



**Longhirst
Wildlife and
Community Trust**



NEWSLETTER

Spring 2024

Welcome to the Spring issue of the **Longhirst Wildlife & Community Trust** newsletter.

WHAT'S ON OVER THE SPRING

Kim Woolhead

Over the next two months or so, we have arranged several events which we hope will be as interesting and stimulating as those held recently (see below). Everyone's welcome at all our events and they're all FREE so please do come along! If you would like to attend any (or all!) of the site visits, please book a place with Pauline Gilbertson by emailing her at paulinegilbertson@gmail.com. No need to book for the Gardening for Wildlife talk, the more the merrier!

"Gardening for Wildlife", Thursday, 28 March, 19.30, Longhirst Village Hall

Geoff Dobbins, Estates Manager at Northumberland Wildlife Trust, will be giving us an illustrated talk on how to make our gardens more wildlife friendly and there will also be an opportunity for questions. This is a free event but please bring some cash to support our fundraising raffle! Free refreshments will be available after the talk.

"Spring Wildlife Walk", Monday, 22 April, 11.00-14.00, Scotch Gill Woods, Morpeth

An opportunity to explore plants and other spring wildlife in an ancient woodland along with Mark Welfare from the Natural History Society.

"Bird ID for Beginners", Saturday, 4 May, 10.00-12.30, Gosforth Nature Reserve

A guided walk around the reserve listening to and spotting the abundant birdlife at this time of year. This event is open to all, NOT just beginners

"Evening Chorus", Sunday, 26 May, 18.00-20.00, Woodruff Wood

A nature walk around Woodruff Wood with the owners to listen to the bird calls at dusk.

Please join us for one or more of these exciting events!

TREES IN WINTER

Bill Burlton, retired Forestry Commission Environment Manager for the North East, gave a talk which attracted a good number of people and was enjoyed by everyone there. Bill had brought along a number of ‘props’ in the form of twigs which, along with his slides, were really helpful for identification of different species. We also enjoyed refreshments and mince pies which went down well.

WINTER WILDFLOWERS

Originally designated a "Winter Wildflowers Walk", our guide James Common from the Natural History Society of Northumbria amended this to a “Winter Nature Walk” in view of the recent cold weather which he rightly deduced had deterred some late-flowering plants from flowering. However we did spot at least four different wildflowers actually in flower, and enjoyed seeing and learning about plants such as Spurge Laurel, Spotted Red Nettle, Yellow Archangel and various ferns and fungi. I particularly liked the tiny Yellow Fairy Cups and Candlesnuff fungi (pictured below).



Yellow Fairy Cups fungus
Photo: P Gilbertson



Candlesnuff fungus
Photo: P Gilbertson

We heard Marsh Tits in Borough Woods, saw several Redwings and were privileged to see Hawfinches flying over us at Abbey Mills. They settled in a Hornbeam tree (their favourite food source at this time of year), not very easy to see or photograph so I’ve included a better photo I took ten days earlier at the same site. These fascinating, fat-billed finches are rare in the UK and we are lucky to have had a small flock arriving to feed here in recent winters. We had set an attendance limit at 15 for this event, and exactly this number came along. As always we are grateful to the Heritage Lottery Fund, and all who play the Lottery, for making these free events possible.



Redwing
Photo: P Gilbertson



Hawfinch
Photo: P Gilbertson

LADYBIRDS IN WINTER – a visit to Havannah Nature Reserve

Our January event, postponed due to icy weather, was reinstated in a more acceptable temperature in early February. Eight of us met at the Havannah and Three Hills Nature Reserve, just north of Newcastle, for a nature walk led by James Common, Senior Naturalist at the Natural History Society of Northumbria (NHSN). The Havannah reserve was created on the site of the former Hazelrigg opencast mine (the ‘three hills’ were slag heaps) and boasts an impressive diversity of different habitats.

As well as learning where to look for over-wintering ladybirds – and finding around ten (mostly Seven-Spot, but also a couple of Pine Ladybirds) – we netted some nice bugs and spiders and learned some interesting facts about the site itself. Here below is a photo of one of the tiny Pine Ladybirds we found, along with a yellow 22-spot from last summer (these will be around again from April onwards).



Pine Ladybird
Photo: P Gilbertson



22 spot Ladybird
Photo: P Gilbertson

Most fascinating was the fact that Havannah (one of 33 parks or reserves managed by the Urban Green Newcastle charity) boasts the only remaining “relic heathland” in the area. As we walked amongst the heather James explained that Newcastle Town Moor, and indeed much of the surrounding area, would once have comprised

this ancient heathland but today, apart from Havannah, it has now all but disappeared.

Happily Urban Green Newcastle's plans include the preservation and regeneration of this habitat, which supports some unusual (for this area) wildlife including the Dingy Skipper butterfly and the Southern Marsh Orchid. It is also the only site in Newcastle for the rare Stag's-horn Clubmoss. To round off a very pleasant urban wander we spotted a Peregrine Falcon, a Kestrel and a Great Spotted Woodpecker.

EAST CHEVINGTON NATURE RESERVE VISIT

Sophie Webster of Northumberland Wildlife Trust (NWT) led an inspiring session at East Chevington Nature Reserve on Druridge Bay.



Photo:
P Gilbertson

We visited the excellent new bird hides, saw a variety of waders, ducks and a couple of Roe Deer, and also heard about the Trust's work on reintroducing Harvest Mice (one of our most endangered mammals) to the reserve.



Photo:
P Gilbertson

Later in the Spring we will be arranging a visit to Northumberland Zoo to see the Harvest Mice for ourselves – the Zoo is working in partnership with NWT and runs a Harvest Mouse breeding programme. Watch out for details!

Normally at this time of year we expect the bees to be clustered around the queen in the brood box with a block of fondant located directly above the cluster on which they feed. As beekeepers, we will check to ensure sufficient fondant is available to last until Spring. We check by removing any outside covers and hive roof, then removing any cushions or other insulating material inside the hive top box, which exposes the upturned fondant container or bag sat above the cluster. It is then relatively easy to add more fondant without disturbing the bees.



Bee Cluster
Photo: The Bee Listener

Indeed, we often do this without bee suits, but not this year. The warm weather has meant that the bees are more active and even if they're not out and about, they are quite active in the hive. Removing the roof often results in a sudden cloud of bees rising up and attaching themselves to your veil which is often the nearest thing to them as they hit the colder outside air. However, after this unexpected surprise, the bees quickly return to their hive.

The weather also brought gales, measuring over 90mph. Surprisingly, there were few incidents where beekeepers I know have reported hive losses. In an apiary I've just taken over from a beekeeper who sadly passed away, two hives lost their covers and top boxes, exposing the clusters, but were quickly recovered by the host farmer and more bricks added on the top. Nevertheless, this changeable weather does not bode well for the Spring as we may have a repeat of last year, where the bees are beavering away preparing to swarm while it's not warm enough for us to go into the hives. The likelihood is that as soon as the weather conditions are right, the bees will swarm while the beekeeper is not able to do anything to prevent it happening. But that's a tale for another day.

WOODRUFF WOOD NEWS

Managing our Wood for Red Squirrels – Part 2. Provisions

Following on from Part 1 of how we manage our wood for red squirrels which looked at transport routes, in this article we'll move on to the all important provisions. By which we mean food and water. As a reminder we'll consider how the wood currently ranks for provisions, how best we can improve supply and how to plan for the future.

Food

The first thing to ask is 'what do red squirrels like to eat?'. The answer is mostly seeds and nuts, supplemented with berries and fungi. In particular, conifer cones, hazelnuts and beech mast are all popular choices. Our wood scores highly on all of these edible delights. We have a broad range of deciduous trees and shrubs in addition to two types of conifers – Scots Pine and Norway spruce. As a result there is currently plenty of food on offer all year round though autumn is the most bountiful time due to the ripening of nuts and berries. Outside of this season buried caches of nuts can help sustain squirrels over the winter period whilst in spring and summer reds may snack on plant shoots, bulbs and flowers if short on other foods.

It is also worth making special mention of the importance of cone crops. These in particular can vary from year to year. For example, 2022 was a mast year for Norway spruce given the overwhelming volume of eaten cones lying discarded on the woodland floor come the following January and February. But not all years are so productive and it is known that numbers of red squirrels naturally fluctuate in response to seasonal food availability.



So the next questions to be asked really go hand in hand. 'Do we need to make any improvements if it is considered that there is already a plentiful supply of natural foodstuff in the wood for red squirrels?' and if so, 'how can we do this going forward?'. Here are some of our thoughts:

- At the very least it is important to maintain what we have. This may be easier said than done given the huge surge of pests and diseases which are now present in the UK threatening to kill or weaken our trees.
- Therefore we need to manage the wood to include a variety of tree species – and of differing ages. This will hopefully provide a continuing and as wide a choice of food as possible. In other words to steer clear of having all of our eggs (or should that be nuts or seeds) in one basket.
- With regards to conifers, a mix of Scots Pine and Norway spruce works well together. The cones of these two species ripen at different times and Scots pine often produce a crop in years when other conifers may have failed. By luck or design (these trees were planted long before our time) the fact that we have both species is a bonus which we hope will continue to thrive (plus we have planted a few extra Scots pine for the future).
- Grey squirrels are a problem! Besides them passing on the deadly squirrelpox virus to red squirrels they also compete for many of the same foodstuffs. Which means that they are continually being enticed into the wood. It is absolutely vital to carry out a grey squirrel culling programme in order to stand any chance of red squirrels continuing to live healthily and finding enough food to eat.
- Supplementary feeding is also an option – in the right circumstances. By putting up squirrel feeders, we can supply reds with additional treats such as sunflower seeds and peanuts to boost their natural diet. However, whilst we have done this successfully in the past, we do not consider it to be a safe option at present given the unfortunate increase in grey squirrels which we have experienced this year (greys have shot up whilst reds have declined). We cannot afford to draw in both reds and greys to the same feeder for risk of disease transfer.



Water

A water source is often overlooked. Yet all animals need a supply in order to survive. However we readily admit that we have never seen a red squirrel drinking! Having done a bit of online research, it seems that reds do not need much water given their relatively small size – and they do get a lot of their liquid intake from their diet. As our wood is a wet woodland, multiple other sources of water are also available – a ditch, a burn, a seasonal pond, dew, many furrows and lots of puddles. This is more than plentiful – and as such we should not need to worry. But there is a caveat – our ever changing, unpredictable weather. We now seem to chop and change between deluges and droughts. In times of drought – which are predicted to become more commonplace in the future – we will have to keep a close eye on water availability in the wood. We do benefit from other nearby deeper ponds which hold their water for longer. Of course, another temporary solution (which we can all do in our gardens as well) is to provide suitable containers of drinking water which are regularly topped up when required.

RED SQUIRREL CONSERVATION – AN IMPORTANT CHANGE Pauline Gilbertson

Please see below a statement from the coordinator of Morpeth and District Red Squirrels:

'It was with regret that we decided to close MADRS at the end of 2023. Membership of our Core Group had been reducing in recent months and we were unable to recruit any new members who were prepared to take on the necessary administrative work. However the members actively involved in grey control remain enthusiastic about their role in Red Squirrel conservation and are keen to continue.'

Colleagues in Bedlington and District Red Squirrel Group have generously extended their area to include parts of our previous patch. If you see a red or a grey squirrel in the Longhirst area, please report it to them. The coordinators are Paul Brannan (07961 937304) and Carole Neesam (07488 286434) and their e-mail is badrsg@btinternet.com. If you already have a grey squirrel trap in your garden please continue to use your current contact person for collection and despatch. If you live in Longhirst and would like to borrow a grey squirrel trap please text 07717 224072 and leave your details. We would love to see more red squirrels return to our Parish!'

GARDEN BIRDWATCHING

Pauline Gilbertson
paulinegilbertson@gmail.com

Each January I enjoy taking part in the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch, and every year I am amazed at the 'unusual' species that turn up just in time for my hour-long survey! How very kind of them, I used to tell myself.... until it dawned on me that these birds are undoubtedly around for much of the winter and I would see them

regularly if I were to set aside more time looking, instead of just a casual few minutes whilst eating my breakfast.

Two years ago I spotted my first Redpoll during the Birdwatch weekend; previously I'd had Bullfinch, Nuthatch and Great Spotted Woodpecker come down on cue, just in time to be included on my list.

This year I was thrilled to see a bumper crop of 18 different species including Blackcap, Tree Creeper, 2 Siskin, 5 Brambling, Jay and Willow Tit (the latter is in fact a regular visitor, much to my delight, as this is one of our many rapidly declining species). The day after my Big Garden Birdwatch I also had a Nuthatch and Sparrowhawk in the garden, as well as repeat visits from most of my earlier species.



Siskin
Photo: P Gilbertson



Male Brambling
Photo: P Gilbertson



Willow Tit
Photo: P Gilbertson

Tree Sparrows were conspicuous by their absence however; I saw them daily until a few months ago, but sadly they have disappeared. Has anyone else noticed a sudden absence in their garden? (*Update: one Tree Sparrow returned at the end of January. If I'd had a fatted calf to hand, I'd have happily sacrificed it in honour of the prodigal spuggy!*)

The other regular garden bird survey I do is the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) Garden BirdWatch. I note down what I see each week, and in what numbers, then submit online to the BTO (you can use paper forms if you prefer). As well as birds you can, if you wish, log animals and insects seen in your garden. Like the RSPB's Big Garden BirdWatch, the BTO project is a great example of citizen science, helping to monitor what is happening to our wildlife. Do take part if you can; full details at www.bto.org.

We'd love to hear from you what YOU saw in your garden this winter/early spring, along with your tips for attracting them. During the winter months I regularly put out sunflower seeds, fat balls and water, supplemented by peanuts and apples when I remember (apples can be great for attracting Redwings and Fieldfares but usually only when it's very cold and they can't find their usual food). Sparrowhawks are of course attracted by all those tasty smaller birds.....

Please don't forget to keep your bird feeders clean, in order to avoid diseases which can spread quickly and wipe out large numbers of birds. We have recently bought a steam cleaner for cleaning bird feeders and nest boxes and you are welcome to borrow it if you would like to try it out. (Just drop me an email). Alternatively, you can use Virkon S, a Defra-approved disinfectant, to safely disinfect your feeders and nest boxes.

So my (late) New Year's resolutions are (a) to clean my feeders and nest boxes more frequently, and (b) to spend more time looking out of my windows instead of charging around the county looking for rarities.

Happy birdwatching!

HEDGEHOGS, WILDLIFE PONDS AND BUMBLEBEES IN SPRING **Richard Tordoff**

Hedgehogs

Photo: istock



Hedgehog hibernation ends in Spring with milder weather and warmer night time temperatures. Hedgehogs appear to be emerging from hibernation earlier than usual in recent years due to climate change. Make sure you have plenty of water available. Hedgehogs wake up thirsty from hibernation. I also put plenty of kitten biscuits out in the feeding station. I use the night camera to check that it's definitely a hedgehog eating the food. It's too early to be thinking about cleaning out hibernation boxes; I usually recommend doing that in April. Spring is a brilliant time to check all your hedgehog

highways linking your garden with your neighbours before the foliage grows back. It is also a fantastic time of year to be creating new hedgehog holes. Read how to create your hedgehog highway [here](#).

Spring wildlife ponds

Wildlife ponds help attract insects to your wildlife garden and also provide a water source for birds and mammals. Always make sure you provide an escape route for hedgehogs though. I have planted pond plants on the shallow ledges around my wildlife pond. These provide fantastic spawning grounds for frogs. Every Spring, I check and re-plant any planters that have lost their plant covering. I use plastic pond containers and fill them with aquatic compost. It must be aquatic compost to avoid adding too many nutrients to the pond which will cause it to go green. I then divide water forget-me-nots and plant them in the aquatic compost, before adding a layer of pond gravel to keep the soil in place and help weigh down the containers. If you are thinking of creating a wildlife pond from scratch, here is a great [guide](#). Even if you don't have space for a pond, an upturned bin lid, a large old plant pot and even a cut down white milk container stuffed with leaves and water can create a hoverfly habitat.



Photo: R Turner

Bumblebees (not honey bees)

Queen Bumblebees are harbingers of Spring and are the first bees to be observed in the year. Throughout Spring, queen bumblebees can be observed nest-searching. This is characterised by a zig-zagging flight low over the ground. Queen Bumblebees also make the most of early-flowering wildflowers such as Willow. When you spot a queen with pollen loads, it is a sure sign that she has settled on a place to nest. Of the 19 bumblebee species to be found in the North East, there are seven bumblebee species that are most likely to be encountered. This short post guides you through these [species](#).

Please try and encourage a little more in your garden. If we can do 5% extra a year each, in 10 years we can increase the habitats of so many needy insects and creatures by a great deal.

AND FINALLY....

We have lots more planned for the next few months which we will reveal as time goes on, but if you have any topics which you would particularly like to see covered either as an article in the newsletter, an event or activity, please do get in touch.

You can email me at kim.woolhead@gmail.com and I'll see what I can do!