



Undergrowth

Issue No 25 Winter 2010

The Newsletter of Foxglove Covert Local Nature Reserve

Editorial Comment

The progress made with the capital injected from the HLS scheme is plain for all to see but we need to reconcile this with the increasing need to raise funds to meet our rising costs and a key element in holding our cost base is the contributions made by our volunteers. In this issue, I have highlighted some of the diverse contributions made by our Friends and Volunteers during 2010 and authors have indicated other areas where help is required in 2011 if we are to successfully meet the aims of our management plan.

Please remember that it is the Foxglove Dinner on Wednesday 15th December, which starts at 7.30 pm and that the AGM is on 26th January; both events are to be held at Wathgill. See the website for more details.

Tom Dewdney

Autumn Expedition to Stora Fjaderagg, Sweden

Foxglove provides an excellent training facility for the growing band of bird ringers but there is a need to take trainees into new situations to broaden their experience and prepare them to become fully fledged ringers. This October some of the Foxglove bird ringers ventured to the little island of Stora Fjaderagg, which translates as the “Feathered Egg” and is an important refuelling point for migrating birds. Stora Fjaderagg is in the north Baltic Sea at the same latitude as Siberia but somewhat warmer and on the bird migration routes south to Africa and Asia from Finland and Siberia.

The ringing team crossed from the mainland in a small heavily laden boat with all their supplies and set up home in the bird observatory for a week hoping to catch birds as they migrate with the cold weather beginning to bite in the north.

There were four trainees on the team Sophie, Rosie, Emma, Jenny, who were supervised by the more experienced ringers from Foxglove

Tony, John, Tom, Stuart and two guests Roger and Ian. We were all supported by the excellent expedition chef, Anne, who managed to produce fine feasts for the ravenous ringers each day.



Arctic Redpoll

Despite severe winds and icy temperatures, each day the ringers found some sheltered places to erect the nets and we caught an astonishing 1460 birds including some very interesting species. The main migration species was the Mealy Redpoll and we ringed 1004 over the course of the week. We also caught Arctic and Lesser Redpoll, Redwing, Redstart, Song Thrush, Blackbird, Treecreeper, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Blackcap and Bullfinch, which are much larger than those we normally see in the UK.

We also caught sightings of Sea Eagles, Raven, Black Grouse and Whooper Swan. Interestingly we saw quite different bird species to those recorded in previous years, where the main migratory species were Goldcrest and Scandinavian Long Tailed Tits.



Stora Fjaderagg

Autumn Expedition to Stora Fjaderagg, Sweden (continued)

Adopt-A-Box

Huge excitement rang out when Tony called in to report sightings of Pine Grosbeaks. These tropical looking birds are permanent residents across Siberia and Scandinavia but will move south if berries are scarce. A literal translation of their name in Swedish is “Silly Bird” as they appear to be drunk and to have no fear of humans. In the end we caught 14 of these fine birds. Throughout the week we had seen flocks of Waxwings that had headed west from Siberia and Finland in search of berries but these birds seemed to elude the ringer’s nets until the end of the trip when we caught an amazing 16 birds. Waxwings are very special and look like they have been painted. They have quills on their wings that look as though they have been dipped in red wax. This catch was certainly one of the highlights of the trip.



Pine Grosbeak

One day there was a tremendous storm that hit the island at around 11 am with 90 mile per hour winds, sleet and a raging sea. In the hours before the storm hit the winds were low enough to allow us to put nets up and we managed to catch around 300 birds and roosted these in little bags in a warm dry shed until the storm subsided. With the storm raging the team retreated to the house but the power went down and temperatures plummeted.

We huddled together in sleeping bags, considering our plight and realised that not only were we unable to cook or heat the house but that there was no running water. An expedition set off to the well to fetch water but the old bucket was full of holes and the rope had disintegrated! The ringers were considering how to get the old disused range going when, just as darkness fell, the power was almost miraculously reconnected! Spirits were high. Anne prepared a fine feast, whisky had never tasted so good and all was well with the Foxglove ringers.

The freezing temperatures demanded every item of clothing on all of the time and dashing across the field to the toilet block took courage. Stripping off for a shower was just too much for some! Tom began to grow a beard for warmth and Rosie just kept her pyjamas on at all times. None the less, morale was kept high by Anne’s fabulous food; Sophie’s and Anne’s home baked cakes, whisky and good banter! By the time we left the island ice had begun to form in the sea around the coast and we learned that the sea freezes completely over for several months each winter. The trip was a really special opportunity for the trainee ringers. Not only did we have the chance to trap, handle and learn about birds not normally seen at Foxglove but we learnt how bird ringing is carried out and recorded in another country, we experienced new techniques, and most importantly we had the chance to learn intensively under the professional guidance of our expert ornithologists.

Jenny Toomey

(Note: this trip was funded by the individual ringers - editor)

In September a small team of volunteers checked the 51 bat boxes that we have on the reserve. To our surprise we found that 4 boxes were occupied by pipistrelle bats and a total of 6 bats were counted. This was a record, we have only found a single occupant in one box before and that was in a bird box! This result is excellent and when coupled with the very good productivity of the bird boxes should leave us feeling very positive about the environmental contribution that these boxes are making.



Roosting bats

If you want to adopt a box for the first time or continue to support this activity, please contact the Reserve Managers or fill in a leaflet when you are next in Foxglove.

Tom Dewdney

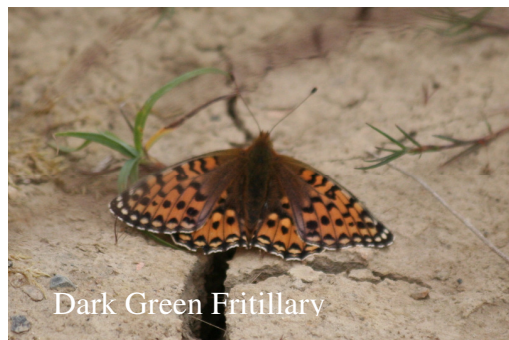
Foxglove Website

By the time Undergrowth drops through your letter box there should be a new and greatly improved version of the website available to all. Please go on line and check it out. Let us know what you think of the improvements by feeding back through the site itself or using more normal methods.

Butterfly Survey - Year One

From 2003 – 5 a detailed survey was carried out of butterflies occurring at Foxglove and I thought it would be interesting to see whether any changes had taken place since then. So, in late May John Smith (who has been a regular Tuesday volunteer for years) and I embarked on our survey. Every week we spent an hour or so following a fixed route through the main areas of the Reserve and counted the butterflies we saw.

And what did we learn? The most notable difference was the frequency and numbers of Speckled Woods. The 2005 survey described them as scarce, but now they form the second highest total. We also identified a Dark Green Fritillary, a first for the reserve.



Dark Green Fritillary

To give you an idea of numbers, the most frequently seen were Ringlets (376), Speckled Woods (190), Small Skippers (110), Green-veined Whites (90), and Peacocks (81).

Our records have been passed to the recorder for Yorkshire for inclusion in the national butterfly census run by Butterfly Conservation. We plan to start earlier next year as soon as the first butterflies emerge.

Is there anyone out there who could do a similar job on dragonflies in 2011?

Bob Longridge and John Smith

The Work Plan for this Winter

The autumn and winter months are an extremely busy time for habitat management at Foxglove. Visitors will no doubt have seen great changes recently as new hides and other wooden structures have popped up and footpaths have been upgraded and improved. However, other changes to the environment may not be as noticeable.

Although the site may appear a bit 'higgledy piggledy' at times, and quite often staff and volunteers are seen causing major destruction to trees and plants, there is method in our madness! Like any nature reserve, there is a management plan to follow.

Foxglove has the largest piece of willow carr habitat in Swaledale, which is very special as it isn't a habitat typical to this part of the world. Roe Deer, Chiffchaffs and Willow Warblers are some of the species that benefit from the Willow. It covers a large proportion of the site and in days gone by would have been a useful crop for building materials and basket weaving etc. Not so much in demand these days! If the Willow were left unattended it would grow old and die. Other species such as Silver Birch and Gorse would then take over and the habitat would be lost. In order to rejuvenate this habitat, the Willow is coppiced. Coppicing involves cutting the stems (or stools) right down to the ground and encourages the tree to send out new ones. The coppicing is done in rotation, there are five blocks and one of the five is coppiced every other year. The result is Willow trees of varying ages to benefit the maximum number of animal species. Coppicing also means that more light can reach the ground and therefore invertebrates such as butterflies and flowers such as Primroses can flourish.

With the help of volunteers and college students we are well on with the 2010 block. The work will continue throughout the season and if time gets short, contractors may be required to finish the job off, as it must be completed before the spring.



Coppicing Willow

Another major winter task will be to fell trees in order to make space for the lake to be extended. This will create a huge amount of 'mess' but as the saying goes: "You can't make an omelette without cracking eggs", so please be patient and hopefully, the disruption over these next few cold months will reap great rewards in terms of wildlife over the coming years.

Foxglove volunteers meet every Tuesday at 9.30am at the Field Centre. Tools and training are provided as well as tea and the odd piece of flapjack and cake! If you would like to join in feel free to turn up in old warm clothes and a pair of boots or wellies!

Marion and Sophie

Our CES data for the 2010 season has finally been loaded into the computer and forwarded to the BTO – a sigh of relief from all concerned! For the 2294 birds caught this year, there are over 90,000 individual entries to make on the computer.

Initial observations are fairly crude and based on totals only. Suffice it to say the results were the fourth best of the 18 years. The number of adult birds caught was the lowest in over six years, down some 30% on the average, due no doubt in part to last winter's prolonged sub-zero temperatures and the poor productivity of the 2009 breeding season. The number of juveniles raised in the 2010 season was good despite fewer adults being available to breed, with the fourth highest productivity level over the past nine years.

The headline successes show the best productivity in the past five years for Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Goldcrest, Coal Tit, Great Tit, Nuthatch and Bullfinch. Species that declined included Kingfisher and Reed Bunting (where no young at all were caught), Garden Warbler, Willow Warbler who produced only half of their 2009 total, Long Tailed Tit and Greenfinch who again produced less than 50% of the 2009 total. Those species, which are just clinging on, include Marsh and Willow Tit, Treecreeper and Wren.

One final statistic, the ringers have walked ca. 7,500 km clearing CES nets alone in the past 18 years! My thanks go to all of the CES Team and our supporters.

Tony Crease



I would like to highlight the contribution made by our volunteers. Every Tuesday a dedicated & hardy band appears around 9.30 to turn their hands to whatever Marion & Sophie has in store.

It must be admitted some jobs are more appealing than others – which is perhaps why no prior notice is given. Would you enjoy cutting gorse bushes in the wind and rain? It is bad enough in sunshine. Or what about converting a wagonload of chaff – leftovers from cereal/rape crop harvesting – into sacks, then moving said sacks by quad bike to the store shed? These were just two of the multifarious tasks awaiting the morning arrivals in the last few months.

Once a month from Saturday 11th December until March (**you must book for this**) an even larger cohort appears to wreak deliberate destruction on rampant nature, attempting to cut back the hazels and willows (coppicing), fell trees, control the blackthorn, open up the ponds and generally trying to show that humans are still in charge. What optimists! The lure must be the hope of a bonfire with baked potatoes or, on Saturdays, a mouth-watering meal courtesy of 'The Management'.

Holes in your clothes are almost a badge of honour for the fire raisers. So what would tempt you to join us?

“Doing something physical in the open air” – “Getting some Exercise” – “Putting my skills to some use” – “Meeting people”

The reasons are many but the results obvious to those that did the work. Knowing you “cleared that area last year” makes you feel good even if others think that it was always like that.

It would be quite wrong to glamorise the outdoor gang as though they are more important than less physically inclined volunteers. Some of the most vital tasks involve helping with groups (especially youngsters), office-related jobs, refilling bird feeders, monitoring mink traps, fund-raising, checking bird boxes – even answering the telephone all helps.

From time to time it would be helpful if there were a pool of volunteers available to support the RMs at the Field Centre from time to time during the week. The job could entail doing a range of tasks, from making hot drinks, to promoting sales and meeting & greeting casual visitors. You would need to have a friendly personality and able to work unsupervised. If this was to work it would probably require a volunteer co-ordinator, otherwise it would be an extra burden on our Reserve Managers. Please contact myself via Sophie or Marion if you would like to know more.

Bob Longridge