



**Longhirst
Wildlife and
Community Trust**

NEWSLETTER

Spring 2023

Welcome to the sixth issue of the **Longhirst Wildlife & Community Trust** newsletter! Doesn't time fly – it seems no time at all since I was putting together the last Spring newsletter. We have made a lot of progress since then, including developing a new Longhirst logo alongside the Parish Council, as you can see above, and there's exciting news about our lottery grant application (see below). Over the last year I for one have learned plenty about the environment and wildlife that we are lucky enough to have on our doorstep. Read on for the next instalment! **Kim Woolhead**

NATIONAL LOTTERY HERITAGE FUND GRANT

Peter Coates

The Trust is delighted to announce that, thanks to Mike Elphick's hard work and the support of the players of the National Lottery, we have been awarded a grant of £10,000 by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Everyone is invited to attend a public meeting in the **Village Hall** at **7.30pm** on **Wednesday 24 May** when we will explain what the grant will allow us to do over the next year and hopefully you will tell us how you would like to see the Trust develop in the future. We are very keen to hear your views and would like to involve as many residents as possible.



wildlife, well-being, woodfuel, warmth

WOODRUFF WOOD NEWS

Squirrel Update – February 2023

It would seem that red squirrels are hanging on by a thread in the wood. An occasional glimpse of a single individual is the most we have enjoyed of late. We presume, rightly or wrongly, that it is the same animal we see, as it always has a dark tail, but evidence is weak and we would be more than happy to be proved

wrong. However, the fact that there is at least one red gives us the hope and motivation to carry on with our red squirrel conservation which is based heavily on grey squirrel control work.as it is the grey squirrels, sadly, which continue to be more numerous.

Whilst it is always difficult to put an exact number on them, what we do know is that despite upping our control work, they continue to turn up. At this point we must pass on our thanks to Allan Scott who has dedicated many a recent hour to patrolling the wood on the lookout for greys and, due to his efforts, numbers of greys are being kept on top of as best as we can hope for. But it is a time consuming task requiring skill and patience and the correct attitude to what is a serious undertaking.

It can be quite a challenge searching for grey squirrels. Pinpointing their location in the wood is part luck and part detective work. Looking out for signs of squirrel activity is key and as squirrels can be messy eaters, it is often the remains of their meals which help us track down their favoured hanging out spots. Of late, Norway spruce cones have been the choice of food and in places the ground is thick with chewed cones and discarded scales as the squirrels extract the seeds from within.



Photo: Woodruff Wood

So by looking around us, we can narrow down our search area for greys. An added bonus is that the repetitive gnawing of cones can be a noisy affair as each one is stripped in a meticulous manner and this can give away the presence of a grey if we happen to chance upon one doing so.

An Important Note - Grey Squirrel Control. Grey squirrel control can understandably be a bit of a touchy subject. Not everyone is in favour of trapping or shooting grey

squirrels. But it is not something we can afford to shy away from. It is important and here is why:

- 1 The most significant factor in the decline of our native red squirrels is the grey squirrel. Greys are carriers of the squirrelpox virus which they pass on to the reds who die an awful death. They also outcompete red squirrels for food. The only means we currently have to save our reds is by carrying out grey squirrel control.

It is worth mentioning that new additional support may be on the horizon which has the potential to be a game changer for red squirrel conservation. The UK Squirrel Accord is developing a grey squirrel oral contraceptive. Ian Baker, Chief Executive of Small Woods (a charity which supports the sustainable management of woodlands) writes in their magazine:

'We heard encouraging news about progress with the development of an oral contraceptive, which if successful could at last see the tide turned in the progress of the grey squirrel and the decline of the red. It is still early days but, if its efficacy is proved through trials and registration is successful, it could be widely available as early as 2030. So, the message is to maintain your control measures..'

- 2 The grey squirrel is an invasive species – a major threat to biodiversity within our parish. It is not just red squirrels who suffer in the presence of greys. Grey squirrels do other damage. They harm our bird community by stealing birds' eggs and eating nestlings. They also harm trees by stripping bark to feed on the sap underneath. This is a major problem. Severe damage can kill the tree whilst milder damage causes scarring which acts as an entry point for pests and diseases. If numbers of greys are allowed to increase further, the future of our woodlands will become increasingly threatened.

Please remember, if you sight either a red or grey squirrel in the Morpeth and surrounding area, report it to MADRS at sightings@madredsquirrels.com or telephone/text the MADRS mobile 07570 897979.

TOUR OF WOODRUFF WOOD

We have arranged a visit to Woodruff Wood for a limited number of people on a "first come, first served" basis. This will take place on **Tuesday 9 May at 2pm** and will last around 1-1.5 hours. If you wish to join us please email paulinegilbertson@gmail.com, **deadline 25 April.**

Please note that the ground is uneven in places and may be muddy; you might like to bring walking poles if you have them, as well as tick repellent (always a good idea in areas where deer might be present).

Northumberland Wildlife Trust and the Royal Horticultural Society are calling on gardeners to reimagine their lawns this summer with their recently launched “Bring your lawn to life” initiative.



Photo: Janet Quinn

Gardeners are being encouraged to experiment with a new look lawn in 2023 for the benefit of wildlife and also the wider environment. It's hoped people will raise the blade on their mower, cut less regularly and embrace daisies, dandelions, clover and other naturally flowering plants.

Lawns left to grow long are shown to help mitigate flooding by better soaking up rainwater, have cooling properties in urban areas and capture pollutants as well as providing all important habitat for a whole host of insects including ants, bees and butterflies. For more information, check out the following website:

<https://www.nwt.org.uk/news/northumberland-wildlife-trust-and-rhs-call-gardeners-bring-their-lawns-life>

FRIEND OR FOE?

Janet Quinn

Whenever gardeners discuss garden pests, **Slugs and Snails** are often at the top of the list. At first sight they would definitely fall into the foe category, however...

These common garden pests are classified as gastropods, with “gastro” meaning stomach and “pod” meaning foot. They are voracious eaters and can leave mature plants full of holes or devastate a crop of seedlings overnight making them a common enemy of many gardeners.



Photo: Janet Quinn

Slugs and snails thrive in warm humid conditions and survive the winter by hiding in places that protect them from freezing. Gardens and lawns are attractive to them as these are often watered regularly and provide a smorgasbord of tender leaves for them to dine on. They are often more active at night when it is cooler. They feed on living and decomposing plant material but they prefer young, tender plant growth. Newly sprouted seedlings and soft growth on established plants are often the first targets. Lettuces and tender herbs, such as basil, are also favoured, as are some foliage plants, such as hostas. They will also feed on succulent fruits, such as strawberries and tomatoes and even citrus. However they tend to avoid plants that have rough, aromatic leaves, such as rosemary.



Photos: Janet Quinn

Life cycle

Slugs and snails mate, but they have both male and female reproductive organs. That means every slug or snail can lay eggs. Common snails may lay up to six egg batches annually with as many as 80 eggs per batch. Some slugs lay up to 500 eggs per year: these mature in three to six months and start laying eggs themselves. Left unchecked populations can increase very quickly. Slugs can live for approximately 2 years and snails for up to 10 years.



Control

Metaldehyde slug pellets (usually blue) have been banned in the UK as they are toxic to other wildlife, e.g. birds and hedgehogs. However other commercially available slug pellets are available and can be used to protect vulnerable plants, e.g. young seedlings, but a longer term solution is to attract wildlife predators to your garden. Slugs and snails are a valuable food source to many of our native species and can be of particular value during the breeding season. Birds (especially ground feeders e.g. thrushes and blackbirds), hedgehogs, frogs, beetles, mice and other small mammals will all eat slugs and snails.

Other control methods include putting coffee grounds, egg shells or recycled wool around the base of vulnerable plants or sink a beer trap in the soil (slugs and snails are attracted to it and will fall in and drown). They won't cross copper tape and Vaseline smeared around the top of pots stops them climbing onto vulnerable plants, but they will reach across from a neighbouring unprotected pot, wall or fence.

Nematodes are an organic biological slug control solution that's environmentally friendly and safe for children, pets and wildlife. This needs to be applied every 6 weeks in summer.

Garlic wash (this is particularly effective on hostas). 2 full cloves of garlic boiled in 2 litres of water until soft. Squash with a fork to release as much juice as possible. Sieve out the skins leaving a cloudy liquid concentrate. Dilute 2 tablespoons to 5 litres of water and spray on plants weekly from March to October. This may need to be reapplied in wet weather.

It will also help to remove debris, old leaves etc that slugs and snails will use to hide in. For seedlings under glass use drip irrigation instead of overhead watering. Plant drought-resistant plants that need less water. This will help make your garden less attractive to these pests.

Benefits of snails in the garden

Yes there are benefits! They are excellent at recycling decaying plant matter. If this wasn't eaten by snails the breakdown of plant matter by bacteria would take a lot longer. Snails are also excellent at aerating the soil, eating bug eggs and they are a good source of calcium for plants when they have decomposed! And finally as stated above they are an invaluable food source for many birds and mammals.



Over the winter, beekeepers will have been repairing frames and preparing hives for occupation by new colonies. The bees in the apiary will have been clustered together to keep warm in a hive that has added insulation, which is removed as the weather improves. We then move into a strange time of year: winter is over but it is still too cold to deep dive into the hive to see how many bees have survived and to check on their health. The bees will have eaten all of the fondant that we fed them over winter and will be filling any empty spaces with wax honeycomb.



On warm days, the bees have been active, collecting pollen and nectar. Seeing the bees loaded down with bright yellow pollen is a sure sign that the queen is laying eggs, as the pollen is used to feed the larvae with their protein. Unlike the nectar that is converted into honey and fed to the larvae to provide carbohydrates, the pollen has to be fresh. Hives taking in little or no pollen are suspect and potentially need a new queen.

Over the period of about 6 weeks and with a good queen laying over 1,000 eggs a day, the hive will double in size; the brood frames will be filled with either honey or eggs and larvae and it becomes a race between the bees and the beekeeper. Once the temperature reaches 15[°], the beekeeper can deep dive and find out what's been happening down below in the brood box where the queen lays the eggs. But it could be too late if there is any delay and the temperature increases further, as the bees may already be chomping at the bit to swarm.

So a beekeeper will go from fixing frames and preparing spare hives to suddenly needing to deep dive every week for the next three months to either prevent swarming or to split the hive and make the bees think they have swarmed. At the same time, the swallows, back from their travels, will be licking their lips, thinking about those big juicy queens when they fly out from the hive!

Interestingly, some of you may have noticed small orangey yellow blobs on your cars and you may think the bees have been dropping pollen, but that is not the case. After a long sleep, we all need to do what comes naturally, as do the bees.

WILDLIFE IN THE GARDEN

Richard Tordoff

Last year I wrote exclusively about hedgehogs for the newsletter. My hedgehog advice this Spring is exactly the same, as human intrusion into the world of nature (at least in Northumberland) has not had that great an effect over the last 12 months. However, as I have gotten older and introduced more nature-friendly features and thinking into my garden, I hope that I can ask you to maybe look at some of the wildlife-friendly things that you can do in your own garden, regardless of size. They cost little and will have a quick and vital impact.

My first topic is **POLLINATORS**.

Hoverflies



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 several of these lagoons in various water receptacles and have found them teeming with larvae.

Hoverflies can often be mistaken for bees and wasps, and in many cases this is intentional. These flies are often covered in yellow and black stripes, which from a distance makes them look like a dangerous **wasp ready to sting**. In reality, the hoverfly has no sting and is completely harmless to humans. Their stripes are a form

of protection. By looking like wasps, they trick predators in not coming near them! It's a strategy that has resulted in the evolution of over a dozen British hoverflies, with varying degrees of blacks, oranges and yellows. To tell wasps and hoverflies apart, concentrate on the eyes and you will see the hoverfly has much bigger eyes. They also differ in the way they fly.

Solitary bees



The second group are the solitary bees. Solitary bees do not live in colonies, do not serve a queen or make honey. They don't make wax either. Some solitary bee species nest in large groups, and a few have evolved social behaviour rather like bumblebees¹, but they generally build individual nests and work alone. I would recommend watching some of the videos of "Wild about Nature" on YouTube [Wild about Nature](#). More than most I have found this individual approach to wildlife very inspiring and have created several of these projects which have worked very well. A piece of hardwood, a drill and several drill bits from 4mm to 10mm are all you need. Please hang on an east-facing wall, and in the late spring sit and watch as these marvels find your habitat.

HEDGEHOGS

As the spring warmth comes around and our ventures into the gardens become more regular, so indeed are the visits by the hedgehogs. After a few months of hibernating, they awake having lost up to 25% of their body weight. Like us the first thing they look for once woken up is a drink. The only drink they need is water. Please do not think milk with its protein and fat is a good answer. Hedgehogs are lactose intolerant and after not eating for four months, milk will cause diarrhoea and gas which could lead to death.



If possible put out a feeding station with water, cat biscuits and cat tinned meat. There are certain tinned/wet foods that hedgehogs do not seem to like but I have found Whiskas chicken in jelly and Lidl's own brand do quite well. Feeding stations are sometimes hard to get right. It seems as if we are feeding the neighbours' cats and, as we are near a water source, we have a problem with rats in parts of the village. Unfortunately rats cannot be prevented going into the hog feed but please keep a look out for droppings. Usually very near the feed there are signs of hedgehog poo which is black, around two inches long and at one end it comes to a point. Rat droppings are around 3/4ins and are oval. There are easily searchable websites that give valuable information.

<https://littlesilverhedgehog.com/hedgehog-information/> gives good information links on the right hand side. I have feeding stations just like this one pictured. To prevent cats gaining access, I face the entrance about five inches from a wall or fence. If you need any help setting one up or have any questions then please contact me on 07850 066633. I am willing to call round and see you if you need me to have a look.

NEWS SNIPPETS

Kim Woolhead

- On 16 February we held our first event open to all residents of the Parish in the Village Hall. Peter Matthewson gave us an illustrated talk about Clark's Bog, the nature reserve he has created on the outskirts of Morpeth. It was well attended and everyone enjoyed the evening. His approach to conservation and habitat creation was particularly interesting and gave us plenty of ideas about how to enhance our own wildlife habitats to increase the biodiversity of the Parish in future.

- The Wildlife Trusts are running a **Great British Nature Survey**, which is open to people living across the British Isles. They want to learn more about what people think about our nature and how we, as a society, should protect it. So getting as many people as we can to join in will make it more representative and inclusive. To take part, visit www.wildlifetrusts.org/great-big-nature-survey.

- Sylvia Smith emailed me to report that she and her partner, who moved into the village fairly recently, have been spotting a variety of wildlife around the area including red squirrels, owls, curlew and foxes. Thank you for your message, Sylvia, and look out for future events which we will be running soon, including hopefully one on the use of trail cameras which might be of particular interest to you.

- A stoat in ermine was reported in February, crossing the road near the golf club. It looked completely out of place with its white coat when there was no snow. Let's hope it's managed to moult back to its usual russet colour for the summer.

- Unfortunately there have been a number of road casualties in the last few months as many animals are on the move. These include several roe deer, badgers (this is the time of year when last year's young are sent out into the world to find a home of their own), a hare or two and one or two birds of prey. If you see any casualties please let us know – it helps us to at least monitor the populations of these rare and special animals in our patch.