February Newsletter

Last month's Speaker Iain Robson

Redpoll—Lemmington—Phil Hanmer

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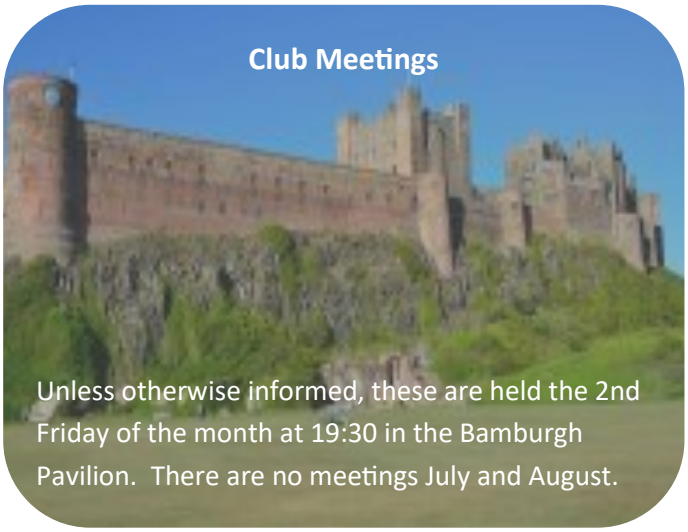

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On our web site at:
northnorthumberlandbirdclub.co.uk

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

"It is not only fine feathers that make fine birds" **Aesop**

Noticeboard

A Handy Reminder

Following the recent introduction of our WhatsApp Group chat "NNBC Chat", one or two of our members have wanted to ensure that they didn't air information detrimental to our birds. So just a gentle reminder, that while the facility is there for any inter-club issues at all, please bear in mind that the precise location of some of our more sensitive species should not be specified, especially during the breeding season. For those that need a reminder of these species, a copy of the "UK Schedule 1 Species" list can be found on most national birding sites, eg BTO (British Trust for Ornithology) at www.bto.org

Neil Hinchliff

Upcoming Field Trips

10th February 2024 starting at 10am, to explore the Coquet Estuary and Birling Carrs. Meet in Warkworth Beach Public Car Park (NU255064), there is no charge. Please share cars if possible.
We'll explore the saltmarsh, dunes, estuary and bay for waders, duck and divers and even possibly snow bunting. For those with the time and energy we'll go to Birling Carrs as the tide rises to see what the rocks are harbouring. Bring warm clothing, stout footwear and a packed lunch for a full day—weather permitting!
Leader: Richard Poyer 07936 909649

March 2024
Bamburgh or Hirsel
Date and Details to follow

April 2024
Branton Pond and Hedgeley Nature Reserve
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, NNBC Chat, or directly with Leaders for the event.

See web site for details of other Field Trips

A date for your diary

Saturday 18th May 2024

There's still a few things to organise but we are planning to celebrate the club's Ruby anniversary with a social event! More to follow…..

NNBC's 40th Anniversary Year

Upcoming Meetings

Friday 8th March at 19:30
Tracking Europe's Wild Soundscapes-35 Years of Wildlife Recording with Geoff Sample

Friday 9th April at 19:30
The Golden Eagle Project in South Scotland (an update) with Rick Taylor

See web site for details of other Meetings

Catalonia '25

In November 2023, Colin Bradshaw delivered a presentation to the club entitled "Just two hours from Tyneside". The amount of interest following this talk suggested that the club ought to be considering organising a similar birding holiday in the future. I have been tasked by the committee to put something together, possibly for May 2025.

Having spoken at length to Colin's brother Jeremy, who in turn has been speaking with their guide in Catalonia, the following plan has been hatched. It is by no means final, as we have the flexibility to add or remove anything we fancy. Anyway, here is the first expedition draft…

On day one, club members would ideally arrive around 0800-0900 at Barcelona airport, to be collected by the guide and thereby enabling a full, first day's birding. The target area for the first two days (and nights) would be the Ebro Delta, which is a large coastal estuary around two hours south of Barcelona. We would then move inland to spend two days/nights in Lleida, and then two days/nights in the Pyrenees.

The aim is for a total of six nights and seven days birding, with the plan again being to arrange to be deposited back at Barcelona airport after a full day's birding… with flights arranged accordingly. Apparently, the usual tour size is between five and seven people. This number would justify a full minibus. If there are more people then logistics would allow for a further minibus, and if there are less, then we would possibly be sharing a bus with birders from elsewhere.

On the basis of six going, using three twin rooms, the cost per person would be in the region of £1260. This figure could change slightly depending on numbers, and there would be a "single room" supplement of c£265 should this be requested, or if we have an odd number in our group (this excess would then be shared equally). The price includes all food (which I'm told is stunning), accommodation, travel (whilst in Spain) and our birding guide.

It would, of course, be necessary for us to arrange and fund our own passage to and from Barcelona. OK, so that's the money bit….and the good news is that all dates in May 2025 are presently free, so if we manage to act fast enough, we can choose the most mutually suitable week for ourselves.
Jeremy suggests we consider starting our holiday on a Saturday, to conclude the following Friday. Jeremy also recommends the second or third weeks in May to visit as this would be sufficiently early in the breeding season for birds to be still singing, with migration in full flow.

Currently a visa is not required for travelling to Spain, but we do need to check the UK Government website for entry requirements, and to check what can - and can't - be taken in. (If you've already been out there for a long spell there may be timing restrictions). Your passport must have been issued less than 10 years prior to the holiday, and you must have at least three months left on it on the date of departure from Spain.

You must also obtain (or already have) a EHIC (European Health Insurance Card) or a UKGHIC (Global Health Insurance Card), which would then allow state medical treatment etc. Private travel insurance is also highly recommended.

At our next indoor meeting on 9th February, I'll be making a small announcement just to bring this to the attention of everyone. To keep things brief I will display a possible itinerary, together with the array of species we have a chance of seeing. The emphasis will be on getting a list of "interested" names so that we can take things forward. I have full access to Jeremy should we need any more advice prior to making a booking with the guide.

I will be around all evening on the 9th for any questions.

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. This 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.

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

Raptor migration through the Straits of Gibraltar, with Iain Robson

Iain Robson's talk this January was an outstanding start to the year, and attracted one of the largest audiences we have had for a while. A packed Pavilion was able to share a bit in Iain's self-confessed addiction to the autumn migration over the Straits of Gibraltar, at Tarifa. He explained that he has been making the trip for 15 years, and although he rarely adds any new birds to his list anymore, he remains mesmerised by the spectacular numbers of birds to be seen.

This phenomenon is the result of the migration routes for large, soaring birds converging at the narrowest crossings of the Med, because the thermals they rely on for sustained flight do not form over the sea. This means that most of western Europe's storks and migratory eagles, kites, buzzards and vultures pass through this incredible narrow gateway. The autumn return to Africa is particularly concentrated and includes all the fledged young from the summer before, pushing the numbers seen to dizzy heights. Iain showed us photos of the sky teeming with Black Kites, and massive swirls of White Storks climbing the thermals, ready to cross the 14 kilometres of sea barring them from the Atlas Mountains in Morocco.

Iain took each of the main participating species in turn, and gave us the background numbers and peak times for migration. He then brought these numbers to life with great images and wonderful tales of how this spectacle has unfolded for him. Stories like how he tracked down the roost of a huge group of Honey Buzzards and then caught them at dawn, or the saga of thousands of White Storks repeatedly losing their nerve half-way across to Africa and returning to Spain.

For me the most awesome section of his talk covered eagles. I suspect that for most of us, seeing an eagle is always something special. You are usually in somewhere remote, and feel a thrill seeing even a single bird.

Speaker's Presentation

Iain showed us eagles in their hundreds. Short-toed Eagle, Bonnelli's Eagle, and Booted Eagle: all spectacular birds, here in spectacular numbers. And a masterclass in eagle identification as Iain took us through plumage variations and key field-marks shown in beautiful photographs.

Although the raptor migration is clearly the highlight of Iain's annual pilgrimage to Tarifa, it is not the only birding on offer in the area. We also had a whistle-stop tour of other key locations and species. These included some real rarities like the carefully monitored colony of Bald Ibis, and White-Rumped Swift.

Many of the more regular Mediterranean birds, that are still special for us northerners, are also seen in good numbers. I particularly like Iain's complaint that despite skies full of Bee-eaters, he had never managed to get a decent photo!

Iain rounded off his talk with advice on how to join the fun by visiting Tarifa ourselves. This included an explanation of how the dominant winds in the area influence the numbers of birds building up before the crossing, and under certain conditions, reducing the spectacle to nothing. As always with birding, there are no guarantees, but according to Iain, give it three weeks, and you are as close as it gets!

For more information you can go to the website of "Fundacion Migres" which Iain referred us to several times: www.fundacionmigres.org (Site in English & Spanish)

Report by **Paul Ashdown**

Field Trip Report

New Year Big Day January 1st 2024

Nine keen members turned out for a very early morning start at High Newton car park on New Year's Day. Just as dawn was breaking, on a cold but sunny day, we were ready to tackle our 20-mile coastal trip, by car, stopping several times as we ventured north.

This was our 16th annual attempt to see as many different species as possible; we pondered on how many we would manage to see on a short mid winter's day?

First birds spotted being Tawny & Barn Owls, Pink-footed Goose, Carrion Crow, Rook, Goldfinch, Song Thrush, Magpie, Robin, Starling, Blackbird, Black-headed Gull, Wood Pigeon, Mistle Thrush, Chaffinch and Wren.

We then drove to Low Newton and visited the Scrape and Pool plus a quick look over the Beach, this gave us Canada Goose, Little Grebe, Redshank, Wigeon, Mallard, Teal, Shoveler, Gadwall, Long-tailed Duck, Moorhen, Dunlin, Stonechat, House Sparrow, Reed Bunting, Rock Pipit, Eider, Curlew, Goldeneye, Pied Wagtail, Common Gull, Herring Gull and Rock Dove. We had clocked up 38 species, so a good start to the day.

En route to Beadnell we added: Kestrel, Lapwing, Mute Swan, Golden Plover and Bar-tailed Godwit. The next stops were the Harbour and Knacker's Hole which added Oystercatcher, Grey Plover, Common Scoter, Sanderling, Gannet, Turnstone and Great Black-backed Gull. A village tour provided Jackdaw, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Dunnock and Coal Tit, we were doing well and now had 55 species on our list.

Driving next to Seahouses Golf Club/Quarryfields we added Greenfinch to the tally. Onwards to Monk's House Pool, where Greylag Goose, Tufted Duck, Grey Heron and Meadow Pipit obliged. A further short drive took us to Stag Rocks where we managed to add Shelduck, Razorbill, Red-throated Diver, Cormorant, Purple Sandpiper, Shag, Red-breasted Merganser and Ringed Plover; we were doing well as we had counted 68.

Next a move inland to the Spindlestone Wood hides where we managed to add Great Spotted Woodpecker, Nuthatch, Tree Sparrow and Long-tailed Tit. Our next halt was Budle Bay where we added Knot, Little Egret, Common Buzzard and Brent Geese, taking us to 76.

Off we went up the road to Harper's Heugh where about 1000 Barnacle Geese needed to be viewed searching for our target at that spot, this took some time but we were rewarded by finding the Red-Breasted Goose in the flock, the best bird of the day! To help our list a Pheasant lurked at the bottom of the field. With the light rapidly failing, our last port of call had to be Elwick where we added Redwing and Linnet.

Our day's tally was a brilliant **81**. Our team had done exceptionally well and everybody seemed to have enjoyed a great day out.

An excellent day out and a great start to the New Year.

John Lumby

Bird Sighting Records

Below are the highlights for January...

Red-breasted Goose	1 at Budle Bay on 1st	NH
	1 at Budle Bay on 19th	PCA
Whooper Swan	20 west of Low Newton on 28th	P&AH
	3 at Newton Scrape on 31st	PCA
	27 at Embleton on 21st	RP
Common Scoter	25 at Stag Rocks on 9th	RP
	8 at Alnmouth Bay on 12th	RP
Long-tailed Duck	1 off Bamburgh on 4th	PCA
	1 at Long Nanny on 19th, 23rd and 26th	PCA
	3 at Seahouses Harbour on 6th	PCA
Goldeneye	32 at Howick Burn mouth on 1st	P&AH
Smew	1 off Long Nanny on 8th	PCA
Red-breasted Merganser	1 at Stag Rocks on 1st	RP
Great Crested Grebe	1 at Seahouses Golf Course on 6th	PCA
	2 at Alnmouth Bay on 12th	RP
Lapwing	740 at Coquet Estuary on 5th	RP
Golden Plover	36 at Branxton on 18th	JJ
	2000+ at Coquet Esturay on 5th	RP
Grey Plover	1 at Seahouses on 6th and 18th	PCA
	11 at Birling Carrs on 12th	RP
Black-tailed Godwit	5 at Coquet Estuary on 5th	RP
Knot	155 at Birling Carrs on 12th	RP
Ruff	1 at Newton Scrape on 31st	PCA
Purple Sandpiper	5 at Howick Burn mouth on 1st	P&AH
	17 at Birling Carrs on 12th	RP
Woodcock	1 at Bamburgh on 6th	PCA
Red-throated Diver	9 at Alnmouth Bay on 12th	RP
Sparrowhawk	1 near Doxford on 13th	PCA
	1 at Warkworth	RP
Marsh Harrier	1 at Branton on 30th	JMcC
Red Kite	1 over Etal and Heatherslaw on 20th	JJ
Barn Owl	1 at Elford Farm on 25th	PCA
Peregrine	1 at Fenham Flats on 21st catching Redshank	PN&MN
Jay	2 at Swarland Woods on 4th	JMcC
Rook	c1000 at Bellshill on 31st	DG&RB
Goldcrest	1 near Doxford on 13th	PCA
Nuthatch	1 at Yearle most of month	DG&RB
Treecreeper	1 at Yearle most of month	DG&RB
Black Redstart	1 at Annstead links on 17th	PCA
Dipper	1 at Hedgeley on 3rd	JMcC
Brambling	1 at Longframlington on 2nd, 2 on 19th, 3 on 20th, 6 on 28th	JMcC
Bullfinch	10-12 at Etal Church all month	JJ
	4 at Rothbury on 22nd	JMcC
	4 at Seahouses on 20th (2M,2F)	PCA
Twite	c35 at Long Nanny from 2nd to 11th	PCA
Common/Lesser Redpoll	1 at Lemmington Hall on 16th and 23rd	P&AH
Siskin	1 at Longframlington on 4th, 3 on 10th	JMcC
	3 at Lemmington Hall on 2nd, 5 on 3rd, 6 on 29th	P&AH
	2 at Chathill on 8th	PCA
Snow Bunting	1 at Berwick on 15th and 17th	PN&MN
Eider x Mallard Hybrid	1 at Seahouses Harbour on 6th	PCA

Bird Sighting Records

Contributors

Paul Armstrong (PCA)
Graham & Rosemary Bell (DG&RB)
Phil & Alison Hanmer (P&AH)
Neil Hinchliff (NH)
James Joicey (JJ)
John McCutcheon (JMcC)
Phil & Marge Noble (PN&MN)

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.

Brambling—John McCutcheon

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.

A Quiet BTO Survey by Neil Hinchliff

I have always loved immersing myself in BTO surveys, so early in 2023 I jumped at the chance of participating in their "Woodcock Survey"; a survey that only occurs every 10 years. After subscribing to the survey, I was allocated a randomly chosen kilometre square in Kyloe Woods, just over the bay from Holy Island.

This was one of the many known Woodcock breeding areas throughout the country, and over a period of three visits would (hopefully) provide a robust calculation as to their population. As with all BTO surveys this was all expertly organised, with full risk assessments, as well as a requirement for me to make a preliminary visit to check access and terrain. Most importantly to announce my co-ordinates from where the requisite three surveys would be taken.

The survey itself would then take place over three months within planned dates, although with a little flexibility built in to allow for weather patterns and personal lifestyle. The day of my first visit dawned dampish although the forecast was to improve by late afternoon, so my wife Trish and I decided to "go for it". We had to be in position to begin surveying 15 minutes before sunset, and then remain there for a further hour.

It was a dry and bright as we left our home in Coldstream, but as we stepped out of the car at the Kyloe Wood's perimeter, light drizzle began and the dreaded midges emerged. All was rather exciting at first; both of us perched on our stools and prepped in readiness for an onslaught of Woodcock: pencil in hand, hovering over the survey sheet.

However, after an hour and a quarter, we had seen a total of 4 Leverets, with our final count of Woodcock for the evening being absolutely zero!

Members' Contributions

Trish of course had found "*options*" a long time before then. It's always my wish for Trish to come along and share my birding experiences, but I could see that getting her along to the next survey would clearly require some coaxing.

Around a month later and with the promise of a nice meal, I managed to persuade her to join me and we set off early for our second survey. I treated Trish to a lovely meal at the Black Bull in Lowick, and £80 later we were at our co-ordinates, 15 minutes before sunset in readiness for round two.

Although it was a warm and dry evening this time, 23:30 announced the end of the survey, with our stake-out producing a total of 2 Tawny Owls, 2 Blackbirds, and a Robin...and amazingly another *zero* count of Woodcock!

Two good things did result however:

- First was the fact that a "zero" count is just as important to the BTO survey as multiple sightings
- Second was the fact that we now didn't have to go back for a third survey as we'd drawn blanks on the first two

That's birding, I guess. Overall, we thoroughly enjoyed taking part, (although I think Trish preferred the pub visit to the birding) and would seriously recommend anybody interested, to take a look at the selection of BTO surveys available, join in and enjoy.

Neil Hinchliff

A Ringer's Year - January 2024

Back in October I reported on the antics of the young swans from this year's brood hatched at Howick and how one of the cygnets had been seen flying around North Shields and Blyth and had to be rescued twice after landing in car-parks. It eventually ended up on Killingworth Lake. Meanwhile the adult male came back to Howick on the 12/11/23 but only stayed until the 21st and I surmised he had gone off to seek his mate. It seems I was right because eventually the pair

arrived back on the 7/12/24 and were still present at the end of January 2024.

You can recognise them by their large darvic rings: the male is ZJP (*at least 12 years old*) and the female A069 (*who is 5 years old*) both appreciate grain, duck pellets and a small amount of bread! It may not be Spring yet but this pair of 'resident' Mute Swans at Howick Pool are back in occupation and ready to defend the pool from other swans and geese (see pictures).

With the support of a grant from the Wingates Windfarm Fund we have been making new Tawny and Barn Owl boxes for erection in the designated Parishes south of Rothbury. We have inspected several sites although getting them put up is proving difficult as the weather continues to be unhelpful; not to mention the saturated farmland.

We have also been making some boxes for Tree Sparrows which are going to Embleton Quarry Nature Reserve; and some other small boxes for school grounds in Rothbury (both as a donation from the Coquetdale Group of NWT).

While ringing at home last month we retrapped a Goldcrest wearing a Jersey Ringing Scheme ring and I have now received details of this bird back from the BTO. It seems it was ringed as a juvenile back on the 18/10/22 at the Longis Nature Reserve on Alderney. This is a large reserve covering an eighth of the island. So, in December 2023 it was controlled as an adult male near Lemmington Hall, Alnwick; an interesting journey of over 630 km for a 5.1g bird!

Ringer's Roundup

It was frustrating to observe a female Siskin on one of our bird feeders also with a ring on the 16/1/24. We could see the ring but only read the notation Z9 (see picture). I have used rings starting *Z9* back in 2017 at home which would make this bird 6 years old; and the longevity record for a Siskin is eight years. However, it's quite possible this is a younger bird ringed by another ringer and unless it hangs around until the weather lets me ring at home again, we will never know!

Ringing myself, at home on the 2/1/24 I captured 36 birds (22 new and 14 retraps). The retraps included a Great Tit from 2018; so, 6 years old (the longevity record is 10 years) and two Robins, one from 2022 the other from 2021. There was also another Robin in the new birds which I aged as a last year's bird (so not yet a year old). Trying again on the 13th with two of my C Ringers we captured 60 birds (34 new and 26 retraps). The retraps included a 7 -year-old Blue Tit (the longevity record is nine years). This time there were 4 retrapped Robins and 2 new ones.

Ringing again on the 30/1/24, a surprisingly bright and warm day, produced 26 birds (18 new and 8 retraps). The first bird captured was an adult female Siskin, previously ringed at Lemmington on the 8/4/23. She was probably travelling north in April; then as I next saw her on the 3/9/23 (presumably going south). It's likely she is starting to go north again (see photo).

I had two new bird ringers that I have trained receive their C Permits from the British Trust for Ornithology in the last month (meaning they can now start ringing on their own). Allan (from Selkirk) managed to control two male Siskins in his garden; one of these had been ringed just up the road at Peebles in January 2023 as a juvenile (that's hatched in 2022) while the other had been ringed as an adult at Forse (near Thurso) in the Highlands 308 km away in May 2022. Meanwhile Kevin (Rothbury) started ringing new birds including tits, Dunnock, Chaffinch and House Sparrows.

Phil Hanmer
S Ringer/Trainer, Natural History Society of Northumbria Ringing Group (Hancock Museum)
Email: tytoalbas@btinternet.com

Meanwhile a return from the BTO told me that a Barn Owl hatched just last year near Fallowdon had unfortunately died after injuring its wing at Christon Bank. A '*thank you*' is due to the vet that tried to help it.

I have also been making some Swift boxes in support of the Longhorsley Swift Project that's being promoted by the Coquetdale Group of the NWT and supported by the Wingates Windfarm Fund administered by Community Action Northumberland (CAN). The photos show two of the boxes recently attached to a house. If the weather would just *settle down* it might be possible to get more attached.

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

NNBC Chat now has 42 members! Posts about Smew, Great White Egret, Mandarin Duck, Snow Buntings, Waxwings, Fieldfare etc

Why not join in?

Just where do they mean?

With no standard location of where someone spotted that rare bird, a good little tool to help can be found at: https://gridreferencefinder.com/

Allows you to enter Grid Ref, Post Code, What 3 Words etc and converts to all convenient location methods to help you find that elusive spot…

Hope you find it useful!

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.