



Darlington & Teesdale Naturalists' Field Club

## ANNUAL REPORT 2024



**Founded 1891**

**Registered Charity No: 510783**

**Website:- [www.dtnfc.org](http://www.dtnfc.org)**

## **Annual Subscription**

Ordinary member £15.00

Full time student £1.00

Cover photograph courtesy of Fleur Miles

Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*

## **Officers and Council 2024**

President	Carol Sobkowiak
President Elect	Vacant
General Secretary	Sue Weston
Membership Secretary	Fleur Miles
Treasurer	Martin Chisholm
Summer Programme	Derek Risbey
Winter Programme	Steve Gater/Lynne Heslop
Editor	Lynne Heslop

## **Section Organisers**

Archaeology	Steve Keeney
Botany	David Selby
Geology	Mary Atkinson
Lepidoptera	Fleur Miles
Mammals	Ian Bond
Marine Biology	Carole Sobkowiak
Mycology	Jill Cunningham
Ornithology	John Turner
Projects	Carole Sobkowiak

## **Other Members of Council**

Falgunee Sarker

## **Other Organisations**

AES  
British Pteridological Society  
BSBI  
Durham Wildlife Trust  
YNU  
Yorkshire Wildlife Trust

## **President's Report - Carol Sobkowiak**

We have had a very successful year with many varied walks and events. Early in the year a cheque for £100 was presented to Dr Margaret Bradshaw MBE who is now an Honorary member of the Club, to support the Teesdale Special Flora and Conservation Trust. As a renowned botanist Margaret has raised money for this Trust with pony treks and walks as she is so committed to saving the rare wild plants in Teesdale.

The summer saw us hold two family days to encourage parents to bring their children along to learn more about natural history. These were held in the Denes on 25th May and in South Park on 17th August. We collected samples and went indoors afterwards to identify them and examine in more detail with the use of a microscope. I am particularly keen to get more children involved especially as there is a new GCSE looming in Natural History.

On the theme of young people we once again sponsored students at the Sixth Form College with the Photography Competition – Looking at the World around us. The winners were presented with their prizes at the College. Third prize went to Harry Wilkin for Brimham Rocks, Second prize to Bethany Lloyd for Marram Grass and First prize to Elesha Langford for Wastwater and the surrounding geology.

We have had a most interesting Winter Programme and what turned out to be very popular were two evenings when members were invited to submit a favourite photograph and speak briefly to it

We participated in the Fresher's Fair at the Sixth Form College on 12th September when students took an interest in our exhibits. It was at this event that people at a neighbouring stall run by Hopetown led us into making new friends with the Stockton & Darlington Railway. They would very much like us to do some recording of part of the railway line near to where it began. Fal Sarker, Jill Cunningham and I have had a preliminary meeting to plan this and we are delighted to think that the club will be involved in the 200th Anniversary of this world famous railway line in 2025.

I would like to thank all our council members for their wonderful support and special thanks to Sue Weston for all the e-mail communications which keep us together. Lastly, thanks to all the members who with their friendship and knowledge make it a privilege to be a member of this club.

## **General Secretary - Sue Weston**

The Field Club had a good year of outings, activities and indoor meetings.

Due to personal circumstances I felt slightly out of touch at times as I cannot attend many meetings or outings

As usual the New Year Plant Hunt for the BSBI started the year and members were forwarded with details.

January was the restart after Christmas of the Winter Meetings held at the Queen Elizabeth 6th Form College and also the first Council Meeting of the year.

Yearly reports were sent in by the Council Members for the Annual Report that was to be available for the Annual General Meeting in March.

The Summer Programme commenced in late March with the usual Yellow Star of Bethlehem recording walk and continued through the year until late September.

The AGM in late March agreed the Council changes and Derek Risbey talked about the Summer Programme and was followed by Fal Sarker's short talk.

Steve Gater stepped down from the President's role to take on shared ownership of the Winter Programme with Lynne Heslop. Carole Sobkowiak took on the President's role for the coming year.

In April the Winter Programme was completed and the Summer Programme got into full swing.

May brought about a number of events. Sadly John Turner's wife Gill died suddenly and a number of Club Member attended the Funeral which was a lovely celebration of her life.

40 Entries were received for the Photographic Competition the Field Club ran for Queen Elizabeth 6th Form students.

The first Family Event for some time was organized in the Denes and then on to Willow Road Community Centre in late May. Only a few turned up so further investigation was needed on the advertising plan going forward.



In July the presentation of the Photographic Competition was held with 3 student being presented with prize money for their input and effort. July also brought sad news that Alan Legg had died. He had been a very well-respected Mycology Leader of the club for a number of years. Outings and reports were received throughout the Summer months and input to the monthly newsletter and website.

An additional microphone was purchased for the Winter Meetings following agreement from the Council Members. Club volunteers assisted at the Queen Elizabeth 6th Form Freshers Fair on 12 September. The outcome of this was the opening for a project with the Hopetown Team and the Field Club on the 1825 Railway Celebration.

Arrangements were made with Queen Elizabeth 6th Form College for the Club's Laptop, Projector etc to be stored on the college premises for the start of the Winter Programme.

The Christmas meal at Blackwell Grange was well received although not so many members attended in 2024 so a rethink required for 2025.

I would very much like to thank members for sending reports and information for the monthly newsletters during the past year. It would not be possible for this publication to be circulated without your input.

## **Membership Secretary - Fleur Miles**

On 9 October 2024, I commenced my 6th year in post as Membership Secretary.

I would like to thank all Members for their prompt payment of their subscriptions this winter. As many paid up at the very beginning of collecting in the subscriptions, this enabled me to review the deadline and move it from 31 January 2025 to 31 December 2024. I would like to thank those Members who subsequently paid their subscriptions by the new deadline. The new deadline of 31 December 2024 was largely met by 17 December which meant we were within the Treasurer's timetable, ie all the monies were gathered in before the Club's accounts were submitted to the auditor in early January 2025 for the 5 March 2025 AGM.

In October 2024, the Treasurer took on the responsibility of Gift Aid from Brian Wood. It was decided to put in claims for Gift Aid for the Membership Years of October 2022 to September 2023 and October 2023 to September 2024. I assisted the Treasurer by making a note of the subscriptions paid by each member, the number of winter programme lectures attended by each member each year which would provide a rough estimate of door donations, and whether each member had signed a Gift Aid Declaration. This was a time consuming task as in the early days the Membership Forms and Gift Aid Declarations were separate items where as since 2011, the Gift Aid Declaration has been included on the Membership Form. The Membership Forms which dated from the Year 2000 to the present day also came in three different formats. It was discovered that 80% of the Gift Aid Declarations were over 4 years old with some last signed in 2004.

As part of the Gift Aid claim preparations, I also made a note of how many members attended each winter programme lecture (this has not been done since the year 2017) and made a note of the reasons why Members leave the Club. There are ongoing Field Club Council plans to make contact with inactive Members, to engage with existing Members, and to increase Membership through marketing.

Apart from one member whom we have not heard from as to whether they are going to renew nor not, 5 Annual Members decided to leave/not renew for personal reasons, mobility problems, or due to the Field Club meeting day of Wednesday clashing with the meetings of their other clubs or societies. 1 Honorary Member left as she has moved to a nursing home. We welcomed Dr Margaret Bradshaw as a new Honorary Member on 7 April 2024.

From January 2024 to December 2024, 18 visitors attended the winter programme lectures, including a former member. 3 of the visitors eventually became Members.

This year, as at the time of writing on 20 January 2025, the Membership Total is 54 members. We now have 49 Annual Members, 1 Life Member and 4 Honorary Members. The trend is "downwards" from 61 to 54 people in total.

I would like to thank the Treasurer and General Secretary for their assistance with notifications of BACS payments received and keeping the Membership List and Emailing List up to date.

### **Treasurer - Martin Chisholm**

The accounts are prepared on the receipts and payments method and are for the financial year ending 31 December 2024. Overall, the accounts show a loss on paper of £279.36 compared to a profit of £589.02 in 2023.

Subscription income was up on the previous year due to the sterling efforts of the Membership Secretary in chasing for payment, rather than collecting overdue subs the following year. Subscription income, therefore, is expected to reduce to a normal level in 2025, though overall income is likely to increase due to outstanding Gift Aid claims.



The reduction in expenditure continues to benefit from the digitisation of the Annual report, however two years of web support costs were taken in 2024. The room rental increase funded summer meetings in village halls which are important to maintain member contact throughout the summer.

For a second year, thanks are due to members for providing free talks, and for the generosity of outside speakers in not charging expenses.

As forecast, Sponsorship activities recommenced in 2024 with running the World Around Us photographic competition for QE students with a total prize pot of £175. Expenditure on the family events was modest.

The expected operational income and expenditure for 2025 should tend towards break even. Sponsorship activity may continue with the World Around Us photo competition at Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College and a series of Family Events, though at the time of writing, no firm decisions have yet been made. As previous years, the club is happy to fund sponsorship activity from reserves. Any welcome increase in membership should allow for speaker expenses and increased sponsorship activity.

The Club's reserves policy aims to ensure one year's running costs are covered and remains at a very conservative £5000. This amount is now held in the Business Premium account in order to gain a small amount of interest and to more easily identify the reserve. The balance remains healthy for use to support the aims and objectives of the Club.

Sponsorship projects support the aims of the club and are currently targeted at activities to encourage the involvement of children and families in natural history. The surplus of the Balance over Reserves easily covers any likely expenditure in 2025, including potential sponsorship activity.

The Accounts have been independently audited, with no issues. Thanks again to Ian Hart for his continued contribution to the audit process.

INCOME AND EXPENDITURE ACCOUNT FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31st DECEMBER 2024							
INCOME	2024	2023	EXPENDITURE	2024		2023	
	£	£		£		£	
Annual subscriptions	955.00	780.00	Room Rental	171.00		120.00	
Entrance donations	296.60	265.00	Subscriptions	144.00		144.00	
Donations	-	-			BSBI	39.00	39.00
Field trip fares	-	-			AES	20.00	20.00
Events donations		592.00			YNU	30.00	30.00
Income tax refund	-	-			Durham WLT	30.00	30.00
Interest and Transfers	76.62	48.02			British Pteridological Society	25.00	25.00
			Printing	-		77.00	
			Programmes & Publicity				77.00
			Administrative Costs			-	
			Website	720.00		-	
			Insurance	157.00		157.00	
			Equipment	39.99		6.00	
			Social events expenses			592.00	
			Event expenses	100.59		-	
			Donations	275.00			
TOTAL INCOME	1,328.22	1,685.02					
(Profit)/Loss on year	279.36	- 589.02					
	<u>1,607.58</u>	<u>1,096.00</u>		<u>1,607.58</u>		<u>1,096.00</u>	
<b>BALANCE SHEET AS AT 31<sup>ST</sup> DECEMBER 2024</b>							
<b>Balance at 1st January 2024</b>				<b>Balance at 31st December 2024</b>			
	£			£			
Cash in hand	3.02		Cash in hand	2.62			
Barclays Current A/C	6,972.72		Barclays Current A/C	6,617.14			
Business A/C	5,092.90		Business A/C	5,169.52			
	<u>12,068.64</u>			<u>11,789.28</u>			
			Cheques not yet drawn				
Profit/loss	- 279.36						
Income & Expenditure A/C							
	<u>11,789.28</u>			<u>11,789.28</u>			

## Summer Programme - Derek Risbey

### March 2023

24th Low Coniscliffe - Fal Sarker

### April

13th Low Barnes - Carole Sobkowiak

23rd Deepdale, Barnard Castle - Brian Wood

### May

11th Hawnby - Fleur Miles

14th Skerningham - Sue Weston

18th Farne Islands - John Turner

21st Hurworth Burn Reservoir - Mary Atkinson

25th Willow Road Family Event - Sue Weston

28th Whorlton Village Hall - Indoor Meeting

### June

2nd Finchale Priory - Steve Keeney

4th Bolton on Swale - Lynne Heslop/John Turner

9th The Shawl, Leyburn - Roger & Sue Colley

11th Marske, Richmond - David Selby

18th Brankin Moor Reserve - Jill Cunningham

22nd South Gare - David Barlow/Derek Risbey

25th Croft Village Hall - Indoor Meeting

29th Len Pasture - Steve Gater

### July

16th South Park - Milly Stoney

20th Teesbank Wood - Fal Sarker

23rd Gainford - Indoor Meeting

### August

17th South Park Family Event - Sue Weston

27th Bat Watch Barnard Castle - Ian Bond

### September

3rd Snipe Pond - Carole Sobkowiak

11th Merrybent Wood - Plant Gall Society

24th Gilling West Walk - David Selby

28th Saltholme & Teesmouth John Turner/Brian Wood

Our 2024 summer program, organised by 17 dedicated club members, proved to be an exceptional year, filled with memorable outings and enriching experiences.

Our adventures began with Fal Sarker's Yellow Star of Bethlehem walk along the River Tees at Low Coniscliffe. Following this, President Carole led ten members on an engaging walk through Low-Barnes Nature Reserve, exploring the lake and its bird hides.

One of the most unforgettable experiences was a trip to the Farne Islands, led by John Turner. After a smooth boat journey and a pleasant visit to the main island the return trip became truly magical. Several dolphins accompanied our boat, swimming alongside, leaping and even swimming beneath us, creating a breathtaking display.

Other highlights included:

- A rare Nightjar sighting at Marske, led by David Selby, was captured in a stunning photograph by Fleur
- A fascinating trip to South Gare with guest Dave Barlow who showcased numerous rare dune plants including the elusive Pale Toadflax
- An informative visit to Finchale Priory, led by Steve and Sylvia Keeney, with Steve providing insightful historical context
- A delightful walk along the Shawl at Leyburn in Wensleydale, led by Sue and Roger Colley, where we discovered the uncommon Good King Henry plant
- A botanical exploration of Swaledale with the Y.N.U., where we observed numerous white Butterfly orchids
- An osprey sighting at Hurworth Burn Reservoir during an outing led by Mary Atkinson

Unfortunately, July's heavy rainfall and flooding forced the cancellation of four outings. However, the program continued with Sue Weston's successful second family event in The South Park, offering engaging activities for children. August also brought an intriguing bat watch at Barnard Castle, led by Ian Bond, where participants observed and heard numerous bats along the river.

The program concluded with a fantastic fungus foray to Lord Stones, led by Jill Cunningham, where participants discovered a variety of fungi and enjoyed refreshments.

My sincere gratitude goes to all the members who contributed to the success of the summer programme.

## Winter Programme - Steve Gater/Lynne Heslop

Date	Speaker	Lecture Title	No of Members in Attendance
January 10th	Tom Parkin	Nextdoor Nature	21
January 24th	Keith Gunning	The Maldives - above and below the waves	23
February 14th	Paul Black	Bright Water - What Next?	18
February 28th	Fleur Miles Jill Cunningham	Butterflies Ladybirds	30
March 13th	Joyce Scott	A Nature Miscellany - Little and Large	18
March 27 <sup>th</sup> (AGM)	Falgunee Sarker Derek Risbey	Elm Ridge Summer Programme	24
October 23rd	Steve Keeney	Escomb Saxon Church A Miracle Survival	26
November 6th	Steve Gater	Promoting Members' Photos Evening 18 Dec 2024	23
November 20th	David Selby	A Sticky Story Nature's Adhesives	25
November 27th	Cait Barratt Claire Skaife	Hopetown Project - Railway Walk	22
December 4th	Jill Cunningham	Curious Fungi	21
December 18th	Steve Gater and 13 other Members	Members' Photos	20

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## **Editor - Lynne Heslop**

Thank you to all the Council Members and Section Organisers for submitting their reports, which always make for interesting and informative reading.

A special mention should be made for the stunning photo of the Nightjar on the front cover. This is a very rare nocturnal bird that is rarely seen but was spotted by the eagle eyed Jill Cunningham on a summer outing to Marske near Richmond. Fortunately Fleur, our resident photographer was on hand to capture it so well on camera.

## **Section Organisers' Reports**

### **Archeology - Steve Keeney**

Another year, another annual report! The time between reports seems to speed by more quickly every year! I would like to thank Programme Organisers, Council Members and Section Leaders for the hard work they do in supporting the Club and its activities.

Special thanks to all walk leaders who take the time and trouble to recce and lead outings for club members. It is now universally recognised that taking time out to spend time in the natural world has many physical and mental health benefits. As well as the companionship and joy of discovering and recording natural history in landscapes shaped by the historical heritage of our area.

I gave my Archaeology Section leaders presentation on "Finchale Priory and St Godric" in last winter's programme. In the summer programme I led an outing on Sunday 2nd June to Finchale Priory and Cocken woods. Finchale Priory is a favourite place of mine to visit with the atmospheric remains of the Priory in a beautiful location alongside the River Wear.



## **Finchale Priory**

Do you have a favourite place or walk you could share with members? Please consider leading an outing in the Summer Programme.

On the 23rd of October my Section Leaders presentation was on another favourite place, Escomb Saxon Church. The church in 1882 was in such a state of disrepair it came within weeks of being demolished. Escomb's national importance as one of the few remaining Saxon Period churches in the Country was recognised by Reverend Robert Eli Hoopell. The Reverend then led a successful campaign to save and restore Escomb church. Another debt we owe to the foresight and campaigning of individuals and Societies such as ours to preserve and enhance our historical and natural history heritage.

As a result of Planning Law legislation which led to an Archaeological investigation at Low Coniscliffe, prior to a housing development; a prehistoric henge monument was identified. The 45 metre diameter henge is understood to be one of a series of henges

near river crossings along connected ancient trackways. Site information boards have been erected by developers Robertson Homes alongside a footpath near the stone carved “Low Conniscliffe” entrance sign.

It's also good to report that in 2024 the cluster of 3 henges at Thornborough have now been gifted to the nation and all can now be visited by the public. Thornborough Archaeology Group have exciting plans starting 2025 to undertake community- centered archaeology projects to enhance our understanding of this remarkable prehistoric site. Follow Thornborough Archaeology group's facebook page for more information.

## **Botany - David Selby**

We started off the year with the New Year Plant Hunt. More than a dozen hunts took place with a wide variety of species in flower noted, some in great proliferation. This was in stark contrast to the event in 2023 when relatively few finds were recorded.

The most common flowers found around Darlington were Daisy, Groundsel (in profusion), Shepherds Purse and Annual Meadow Grass and a mass of Winter Heliotrope in Melsonby Churchyard. This despite the land being badly churned up when some yew trees were cut down in the early months of the previous year.

Of the Club outings, that to South Gare was particularly memorable. It was led by David Barlow, the North Yorkshire Botany Recorder, and he identified some beauties. The find of the day was a Proliferous Pink, *Petrorhagia prolifera*, a member of the Campion family only found there and in one other site in Norfolk.

Other significant finds there included Sea Milkwort *Glaux maritima*, Crow Garlic *Allium vineale*, Blue Fleabane *Erigeron acris*, Lyme Grass *Leymus arenarius* and Pale Toadflax *Linarea repens*.

The weather had a significant impact on the planned summer programme and a number of events had to be cancelled.



From the various outings, botanical highlights at least in our part of the world included:

- In Hurworth Burn we came across Celery-leaved Buttercup *Rununculus scleratus*, Leopard's Bain *Doronicum pardalianches* and Spring Cinquefoil *Potentilla tabernaemontani*
- A visit to Len Pasture in Swaledale with the Yorkshire Naturalists' Union (YNU) where about 50 greater Butterfly Orchids *Platanthera chlorantha*, were found, along with three types of Ladies Mantle *Alchemilla vulgaris* agg., Pale Ladies Mantle *Alchemilla xanthochlora* and Southern Ladies Mantle *Alchemilla filicaulis*. Unfortunately, a second YNU event at Askham Bog had to be cancelled because of the excessively wet weather
- At Hawnby in the North York Moors we found Dusky Cranesbill *Geranium phaeum* and Climbing Corydalis *Ceratocarpus clavicolate*
- On Leyburn Shawl unusual finds included Hairy Rockcress *Arabis hirsute*, Rue-leaved Saxifrage *Saxifraga tridactylites* and Musk Thistle, *Carduus nutans*
- At Redcar Field Reserve we found Marsh Lousewort *Pedicularis palustris*, Fen Bedstraw *Galium uliginosum* and Blunt-flowered Rush, *Juncus subnodulosus*
- At Tees Bank Wood we found Common Cow Wheat *Melanopyrum pratense*, a white Giant Bellflower *Campanula lactifolia*, Herb Paris *Paris quadrifolia*, Wood Vetch *Vicia sylvatica*, Wood Speedwell *Veronica montana* and a Black Poplar *Populus nigra*
- Finally an unusual anomaly. Spear thistles are very common but sometimes show a deformity in which the stems are fused together. One was found on Leyburn Shawl.

Many thanks are due to Mary Atkinson, Jill Cunningham and Derek Risbey for their invaluable help and photographs in compiling this report.



Fasciated Spear Thistle



Dusky  
Cranesbill

## **Geology - Mary Atkinson**

Having been newly appointed to Geology, over past months there have been only exploratory trips to personally reconnoitre the north-east Durham coastline, following my local research into its ancient history. This is where I plan to lead a group in midsummer, who may also enjoy the exceptional botany that thrives on magnesian limestone soil, for which this area is well-known.

## **Lepidoptera - Fleur Miles**

15 March 2024 marked one year of my being the Lepidoptera Section Organiser. So, at the time of writing - 26 January 2025 - I have been in post nearly two years.

On 28 February 2024, I delivered my first ever long lecture. I gave an illustrated talk about Butterflies on 17 species which had either been photographed by Jill Cunningham on her own personal walks, by me when on holiday in Normandy, on my own personal walks or on 9 Field Club outings during 2023.

I recorded my first sighting of a butterfly in 2024 on 22 March: it was a Small Tortoiseshell in my backyard.

I carried out a recce of Hawnby Hill Crag on 27 April. Although it had started out as being a sunny day, it quickly clouded over requiring me to wear many layers to keep warm. Luckily on the day of the walk - 11 May 2024 - we were blessed with a beautiful blue sky day, a gentle breeze, great 360 degrees landscape views from the top of the crag and sightings of bluebell woods in the surrounding countryside. I led 6 members on a walk around Hawnby Hill Crag with a view to try and get a sighting of the elusive Duke of Burgundy butterfly: Hawnby is one of its few strongholds. We saw Small Tortoiseshell, Red Admiral, Peacock and Green Veined White butterflies and a Looper caterpillar. Jill Cunningham also pointed out Common Case Bearer Moth cases, Red Backed Carrion Beetles, and the Pill Millipede. The best moth sighting, pointed out to us by Jill, was Long Horn Moths dancing in the sunshine in an oak tree. Eventually, in the woodland below the crag, at approximately 3:20pm, three of us had a fleeting glimpse of a Duke of Burgundy butterfly. We also saw one of the butterfly's food plants the cowslip, the other being primroses. Unfortunately, we were unable to get a photo of the Duke of Burgundy butterfly. It was felt that next time we visit Hawnby Hill Crag, we need to visit the middle layer of the crag, ie the open, sunny shrubby area between the woodland at the base of the crag and the summit of the crag. However, it was nice to see the wood sorrel in flower in the woodland along with Climbing Corydalis and Greater Stitchwort.

On 13 November 2024, I had a meeting on a nice sunny day in South Park, with Lauren Gibson, the Darlington Borough Council Ecologist. She was compiling an Environmental Impact Report for Skerningham.

She had gained information from the Environmental Records Information Centre but was seeking our assistance just in case we had any records of White Letter Hair Streak butterflies which had not been reported to ERIC. Unfortunately, my predecessor, Brian Wood, had not inherited any butterfly records from Cliff Evans. I had seen the butterfly from Coniscliffe Road Bridge over the Baydale Beck near the pub of the same name and Jill had seen it at Westpark, but no-one had seen it at Skerningham. This meeting highlighted the need to keep records or if you have the time to record the butterflies or any other species onto ERIC's website as Local Authorities do request information from ERIC. Paul Stevens and Stephen McAvoy gave us a talk about this on 8 November 2023.

I would like to thank Jill for her assistance.

## **Mammals and Herptiles - Ian Bond**

This seemed to have been the year for urban mammals, at least as far as the Field Club reports went. Chief among these were the Otters and none more so than the mother and cub that decided that South Park and Victoria Embankment were the place to go fishing. The mother would repeatedly catch and eat crayfish just metres away from onlookers and as far as I could tell from the one time that I chanced upon a group of people watching them, they displayed no obvious signs of being the least bit bothered by their audience.

Later in the year Otters penetrated even further into Darlington when one was seen on West Beck by the allotments, just off Bates Avenue and another, or probably the same one, was filmed in a garden near Aston Terrace. I also found otter spraint on a rock near the Skerne Bridge, which is about as urban as you can get.

Much to my surprise, it appears that Badgers are also now mustelids about town. I have never found signs of Badger in the town itself in my 65 years as a resident, the closest being footprints at Skerningham and latrines at Stressholme. However information from John Barker and Sue Colley confirmed that there are some resident in the West end of the

town and that, at least on occasion, they pay their respects at East Cemetery.

Not to be outdone by these metropolitan mustelids, deer have also been spotted in the town with one in the grounds of St Augustine's primary and one right outside the Dolphin Centre (the Dolphin Centre does of course have a strict policy on not admitting deer). That most urban of deer, the Muntjac, has also made a comeback this year. A decade or more ago they were starting to colonise several locations in the North East, but especially in the triangle of countryside between Darlington, Stockton and Sedgefield. Then, according to British Deer Society records they seemed to have completely disappeared from the North East. Now they are back and I am told that the deer chased out of Teesside Airport to avoid potential collisions with aircraft were Muntjac. (That would be collisions on the ground; potential collisions between deer and aircraft in the air generally only happen with Reindeer). I wonder how long it will be before Muntjac become a feature in Darlington's suburbs?

Other than rats and mice, perhaps the most traditionally urban of mammals are some of the bat species. It seems to have been a poor year for bats, due in part to the miserable summer weather, which will almost certainly have impacted on juvenile recruitment as well as adult survival rates. One bat that probably was struggling earlier in the year was seen by Martin Uitenbosch feeding over the ponds in his garden at two in the afternoon in February. That a bat would be on the wing in February is not that unusual, especially as the weather had been particularly mild, but that it was out in the middle of the day is and likely indicates that this was a very hungry bat.

The Daubenton's bat count along the Skerne through South Park that I do every August for the Bat Conservation Trust's National Bat Monitoring Programme was only slightly down on the usual level of bat activity. In contrast, on the three occasions that I looked this year, there was very little Daubenton's bat activity over the lake in South Park, which is usually buzzing with them. Possibly more concerning still, there were no bats whatsoever on the transect that I walked through the Denes, though this was the first time that I have done that route so no bats may be the usual state of affairs there for all I know.

Happily, the Field Club's bat walk had much more positive results. For a change we went to Barnard Castle and in between the rain got a

decent showing of bats. Noctules were feeding over the river all the time we were there and a single Soprano Pipistrelle was constantly flying around the trees (this was after all the first place in County Durham where Soprano Pipistrelle was identified, back in 1997). Daubenton's bats appeared a little later but were constant over the river once they arrived and a Common Pipistrelle put in a brief appearance at the end to give us four species in total. However the most intriguing observation was of what appeared to be a small Noctule that was echolocating at a little higher frequency than the other Noctules as it flew past upstream. It was a brief view and it didn't come back to enable me to properly judge its size against the definite Noctules (which looked enormous) but it could have been a Leisler's bat, of which there has only been one other record in the County as far as I am aware. However extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, so perhaps we should go there again next year

Finally, on the subject of bats, Fal Sarker sent me a photo of a Brown Long-eared bat which was found on the floor in South Parade, Croft. On Fal's advice it was kept warm, then on the evening placed on a high ledge under the bridge from where it crawled away, so hopefully a happy ending. I believe this is the first record of Brown Long-eared for Croft, though it's not unexpected as it does occur in other locations in the borough along the Tees.

The Field Club has produced very few records of amphibians this year but the Great Crested Newt that turned up in Margaret Rolland's garden appeared to want to take life as an urban newt to a new level. In Margaret's words, "I was surprised to find a newt sitting on my low white plastic front step. I was concerned that opening the front door would hit the newt, but no, I stepped over and into the porch, shut the door - and then had to step out as I had left the keys in the outside - then back in again and closed the door. The newt just sat motionless."

What with amphibians, badgers and riparian mammals moving in with us, it's like Darlington is becoming the setting for a sequel to "Wind in the Willows".

## Marine Biology - Carole Sobkowiak

We are seeing a big decline of wildlife in our seas and Bex Lynam has written a superb article about this entitled “A Vision for the North Sea” which was published in the winter edition of the Yorkshire Wildlife magazine. Bex is the North Sea Marine Advocacy Officer based in York.

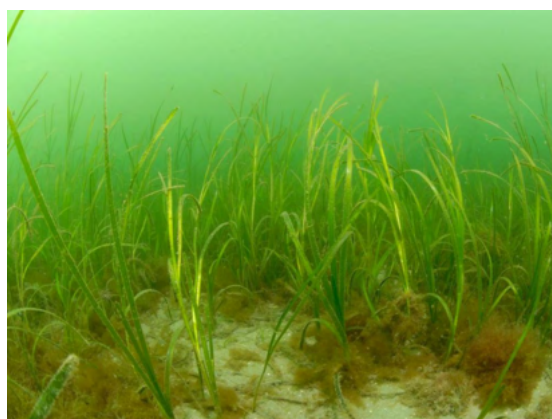
There are 37.4 million tonnes of organic carbon stored in just 10cm of seabed mud in the North Sea which covers 14,000 square kilometres.

The Blue Carbon Report describes how physical disturbances to the seabed such as bottom trawling and offshore developments are threats to carbon storage. Disturbing seabed habitats can release large amounts of carbon into the atmosphere worsening climate change. Seagrass meadows provide a habitat for animals and also clean the surrounding water.

Various Wildlife Trusts are calling on governments to strengthen protection for more blue carbon store.

Most Marine Protected Areas (MPA's) were not designed to protect blue carbon which could threaten biodiversity goals. The recommendations therefore are as follows:

- Allocate more funding to restore habitats including seagrass beds and salt marshes.
- Support research and monitoring of blue carbon dynamics.
- Add seagrass and salt marsh to the Greenhouse Gas Registry to track and monitor emission.



## Mycology - Jill Cunningham



Most fungi seem to have flourished this year despite the bouts of extremely dry, hot, or wet weather. Highlights included an unusual polypore at the base of a log pile which keyed out as *Polyporus ciliatus*, a rare find on our Deepdale meet in April.

St. George's Mushrooms, *Calocybe gambosa*, are an early species, typically fruiting just after St. George's Day and were recorded during the Hawnby (NYM) meet in May, as well as *Melogramma spiniferum* a less common bark spot on a fallen Beech trunk. In June we found Persistent Waxcaps, *Hygrocybe acutoconica* and a dung fly infected with *Entomophthora muscae* at Leyburn, plus Dryad's Saddles at Marske.

West Cemetery continued to come up with new finds, amongst them were the micro-fungi - *Clonostachys buxi* a box leaf infection and the fine black mats of *Kirschsteiniotelia aethiops* along with the pored resupinate *Ceriporia purpurea* on a fallen Sycamore branch, plus the slime mould 'blobs' of *Fuligo septica* on a woodchip pile.

Fallen trunks and logs at Elm Ridge proved to be very fruitful this year giving us another boost of the Dryad's Saddles, sturdy little Blackfoot





Polypores, *Polyporus leptoccephalus*, hairy ginger mats of the Firerug Inkcaps, *Coprinellus domesticus* and swarms of Lemon Disco, *Bisporella citrina*.

Over 60 species were recorded at the Fungus Foray at Lordstones and although the Yellow Fans, *Spathularia flavida*, had withered a bit in the wind since my recce the Bonnet Mould, *Spinellus fusiger*, was still in display on a group of Yellowleg Bonnets and very pretty for a parasitic mould!

## **Ornithology - John Turner**

Bird reports from club outings were rare this year but included Little White Egrets, flocks of Fieldfares and Red Wings in the local fields and the usual common species. However one citing supported by a photograph was of a Nightjar resting in a tree near Marske in Swale Dale on June 11th. This was a rare bird for this area and due to its excellent camouflage could easily be missed.

The Club enjoyed two bird oriented outings to the Farne Islands on May 18 and an evening visit to the reserve at Bolton on Swale on June 4. The Farnes had good numbers of Puffins and Guillemots but had no Arctic Terns and reduced numbers of Razor Bills, Eider Ducks and other species of terns. We were told that the birds of the Farnes were badly affected by bird flu in the previous years.

Information from magazines published by RSPB and BTO have recorded serious reductions of many bird species during the last five years probably due to lack of food for farmland birds such as Yellowhammers, Skylarks and Thrushes. In general statistics covering farmland and garden birds show that in the last 5 years 12 species have reduced in numbers between 30 and 66 % in mainly farmland while 8 species have increased. These are the Crows except Jays, Tits including Long-tailed Tits and Pigeons, except Collard Doves. In

general the species that have increased are garden birds that can benefit from bird feeders. One species, Blackcaps have changed their migration patterns to over winter in England to take advantage of bird feeding. It seems that birds dependent on feeding on farmland are starving in winter while garden feeders are thriving.

It's not all bad news about birds as while many of our resident birds are failing or moving north to avoid the effects of global warming others are arriving from the south for the same reason. During the last ten or so years Little White Egrets have spread to live as far north as Scotland and are breeding in many areas, sometimes sharing nest places with Grey Herons. We are now seeing increasing numbers of Great White Egrets, Cattle Egrets and Spoonbills nesting in southern England and gradually moving north. Not so long ago you had to go to southern France and Cyprus to see these. Others are exploring southern England and East Anglia but not yet nesting regularly, such as Glossy Ibis, Purple Herons, Bee Eaters and Hoopoe.

We are entering an interesting time for birding with many opportunities to study the changing bird population.

## **Projects - Carole Sobkowiak**

### **Historic Blackwell Parkland**

We have supported Michael and Angela Green with their enormous efforts to save and restore the Historic Blackwell Parkland.

Previously this Parkland was intensely managed and did not give opportunities for wildlife to flourish.

The restoration has provided opportunity to reverse the loss of biodiversity which has occurred since 1971 and in keeping with the Environment Act 2021 for Biodiversity net gain it has created a naturalistic landscape. There are now wildflower meadows to allow recovery of nature in this Ancient Historic Parkland which dates back to 1693.

The Club has done surveys which have contributed towards this restoration and advised about the preservation of special trees eg. Abies Grandis/Grand Fir



The pond has also had work done on it and so we are looking for the great crested newts.

We are deeply indebted to Michael and Angela for all their efforts over several years. We are delighted to congratulate them as they received the prestigious

“Stronger Communities Award” from Darlington Borough Council in the Autumn of 2024.

The Historic Blackwell Parkland is a place to be cherished and enjoyed by the community of Darlington.

### **Elm Ridge Methodist Church**

We have been invited by Susan and Roger Colley to become involved with Church members who have undertaken a project to enhance the Nature Conservation of the woodland which drops down to the River Tees at the rear of the Church.

Advice has been sought from the Durham Wildlife Trust and initial funding has been donated by a Charitable Trust at the Community Foundation Tyne & Wear & Northumberland “*for development of relic*

*woodland and wetland on the premises for ecological and community benefits”.*

Members of the Club have made recordings and help as volunteers to clear the ground. Some exciting fungi have been found including one with spiderlings



Thanks to Susan Colley for the photographs



