

**The South Yorkshire Branch Residential trip to Northumberland**  
**9-11<sup>th</sup> November 2017** By Mark Dudley MBNA

The day was set 9th November as fourteen BNA members set off for the pleasures of the Northumbrian coast. A place last visited in 2014 (see newsletter Winter 2014-2015 issue number 9) where the group had seen 84 species over 4 days, so to have this as a target in three days was going to be a challenge, even if the group were more experienced than the last visit.



St Mary's Island photo P. Rutherford

St Mary's island was the destination for us all to meet at noon, where after a cuppa and a sandwich we headed towards the lighthouse. After refreshments the group did a bit of bird spotting around the lighthouse, finding amongst the rocks Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*), Purple sandpipers (*Calidris maritima*), Redshank (*Tringa totanus*) and a Grey seal (*Halicho erusgrypus*) with its long nose which it kept bobbing up and down. Further around the lighthouse was a Rock pipit (*Anthus petrosus*) spotted by Rachel, with its olive-green feathers.



Redshank, Purple Sandpiper and Rock pipit by S. Rutherford

The group then moved back along the front where Di spotted a Herring gull with yellow legs, (*Larus michahellis*) - Yellow-legged gull, it was sat on a rock showing its white head and other features which make it distinct from the Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) and Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*), it also gave the group its first new bird of the weekend compared with previous visits.

Adjacent to the rocky shore is a more sheltered area where birds can shelter when the tide is in or blustier than today, but unlike previous visits it was a little sparse of perching birds. Probably because sat in a bush, ever watchful was, a Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*). There were however a few Meadow pipits (*Anthus pratensis*) and both Pied (*Motacilla alba*) and Grey Wagtails (*Motacilla cinerea*) around. Most of the group got a glimpse as it flew westerly of a lesser spotted woodpecker (*Dendro copos minor*), with its shorter tail and less undulating flight than the Greater spotted woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*). I wonder if it had come over from France or Belgium that afternoon?

Due to renovations at the Premier inn, the group were forced to eat at a different establishment to the Brewer's Fayre for our evening meals, so we all went to Toby where they served a four-meat carvery with "ruffled roasties" and for pudding plum and damson crumble with jugs full of custard, delicious. There were other puddings available, tempting other members of the congregation, even after we had all pigged out a large carvery, must be the fresh Northumbrian air that gave us all an appetite. In total 33 birds for the day, 3 new added to the Northumberland list.

The Premier inn was open the next morning for breakfast and after a hearty meal we set off for Cresswell ponds. Some of the group went to the bird hide where they spotted Red breasted merganser (*Mergus serrator*) and Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*). Untypical for the season in sheltered areas on the path were Tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*) and Viper bugloss (*Echium vulgare*) still in flower. The rest of the group went down the road and got good sightings of Stonechat (*Saxicola rubicola*) using the fence posts as watch points, whilst the other of the pair took to feeding in the long grass below. As we walked up the road, we saw a Weasel (*Mustel anivalis*) dash across, not once but twice, but the speed at which it ran meant unfortunately most people missed it. Not so for the many Pink footed geese (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) in the field and the flocks that flew past on the horizon. But the star of the show was probably the Merlin (*Falco columbarius*), a small grey bird that flew low over the grassland that most were able to get great sightings of. After this we all went to the Drift cafe for a much-deserved coffee with cheese and chive scones.



Snipe and Stonechat by S. Rutherford

After a short break we all headed in our cars to East Chevington. We went looking for Slavonian grebe (*Podiceps auritus*) as they had been reported along with Twite (*Linaria flavirostris*) and Shore lark (*Eremophila alpestris*) and whilst we saw none of these, using the many telescopes that had suddenly appeared at the side of the hide we found several blobs that turned out to be Scaup (*Aythya marila*), Long tailed duck (*Clangula hyemalis*) and just before we left Whooper swans (*Cygnus cygnus*). It was just a shame they were so far away to get the scope filled up with their beauty, so we all could really appreciate some rarely seen birds.

Boulmer beach was the next stop where amongst a large mixed flock of Sanderling (*Calidris alba*), Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) and Ringed plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*) were bar tailed godwit. The Bar Tailed Godwits (*Limosa lapponica*) are frequent to this area, different from the Black Tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*) in being slightly smaller in leg size particularly above the knee, no wing bars visible when in flight, a white triangle up the back instead of a square white rump, a bar tailed hence its name and a long slightly up curved bill. Many of the group got to see a Curlew (*Numenius arquata*) standoff, which would have been one of those highlights on a nature channel documentary but here we were watching a bit of unusual behaviour. The first Curlew ran at the second Curlew who turned to face it just before it ran into it. They then kept a ruler's width apart and started to parallel walk up to the shore; picking up seaweed to what I assume was an act of who was the more dominant. This happened for a couple of minutes and then the aggressor hesitated to pick up a piece of kelp, the Curlew it was attacking picked up a lovely long piece of kelp as if to say I will hit you with this and the act was over. The aggressor backed down and like the sugar plum fairy side stepped away leaving the other Curlew to search for ragworm on the beach its dominance had established.

The last stop of the day was Barter books in Alnwick (pronounced 'anick') once a railway station but only now housing several model trains that run above the bookcases, it is one if not the best second-hand book shop in the country. It's famous for 'Keep calm and carry on' poster which was thought to have been lost after the war

but was found in a box of books sixty years later. Its inviting fires which many of us took to using, was more like a library where many of us got a book and sat in front of whilst we warmed from our day on the beach. I have bought many a book from here in my previous visits but for the first time I headed for a cafe for a much-needed hot chocolate, first time in three visits I actually made it there. I for once came away with no purchase, but wished I had viewed the microscopy books if not for a later conversation with Bob in the Widdrington Arms. This establishment provided great food along with cask ales, and large glasses of wine (how big was that glass Jean), it was just a shame I was too full for the Twix cheesecake. But with our bellies full I think the group was all ready for their beds so we all set off for home. On the way home that night some of the cars were lucky enough to view Barn owls (*Tyto alba*) along the roadside. Thank you to all the drivers that day who transported us around. In total 57 birds for the day, 7 birds added to the Northumberland list.



Catherine and David relaxing in Barter Books photo by M. Dudley



Gulls at Tynemouth Park photo by M. Dudley

The next morning being Saturday Chris had negotiated a 15min lay-in which I think we all appreciated, if not for the extra time to pack our bags before check-out. The first stop was the Gull pond at Tynemouth Park. When I was a teacher, I would often create lesson plans, with the hope that I could create something that would stretch the better learners in the group but not leave behind the novices. Gulls are not for everyone; the majority of bird watchers are happy to identify Black headed (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) from a Herring from a Lesser black backed but when it comes to ageing gulls then most if not all turn off. But we are naturalists of the South Yorkshire group and we will fight them on the beaches, so with the never surrender attitude on Armistice day Steve and Pauline had organised a lesson plan to perfection. The scene was set with a pond full of gulls of all different ages and with the superb pamphlet they had created, we as a group began picking out the adult from the 1st, 3rd, 4th and a little later on 2nd winter Herring gulls. With that under our belt some of the group even got into ageing Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*) using the bill and blue feather patch. It was one of the highlights of the weekend, well done S&P. Normally a Sparrow hawk (*Accipter nisus*) fly through would be a highlight but it was a foot note on this occasion.

Briar dene is another one of those inlets where migrating birds can be found taking shelter, and it would not be uncommon to have found Fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*) or Redwing (*Turdus iliacus*) here amongst the trees and scrub, but that was not one of those days. There were however a few perching birds to add to the list which included Long tailed tit (*Aegithalos caudatus*), Greenfinch (*Carduelis chloris*), Bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*), and magnificent views of Gold crest (*Regulus regulus*) and a fleeting glimpse of a Common redpoll (*Acanthis flammea*), well for some of us at least, unfortunately not the author.

The final stop of the little adventure was Seaton Sluice, a magnificent view over the sea past the mermaid and witch on the swing. Unlike the start of the trip where the Eiders (*Somateria mollissima*) flew off, many got to see them floating on the sea, along with a flotilla of Common scoter (*Melanitta nigra*) and a couple of Red throated diver (*Gavia stellata*).

In total 42 birds for the day, 6 birds added to the Northumberland list

The group finished their 3-day adventure at Castaway's cafe, where many of us had a large bowl of soup followed by a slice of cake. Thanks, were given to S&P for a wonderful weekend by Chris Fitt on behalf of all the group thanking them for all the hard-work that went into the preparation, organisation and all the knowledge shared by Chairman Steve throughout the different reserves visited. The target had been 84, to which we only fell short by 2, but that was an achievement to get so close and brings the total of birds seen in the area in 3 visits to 106. I would like to thank all those that contributed to the list and calling out the birds spotted. What a wonderful few day we had, the weather was great, the food was great, the company was great, and the birds were alright.