

LONGHIRST WILDLIFE & COMMUNITY TRUST

NEWSLETTER

Winter, January 2023

Welcome to the fifth issue of the Longhirst Wildlife & Community Trust newsletter! The weather may not be the best at the moment but we can still bring you plenty of information about what's happening in and around the area which you can enjoy in the comfort of your own home or which may encourage you to get out and explore (when the wintry weather permits!).

STOP PRESS!

LONGHIRST WILDLIFE AND COMMUNITY TRUST - public event
Thursday 16 February, 7.30pm at Longhirst Village Hall

Join us for Peter Matthewson's illustrated talk about Clark's Bog, the nature reserve he created on the outskirts of Morpeth. Hear how he has transformed a disused piece of farmland into a wildlife haven teeming with thousands of different species, just three miles away!

Suggested donation of £3 per head, to include tea or coffee. No registration necessary, just come along. All are welcome.

THE LONGHIRST WILDLIFE & COMMUNITY TRUST

Kim Woolhead

Since the last newsletter, we have been granted charity status as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) and eight members of the Steering Group are now Trustees. Having charity status has enabled us to start applying for grants to develop the project which we hope will grow from strength to strength with the interest and enthusiasm of many residents of the Parish who, from the positive responses we have had so far, are already keen to join us.

After a lot of hard work and research, we (especially Mike Elphick – thank you, Mike!) have submitted a bid for funding to the Heritage Lottery Fund. We are initially seeking to fund professional resources and equipment to provide targeted education and activities for local people focussed upon wildlife conservation, the construction, appropriate location, maintenance, and disinfection of water sources, nest boxes, bug boxes, feeding stations, areas of woodland, wildflower meadow and other wildlife-friendly environments. We also intend to have trail cameras and bat detectors available to enable local residents to explore the wildlife that visit our gardens when we are not around to see it.

Watch this space!

The winter months can be wonderfully productive for Northumbrian bird watchers. It's always good to see an increase in the number of Redwings, Fieldfares, Song and Mistle Thrushes and of course Blackbirds, many of which come across from Scandinavia and Russia to overwinter here, and all of which can be spotted within our parish. If you throw apples into your garden in icy weather you'll probably attract Fieldfares as well as Song Thrushes and Blackbirds.



Fieldfare in my Longhirst garden
December 2022

Then there are the skeins of Pink-Footed Geese which arrive from the Arctic tundra and gracefully honk their way across our winter skies; not forgetting Waxwings, those stunning visitors from Russia and northern Scandinavia which venture over here when food sources are scarce at home. This winter I have seen small flocks of Waxwings in Acklington and Gosforth, and am hopeful of more arriving as winter progresses. Also very charming are the Snow Buntings which are being spotted in small numbers up and down the Northumberland coast.

Waxwing, Acklington
November 2022



In addition our coastline is blessed with a good number of rare 'vagrants' and accidental visitors, the majority blown off-course by a strong wind (alongside a few victims of a poor sense of direction). In the autumn a Lapland Bunting and a Red-flanked Bluetail turned up near St Mary's Island and both stayed for several days, to the delight of birders and photographers. Then in November a juvenile Pied Wheatear arrived and was temporarily resident at Whitley Bay for almost a week, posing nicely for photos. This species is a once-every-ten-years rare vagrant visitor, which should have been heading from southern Asia to over-winter in East Africa (but clearly had a rotten sense of direction!). A couple of Pallas' Warblers and

Hume's Warblers also turned up in November but I only managed fleeting glimpses of them (photographing small birds flitting about high up in trees requires more patience and skill than I can muster!).

A Red-throated Diver on the pond at Linton Lane NWT nature reserve and a Velvet Scoter and Red-necked Grebe on Widdrington Moor Lake were more accommodating. I was particularly excited by superb views of the Velvet Scoter, which is normally only seen at a distance on the sea. Presumably he'd headed for this inland pool hoping for a rest.



Velvet Scoter, Widdrington Moor Lake
November 2022

Winter is a great time to go birdwatching. Grab your hat, scarf and binoculars, get out into the countryside or off to the coast and let us know what YOU find!

WHAT HAPPENS TO HONEYBEES IN THE WINTER?

Peter Lovering

As we head into autumn, the Honeybees prepare for winter. The queen reduces her egg laying and the number of bees in the hive reduces naturally to about 10,000 – 15,000. These relatively young bees will take the colony through the winter before they are replaced by new bees in the Spring. Brood frames that a few weeks earlier were full of larvae, are now filled with honey and concentrated sugar solution provided by the beekeeper.



Winter bee cluster
Photo: The Bee Listener

As the temperature drops, the bees will cluster around the queen, keeping her at about 30°C, rotating between the centre of the cluster and the outer edge to ensure all bees survive, squeezing tighter together as the temperature drops.

Also, it's time for us beekeepers to help protect the bees against bad weather; insulation is installed below the hive lids and inside the top of the hive above the cluster, external covers are fitted to protect against draughts and the rain, and fondant food is placed above the cluster. Indeed, it is important that the fondant is placed directly above the cluster and open on the underside to enable the bees to feed. If the fondant is not directly above the cluster, the bees may not find it and unbelievably, the colony will starve, even if the fondant is only inches away.

On warm days through winter, bees will be seen flying out of the hive, mainly to defecate and to remove dead bees. Also, beekeepers will take the opportunity provided by warm days, to check on the health of the colonies and where necessary, top up the fondant. Honeybees are very clean creatures and the level of cleanliness is an indicator of the health of a hive. Grouping hives together enables hive activity to be compared, highlighting failing hives.

We look forward to spring and hopefully, a full complement of surviving hives.

RED SQUIRRELS IN LONGHIRST

Allan Scott

My name is Allan Scott and I carry out red squirrel conservation and wildlife management in and around Longhirst. I am attached to Morpeth and District Red Squirrels (MAD RS) as well as also working on a private basis. Originally from Newcastle, I have lived in the Morpeth area since 2015 and moved to Longhirst Colliery in 2018. Some locals will know me or have seen me around. Although now retired, I have been involved with wildlife management since the age of around 11 and I am particularly committed to helping to save our red squirrel population.

We currently have red sightings in Longhirst Hall grounds, on the Golf Course and in the nearby woods, and the spread of the reds is a result of the work done in the grounds of the Hall. It is very time-consuming but the results make it all worthwhile. This said, the survival of the reds is a continuous battle and a delicate balance and the reds need all the help they can get in order to survive and expand their numbers. The grey squirrel population therefore needs to be controlled as the greys out-compete the reds for food, as well as carrying the deadly Squirrelpox virus and causing millions of pounds worth of damage to British forests and woodlands.



Photo: Phil Hourigan

I control the greys by using humane traps, and by shooting. If I catch a non-target species in a trap (which does occasionally happen) it is released back into the wild as quickly as possible – my traps are checked at least once, usually twice, daily and I follow all the relevant guidelines to the letter. I have a lot of experience in the field of trapping and shooting and I pride myself on my competence in carrying it out. Removing the greys is unfortunate but essential as without this we would lose our reds, maybe forever, as has already happened in most of the UK. And this would be devastating as the reds are such beautiful creatures.

Every section of ground I manage has such a large number of different and diverse species which are a joy for all of us who see them. It's important that if you spot any red or grey squirrels in the area, please always report them to MAD RS (email date and location to sightings@madredsquirrels.com or text 07570 897979) so that we can continue to help our beautiful reds survive.

(Adapted from a piece written for the Morpeth and Red Squirrels newsletter)

HIBERNATION – AND OTHER WORDS THAT ESSENTIALLY MEAN SOMETHING SIMILAR

Richard Tordoff

A topic that's relevant to us all at the moment with our escalating winter fuel bills is how all our wildlife copes at this time of year and why we no longer see them. Opportunities for forage are the main reason as most forms of food are non-existent or themselves dormant.

Hibernation is where some animals enter a state of almost total inactivity during the winter months. They do this by slowing their heart rate to be up to 10x slower and lowering their body temperature too. A hedgehog's heart rate is usually around 190 beats per minute but drops to just 20 during hibernation. They also lower their

metabolism, so they don't waste vital nutrients needed to maintain their bodies throughout the winter. All this means that they're able to survive for long periods without eating, although they can occasionally wake up for short bursts, on milder days, to look for extra food and go to the toilet. I see this in my beehives as the hardier ones come out and investigate. Their bodies have also adapted to wake them up from their dormant hibernating state if they are in danger of freezing due to drastic temperature drops.



Hibernating hedgehog

www.istockphoto.com

While hibernation is common in many mammals, most insects enter a state of *diapause* instead. Diapause is a state where the animal will cease to develop and is common in the egg or larval stage of many insects but can also occur in adults. This is similar to hibernation, with the metabolic rate falling and the animal entering a state of dormancy. Most insects are classed as entering diapause rather than hibernation because they are mostly cold-blooded or ectothermic, eg butterflies and moths etc.

Similarly, many reptiles will enter *brumation* during the colder months, being very similar to hibernation but with the changes more specific to those that these ectothermic animals need to make to survive. Look out for the topic on Hibernaculum in Spring...

The only animals that truly hibernate in the UK are hedgehogs, dormice and bats. During hibernation, animals will likely not leave their nests/hibernation spots all winter, whereas other animals will technically still hibernate, but only for very short periods of time. This is known as a state of 'torpor', like a mini hibernation which reduces energy requirements during the coldest days.

Hibernating dormouse

Photo: Woodland Trust



Where are the butterflies in winter? Basically, most butterflies look for a sheltered place in winter. Naturally, these are often tree cavities, spaces in stones or gaps in evergreen plants. However butterflies are often found overwintering in the home. At the moment I have around 7 above my stairs clinging to the ceiling because the temperature does not fall below zero but at the same time is low enough for winter torpor. Similarly, ladybirds come indoors looking for a place to stay.

What can we do to help? We can continue to feed the hedgehogs as late as possible. Everything is looking for an early boost, and we can help by not knocking the heads from dandelions and by maintaining a clean water station. We can create a hibernaculum and also wilder areas with logs and bricks etc (both topics to be covered in the spring edition of the newsletter). When spring arrives, please take a moment to see what is around your garden. I don't normally do it, but this year, as I have learned a lot more about insects and bats, I will be looking around all areas including my small pond. I love to see the Bumblebee Queen come out earlier than most whilst she looks to start it all over again.

And finally...

Richard Turner sent in pictures of his new pond, built last summer.

'I have just built a wildlife pond which is starting to show signs of life. I got inspiration from Joel Ashton on YouTube. We've also built a bog garden next to it. Kathy, my wife has done the planting.'

Before

After



Hopefully it will inspire more residents of Longhirst to install a water feature in their gardens in 2023. As far as the local wildlife are concerned, the greater the variety of habitats we can create in our gardens the better!

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.