



Newsletter for East Lothian Countryside Volunteers
April 2017

I may have said it last month, but this time I mean it. Spring is here! Plenty of sightings of bees and butterflies (checking out some blossom on a sunny day is a good place to start), Great Spotted Woodpeckers drumming in the woodlands, Chiffchaffs back from Africa and chiff chaffing, Kittiwakes in Dunbar harbour kitt-i-waking, Gannets reclaiming their territories on the Bass, people walking around without coats...the list goes on. What's not to like? Let's hope it lasts.

Conservation Volunteer tasks scheduled in April:

New faces always welcome! If you would like to join in with a group for the first time, please get in touch with the relevant ranger to confirm details.



Making Hay whilst the wind blew © Abbie

5th & 23rd April Aberlady John; jharrison@eastlothian.gov.uk

6th April Yellowcraig Dave; dwild@eastlothian.gov.uk

20th April Path Warden team Duncan; dpriddle@eastlothian.gov.uk

1st & 26th April Dunbar CVs Tara/Laura; dcv@eastlothian.gov.uk

25th April North Berwick Sam; sranscombe@eastlothian.gov.uk

25th April Levenhall Nick; naitken1@eastlothian.gov.uk

Upcoming events for volunteers – some new ones just added!

All welcome. If you would like to secure a place on all or any, please send me an email.

4th April and 24th April : How to lead a guided walk. Get some tips from the rangers on how to lead engaging (and safe) guided walks. Meet 10am Nungate Bridge, Haddington

7th April : Prestongrange Museum litter pick. Help get the museum site looking good for the start of the season. Tea and coffee provided! Meet 10am at the museum.

26th April : Electric Strimming. We have a new fleet of electric trimmers! Join Duncan to learn how to use them. 1pm – 4pm. Location tbc.

27th April : Mindfulness in Nature, Butterdean Wood 1pm-3pm

Introduction to experiencing nature through meditation skills, bringing attention to breath and body during stillness and movement

2nd May Amisfield and 5th May Gosford: Crack of Dawn Chorus walks at 5am.

An early morning stroll identifying birds from their song. Please indicate if you have a preference for Gosford or Amisfield (or if happy to go on either).

17th May Wildlife Recording Workshop with Natalie from TWIC. 10am – 3pm, Levenhall.

Get ready for a summer of wildlife recording! Morning indoor session learning the theory, followed by an afternoon outdoors putting it into practice.

Volunteer activity during March



Tidying Sea Buckthorn devastation at Yellowcraig © Katty



Ranger Hike on top of the Law



Counting camouflaged sheep is not easy! © Liz



North Berwick litter pick



Collecting and recording beach litter at Aberlady © Abbie



A jolly good tamp at Aberlady © Abbie



Path and fence repair at Aberlady © Abbie



More photos needed! Aberlady always features on this page (thanks Abbie!). But it would be good to showcase more frequently all the other hard work that goes on at other sites - taking photos is a perfect excuse for a rest too!

Foraging Foot Forward

By Amanda Graham

WILD GARLIC

One of the beauties of foraging for wild ingredients is that your cooking is truly seasonal. And if you only ever forage for one plant, let wild garlic be the one! East Lothian has masses of the stuff! You can't miss the carpets of emerald green stretching through our woodlands during April and into May. If you can't identify it visually, you cannot miss the unmistakable smell of fresh garlic as you pass by.

Wild garlic, *Allium ursinum*, sometimes known as ramsons, is an allium, a member of the onion family. With a few handfuls of the leaves, picked while they are still young, and a good recipe, wild garlic can make a meal (in a risotto or with pasta), or complement a dish with ease and distinction. When the plants are in bloom, a few of the white flowers are delicious, strewn over a green salad.

Wild garlic pesto is a wonderful thing. You can use it with pasta – fresh tagliatelli is the best. It is delicious served as a dip for raw vegetables, generously dolloped on top of minestrone soup, or as an accompaniment to roast lamb.

Ingredients

2 large handfuls of freshly picked wild garlic leaves
50g shallot, spring onion or young leeks
50g mixed nuts – walnuts, brazils, hazelnuts
150 ml mild olive oil (you could also use sunflower oil)
50 – 60g mature hard cheese, grated (Parmesan, Quicques goat cheese)
½ - 1 tsp sea salt
½ tsp sugar

Only wash the garlic leaves if they are from the roadside, otherwise pick them over, discard any coarse stalks or damaged leaves. Put the leaves in the food processor with the nuts and oil, and blitz the ingredients until finely chopped up. Fold in the grated cheese, sugar and salt.

Keep the pesto in a glass jar, firmly pressed down to eliminate air pockets. Pour a thin layer of olive oil over the pesto to seal the surface. You can mix the oil into the pesto before serving.

Wild garlic hummus, delicious with pitta bread, with vegetable crudités, or crostini.

Ingredients

- 400g can chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- 1 good handful fresh wild garlic leaves
- 2 tbsp water
- 4 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 2 tbsp fresh lemon juice
- sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

Blend all the ingredients in a food processor until the mixture is smooth. If you like your hummus with a bit more texture then blitz accordingly. Check the seasoning, adding more salt or lemon juice, whichever you prefer.



Wild garlic butter can be used to add a finishing touch to vegetables, stirred through pasta or rice, or spread on fresh bread to accompany a bowl of good homemade soup.

Loosely fill a carrier bag with wild garlic leaves and blitz in the food processor with 100g of salted butter. Turn the bright green butter on to a sheet of greaseproof paper, roll it into a cylinder, and then cut off discs as you need them. The butter will keep well for up to a week in the fridge. You can also freeze the butter very successfully.



Robin Diary

by Abbie Marland

March arrived with strong easterlies & heavy rain, bringing a fall of incomers which included two 2 extra male robins. This marked a clear change of tempo in robin behaviour. March 4th was dominated by a particularly large male + resident robin (the mate of our “tame” robin) chasing each other round the front garden and song-fighting. All day! At first our female robin swiftly retreated to dense vegetation, then joined in to rebuff the intruder. She remained lower, but making the threat display: sky pointing with red breast feathers fluffed up. It was hard not to imagine a silk bandana knotted round her head (sorry). Anyway, our pair eventually “won” by keeping the defence up until dusk. I should add that the female gave herself short breaks for cheese provisioning.

From March 9th-15th, the female robin started collecting delicate materials, presumably for nest lining. I had missed the early phase of nest building, which is probably moss upon a foundation of dead leaves. She concentrated on fragments from my doormat and paid more attention to her mate’s location. By quietly watching at a distance for many hours, I finally worked out where she was building: in a dense bush (albeit cat territory) next door. Meanwhile the elderly blackbird (BB) completed her own nest, and the Magpie pair “upped sticks” - literally - and engaged in a spot of affordable housing. They extracted all the twigs from last year’s nest in the pear tree, and created a new one near by.

After a day's absence on March 18th, I returned to find the female robin making single beep calls, indistinguishable from a juvenile. Still beeping whilst taking food from hand, but now flying off to the male with last beak-full. I suspected she was trying to elicit food courtship by presenting cheese & then asking for it back. The beeping stopped on March 22nd, and I breathed a sigh of relief that natural behaviour was developing. She switched to Wensleydale as the cheese of choice, and kept company with her mate. The latter continued to draw song-lines round his territory from a tree near the nest site.



March 23rd-26th saw very cold nights, with more nest lining and long morning absences by the robin. I hope this means eggs were being laid. Sadly, on March 25th I found predated eggshells from BB’s nest, and discovered it had been destroyed.

March 26th-28th brought warm, fine weather. The blackbird, robins and wrens basked in sunshine, stretching wings, half closing their eyes. And for the very first time, I heard and saw my robin sing. The tiniest and most lovely arrangement of fluting. Only audible from a couple of feet away, as her breast feathers gently rose and fell with the notes. With a descant from chiffchaffs, Spring is here.



Making Hay

Those of us involved in the grazing project at Traprain, North Berwick Law and Barns Ness can see that ponies and sheep are really important for maintaining a good habitat. Tall rough grasslands may look wild, but if they are difficult to walk over they are even more difficult to grow through. Ponies and sheep chomp at the big tussocky grasses and scrape away the mat of dead plant matter that can build up. Grazing opens up the habitat to provide a lot of space for smaller wildflowers.

Grazing is great for large areas that can be fenced off without affecting walking and recreation too much. But what about areas that are less suited to grazing, such as Longniddry Bents? Without some form of management the grassland will become dense and matted, like a child's hair, and the delicate features will be lost in the mess.

This is a job for machinery and muscle. Longniddry Bents was the scene of a recent grass cutting trial where a mechanical flail romped through the thick growth of coastal grasses to leave a thick mulch instead. This had to be removed or it would smother the wee flowers just as effectively as the uncut grasses.

Conservation volunteers then stepped forward to rake the cuttings into piles to be removed from the site. Weather conditions were tough. The wind clearly wanted to help and did its best to blow grasses into Gosford Estate but it did its best to blow the rakers into Gosford as well. The Junior Rangers did an excellent job of clearing grass from the furthest areas of grassland.

The result was a well-cleared site with vegetation that was much more open and habitable. We could see the leaves of orchids coming through, along with some of the wildflowers that will bloom in the summer also.

Well done to everybody who helped. It was a fantastic job and will ensure that Longniddry Bents will flower even brighter this year.

Words: Stuart McPherson; Photos: Abbie Marland



Who's who

Is it “last but by no means least”, or are we “scraping the bottom of the barrel”? This is the last of our Countryside Services staff's Who's Who (but of course certainly by no means least). Thanks to John for saving himself until the very end... he's even managed to slip in a favourite joke! Whatever next?

Name: John Harrison

Job Title: Nature Reserve Warden at Aberlady Bay LNR

Brief career: Originally from Otley, in the People's Republic of Yorkshire, I studied Geography at Aberdeen University where four years in the, sadly now defunct, university Bird Club kindled my enthusiasm for wildlife and the countryside. I volunteered at the wonderful Loch of Strathbeg nature reserve in Aberdeenshire for 6 months, which led to a 6-month paid contract and then a further four years at the RSPB in Wales, the Wirral and Oxfordshire. I took up post at Aberlady Bay in January 2007, as only its fourth Warden since 1974.



Best part of job: Working with volunteers! It's so great to work with such enthusiastic and dedicated people from a great variety of backgrounds. Break time conversations can, and often do, go anywhere! Oh, and the wildlife experiences are pretty good too.

Favourite place in East Lothian: Aside from the Bay, the Garleton Hills. Great views, wildlife, walking and archaeology. And a climb up a big sticky uppy thing to boot.

Best wildlife experience? Ah, so many. Recently, seeing a pine marten for the first time was pretty special, getting to within a couple of feet of it as it munched away noisily on the window ledge, poking its bushy tail through the wee gap in the window.

Favourite wildlife? Nature's made so many! Like Desert Island Discs, I think I should be given the stoat and the complete family of shrikes, so I'll go for the great diving beetle; an impressive wee beastie that can swim and fly and frankly I'm going to say only nice things about something with mandibles as big and powerful as that!

Next trip abroad? A trip up to the Arctic somewhere, in the spring when our wintering birds are up there, strutting their stuff and looking fabulous. I ringed a black-tailed godwit in Iceland in April one year and then spotted it the following autumn on the nature reserve where I worked. Bird migration fascinates me and seeing it happen is amazing.

Best shellfish joke? Did you hear about the prawn that went to the disco? It pulled a mussel!

Wildlife you'd most like to see? Right, well obviously I'm not able to pick just one so can I have please a lekking capercaillie, a sand lizard and a lobster moth caterpillar? Ooh, and a puss moth caterpillar. We get these in East Lothian so if any of you spot one then please let me know.

Other events, opportunities and goings-on

The Wildlife Information Centre's Spring Conference is coming to East Lothian! Farming and Biodiversity in Scotland – An Essential Partnership Brunton Hall, Musselburgh, April 29th

The TWIC Spring Conference is a chance for individuals from across the region to join together at the start of the recording season to share news and to enjoy an interesting programme of talks. This year's theme focuses on farmland biodiversity and talks will highlight the diversity of wildlife found on farmland - from soil organisms through to wildflowers, birds and mammals - and how this interest can be managed.



©Mike Beard

FREE, but places limited and Booking Essential.

Visit www.wildlifeinformation.org.uk for more information and to book.



Heavy ladders and exploding eggs

An invitation to help Dave Wild check and clean out a few barn owl boxes sounded a fun day out – climbing ladders, possibility of seeing an owl (or something else), some early spring sunshine... why not? Well I don't want to put anybody off helping next year, BUT those ladders are extremely heavy. Worse, Wood Pigeons evidently have a liking for owl boxes, leaving their final (failed) clutches of eggs to fester and explode as they and the old nesting material is scooped from the box. Not so bad for the nest scooper up the ladder (once we'd realised gloves were in order), but not great for the person holding the base of the ladder and at the mercy of a mix of sticks and rotten egg being flung to the ground. I finished the day wearing a perfume even my dog would have been proud of! Other finds included a beautifully constructed wasp's nest, a dead pigeon and a mummified squirrel. It wasn't all bad (or rotten) though. We did see a tawny owl and a pair of barn owls so perhaps the exercise was worthwhile after all; at least some of the boxes are fulfilling their intended purpose.

Best boot forward?

This spring and summer there is a programme of guided walks led by our path wardens. Why not join them and find out more about the wildlife and history of some of East Lothian's core paths? First up: The River Tyne on 22nd April

Saturday April 22nd East Linton to Linkfield (nearly Dunbar). We will follow the river on its journey to the sea, watch it change from river to estuary and learn about its history and wildlife along the way.

Duration: about 3.5h

Contact Thomas Bower

(tom@tbower.plus.com) to reserve your place.



What's in a name?

These beautiful pictures taken by Abbie are of a Comma butterfly. These are one of our UK butterflies that overwinter as adults, and are therefore one of the first butterflies seen on the wing in spring. They probably hibernate in dense ivy or other thick vegetation (unlike Peacocks and Small Tortoiseshells which obligingly often overwinter in old buildings where we can easily record them).

Their Latin name is *Polygonia c-album*. Polygonia means "many angles" and refers to the ragged-edges wings which help provide excellent dead leaf camouflage. C-album means "white C" which refers to the white mark on the underwing. And it is this white c-shaped mark, looking much like a punctuation mark, that gives the butterfly its common name.

In North America, there is a related species *Polygonia interrogationis*, commonly known as the Question Mark. You can imagine the shape of the small white mark on its underwing!



Visit to Torness

Despite its battleship grey camouflage, Torness Nuclear Power Station dominates the coastal landscape south of Dunbar. The formidable security arrangements match its size and it took 12 of us over half an hour to negotiate these before we were eventually admitted and our tour began.

Planning for Torness started in the early 1970s, construction began in 1980 and it opened in 1988. It is licensed to operate until 2030. There are 550 full time staff plus about 200 contractors working on site.

Torness generates about a quarter of all the electricity used in Scotland and operates at maximum capacity most of the time to provide the base load needed. There are two nuclear reactors cooled by pressurised carbon dioxide which in turn heats water to produce steam which then drives turbines and generators. The electricity produced goes underground for a short distance before being taken by pylons to the main grid.

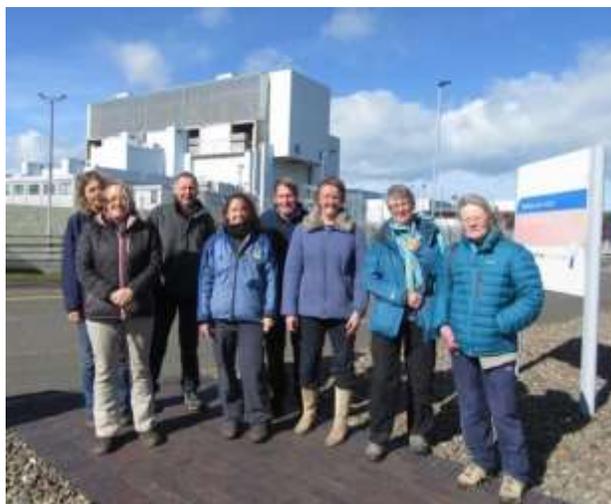
The spent uranium fuel in the reactors is replaced on a regular basis. This is highly radio-active and is taken by a dedicated train to Sellafield where 97% is reprocessed as new fuel and what is left held in long term storage. As one would expect, safety is a top priority with extensive backup equipment and ongoing training and exercises. We were not allowed into that part of the power station where detectable levels of radiation might be experienced, but those who do work there have personal dosimeters to ensure they do not receive harmful levels. To date there have been no significant safety incidents.

One cannot help but be impressed by Torness – not just by its vast size but by the very professional way it is run. Though 30 years old it looks as though it was commissioned yesterday.

Many environmental organisations seem to be a little dishonest when it comes to energy policy. They reject nuclear power despite its low carbon footprint while condemning the burning of fossil fuels though knowing very well that renewables on their own cannot keep the lights on. Nuclear power should surely be part of our energy mix and perhaps we need a more rational and informed debate than is usually the case.

Many thanks to Katty for organising an excellent visit.

John Hunt



Most of the group outside Torness© Liz

The LAST page



Picture Quiz
Name that creature



Can you name these animals?
Bonus mark for identifying the ranger's legs.

Answers at bottom of page.



Bird Brain?

Liz's pictures in the last BBF were of Reed Bunting (above) and Dunnock (below)
Want to know more about birds? Why not join one of our dawn chorus walks at the beginning of May?



Please help....
Words, pictures, puzzles needed to fill my gaps!



CONGRATULATIONS to Thomas!

As many of you might know, Thomas has been successful in securing a job with the Council as a "Seasonal Amenity Services Operative". So he won't be out volunteering quite as much as before, though I'm sure we will see him from time to time. Well done and well deserved!