

Alnwick Wildlife Group

Promoting awareness of the countryside and its flora and fauna



REVIEW OF OCTOBER 2011

NEWSLETTER 122

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NEXT MEETING: DECEMBER 14TH 7-30PM MEMBERS' MEETING PROGRAMME

1. *Lindisfarne's Geese* - George Dodds
2. *Britain's rarest orchid - a ghostly tale* - Colin Scrutton
3. *Walking in a Weedy Wonderland* – Richard Poppleton
4. *Refreshments* - as we are approaching Christmas, as in previous years, please bring along some nibbles to accompanying coffee and tea!
5. *Quiz*

Late Autumn Jottings

Our usual front page columnist Jack Daw is indisposed at the moment, so I'm covering for him.

November so far has been remarkably mild and dry in Northumberland, although I can't help remembering that November 2010 was also mild – until the snow came. One consequence is that some of our resident breeding birds do get confused. I'm sure I've detected signs of pre-breeding activity amongst our garden blackbirds, for example, even though I know that some of them will be winter incomers from other parts of northern Europe. We really do need some good cold weather soon to convince them that producing a brood now would not be a good idea.



One thing to look out for over the next few weeks is evidence of the unusual since our strange weather patterns must produce some unseasonal behavior in both animals and plants. In a wet field near Bolton village (the one that used to have the Leper Colony in the 13th and 14th centuries!) there are two trees that from the road look as though they are in flower. I stopped today to look more closely to find they are willows whose catkins are still full of 'thistle-down' seeds.

I really can't remember seeing willows in this state this late before. Probably the lack of heavy rains and gales has allowed the downy seeds to stay attached.

Winter thrushes are around in large flocks. There are far more Fieldfares than Redwings but this is what we usually find inland in the early part of the winter. Those farms that grow grain only for their own stock do tend to leave some fields in stubble until spring ploughing and there have been very large groups of geese (>500) taking advantage of these feeding opportunities. They are mostly Greylags (regarded as feral birds these days), but on my patch they have sometimes been joined by smaller groups of Canadas.

The effects of the last two winters on our owl populations is, I think, quite obvious. Driving home from Alnwick after dark used to reveal regular tawnys and barns, but at the moment we are lucky if, in ten miles, a single tawny is caught in the headlights. It would be interesting to know if that is true in all parts of our area.

When you are at the coast don't forget that now is a good time to reacquaint yourself with the larger seaweeds. There are usually plenty of specimens cast up on the shore and a small guide like the Collins Pocket Guide to the Sea Shore should enable you to revise your knowledge of the kelps, the wracks and the other types of brown, red and green seaweeds.

Kitty Wake



CURLEW

ROBIN

RATTLE THOSE

JOHN STEELE offers some advice on identifying animal skeletons.

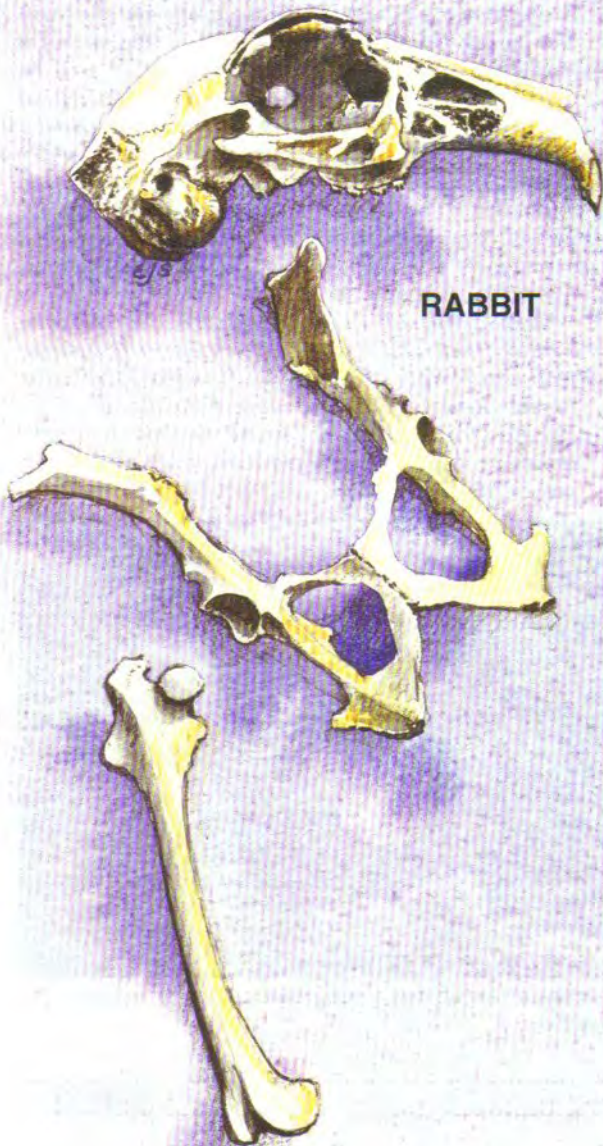
“WHOSE bone is this, mister?” came the high-pitched question from the back of the guided walk group. Like the parting of the Red Sea, the wall of bodies opened to reveal a tiny enthusiast, excitedly waving a gleaming white jawbone of a sheep. Kids are always fascinated by such objects, until they are put off by uninitiated adults.

I'm sure my first bony encounter must have made a lasting impression on me. Among my first toys (which I probably used as a teething ring) was a four-foot length of a snake's backbone strung together as a necklace, which was brought back from West Africa by my grandfather in the early 1900s. I still have it to marvel at its amazing construction and flexibility.

Skeletons are incredibly beautiful pieces of structural engineering — their complexity and variability of size and shape are infinite. All vertebrates have bony skeletons which support the soft stuff that hangs off them. Every bone has a particular function, whether it is to protect vital organs or to provide support for the muscles. Some have very special functions, like the tiny bones of the inner ear that allow animals to hear, or the long narrow bone that supports the penis in foxes, badgers and other carnivores.

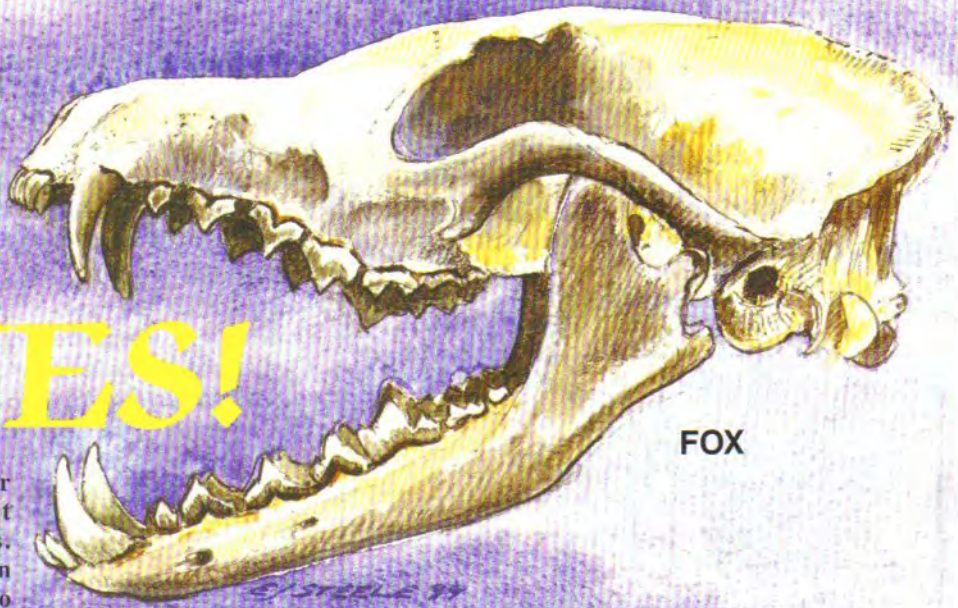
Any animal artists worth their salt will have studied the anatomy of their chosen subject very carefully. All the basic structures are there, whether it's the human form or the hedgehog you're interested in. In some creatures certain bones are missing, or are so small as to have apparently little or no use. Examples of these might be finger bones in a bird's wing, for instance, or the legs of a legless lizard — the slow worm.

They just tend to vary a bit in size and shape so, with a little knowledge of typical bone shapes, you can begin to identify odd remnants you find lying about in front of fox earths, on a seashore strand line, or even in an owl pellet of regurgitated prey.



RABBIT

BONES!



FOX

Most vertebrae, for example, look like fat Polo mints with wings. The shoulder blade often looks like a shovel — so it's not surprising that in prehistoric times the shoulder blades of large mammals like oxen were used for that very purpose.

Long limb bones are a little more tricky to sort out. However, by looking at the ends of each bone and deciding whether it has a ball-and-socket or hinge-type joint, you can begin to imagine what they would have been attached to on the animal — the shoulder, hip or knee, or elbow. Some, which are partly fused together, will be the forearm or shin.

Their durability and strength meant that bones were used in bygone times for all manner of tasks. Sharpened, they could be used for stitching, punching holes in leather, or even as decorated pins for holding clothing together. Barbed harpoon heads, tools and other weapons, as well as hair combs and even tweezers have been found fashioned from bone.

Ribs tend to be beautifully curved with a knobbly bit on one end, whereas the bones that make up the feet and hands appear like short bits of Edinburgh rock — although bats are the exception, having finger bones as long as limb bones.

I've left skulls and pelvises until last because, in incomplete examples, they can look at first glance very similar in size and shape. If teeth (or their sockets) are present there's no problem, but what if it's a bird with no teeth; remember the expression "as rare as hen's teeth"? A bird's pelvis, for example, has amazingly convincing 'eye' sockets which are really the hip joints, and a 'beak' which is actually the tapered end of fused backbones. Look for the inflated brain case to be sure.

In the pelvises of mammals, two fat and twisted tennis racket shaped bones are linked to form a structure which joins the spine to the hind legs. Differences in shape and size, of course, separate the species.

Skulls are perhaps the best structures with which to start the identification of particular species. They are hard to sort out to begin with because in life, muscle, hair and feather camouflage the underlying bone.

Birds are the easiest, because at least there's the shape of the bill to work on, and you can pick up clues to explain how they live. For instance, how does a woodpecker not end up with concussion — or how does a puffin carry so many fish without dropping the ones nearest the bill tip?

It all comes down to structure: bill strength and skull cushioning in the woodpecker, and jaw hinge position and curious backward-pointing teeth-like projections in the roof of a puffin's mouth. Then there's the gannet: how does it stop water rushing up its nose when diving at high speed? Easy — it doesn't have nostrils like most birds; it has to breathe through its mouth.

The easiest key to identifying mammal skulls is to sort out their shape, size, and arrangement of the teeth — and what a range there is, too. It all depends on what you eat. Catching and biting slippery fish requires a different set of gnashers from those who quietly nibble or grind up grass.

For instance, you don't need the long fang-like canines used by carnivores to seize their prey if you're a plant eater, therefore rabbits and voles have lost them, leaving a long gap in the teeth. Instead these plant eaters have highly developed incisors, or nibbling front teeth.

To dissect an owl pellet and discover all those tiny bones is an exciting experience for any naturalist. It's not difficult to tell shrews apart from mice and voles once you get a good field guide — and once you've got your eye in you can even sort voles into male and female by looking at the shapes of the pelvises. Happy hunting! ●

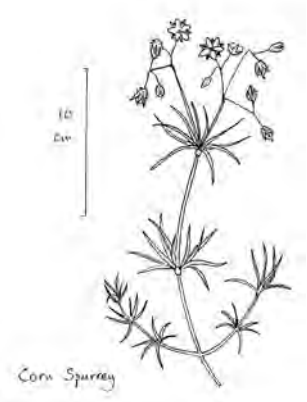
PLANT CORNER

At the end of October, while walking in the Edlingham area and on Caller Craggs above the Alnwick Moor road, we noted 41 species still showing some flower. It is possible that a few of these may still have some late flowers at the end of November when you get this newsletter. Meanwhile, in the crop fields here at Titlington Mount I've recently noted three particularly prolific weeds.

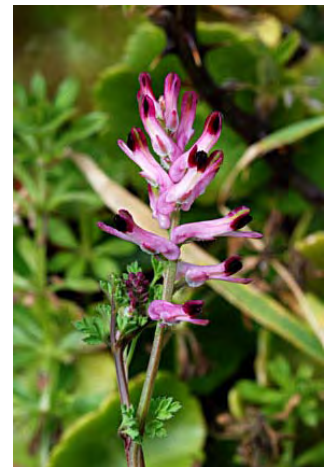
Corn Spurrey (*Spergula arvensis*) is recorded in Swan's Flora as common in both North and South Northumberland, although people I speak to from the Tyne



Valley say they see it rather rarely. It belongs to the family Caryophyllaceae, along with the Chickweeds, Campions and Stitchworts. The characteristics that make it unmistakable are the growth of the greyish, stickily-hairy leaves in whorls at intervals up the thin tough stems, combined with the flowers, which are borne on oddly angled stems. The flowers themselves are not very obvious and in fact they only open for a few hours each day in the afternoons and the plants are more commonly self-pollinated. One of the reasons for its common occurrence in our area is its major preference for light acidic soils which, together with its resistance to some common herbicides, allows it to flourish.



Common Ramping Fumitory (*Fumaria muralis*) is usually to be found here growing along the edges of the barley fields, but this year one field that was ploughed but not drilled in the late summer has large patches of foliage that I thought from a distance were one of the Mayweeds. But looking more closely they turned out to be the Fumitory. Common Ramping-fumitory is one of several very similar species in the family Fumariaceae. The term 'ramping' refers to its tendency to scramble up through any suitable vegetation, although in this particular field there is no other vegetation at the moment to scramble through, which is why it is growing in uncharacteristically dense clumps close to the ground.



Groundsel (*Senecio vulgaris*) is one of the composite plants of family Asteraceae. Apparently the name comes from an Anglo-Saxon source meaning 'ground swallower', a reference to its rapid spread over disturbed ground. When Jane and I did one



of the coastal farm surveys this spring Groundsel was the commonest weed in the fields that had been left fallow over winter. The generic name *Senecio* is from the Latin word meaning 'old man' and this refers to the yellow hair (flowers) that turns white (seed heads) and then goes bald (after seed dispersal). Old herbalists claimed an amazing range of medicinal properties for Groundsel. So if you marinade the flowers in your beer your jaundice will be cured and if you apply the leaves as a poultice to the belly of a crying

infant its colic will disappear. And for good measure you can make an infusion of the whole plant and feed it to your horse to cure staggers and bot-fly worms. But don't quote me as recommending any of these remedies!



	SIGHTINGS OCTOBER 2011
BIRDS	
Red-throated Diver	3 at Annstead on 9 th and 6 at Ross Back Sands on the 16 th
Black-throated Diver	1 at Annstead on the 9 th
Great Northern Diver	1 at Annstead on the 9 th
Little Grebe	2 at Branton Ponds on the 7 th
Great Crested Grebe	Up to 4 all month at Branton Ponds
Manx Shearwater	1 at Annstead on the 9 th
Whooper Swan	3 at Branton Ponds on the 7 th and 11 th also 7 at Swarland on the 15 th
Pink-footed Goose	Monks House Pool on 1 st and 350 at East Chevington on the 26 th
Barnacle Goose	Up to 10 at Monks House Pool on the 1 st and 9 th . Also 240 at Fenham Flats on the 16 th and 218 at East Chevington on the 26 th
Snow Goose	2 at Monks House Pool on the 1 st
Greylag Goose	40 at Monks House Pool on the 1 st
Ross's Goose	2 at Monks House Pool on the 9 th
Shelduck	245 at Budle Bay on the 16 th
Shoveler	Up to 14 all month at Monks House Pool
Goldeneye	7 at Branton Ponds on the 12 th
Goosander	22 at Branton Ponds on the 17 th
Pochard	2 at Branton Ponds on the 17 th
Lesser Scaup	1 at Marden Quarry all month, a rare visitor from North America and was still present at time of writing
Pintail	2 at East Chevington on the 26 th
Sparrowhawk	1 at Swarland on the 10 th and 18 th
Buzzard	1 at Newton on the Moor on the 13 th and 1 at Swarland on the 15 th
Merlin	1 on Holy Island on the 16 th , 26 th and 30 th
Peregrine	1 at Fenham Flats on the 16 th
Hen Harrier	1 at Annstead on the 9 th and 1 on Holy Island on the 30 th
Oystercatcher	840 at Guile Point on the 16 th
Golden Plover	250 at Monks House Pool on the 9 th and 650 at East Chevington on the 26 th
Knot	50 at Stag Rocks on the 1 st and 150 at East Chevington on the 26 th
Snipe	7 at Monks House Pool on the 27 th
Bar-tailed Godwit	520 at Guile Point on the 16 th
Black-tailed Godwit	4 on the 1 st and 6 on the 9 th both Monks House Pool also 1 at Budle Bay on the 16 th
Sanderling	270 at Fenham Flats on the 16 th
Little Stint	4 at Low Newton on the 20 th
Ruff	2 at East Chevington on the 26 th
Little Egret	4 at Beal Point on the 3 rd
Long-tailed Skua	1 (juvenile) at Stag Rocks on the 1 st
Arctic Skua	2 at Holy Island on the 3 rd and 1 on the 26 th also 1 at Cresswell 25 th
Pomarine Skua	1 at Stag Rocks on the 23 rd
Lesser Black-backed Gull	32 at Branton Ponds on the 2 nd
Little Gull	6 at Stag Rocks on the 23 rd
Mediterranean Gull	1 (1 st winter bird) at Monks House Pool on the 23 rd
Herring Gull	130 at Swarland on the 28 th
Common Gull	40 at Swarland on the 5 th
Sandwich Tern	2 at Stag Rocks on the 23 rd
Arctic Tern	1 at Stag Rocks on the 23 rd
Turtle Dove	1 (heard) Branton Ponds on the 11 th
Kingfisher	1 at Branton Ponds all month
Great Spotted Woodpecker	3 at Swarland on the 28 th
Sand Martin	6 at Branton Ponds on the 4 th

Swallow	6 at Branton Ponds on the 7 th , 20 at Powburn on the 5 th and 1 at Newton on the Moor on the 5 th
Grey Wagtail	1 in Hulne Park on the 28 th
Dipper	1 in Hulne Park on the 28 th
Fieldfare	50 over Branton on the 20 th and 6 at Smeafield on the 5 th
Redwing	3 at Holy Island on the 3 rd and 1 at Branton on the 6 th
Blackcap	1 on Holy Island on the 3 rd and 6 on the 26 th also 5 at Cresswell Pond on the 25 th
Chiffchaff	4 on Holy Island on the 26 th
Yellow-browed Warbler	2 on Holy Island on the 3 rd and 1 on the 26 th also 1 at Cresswell Pond on the 25 th and 1 at St Mary's Island on the 26 th
Goldcrest	Many on Holy Island on the 3 rd
Firecrest	1 at St Mary's on the 24 th
Long-tailed Tit	12 at Branton Ponds on the 10 th and 15 at Swarland on the 18 th
Nuthatch	1 singing at Swarland all month
Treecreeper	1 at Swarland on the 14 th
Hooded Crow	1 at Elwick on the 16 th
Rook	80 at Swarland on the 18 th
Jackdaw	40 at Swarland on the 9 th
Jay	1 at Felton on the 20 th
Tree Sparrow	Singing at Swarland in the first half of the month
Brambling	1 on Holy Island on the 3 rd and 3 on the 26 th .
Siskin	1 at Swarland on the 31 st
Twite	120 at Bamburgh GC on the 27 th
Crossbill	25 at Thrunton Woods on the 27 th
Lapland Bunting	1 on Holy Island on the 16 th , 11 on the 26 th and 1 on the 30 th
MAMMALS	
Porpoise	2 off Stag Rocks on the 1 st
Stoat	1 at Branton on the 13 th and 1 at Felton on the 4 th
Badger	1 at Chillingham Park on the 14 th .
Red Squirrel	1 at Branton on the 6 th and several in Swarland all month
Grey Squirrel	1 at Old Swarland on the 14 th
INVERTEBRATES	
Peacock	Singles in Swarland on the 1 st and 15 th
Red Admiral	Up to 6 all month in Swarland
Small Tortoiseshell	Singles in Swarland up to the 24 th
Large White	Singles in Swarland on the 9 th and 11 th
Silver-Y	1 in Swarland on the 1 st
Red Green Carpet	1 in Swarland on the 1 st
Yellow Line Quaker	1 in Swarland on the 1 st
Merveille du Jour	1 in Swarland on the 1 st
November Moth	1 in Swarland on the 1 st
RAINFALL	45.5mm
OBSERVERS	I & K Davison, M Hall, A Keeble, D Makepeace, S Reay, S Sexton.

Please send sightings reports for September, no later than 6th December, 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.

Howick Moths October 2011

Code	Taxon	Vernacular	Totals
464	<i>Plutella xylostella</i>	Diamond-back Moth	1
483	<i>Epermenia chaerophyllella</i>		1
648	<i>Endrosis sarcitrella</i>	White-shouldered House Moth	3
672	<i>Depressaria heraclei</i>	Parsnip Moth	1
819	<i>Scrobipalpa costella</i>		1
874	<i>Blastobasis lacticolella</i>		1
1011	<i>Pseudargyrotoza conwagana</i>		1
1041	<i>Acleris sparsana</i>		11
1048	<i>Acleris variegana</i>	Garden Rose Tortrix	8
1139	<i>Epinotia tenerana</i>	Nut Bud Moth	1
1395	<i>Udea ferrugalis</i>	Rusty-dot Pearl	32
1631	<i>Poecilocampa populi</i>	December Moth	10
1760	<i>Chloroclysta siterata</i>	Red-green Carpet	17
1764	<i>Chloroclysta truncata</i>	Common Marbled Carpet	2
1767	<i>Thera firmata</i>	Pine Carpet	1
1768	<i>Thera obeliscata</i>	Grey Pine Carpet	3
1769	<i>Thera britannica</i>	Spruce Carpet	32
1776	<i>Colostygia pectinataria</i>	Green Carpet	5
1795x	<i>Epirrita dilutata</i> agg.	November Moth agg.	20
1913	<i>Ennomos alniaria</i>	Canary-shouldered Thorn	1
1923	<i>Colotois pennaria</i>	Feathered Thorn	12
1935	<i>Erannis defoliaria</i>	Mottled Umber	1
2020	<i>Diloba caeruleocephala</i>	Figure of Eight	1
2087	<i>Agrotis segetum</i>	Turnip Moth	1
2107	<i>Noctua pronuba</i>	Large Yellow Underwing	5
2126	<i>Xestia c-nigrum</i>	Setaceous Hebrew Character	3
2134	<i>Xestia xanthographa</i>	Square-spot Rustic	1
2199	<i>Mythimna pallens</i>	Common Wainscot	3
2240	<i>Lithophane leautieri</i>	Blair's Shoulder-knot	9
2245	<i>Allophyes oxyacanthae</i>	Green-brindled Crescent	10
2247	<i>Dichonia aprilina</i>	Merveille du Jour	3
2256	<i>Eupsilia transversa</i>	Satellite	1
2258	<i>Conistra vaccinii</i>	Chestnut	10
2259	<i>Conistra ligula</i>	Dark Chestnut	7
2262	<i>Agrochola circellaris</i>	Brick	6
2263	<i>Agrochola lota</i>	Red-line Quaker	25
2264	<i>Agrochola macilenta</i>	Yellow-line Quaker	22
2306	<i>Phlogophora meticulosa</i>	Angle Shades	22
2361	<i>Hydraecia micacea</i>	Rosy Rustic	24
2364	<i>Gortyna flavago</i>	Frosted Orange	2
2441	<i>Autographa gamma</i>	Silver Y	48
2477	<i>Hypena proboscidalis</i>	Snout	5
2484	<i>Schrankia costaestrigalis</i>	Pinion-streaked Snout	1
		Total	374



Above - Rusty-dot Pearl. A scarce migrant to Northumberland. Record numbers were at Howick during the month.



Above – Pinion Streaked Snout.



Above – Turnip Moth

Stuart Sexton

Howick October Highlights.

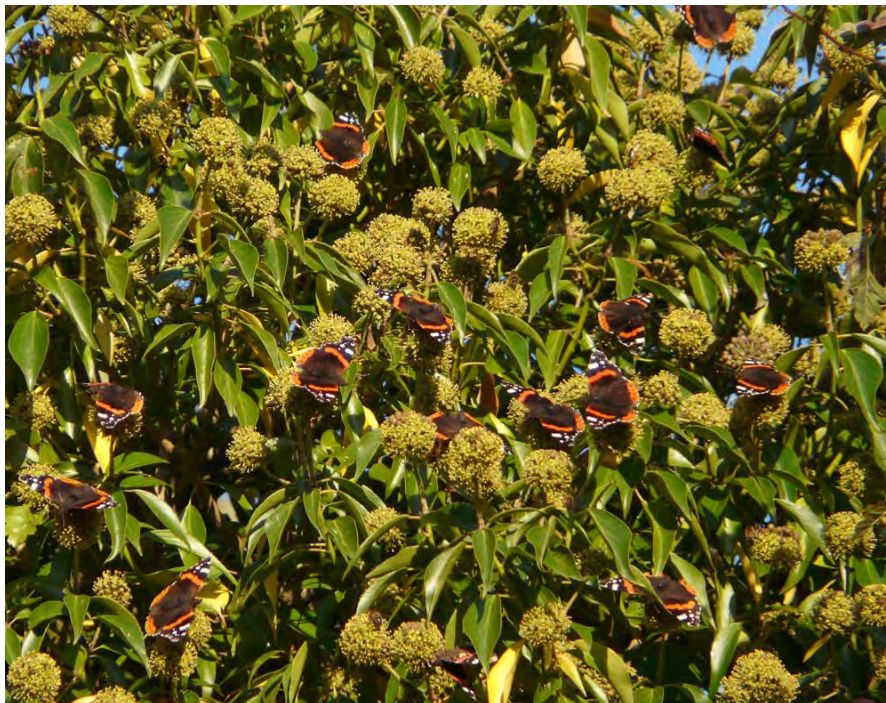
We spent the first week of October on holiday in Norfolk in very unseasonal weather. It was warm and sunny with most day temperatures between 24 – 30 degrees! A lot warmer than any day at Howick this year that's for sure.

Arriving home on **8th**, a small movement of **Barnacle Geese** was apparent with 12, 7 and 30 birds all moving north. Re-orientating, then heading west to the Solway no doubt.

The following morning, **9th**, 9 **Redwings** flew W and a seawatch between 12.20pm and 1.20pm included – 3 **Velvet Scoter**, 83 **Common Scoter**, 1 **Pintail**, 4 **Goldeneye**, 1 **Scaup**, 3 **Red breasted Merganser**, 1 **Goosander**, all heading north and 4 **Sandwich** and 1 **Arctic Tern** going S.

Only a brief walk to the Village Wood on **13th** had 7 **Bramblings**, my first of the autumn, fly over along with 21 **Redwings**. A late **Whimbrel** called strongly as it flew north in darkness later on. A few **Blackbirds** seemed to have arrived through the night to boost our local population.

A sunny and warm Saturday **15th** was excellent for late butterflies around the village and Howick Hall. **Red Admiral** in particular with 40+ altogether feeding on an ivy high in a tree and another 8+ seen flying in other areas. Also 3 **Speckled Wood**, 1 **Small Tortoiseshell** and a **Painted Lady** came through our garden, a good record in a year that has been quiet for this species.



Some of the Red Admirals on one Ivy, Howick.

On the same day a **Red Squirrel** ran rings around us near the Hall and a **Raven** flew over calling a distinctive 'cronk' only to be mobbed by crows. This

rare crow has been seen in this area now quite regularly over the last two years. A very rare bird on the Northumberland Coast.

On the 16th a **Barn Owl** flew from its roost and over the Village.

The first 2 **Whooper Swans** flew south on the 20th and my first **Fieldfares** of autumn were in Village wood on 22nd with 20 + feeding on Yew berries.

A nice surprise came on 23rd. I was dog walking along the coast path when a female type **Snow Bunting** was found feeding along the ash surface. This seemed to be the start of a few nice migrants here with a year first **Whinchat** on 25th and 2 **Black Redstarts** on a muck heap near Seahouses Farm on 26th.

Mammals were few and far between, 3 **Pipistrelles** in the village, a few **Roe Deer** and occasional **Rabbits** were the only sightings.



Snow Bunting, Howick Coast Path.

Stewart Sexton, Howick.