



Blaydon Burn Blurb



2009 was a pretty busy year in Blaydon Burn, and there's still plenty to do in 2010! Here's a round up of last year's more notable events, and an insight into what lies ahead.

2009 Calendar

April

The re-excavation of Herds House Pond and the installation of a sluice gate has enabled the water level to be raised and cattle to poach the waters edge. A mosaic of marsh, wetland and scrub has been created, which will benefit birds and aquatic wildlife.



May

A wooden bridge crossing a tributary of Blaydon Burn was removed and replaced after it became unsafe.



June

The Blaydon Burn Festival was another huge success thanks to the preparation and organisation of the Friends Of Blaydon Burn.



June

It was also in June that the stone bridge in the centre of the nature reserve was repaired.



July

A busy month, as the miles and miles of paths and tracks were strimmed to prevent them from becoming overgrown. Overhanging branches were removed to allow light to reach flowers such as red campion and germander speedwell beneath.

Red campion
(*Melandrium rubrum*)



Germander
Speedwell
(*Veronica chamaedrys*)

August

Over four acres of meadow were mown and the cuttings raked off by hand by a number of school and volunteer groups.



September

Underneath the A695, grey water run-off from the road was collecting in a chamber, which should have been flowing through a pipe under the main footpath and into Blaydon Burn. Instead, the chamber was filling up, unable to cope with the quantity of run-off, and water was bursting through the manhole cover, flowing down the footpath and washing away the surface. In September, the footpath was taken up, a second outflow pipe fitted and the footpath resurfaced all the way to the Black Bull Pub, thus solving this ongoing problem.

October

Tree thinning works began in October and continued throughout the winter months. Most notably, the area of trees and scrub between Blaydon Burn and the electricity substation at Twizell Avenue has been coppiced to encourage a more varied age structure amongst the trees and shrubs here. Greater diversity of vegetation will encourage a wider range of birds to nest and feed here. Willow tit and spotted flycatcher have both been found nesting in other areas of woodland in Blaydon Burn.

Willow tit
(*Parus montanus*)



Spotted flycatcher
(*Muscicapa striata*)

October

Trees were also felled to allow access to a large excavator, which de-silted Hobby's Mill Pond.



Open water is an important habitat for aquatic invertebrates amongst the many other creatures that rely on ponds for their survival.



October

New fencing and kissing gates were installed to reduce illegal access to the nature reserve by motorbikes. With the boundaries secure, internal fencing can be erected to facilitate grazing projects on the meadows for the benefit of wildflowers.



November

Trees immediately adjacent to footpaths were cleared to allow light to reach the ground below. By widening these areas, wildflowers are encouraged to grow in the springtime, allowing moths and butterflies to disperse and spread along the length of Blaydon Burn.



December

Students from Houghall Agricultural College got stuck in at Herds House Lane Pond removing willow saplings and clearing bulrushes (*Typha latifolia*) that had choked the open water.



Throughout the year...

... many people have given their time and worked incredibly hard to make Blaydon Burn a more inviting place for people and wildlife. These include:

- Friends of Blaydon Burn
- Gateshead Countryside Volunteer Rangers
- Local residents
- Houghall College
- Emmanuel College
- St. Thomas More School
- Probation Service
- Newcastle University Conservation Society
- British Trust for Conservation Volunteers
- Gateshead Council Local Environmental Services and Community Based Services Teams
- A team of external contractors who have provided machinery and expertise.
- And the many individuals who litter pick and tidy as they walk!

The grand total of organised practical **volunteer** days carried out since I began counting in April stands at:

246!

And that's not to mention the many hours and days of preparation involved in the organisation of the Blaydon Burn Festival.

Training Days in 2009

As well as the many events and practical works that have been happening on site, there have also been a number of training days organised:

Newt Evening - Following a slide presentation at Thornley Woodlands Centre, a small group visited a newt hot spot in west Gateshead to set traps, capture and identify newts. The information recorded was then sent to a regional database to allow populations of



Smooth and palmate newts inside a trap, waiting to be counted.



Male smooth newt

amphibians to be mapped, and where possible, corridors of suitable habitat created to allow populations to disperse and mix. Isolated populations are more at risk of dying out should disease or drought occur.

In total, 70 newts were identified and counted from 20 traps. One trap even contained 16 individual newts – a record for the site!

Many people had not seen a newt before, but everyone took part in an aspect of the training day, from making and setting the traps to identifying the catch.

Butterflies – Two groups of volunteers took part in butterfly identification training days last spring, resulting in new information being gathered about Blaydon Burn. Butterflies are known to act as biological indicators of the health of an environment, or nature reserve such as Blaydon Burn, due to their short lifecycles and, in many cases, their high sensitivity to environmental conditions. The species and abundance of butterflies present in a given area allows us to assess the state of the environment and the impact of climate change. The news from Blaydon Burn appears to be very good, with sixteen species recorded this spring and summer. Not surprisingly the highest numbers of butterflies were recorded in the first two weeks of June.



Small tortoiseshell



Peacock

Bats – A British bat training evening in July proved very successful as a fantastic turnout of Friends were able to establish that the bat population in Blaydon Burn is thriving. The main species found were pipistrelle bats, and electronic detectors showed large numbers feeding on insects along the tree edges of the main footpath.



Common pipistrelle bat

Daubenton's bats were also found roosting in historic features near the burn itself in an area that had not previously been identified as a bat roost.



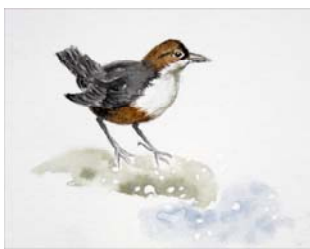
Owls - A creatively named 'Owl Squeezing' training session attracted a large crowd to Thornley Woodlands Centre in November. The aim of the day was to identify which birds of prey had produced a selection of regurgitated pellets. By examining the pellets and determining the proportion of prey items (voles, mice, insects, earthworms) in each, the pellets were found to have come from tawny owls and peregrine falcons.



Looking ahead to 2010

As you can see, a great deal was accomplished in 2009 with almost all major practical works being completed. The outstanding works include:

- Removing the heaps of soil from Hobby's Mill Pond and relocating them to areas of Blaydon Burn with thin soils.
- Resurfacing the main footpath after machinery has been used to remove the heaps of soil!
- Fitting a sluice gate to Hobby's Mill Pond to allow the water level to be raised or lowered at the appropriate time of year. Debris has already been cleared from the existing metal grill to allow this to happen.
- Thinning the remaining section of trees along the A695 bypass to benefit the ground flora beneath.
- Printing the Blaydon Burn leaflet, which is now in the final stages of its design. The dipper and dragonfly watercolours (left and below) were some of the artworks created specially for the Blaydon Burn leaflet.
- Installing interpretation panels at the main entrances to the nature reserve and creating the way-marked trail shown on the panels and leaflets.
- Complete the post and wire fencing to allow grazing of the meadows along the A695. This will reinforce the felling works that have been taking place over the past three years.



These tasks will be undertaken before the end of March when the Blaydon Burn Project is completed. So no pressure on the project officer! In April, management of the nature reserve will transfer to Thornley Woodlands Centre.



Environmental Courses 2010

The Low-Impact Living Initiative (LILI) is a non-profit organisation whose mission is to help people reduce their impact on the environment, improve their quality of life, gain new skills, live in a healthier and more satisfying way and have fun whilst saving money. LILI run a variety of environmental courses across the country and this year many are being hosted in Gateshead and Newcastle. Details of all courses can be found by visiting www.lowimpact.org/courses.htm but here is a summary of those being held locally:

Environmental courses at Bill Quay Community Farm, Gateshead:

April 24	Beekeeping
May 15	Cultivating edible mushrooms
June 5	Make a wood-burner from a gas bottle
June 12	Keeping chickens
June 19	Permaculture gardening
July 10	Urban/small space gardening
September 4	Cheese making
November 20	Living willow structures

Environmental courses at Ouseburn City Farm, Newcastle:

April 10	Herbal medicine
April 24	Make your own natural skin-care products
May 8	Solar electricity
May 22 & 23	Make your own natural soaps
July 17	Clay rendering
July 18	Lime rendering
July 24	Rag rug making
September 11	Brewing beer
October 2	Basket making
October 9	Cider making

For more information, or to book a place, contact the Low-Impact Living Initiative (LILI) at www.lowimpact.org or by phoning 01296 714184.

Practical Task Days

The following dates are proposed as task days down in the burn. If you are available to work on any of these dates please feel free to come along. Please ring/email me before hand for further details and just to let me know you will be there.

Thursday 28th January

Scrub bashing

Meet at 10:30am at the middle stone bridge.

Tuesday 2nd February

Meet at 10:30am at the middle stone bridge.

Wednesday 10th February

Follow the sound of the chainsaw, or give me a ring for the exact location!

Tuesday 16th February

Meet at 10:30am at the middle stone bridge.

Sunday 21st February

Please get in touch in advance if you would like to attend this task, so I can prepare the tools.

Tuesday 23rd February

Meet at 10:30am at the middle stone bridge.

Wednesday 24th February

Follow the sound of the chainsaw, or give me a ring for the exact location!

Tuesday 23rd March

Meet at 10:30am at the middle stone bridge.

Nature Notes

Flocks of curlew have once again returned to Blaydon Burn meadows to spend the winter months feeding on earthworms in the sandy soils. However, they're not the only wildlife to be spotted in these fields! Just a few days before Christmas, on a beautifully cold, white morning three roe deer were seen visiting the pond to drink.



Roe deer have a particularly keen sense of smell, with excellent hearing and good eyesight, so soon picked out the camera. The young buck and two does raised their tails to reveal a white flash of alarm and were soon running across the fields to safety.



Dippers have recently been seen and heard patrolling the burn, whilst grey wagtails have been seen at Hobby's Mill Pond. Since the excavation of the pond, these birds have been feeding on bugs found in the exposed mud banks. Once the sluice gate has been fitted to the outlet stream, the water level will rise and these mud banks will become flooded. The water will prevent the banks from drying out so that next year the gate and water level can be lowered to reveal fresh mud, and birds such as the grey wagtail can take advantage of this food supply year after year.



Grey wagtail at Hobby's Mill Pond

**Fran Mudd
Blaydon Burn Project Officer**