South Yorkshire Branch Newsletter Winter 2020/21

Editor Pauline Rutherford M.B.N.A. Issue number 33

Winter Berries by Pauline Rutherford

The Virus Didn't Stop Us!

Pauline Rutherford

Who would have thought as we were all getting over Christmas last year, we would be about to experience a pandemic flu virus? Well, as you all know it wasn't an ordinary flu virus; it brought the whole world to a standstill with over 63 million cases and over 1.5 million deaths worldwide. Two lockdowns, and different tier levels resulting in restrictions stopping us from going to the pub, out for a meal, getting our hair cut and more importantly not seeing our friends and family for most of the year!

But South Yorkshire are made of sterner stuff and we weren't to be beaten! We organised a few things to keep in touch, and here is a summary of them.

Quizzes and Newsletters

I organised a few things to test our "little grey cells" – a few photographic quizzes with sections of birds for you to guess the identity of, a natural history crossword and a colour block quiz. I got you all listing your garden sightings and sending them to me to make a special "Lockdown Newsletter". All of these were very well patronized (perhaps you had nothing else to do!!)

Rule of Six Meetings

Once the Government allowed us to meet up again, albeit in a small group, we began meeting locally to look at birds, nature in a village and fungi; then Mr. Johnson stopped us by sending us into lockdown again! However, everyone who attended them enjoyed them.

Zoom Meetings

A new venture – entering the techno world and starting our own 'virtual' meetings on Zoom. Steve did a presentation of a few things he picked up on a walk around Thorpe Hesley. It was difficult to see the detail of the things he was showing us so, he did a handout and sent it to you all which had good feedback. The next meeting included a quiz from Mark Dudley.

Species of the Week

Several of you have been sending Steve your unusual sightings so he can use them on Species of the Week, and again this has had very good feedback. Please, keep them coming!

As I write this, none of us know how long the virus will keep affecting our lives we can only hope 2021 is a better year and we get back to normal soon.

A View from A Comfy Chair

By the Chairman

Trees! The rush to plant 30,000ha of new plantations every year by 2025 is the government's target to help offset the climate crisis that we are in. A number of questions come to mind with this –

1. Where are all of these saplings coming from?
2. Will they be "nice trees" or "productive timber trees"?
3. Who will be looking after them once they are in the ground i.e., watering them?
4. How long will it take to counter the amount of energy it takes in transporting the saplings and preparing the area for them to be planted?
5. How long will these trees be allowed the live before they are felled as a crop?
6. How much carbon will that have stored?
7. What land is available to plant these trees on?
8. Should we be using uninteresting areas such as peat bogs and upland grass areas to grow these trees on?
9. Who should be making the decision above?

I have an idea, let's just leave a field without any management and see how long it takes for a woodland to grow unattended! We could also stop the destruction of wildflower meadows, meandering rivers, ancient woodlands and veteran trees, stop buying peat-based products and think about another point – biodiversity.

Sorry for the rant.

Old Oak Tree in Riddlesworth, Suffolk by S. Rutherford

Six Go “Abroad” in Thorpe Hesley

By Trish MacDuff ABNA

On 9th October we used the pandemic's Rule of Six to meet up for a ramble around Thorpe Hesley. After weeks of lockdown since March it certainly felt as good as being abroad. We met in the churchyard of Holy Trinity Church. I do love a churchyard not only for its tranquility but its wildlife, and this one didn’t disappoint with its offerings.

Thorpe Hesley Churchyard, S. Rutherford

The first tree we gave our attention to was the splendid Wych Elm (also known as Scots Elm or Scotch Elm). Its name is nothing to do with witches, but from the old English *wice* and *wic,* probably coming from the Germanic *wik* meaning bend. This wood is very pliable and bendy, very hardy and easy to grow, living for up to 300 years, Recently, they have become victim of Dutch elm disease, so have become rarer, with many having been felled. The disease mainly killed mature specimens and prevented new ones from growing. Dutch elm disease is caused by a member of the sac fungi affecting elm trees, spread by elm bark beetles.

This particular wych elm has a wonderful example of beetle galleries exposed from under its bark. The insect lays its eggs at the centre of this gallery, and after they hatch, the larvae bore their way out making these parallel tunnels. They pupate at the end of the tunnels, where they emerge as adults. When the insects leave their refuge, they leave behind wonderful patterns in the bark which shows where they have moved around, like exquisite miniature art.

Beetle tracks in the bark, S. Rutherford

Next, we paid attention to the Irish yew - *Taxus baccata fastigiata.* It was originally discovered in County Fermanagh in 1780 and is considered a mutant form of the common yew, *Taxus baccata.* The needles of the Irish yew grow around the twig, unlike the common yew where it grows in rows. All parts of the yew are toxic, apart from the red flesh of its berry, the aril. Birds are able to safely eat the berries, ejecting the poisonous seed. They will be eaten by birds such as the thrush, blackbird and redwing. The red berry is a modified cone (the yew being a conifer). No fungus will attack a yew, due to its antifungal properties. Two chemotherapy drugs were originally developed from yew trees – Docetaxel (Taxotere) was first made from the needles European yew tree, and Pacilitaxel (Taxol) was made from the bark of the Pacific yew.

We could see a row of lime trees, which at one time would have lined the path to the school. Lime is a man-made hybrid, useful as it is fast growing, and can often be seen growing in avenues at stately homes and mansions. The buds and leaves grow in pairs, the bud resembles a tiny boxing glove, with its separate "thumb" and the leaves are heart shaped.

Lime Trees and Japanese White Pine, S. Rutherford

Outside the church was an example of a Japanese white pine, *Pinus parviflora glauca.* This pine is native to Japan and Korea, so will probably have been brought into the country by a collector.

Next, we looked at the aspen – *Populus tremulus*. Its leaf stalks (petioles) are flattened, which catch the wind giving the tree the appearance of shimmering leaves, and its name of quaking aspen. The trunks often have diamond shaped pores, called lenticels. Buds spiral around the twig and are very closed pressed to the twig. Its wood is light and strong, and was used in boatmaking for paddles and oars, besides surgical splints, and papermaking. Its low flammability also makes it suitable for matches as it burns slowly. Because the tree is hardy, and regenerates quickly, it is important in the role in the production of renewable energy. It often colonizes areas after fire or clearance cutting, either by seeding or sending out suckers. It is a pioneer species, which needs bare wet soil, when it will reproduce prolifically.

We saw one solitary parasol mushroom *Macroleiota procera.* Its stipe (stalk) is thin, the surface has a scaley appearance similar to snakeskin, and the immature cap is egg shaped. As it matures, the cap becomes flat with a chocolate brown umbo (the raised area in the centre of the cap) that has a leathery feel. The spore print is white, and this mushroom has a nutty smell.


Leaf petiole from Black Poplar and Parasol mushrooms, Trish Kril

We walked away from the churchyard, seeing a large are with trees that had sprung up over the years. These trees were completely unmanaged, were tall and straggly, and not looking very healthy. As they cut off the light to anything growing below, there was little diversity of plants, and nothing much could compete with the trees. Many of these trees were silver birch, a pioneer species which prepare the ground for plants that follow on afterwards. After a relatively short life compared to other trees (a silver birch might live for 50 – 60 years, as compared to an oak which can live up to a thousand years) the trees will die and fungus will assist in it breaking down, returning nutrients to the ground which will benefit the trees that grow after them.

Further along we saw a sycamore, where we could see the leaves had been attacked by tar spot fungus. These do indeed look like large black spots of tar and can be seen on sycamores and maples in late summer and autumn, but does not affect the long-term health of the tree. The fungus overwinters in the fallen leaf debris, and once the temperatures rise again active spores are released, thus continuing the cycle.

We saw several oak trees and remarked that this year had been a bumper year for acorns. Many trees go through cycles of producing either very little fruit or an extra-large harvest, and this year seemed to have been exceptionally good for acorns. They provide welcome food for squirrels and jays, both of whom will bury acorns with the intention come back to feed on them later. In the year. Many are left in the ground, the ones that the squirrels' plant are unlikely to germinate as they leave teeth marks and leave the acorn susceptible to rotting and dying, whereas those planted intact by the jay have a chance of growing.

We saw an assortment of galls on the backs of the leaves and twigs, mainly on the oak, which included smooth gall, knopper gall, silk button gall, pea gall, and artichoke gall, nail gall.


Cola nut and pea galls, Trish Kril

Close by, we could see brambles. These can act as “nurseries” to developing young oak saplings, the prickly leaves and thorns preventing them being nibbled by mammals. Hawthorn and blackthorn both have spikey twigs which can act in a similar protective way. There were several examples of brambles which looked to be exhibiting beautiful shades of autumn colour – the colouration was in fact violet bramble rust fungus.

We considered Hooper's Rule on dating hedgerows: he suggested that the age of a hedge can be roughly estimated by counting the number of different woody species in a 30-yard stretch and multiplying by 110 years. Max Hooper published his formula back in 1974. He recommended that this should be used only as a rule of thumb.

We saw several species that suggested the hedgerow we observed was ancient. Field maple is the UK s only native maple, it is slow to grow and often indicates a hedge is old. Other species we saw included hawthorn, hazel, and blackthorn. Hedgerows were important not only as boundaries and barriers for livestock, but they provided both food and shelter for many different species. It could offer leaves, flower, nectar, pollen, seeds, berries and nuts, which would encourage and support many different birds, insects and mammals. These hedgerows would have been trimmed by hand originally, but this is another job that has fallen to mechanization, and we saw a recent occurrence of a hawthorn being roughly cut back by machine exposing a lot of its inner wood. This in time could die back and not regenerate.

Many hedgerows were lost completely when farming became mechanized and hedgerows were ripped up in order to increase field size for a greater crop yield. It is estimated that since World War II we have lost 50 per cent of our hedgerows. In 1997 the Hedgerows Regulation Act required permission to be sought before removing any hedgerow which it is hoped will prevent any more such losses, and help to preserve these wildlife corridors.

In the corner of a field was an area where we could see there had been heath spotted orchids which had now gone to seed. Here Steve saw a weevil which he wanted to take back for identification. Steve very nearly had it in the pot, when it eluded capture and escaped. He was able to find a similar but smaller specimen which he was able to catch, when Trish Krill delivered the classic line “That was the lesser of two weevils!”

Orchids in the corner of the filed before going to seed, P. Rutherford

As we made our way back down to Thorpe Hesley, we walked through a brownfield site -

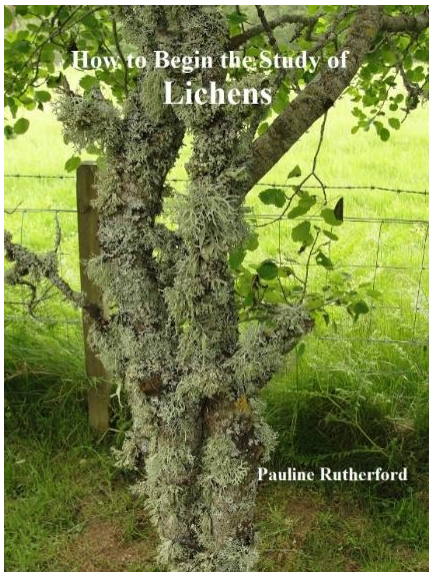
"*Brownfield land is an area of land or premises that has been previously used, but has subsequently become vacant, derelict or contaminated. This term derived from its opposite, undeveloped or 'greenfield' land."*

In this instance, the land here had previously been used for mining activity. Thorpe Hesley had three modern day coal mines which were closed in the 1970 s and 80 s. I was initially surprised that this area had far more variety of trees and plants than the unmanaged area of trees that we saw earlier in our walk. It was far more open here and much lighter and air was able to get into the area, with a pathway through, so more flowers and bushes were able to flourish. It was here that I learned my new Word of the Day. Steve suggested that this path might have been a way for the locals to go backwards and forwards to work, and a particular tree that had sprung up and grown to maturity might have been the result of one of the workers throwing away their gowk. Gowk? Their what?? Gowk is on the list of Geordie words that are dying out – gowk is what we southerners would call an apple core.

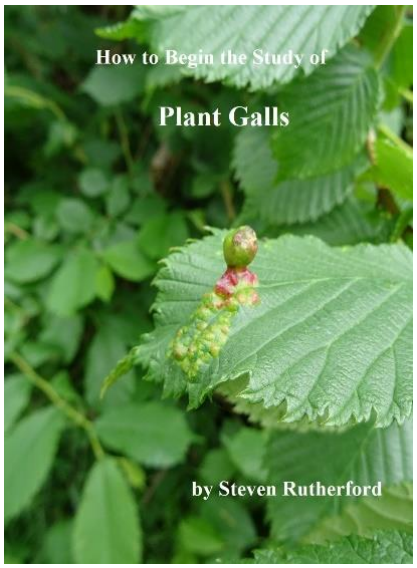
(Just as an aside, other words appearing in 2017 on this list of words from the North East that are dying out are: 'hockle' *spit,* clamming *hungry,* to 'ploat' down *rain heavily, '*blatherskite' *someone who talks too much,* 'clarts' *mud,* 'netty' *toilet*, and 'bleezer' *a metal guard placed in front the coal fire to help it take hold*.)
Eds Comment: Geordie lessons can be arranged!

After being subjected to many weeks of lockdown, it was wonderful to escape outdoors again, I think this was a record distance I have ever covered with SY BNA, and found the contrasts in landscape and diversity really interesting.

New book – For Sale Now!



Coming Soon – Plant Galls



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