NORTH NORTHUMBERLAND BIRD CLUB

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Mute Swan on Nest *photo: LH*

Female Tawny Owl *Photo: P.Hanmer*

LOCKDOWN WANDERINGS

It has taken the travel restrictions of the Pandemic to encourage Liz Harrison to revisit the familiar haunts of her childhood, from home in East Ord near Berwick-upon–Tweed. This Mute Swan, nesting on the lower reaches of the Whiteadder is one of the birds which form the second largest herd of Swans in the UK, joined by several hundred birds which gather annually swelling the local population to moult around the Tweed estuary. Turn to page 3 for Liz's account of her recent wanderings along the Tweed and its tributary

BIRD RECORDS for MAY

On page 6

DAWN CHORUS *with a difference*

Due to Lockdown, our annual invitation to the Ford & Etal Estates was replaced, at the suggestion of Lord Joicey, with an alternative home and garden-based challenge! Turn to page 4 to find out how well our participants fared on a near-perfect May Morning, without breaking the rules. (*Archive photo: How things used to be; photo from Etal Manor (2018) 'relocating the Treecreeper' in pre– social distancing days!)*

MINDRUM MEANDERS

It is a long time since trains stopped at Mindrum Station, (1930 –if you are curious), but for Janet Chubb, who lives nearby, it has been the starting point for her meanderings along the banks of the Bowmont River. Turn to page 5 for her description of this idyllic valley during the peace and quiet of the lockdown– quiet enough to hear grasshopper warbler or goldcrest…..

WHAT'S NEW ON THE WEBSITE

Don't miss " It's on the branch above you!" Enjoy reading Philip Hanmer's latest ringing stories as he is once more able to resume checking nestboxes

NOTICEBOARD

INDOOR MEETINGS

BAMBURGH PAVILION

All Indoor Meetings, Field Trips and Committee Meetings are cancelled during the UK Government's Directive in response to the Coronavirus Pandemic. The Committee continue to monitor and assess the situation and remain in contact with each other via telephone and email. All Members will be contacted by email or phone as and when we can resume our meetings. Meanwhile stay safe and stay well.
As usual, no e-NEWSLETTERS will be produced or circulated during July or August, but the SEPTEMBER Issue will be sent out early in the month. Bird Records can still be submitted through the summer months (see page 6 for details) and any items for the Newsletter should be sent to the Editor (stewart@yearle.plus.com)

A Message from our Chairman, Richard Poyer

Dear Members,

On behalf of the committee, I hope that you are all keeping well and safe in these difficult times. It seems a very long time since Graham Sorrie was speaking to us about swifts. They are now here, but we seem little further forward in tackling the virus and its affects. There have been a series of relaxations of "lock down" but nothing yet that would let the NNBC programme continue.

- Liz Harrison has been busy negotiating new dates with the speakers who were cancelled for our April, May and June meetings; they have all agreed to come on various dates in 2021.
- What will have happened by September is any one's guess. I think that there is an air of pessimism amongst the committee about whether we will indeed be able to hold an indoor meeting at Bamburgh Pavilion on September 11th. We will all have to wait and see how the situation evolves. Perhaps a field trip may be possible.
- Last year, Tony Lightley gave the NNBC a gift of members going to see juvenile ospreys being ringed. He then extended this to this year and future years. Sadly, this is another event that will not now take place.
- Are you hearing bird song more clearly or hearing "new" birds to you? For those able to get out further from home do you think that the birds are or seem to be "tamer"?
- Our thanks go to Stewart for editing June's newsletter at a time when there is not much Club news.
- The future? Please keep your eyes on the NNBC Website, NNBC Facebook and emails from Stewart as to how the situation is in September.

Denis Summers-Smith

The celebrated Ornithologist Denis Summers-Smith has died at the age of 99 on 5th May 2020, a few months before reaching his Centenary. Best known for his pioneering work on Sparrows , he wrote the definitive book on 'The House Sparrow' in 1963, followed by several other books in later years including 'The Tree Sparrow' and 'In Search of Sparrows'. A Mechanical Engineer by profession, he was recognized as the World Authority on Sparrows, and served on several committees including the British Ornithological Union and the British Trust for Ornithology. He co-founded the Teesmouth Bird Club in 1960 alongside our President Graham Bell and travelled up to Northumberland on several occasions to speak to NNBC at Bamburgh Pavilion.

'RACONTEUR REPORTS' from ROSEMARY SKINNER

'A Red-legged Partridge comes to my garden every morning for its Breakfast'

'A Blackbird followed me into the Conservatory one day causing total Chaos! I eventually managed to usher it out.

I watched this same Blackbird have a long bath in the Birdbath, shortly before the Sparrows came down for a drink. There seemed to be a total lack of Social Distancing

Lockdown Wanderings around East Ord

Considering I was brought up only half a mile from our present location, it has taken a pandemic to encourage us to revisit my old childhood haunts! Under normal circumstances since moving to East Ord two years ago, my non-birding husband would head for Goswick Golf Club and I would head south to the Cheviots! So much has changed!

We have tried to walk daily; short fast circuits for exercise interspersed with longer wanderings of 6 to 10 miles. Two favourite circular walks emerged. The first is a walk from East Ord up the River Whiteadder to Canty's Brig, thence to the Scottish Border. An access track down to the River Tweed leads up through Paxton House Woods to The Union Chain Bridge, returning to East Ord on the Northumbrian side of the Border. Starting our permitted walks from home at the beginning of lockdown, it has been interesting to witness Spring arriving and burgeoning! We have enjoyed he excitement of the first Blackcap, Garden Warbler and Swallow, noted the first Butterbur, Celandine, Primrose, Rampion, Violets and the gorgeous blue of Alkanet, Forget-Me-Nots, and Bluebells! All accompanied by the ever-present perfume of Gorse, so reminiscent of summer holidays! It was on the Whiteadder Walk on 19th April we encountered our first Sand Martins of the season, our first Common Sandpiper and a nesting Mute Swan. (see front cover)

The list continued to grow, adding Skylarks, Meadow Pipits, Linnets, Yellowhammers, Willow Warblers and Chiffchaffs. A Tawny Owl was heard in Paxton House woods, along with a Great Spotted Woodpecker. One species expected here, the Nuthatch, was surprisingly quiet. Along this stretch of the Tweed there were fewer of the usually plentiful Goosander, but other birds of the river including Moorhen, Herring and Black-headed Gull, Canada Goose, Heron, Cormorant, Redshank and Oystercatcher.

Our second favourite circular walk is along the Tweed. From East Ord one heads down by one of the disused Salmon Fishery Shiels, past the Sewage works (A great place to pick up the first warblers-including this year, our first Garden Warbler!) The route then heads downstream past Yarrow Haugh (*which is generally more productive in Autumn and Winter*), across the Old Bridge to Berwick, then up the New Road, through the Castle ruins to a well- established plantation which includes some magnificent Beech trees. Continuing along New Water Haugh, we soon reach the A1 Bypass bridge to re-cross the river and complete our circuit. Here, on the ruins of a former shiel, we had our first two Wheatear sightings of the year! Other sightings included Grey Heron, Yellowhammer, Goldfinch, Chaffinch and Common Sandpiper (see below).

On our last walk that way we were pleased to see the Salmon fishermen recommencing fishing down by the Old Bridge- one of the few commercial fisheries remaining on the Tweed. I have fond memories of childhood walks in the evening down to the local shiel to chat to the fishermen whilst they went quietly about their work. Sometimes I would be allowed in the boat which is rowed out to drop the huge heavy net into the water and I still remember my excitement if there was a fish in the net – and my parents' pleasure at having a freshly caught salmon to take home for dinner. (Wild Salmon being cheaper than beef then!!)

Meanwhile, home has also been far from uninteresting during lockdown. We have a Chiffchaff nesting in brambles across our tiny stream, and for the first time ever, large numbers of House Sparrows have found the feeders! Greenfinch, Bullfinch, Long Tailed Tit, are regulars and we have an occasional visit from a Heron which adorns our rockery like a garden ornament. A female Mallard unadvisedly built a nest across the stream but her two eggs were sadly predated by the ever-watchful Carrion Crows. The most amusing entertainment has been provided by our one and only nest box which seems to be a constant source of aggravation between a pair of Blue Tits and a pair of Great Tits! We are still not sure which, if either, is in residence or perhaps it is multi occupancy?

The first cautious lifting of the travel restrictions immediately widened the choice of 'local walks' to favourites such as Twizel, Ford Moss and Goswick and the thrill of seeing such birds as Kingfisher, Cuckoo and Wheatear…. but that is another story!

Common Sandpiper *Photo: LH*

Salmon Fishermen at Old Bridge, Berwick *photo* ***LH***

NNBC DAWN CHORUS *with a Difference*

The UK Lockdown announced on 23rd March in response the Coronavirus Pandemic came to dominate our daily existence for many weeks. In common with many other activities, the Annual Dawn Chorus Event, hosted each May by Lord James Joicey, was inevitably cancelled. In its place, (knowing that the birds would still be singing their hearts out at the peak of their breeding season) he proposed holding this '*Lockdown-Compliant'* alternative event for our members, whereby we were invited to listen to the birdsong in and from our own house/garden on the morning of 9th May, responding by returning a 'birdlist' along with any (optional) comments, creative writing, photos or recordings. (Sadly, the eagerly anticipated cooked breakfast back at Etal Manor House after the traditional event was another casualty of this d-i-y version, along with the camaraderie, and the company of knowledgeable birders with a seemingly encyclopaedic knowledge of birdsong and *jizz*.) Happily, Saturday 9th May turned out to be a near-perfect dawn, the birds put on their best performance, and (for at least one participant) a cooked breakfast appeared, *as if by magic*, on the table!

Many of our 16 members who participated commented on *how much they had enjoyed the experience*, whether regular participants or not, and did not appear to have any difficulty identifying the birds in and around their garden whether by sight or sound. The total number of species recorded by participants reached a very creditable 55; most lists recorded totals in the range 20-29, with two members tying in 'first place' on 35.

As the focus was on enjoyment and participation rather than a rigorous scientific study, no adjustments have been made regarding size of gardens, start and finish times or indeed whether (or not) the participants required to get out of bed to take part in this Dawn Chorus *with a difference*!

Surprisingly, only four species featured in all lists- Woodpigeon, Blue Tit, Chaffinch and Goldfinch. Skulking at the other end of the statistics, a motley collection of sixteen species made a solo appearance, so to speak, on only one list, including such interesting characters as Canada Goose, Moorhen, Sparrowhawk, Stock Dove, Cuckoo, Skylark, Grey Wagtail, Spotted Flycatcher, Goldcrest and Bullfinch.

Not all lists sent in gave an indication of start or finish times; a few were rigidly bound by the 'suggestion' of 6-7a.m. whilst others were more flexibly arranged or extended. [e.g. *My 'event' began around 4.30am when the glorious song of the blackbird alerted me to the pre-dawn symphony already playing outside my bedroom, which prompted me to rise and shine, continuing (with various little breaks for a cup of tea…. or a bowl of porridge) until such regulars as that lazy-bone dunnock or a tardy nuthatch put in an appearance!*]

Additional comments and creative 'extras' were varied such as a sound file (attached to email), or 'words' devised for the repeated tri-syllabic call of the Collared Dove "we need rain ….. we need rain". Another participant sent in a shortlist of 'pluses and minuses' with our President even managing to feature in both! **Minus**– "nobody to confirm your ID, and no Graham Bell to mimic the bird and help you remember the call." **Plus**- "No Graham Bell doing cuckoo impersonations and getting everyone looking for it" **Endorsement:** "What a brilliant exercise! The lack of road and aircraft noise made this such a pleasure. I hope to be back at Etal next year!".

A photo of the editor having the traditional 'Etal Manor' breakfast in the kitchen at home. (*except the only company was his significant other and the cat!!* Not quite the same ambience as sitting round the huge table at Etal Manor with lots of chat and Harriet 's excellent breakfast ***Alison McC***.

Echoing the final comment above, I would like to thank everyone who participated in this *'different'* Dawn Chorus, and look forward sharing the 'hope that we are back at Etal next Year'.

Stewart McCormick

FULL LIST OF BIRDS SEEN OR HEARD: *Greylag Goose, Canada Goose, Mallard, Red-legged Partridge, Pheasant, Moorhen, Coot, Sparrowhawk, Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Black-headed Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, Feral Pigeon, Stock Dove, Woodpigeon, Collared Dove, Common Cuckoo, Swift, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Skylark, Swallow, House Martin, Grey Wagtail, Pied Wagtail, Wren, Dunnock, Spotted Flycatcher, Robin, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Blackcap, Common Whitethroat, Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler, Goldcrest, Long-tailed Tit, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Coal Tit, Nuthatch, Treecreeper, Magpie, Jackdaw, Rook, Carrion Crow, Starling, House Sparrow, Tree Sparrow, Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Siskin, Bullfinch (55 species)*

LOCK-DOWN AT MINDRUM

During the last weeks I feel very lucky to have been able to enjoy the passage of spring; by walking the same route nearly every day I've noticed details that I wouldn't previously; the gradual change from bare branches to blossom and full leaf cover; my first sights and sounds of this year's migrants as they arrive,, and over the weeks to recognize the change in dynamics – for example, as the warblers arrive, different songs take precedence. After the first flurry of activity, things seem to quieten down somewhat, with the birds settling into their territories.

My lock-down walk consists of a four-mile road circuit, following both sides of the river Bowmont and crossing Langham and Pawston bridges – it is surprisingly varied, with the river running through open fields, and tree-lined lanes. Despite most of the surrounding land being intensively farmed, there are pockets of scrubby unkempt areas, which are extremely valuable, and of course, essential habitat for birds and wildlife.

From here at Mindrum Station Cottages, my walk takes me along the north side of the river, where I often see tinkly flocks of linnet and goldfinch on dandelion seed in the field. Yellowhammers have favoured spots on the two trees in this stretch, and there are chaffinches and tree-sparrows in the hedges, with the song of skylarks forming a constant background. Seen along the river – herons, one or two pairs of oystercatchers and a few male mallards, and sometimes a redshank pair or a common sandpiper. My first sight of the arriving sand martin colonies was on 7th April; they are all along the vertical banks, their wings shimmering in the light as they flit in and out of the nest-holes. This road is normally busy, and it is difficult to stop and observe – I certainly hadn't been aware before of these colonies!

On the same day, I heard my first blackcap in the thicket on the corner leading to Langham bridge, followed on the 9th by a willow-warbler, and on the 26th my first whitethroat. The chiffchaffs had been singing for some time – I counted one every half-mile along the route. From then on, these warblers could be seen and heard all round the route in various suitable spots. Past the kennels, there are a couple of very noisy rookeries, and a buzzard always comes over to check me out!

Along the lane I pass a small plantation of young broadleaves in long grassy undergrowth surrounded by a ditch, which provides good habitat for warblers. Whitethroat, willow warbler and some very noisy sedge warblers are all here. I heard my first grasshopper warbler here on the 29th April – unmistakable- but would I have noticed it if I hadn't been walking quietly by? I have also heard it in other similar sites nearby. This is on a quiet lane on the south side of the river, lined with lovely old oak and sycamore trees – home to blue, great and coal tits; both song and mistle thrushes are also heard, the latter from early on and is still singing now. I kept my eye open for treecreepers and have seen them - on one day I even spotted two pairs. Walking through Pawston I saw a pair of nuthatches preparing to nest in a tree-hole; the female (I assume) pecking out round the hole, while the male kept watch and made a noise!

By Pawston bridge, a family of resident dippers nest each year – after seeing an adult there most days, its bright white bib showing in the gloom underneath the tree roots. There were two grown-up juveniles being fed, learning how to swim and catch their own food. I think they start breeding much earlier in the year! Another interesting sight in the same spot - loud piping alerted me to three common sandpipers displaying – two of which I assume were male-dashing about with their wings vertical, competing for the female.

In common with all, I have also enjoyed monitoring the birds in and around my garden; being surrounded by trees and conifers, with some wild and rough areas nearby. I get quite a selection – the several bird baths, continually topped up, provide a draw, especially during the prolonged dry spell.

Most frequent (ignoring the woodpigeons and collared doves) are house martin, pied wagtail, wren, dunnock, robin, blackbird, song and mistle thrush, blackcap, chiffchaff, goldcrest (this is my favourite – it sings and sings, and looks so tiny in the bird-bath!) blue and coal tit, starling, house and tree sparrows, chaffinch, greenfinch, goldfinch and bullfinch. I was thrilled to see two barn owls hunting one evening, and the final flourish was the arrival of the swifts on 6th May!

Janet Chubb 9th May 2020

Chiffchaff

Whitethroat

BIRD RECORDS MAY 2020

Shoveler	2 pairs at Monk's House Pool all month (JPL), 1 pair at Branton Ponds on 25th (IB&KDa).
Gadwall	2 pairs at Monk's House Pool all month (JPL,DG&RHB).
Tufted Duck	3 pairs at Monk's House Pool all month (JPL).
Quail	1 at Branton on 26th (IB&KDa).
Avocet	1 pair at Low Newton Scrape on 15th hatched 4 young, 3 remaining 26/31st (KHP, etal).
Black-tailed Godwit	2 at Low Newton Scrape on 1st & 13th (WMB).
Turnstone	few at Stag Rocks most of month (JPL).
Purple Sandpiper	few at Stag Rocks most of month (JPL).
Woodcock	1 at Beanley Wood on 24th (IB&KDa).
Common Sandpiper	1 at River Aln on 1st / 4th (A&MG), 1 pair at Happy Valley on 8th (DG&RB).
Greenshank	2 at Hedgeley Ponds on 2nd (IB&KDa).
Little Tern	12 + pairs at Long Nanny on 14th (A&MG).
Arctic Tern	1000 pairs at Long Nanny on 14th (A&MG).
Cuckoo	1 at Brandon on 2nd , 2 at Beanley Wood on 6/9th , 3 at Shepherds Law on 9th , 1 at Chillingham on 16th all (IB&KDa), 3 at Harthope Valley from 20/30th (IB&KDa,DG&RHB), 1 pair at Ford Moss on 25/28th (A&MG,SVM) and 1 at Holburn all month (CD).
Barn Owl	1 at Branton on 26th (IB&KDa), 1 at Holburn all month (CD).
Little Owl	1 pair at Embleton all month (PAs,WMB).
Nightjar	1 at Beanley Wood on 24th (IB&KDa).
Swift	4 at Branton Ponds on 5th were the earliest (IB&KDa).
Sand Martin	c.10 at Beadnell & Seahouses dunes all month (JPL,DG&RHB).
House Martin	c. 50+ nesting Beadnell & Seahouses all month (JPL).
Willow Warbler	many at Harthope Valley all month (DG&RHB).
Chiffchaff	many at Harthope Valley all month (DG&RHB).
Sedge Warbler	2 at Alnwick all month (A&MG).
Grasshopper Warbler	1 at Embleton Quarry on 5th (WMB), 1 at Beanley Moor on 6th (IB&KDa).
Blackcap	2 at Happy Valley on 8th & 1 at Yearle on 23rd (DG&RHB).
Garden Warbler	2 at Happy Valley on 8th (DG&RHB), 1 at Ford Moss on 25th (A&MG).
Lesser Whitethroat	2 at Alnwick all month (A&MG).
Whitethroat	4 at Beanley Moor on 6th & 2 at Bewick Moor on 16th (IB&KDa).
Fieldfare	3 at Shepherds Law on 9th (IB&KDa).
Spotted Flycatcher	1 at Branton on 29th (IB&KDa).
Pied Flycatcher	2 at Harthope Valley on 20th (IB&KDa).
Redstart	1 at Hedgeley Ponds on 2nd , 3 at Beanley Woods on 6th & 1 at Branton on (IB&KDa).
Whinchat	8 at Harthope Valley on 13/20th (SVM,IB&KDa).
Stonechat	1 at Beanley Moor on 6th , 4 at Shepherds Law on 9th , 12+ at Berwick Moor on 16th & many in Harthope Valley on 20th (IB&KDa).
Wheatear	1 at Newton Links on 14th (A&MG), 6 at College Valley on 31st SV&AJM) .

Observers Paul Ashdown (PAs), Winnie Banks (WMB), Graham & Rosemary Bell (DG&RHB), Ian & Keith Davison (IB&KDa), Chris Duncan (CD), Alan & Margaret Goodall (A&MG), John P Lumby (JPL), Stewart & Alison McCormick (SV&AJM), Kathryn Potts (KHP).

June records etc, DUE TO CORONA VIRUS please continue to submit records throughout the summer for county record submission only by Telephone or Post to the recorder, John Lumby, Shearwater, 2 St Cuthbert Close, North Sunderland, NE68 7WG. TEL:01665-720654 **For September newsletter please submit all outstanding records by the 3th September at the latest to the recorder, many thanks.**