Happy New Year

January Newsletter

Last month's Speaker Martin Davison.

Otter on Colonsay - Martin Davison

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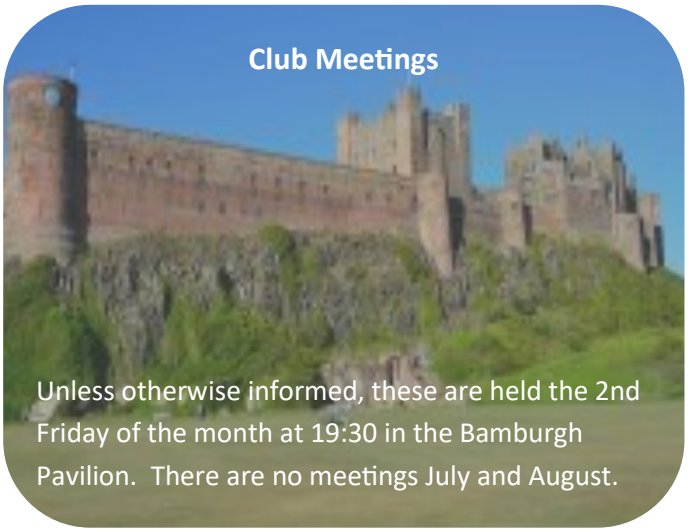
Committee Member
Vacant Position



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Check out our Internet presence

On our web site at:
northnorthumberlandbirdclub.co.uk

On our Facebook page at:
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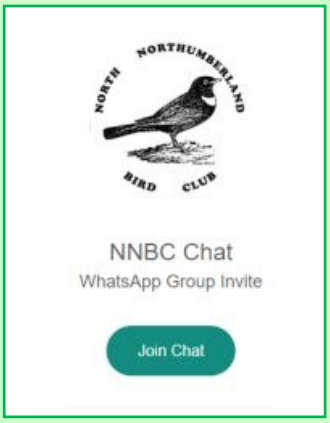
Members WhatsApp Group Chat
NNBC Chat (Join by requesting a link)

"A bird doesn't sing because it has an answer, it sings because it has a song" **Maya Angelou**

Noticeboard

NNBC Chat—A New Service for Members



At least 40 club members have already joined the club's WhatsApp Group Chat service. Here you can interact with other members and discuss car sharing, favourite birdwatching locations, recent bird sightings etc - in fact anything you want to discuss/ask others.

Committee member Neil Hinchliff (neilskye8@gmail.com) and Newsletter Editor John McCutcheon (john@waterstar.uk) are administrators.

If you haven't already had an email with a link inviting you to join, please request it from one of the Admins. When you get the email, follow the link to join the group. If you already use WhatsApp, it will display a window where you can click the "Join Chat" button. Otherwise it will take you to a web page, where you can click the same "Join Chat" button. If you do not already have WhatsApp on your phone you can first download it from the same web page, or get it beforehand from an App Store. It's available for both Android and iPhone.

As you join in and contribute, please remember to be civil and thoughtful with any content you share.

Upcoming Field Trips

February 2024
Coquet Estuary Leader: Richard Poyer
Date and Details to follow

March 2024
Bamburgh or Hirsel
Date and Details to follow

For all Field Trips please read the Risk Assessment on our Web site beforehand. For dates and times and last minute changes / cancellations check our Facebook Page, or directly with Leaders for the event.

See web site for details of other Field Trips

Upcoming Meetings

Friday 12th January at 19:30
Raptor migration through the Straits of Gibraltar with Iain Robson

Friday 9th February at 19:30
Swapping Puffins for Penguins with David Steel

See web site for details of other Meetings

Noticeboard

THE CLUB NEEDS YOU

There are still two spaces on the committee and we would like to encourage members to consider joining it to help organise and run the club. It is not really onerous, but it's essential to have new blood and ideas to ensure the club continues and thrives. Next year marks the 40th anniversary of the NNBC and it would be good to think that it still has many years to contribute to birding in the area.

Please ask any committee member if you are interested.

Happy New Year

Enjoy your birding in 2024

Fancy using a telescope when birdwatching?

Glynis Gower, an ex-Club Secretary, very kindly donated a telescope to the club for members, and we have been thinking of the best way to make good use of this gift. Buying your own first "scope" can feel a bit daunting, as they are expensive and something you may not feel sure of using regularly. To help members check this out, you can borrow the club scope for a month or two, to try it out and assess how you would use it. It is also available if you are going on a special trip where one would be really useful. With only the one scope, it might not always be available immediately, but we will try to "share it around" and make sure as many members as possible benefit. If you would like to borrow the scope, please contact Alan Goodall for further information.

Speaker's Presentation

A Bird Man on Colonsay , with Martin Davison

Although unable to share with us his planned talk on Goshawks in Northumberland, Martin Davison still gave us an inspiring December talk: full of humour, a bit of adventure, and plenty of interesting birding knowledge. He took us to the Hebridean island of Colonsay, where he goes for a "busman's holiday" every June.

By visiting with such regularity, and ringing many of the key breeding species on the island, Martin has built up an incredible knowledge of the population dynamics of birds across this special little island and the semi-detached islet RSPB reserve of Orsonsay, nestling on its southern shore.

It was fascinating to hear the different - often contrasting - fortunes of the various species unfold as Martin explained how different factors led to some quite dramatic fluctuations in bird populations.

We also gained a real insight into what lengths he and his companions have gone to in order to build up this knowledge, climbing (or descending) to nests perched on cliffs and overhangs, braving protective parents, and enduring half-digested meals shot out from both ends of disgruntled chicks!

Choughs appeared as one of the losers in this story. After reaching a peak of something like 28 pairs in the 90s, their numbers are now down to only five or six pairs. The problem - Martin explained - of in-breeding in an isolated population causing blindness in many chicks and reducing the survival rate of each year's broods well below sustainable levels. Perhaps supplementary feeding in the winter, and some strategic release of birds from elsewhere to widen the gene pool, both now being considered according to Martin, may change the fortunes of this really charismatic corvid on the island.

Speaker's Presentation

Martin also featured another well know Hebridean speciality, the Corncrake. Recent declines of this species on the island probably stem from the combined challenges of an increasingly difficult migration to and from Africa, and more locally, to a reduction in "corncrake-friendly" farming practices with the end of some eco-subsidies. The spectacular seabird colonies on the island are also in decline along with so many others, and Martin explained how his regular ringing work with guillemots and kittiwakes, repeat catching individuals over many years, has increased knowledge of the incredible longevity of these birds, many of them surviving and breeding for over 30 years.

One of the birds doing better on the island is the Grey Heron. Here, what was really interesting was to see how the local ecology had led to changes in bird behaviour. We saw pictures of herons nesting on ruined crofts and stunted willows only a few feet off the ground. With few land-based mammalian predators, and even fewer tall trees, the heron has switched to a nesting strategy more suited to island life.

Of course, Martin's star birds for the evening were raptors. He charted the rise of the eagle population on this small island from one pair of Golden Eagles when he started his work, to two successful pairs now, plus a pair of White-tailed Eagles.

He also explained that the success of these spectacular birds explained a parallel reduction in the success of local Buzzards, who now faced regular predation. It was also heartening to hear that when one of the Golden Eagle pairs had managed to raise two eaglets, one had been relocated south so, theoretically, could one day soar over The Cheviot! Fingers crossed!!

In discussion after the talk Martin responded to several questions about raptor persecution and the impact it has on populations. He felt that on Colonsay, this wasn't the key issue. Hen Harriers on the island are doing well, with six pairs, but no grouse shooting interest causing pressure. He contrasted this with the challenge facing parts of Northumberland where he felt the numbers of species like Red Kites and Goshawks were definitely being supressed by illegal trapping, poisoning or shooting.

Despite this rather depressing end-note, Martin's talk gave us plenty to think about, and yet another birding destination for us to add to our holiday list! And we still might have the Goshawk talk to look forward to in the future.

Report by Paul Ashdown

Field Trip Report

Well there was no organised field trip in December!

But I did visit **Branton Ponds** on a snowy day which was quite enjoyable, if not necessarily that fruitful in species count. Did you have your own trip or special photograph that you would like to share with the group? Please let us know.

Richard Poyer enjoyed an outing to the Chandlery in Berwick and took these fantastic photos of Long Tailed Ducks.

Bird Sighting Records

Below are the highlights for December...

Pochard	4 at Branton on 31st	JMcC
Scaup	1 at Holy Island on 31st	NH
Long-tailed Duck	1 at Low Newton on 13th	JMcC
	1 at Stag Rock on 28th	PCA
Red Grouse	3 at College Valley on 29th	RP
Red-necked Grebe	2 at Holy Island Causeway on 26th	PN&MN
Knot	153 at Coquet Estuary on 1st	RP
Red-throated Diver	1 at Coquet Estuary on 1st	RP
Great Northern Diver	1 at Holy Island Causeway on 26th	PN&MN
Marsh Harrier	1 at Hedgeley on 10th and 31st	JMcC
Hen Harrier	1 Female at Ford Moss on 14th	EH
	1 Female at The Snook, Holy Island on 26th	PN&MN
Barn Owl	1 at Chathill on 29th	PCA
	1 at West Fleetham on 29th	PCA
	1 at Brada Hill on 6th	P&AH
Tawny Owl	1 at Chathill on 29th	PCA
Kingfisher	1 at Spindlestone South Hide on 15th	PCA
	2 at Barrack Woods on 6th	P&AH
	1 at Hedgeley on 17th	JMcC
Hooded Crow	1 at Long Nanny on 14th	PCA
Waxwing	6 at Howick on 11th	PCA
Blackcap	1 at Chathill on 6th and 8th	PCA
Nuthatch	1 at Spindlestone South Hide on 15th	PCA
Treecreeper	1 at Spindlestone South Hide on 15th	PCA
Brambling	1 at Low Newton on 13th	JMcC
Bullfinch	1 at Seahouses (Old Railway Line) on 21st	PCA
	6 at Howick Pool Woods on 16th	P&AH
	1 at Branton on 5th	JMcC
	1 at Longframlington on 6th	JMcC
Twite	37 at Long Nanny on 29th and 30th	PCA
Snow Bunting	1 at Seahouses Golf Course on 2nd	PCA

Bird Sighting Records

Contributors

Paul Armstrong (PCA)
Phil & Alison Hanmer (P&AH)
Liz Harrison (EH)
Neil Hinchliff (NH)
John McCutcheon (JMcC)
Phil & Marge Noble (PN&MN)
Richard Poyer (RP)

North Northumberland Bird Club's area is between the River Tweed in the north and the River Coquet in the south, east to the sea and west to the Northumberland county border.

Golden Plovers on the Coquet— Courtesy of Diane Whittaker
Posted on the club's WhatsApp group page: NNBC Chat

Please send sighting records to **Paul Armstrong** NNBCrecords@yahoo.com by 1st of next month.
If you want a bird adding to the highlights list, you will need to submit the species, location, date(s) and count, together with any comments. If you just want it added to the species list, then you only need to submit the name of the bird.

Members' Contributions

Forty Minutes in a Bird Hide : by Phil Hanmer

6th December 2023 near Bamburgh: I had met Mark Middleton (the Northumberland Coast Nature Recovery & Farming Officer) at 11:00 to put up a Barn Owl box in a tree. It was very cold when we had arrived but quickly warmed up. After first negotiating some very friendly sheep, who did think my bag of owl-bedding (wood-shavings) was sheep food; and taking the ladders to the wrong tree, we had eventually found the right tree and got the box up. Hopefully an owl looking for a new home will use it soon. Mark had to go to a meeting so we went our separate ways and I headed to the North Hide near Spindlestone, to eat my lunch and hopefully watch some birds. The pool at the North Hide was frozen over and there were only a few tits and a Robin around, so I soon moved on to the South Hide.

Those that know this hide will realise that it's a short walk down a field with the wood on the right. In making this approach I observed a few Blackbirds and two Tree Sparrows and then spotted a Grey Squirrel in the field, running very fast across the path in front of me heading vaguely in the direction of the hide (and bird feeders). This was not a particularly auspicious start but I continued on to enter the hide.

First, I watched some tits and a Chaffinch and a Robin, then there was some minor excitement when a female Great Spotted Woodpecker arrived and set about a peanut feeder with some urgency.

It was notable that it was *a little* warmer in this hide and the water in the pool was not frozen. I glanced at the log-book in the hide and noted that someone had spent a few cold hours waiting for (and eventually seeing) a Kingfisher. I thought it unlikely I would be staying long enough to see such a beautiful but elusive bird.

Then things started to happen, first a Red Squirrel arrived *(not what I was expecting having already seen a grey as I walked up to the hide*). This squirrel (not I thought a very large squirrel) proceeded to open the top of a wooden feeder and take out several hazel nuts in quick succession, then it made several trips backwards and forwards through a metal trap and I reasoned that this was set to catch the heavier greys (this I confirmed by reading some notes in the log-book).

Then another squirrel arrived and some chasing started, although this was only brief. Eventually one settled on eating peanuts while the other returned to the hazel nuts.

Next, I heard a loud shrill pinging sound, which while I was certain I had heard it before, I could not immediately place. Anyway within a few minutes a Kingfisher appeared, chasing another Kingfisher. After another few minutes one of them came back and perched agitatedly on a perch (that someone had obviously left near the waters edge just for this eventuality).

I took some photos but the Kingfisher did not stay long: instead, it disappeared into a thicket of vegetation that overhung the pool. Eventually it flew out and disappeared.

Meanwhile the Red Squirrels had been continuing to feed and were briefly joined by a third, although it did not seem as though this one was welcomed by the other two and it quickly hid around the back of a tree. Next, I watched one of the squirrels abandon the feeder it was on and move to the ground to eat some loose grain.

Then a Treecreeper arrived and started to feed on the ground, using its long tongue to lick-up flaked pieces of peanut that had fallen from the feeder above, recently occupied by one of the squirrels. If you have never seen this behavior its quite interesting (*I remember seeing it first at Wallington perhaps ten years ago, when it was definitely unusual*).

Soon one of the Kingfishers came back and I was able to take some more photos. Looking at these at home I can confirm that there was a male (all black beak) and a female (base of lower mandible orange) although they really did not seem to be a 'pair'.

Suddenly a Grey Squirrel appeared, although it did not stay long as pandemonium broke out amongst most of the small birds (tits, chaffinches, robins) as a Sparrowhawk came through the trees and I think grabbed a poor unsuspecting Coal Tit for its lunch.

The remaining Kingfisher's behavior at this point was interesting: despite being somewhat out in the open, it did not fly away, instead it froze and apparently watched the Sparrowhawk until it was quite certain it had moved on.

Then it moved into its favourite thicket, although this time it settled where I could still see it and take some more pictures.

I had an excellent and intense bird & squirrel watch for just 40 mins. So, thank you to whoever still maintains these hides and provides the bird food and I must remember to come here more often. All photos were taken from the hide.

Phil Hanmer

(The Spindleston hides, also known as Barrack Wood, were created on land belonging to Charles Baker-Cresswell. Charles visits most days to fill and maintain the bird feeders, see if there are any trapped grey squirrels and put hazel nuts in the squirrel feeders.

Visitors are welcome to visit the hides. Grid references NU155334 and NU157328.

The NNBC supports Charles with annual donations - £100 so far this year.)
R Poyer

A Ringer's Year - December 2023

An interesting control (by a fellow ringer) of a Barn Owl checked near Amble reached me from the BTO; this was of a Barn Owl FH69456 a bird originally ringed near Warkworth back in 2014. So, at nine years old it's surviving well! In response to questions as to *''how did the Barn Owls do this year''* I have attached my summary of this year's productivity:

BARN OWL BREEDING SEASON 2023:

This study (of around 100 sites) in **North Northumberland** (outside the National Park) indicates that this was a poorer year than 2022 but still better than 2021. At 36% occupancy it was above the long-term average of 30% - although only 29 nests were successful at raising young.

The influence of the weather seems very stark this year as the mild winter encouraged birds into starting to nest (particularly inland) but then the wet and cold spring caused delays. This seems to have particularly affected coastal sites as we came across some adult owls which were underweight occupying nest sites, but did not go on to actually breed. It was very notable how few of the usually reliable coastal sites did well this year. Towards the end of June and into July there seems to have been a loss of eggs/young around hatching time. I emphasise the geographical area of this study because there have been reports of better productivity further west.

As the summer moved on the weather did not improve, and this mitigated against second or late broods.

The average number of eggs laid per clutch was up at 4.5 similar to last year although one '7' was recorded. The average number of owlets fledged was 2.1 although two pairs raised 6 and another 5 (in a site used for the first time). The attached table shows how Barn Owl productivity has changed over time.

A total of 77 owlets were ringed and mostly fledged, although in two instances young owls left their nests early (possibly searching for food) and perished early. 20 new adult Barn Owls were ringed and 33 re-trapped/controlled; including females that are 8 and 6 years old respectively.

One coastal female that I had ringed (in the nest) at Lesbury in 2011; had nested most years (*near Boulmer*) since 2012 and was unfortunately found dead in September (12 years). *She almost certainly had not nested this year*. Interestingly this bird had been controlled an amazing 16 times over the years and clearly suffered no ill-effects.

Jackdaws continue to be a problem occupying owl nest sites.

Ringer's Roundup

Kestrels seemed to make a bit of a come-back, occupying four owl boxes (*although one had lost its roof during Storm Arwen – which did not seem to bother the kestrel overmuch!*). Two Tawny Owl (see picture of one of the females) put Barn Owls off using boxes, one of which was rather late.

Tawny Owls usually nest very early in smaller boxes in dark secluded places (in trees) while Barn Owls like to nest later and use larger boxes in more 'open' places, or in buildings that they can see their way in and out of easily.

With the recent dreadful weather, I have also had time to review this year's sessions at Howick Ringing Station and I can take this opportunity to thank all the folks at Howick Arboretum who have again supported our efforts. This year we captured 1,017 birds from 21 visits (compared to 1,124 in 2022 and 878 in 2021). 86 were new adults, 630 new juveniles of the year and 24 we could not age (Tree Sparrows etc.).

The rest were re-traps. We captured a Brambling this year but no Redpoll, Siskin, Greenfinch, Whitethroat, Swallow, nor any Yellow-browed Warblers (there were 3 last year). However, we did catch a Firecrest, 4 Garden Warblers (1 in 2022); 9 Redwing and 53 Blackbirds. There was also two Chaffinches first ringed in 2014; two Great Tits from 2018, and a Coal Tit from 2020.

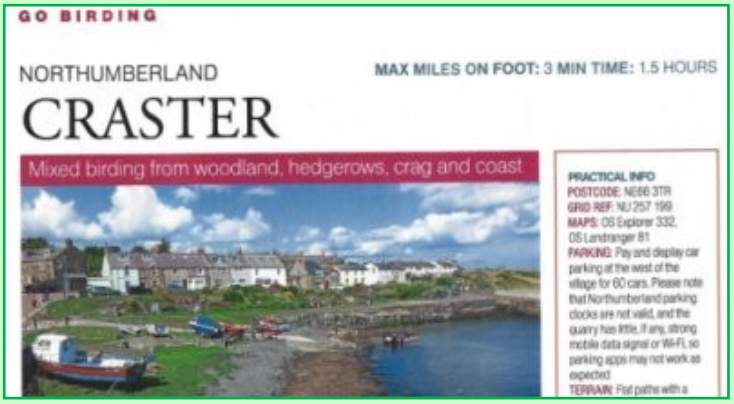
Finally, while ringing at home last week, we controlled a Goldcrest with an unusual ring on it; after some careful examination it proved to be a ***Jersey*** Ringing Scheme ring! This detail has gone into the BTO and I hope to hear back soon as to when it was ringed (see photo.)

Phil Hanmer

S Ringer/Trainer, Natural History Society of Northumbria Ringing Group (Hancock Museum)

Email: tytoalbas@btinternet.com

Epilogue


GO BIRDING

NORTHUMBERLAND

MAX MILES ON FOOT: 3 MIN TIME: 1.5 HOURS

CRASTER

Mixed birding from woodland, hedgerows, crag and coast

PRACTICAL INFO

POSTCODE: NE66 3TR

GRID REF: NU 257 199

MAPS: OS Explorer 332, OS Landranger 81

PARKING: Pay and display car parking at the west of the village for 60 cars. Please note that Northumberland parking clocks are not valid, and the quarry has little, if any, strong mobile data signal or Wi-Fi, so parking apps may not work as expected

TERRAIN: Flat paths with a

Published recently in Birdwatching Magazine, check out member Steve Newman's Craster Walk on the club's web site. Look in Bird Watching Places section.

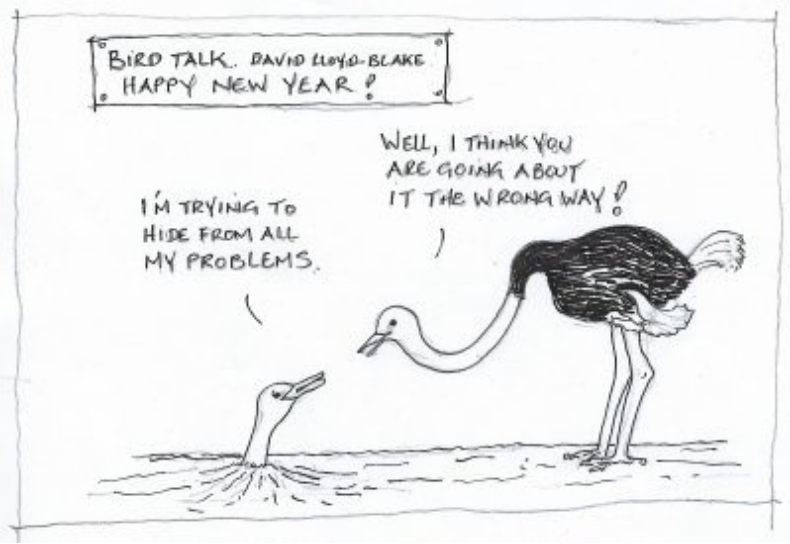
Volunteers Needed!
Winter Gull Survey

Sign up now for the January Winter Gull Roost Survey (WinGS)

www.bto.orgwings

BTO British Trust for Ornithology

WinGS



Want to improve your bird photography?

We found a good (and free) online course at https://chrisbrayphotography.com/courses/online/

Part 5 is especially relevant for Bird Photos

Hope you enjoy!

Got something you'd like to add? Please let us know.

Content for the Newsletter

Submissions for inclusion in the form of notes, articles, photographs etc are welcomed. These should be Emailed to the Newsletter Editor. Deadline for copy is the first Friday of the month, but earlier is preferred. The target date for distribution is the weekend before the club's meeting, usually on the Sunday.