 bumblebees, one honeybee and the rest? Solitary bees! Unlike honeybees and bumblebees, solitary bees do not live in colonies with 'worker' bees. Rather, a single female builds and provisions her own nest.



Depending on the species, solitary bees can be ground or aerial nesters, and may use mud, leaves, body secretions or floral oils as their nesting material. Some are furry and larger like their bumblebee cousins while others are virtually hairless and no more than a few millimetres in length. Inside a solitary bee nest is a series of egg cells, each protected by a wall of material and provisioned with nectar and pollen. Male eggs are laid towards the front of the entrance, so that they emerge before the females and are ready to mate in the following year. The female's larvae remain

within these cells until the following year and emerge as fully-formed adults, ready to mate and start the cycle again. Solitary bees are only on the wing for a matter of weeks, so it is a race against time for females to complete their nests and ensure their larvae are fully provisioned.



Ground-nesters, such as mining bees, can be found in lawns, along paths, cliff faces and on sunny banks. Using their legs, they dig into the ground to create a tunnel, which then splits into different chambers where they lay their eggs.

While most species are ground-nesting, some bees nest aerially. Solitary bees such as flower bees, leafcutters and mason bees may nest in hollow plant stems, cavities in dead wood, or more artificial structures such as walls and bee hotels. I have a few of these up on an east facing wall and it is wonderful to see them taking up the accommodation I have for them. While solitary, you can find females nesting close together at good sites. Only females collect pollen and males play no role in nest building or provisioning.

And finally to **Hedgehogs**. Their mating season began in May. Keep an ear out for loud snuffling and grunting noises at night, it may be hedgehogs mating!



Males will circle around the female, sometimes for hours, trying to persuade her to mate. It is very important to keep feeding to build up the female and give her the best chance of being able to support her hoglets. In addition, bowls of water can come in handy as a dry spell makes foraging thirsty work. As usual watch out for hogs around during the day. The females can be around looking for food, so if you see a hog moving around "with purpose" then it is probably normal. A hog that is listless, curled up, surrounded by flies etc. needs help - feel free to ring me.

And finally

We'd love to hear about what's happening in your garden or anywhere in Longhirst Parish, so if you've been inspired by any of the articles in this or earlier newsletters, please feel free to send me (kim.woolhead@gmail.com) a snippet of news which I can include in the next newsletter.

In my garden, for example, a new bug box which I only put up at the end of April this year has already been visited by lots of insects and most of the nest holes have been sealed up by solitary bees ready for next year's hatching!



For more information, see the article on pollinators.