

Blaydon Burn Blurb

Welcome to the second edition of the Blaydon Burn project newsletter. Autumn is arriving and another busy autumn/winter season of conservation work is about to start in the Burn. This is the busiest time of year for countryside staff as the summer breeding and growing season ends allowing work to take place minimising the disturbance to wildlife. There is a packed schedule of work for this season including dam construction, tree thinning, tree planting and grassland management. So much to do and so little time!!

If you require any further information on the Blaydon Burn Project or are interested in joining the Friends of Blaydon Burn. Please give me a call on 0191 4333525.

Lee Rankin (Blaydon Burn Project Officer)

Of biblical proportions.....well almost!

As you may or may not be aware the task day on the 6th of September was cancelled as monsoon season arrived! I was however on site just before the water came over the top of Hobby's Mill Dam, it was about an inch from the top before I came to my senses and evacuated the site, despite being in a land rover I felt discretion was the better part of valour!

All things considered the site had very little damage other than path surfacing being washed out and the occasional tree falling. Further damage to the footpath running down from Blackstone Court (the former Ottovale tar works site) has occurred as the manhole cover in the field has been lifted by the force of the floodwater. This has been reported to Northumbrian Water and hopefully a long-term solution to this continual problem will be reached.



The unpleasant and recurring problem of the manhole cover near Blackstone Court has once again reared its ugly head.

The accumulation of flood debris at the culverts under the blue bridge and at Hobby's Mill will be removed soon.



Where did I put the litter picker?.....and my wellies!

Timber!

With the end of the bird breeding season and the approaching winter (where has the year gone!) countryside staff everywhere begin to sharpen their chainsaws in readiness for 'felling season'.

Believe it or not there is a strategy behind the felling of the trees in Blaydon Burn and the apparent carnage does have positive benefits for the woodland in the burn (it is not just the Project Officer letting off steam after a summer of shouting at motorcyclists!)

This year the felling programme will concentrate on thinning the stands of willow along the valley floor and removing tree growth from the industrial remains on site. By removing the trees from any structures any damage from tree roots and the sheer weight of the trees will be prevented.

The willow along the valley floor has developed in dense stands of thin spindly looking trees, which are of little value to wildlife. The thinning work will allow the remaining trees to spread their crowns and develop a better structure. Thinning will also allow more light to reach the woodland floor allowing a greater variety of plant species to grow. Where practical larger areas will be felled and the resulting open spaces replanted with a more wildlife friendly mix of tree species including oak, ash and hazel.

At least a couple of the FOBB task days through the winter season will consist of tree felling and some tips on how to identify trees during the winter.

Friends of Blaydon Burn Task Days

The following dates are proposed as task days down in the burn:

Saturday November 8th - FOBB social at Path head Mill

Saturday December 13th

Saturday January 10th

If you require any further information on how to join the Friends of Blaydon Burn (FOBB) please contact Lee Rankin on 0191 4333525.

Further details will be forwarded before each task.

In addition to those dates I will be working in the burn with Gateshead Countryside Volunteers on the following dates:

Tuesday October 28th

Thursday November 27th

Tuesday December 16th

If you wish to join Gateshead Countryside Volunteers please contact Jayne Calvert on 0191 4333524.

Grassland management

Following on from the task day in August spent bashing the grass and rosebay willowherb on Cowen's Low yard a few questions were raised as to why we were cutting the grass and removing the cuttings.

Basically by cutting the grass sward and removing the cuttings we are performing what cattle and sheep grazing the meadow would normally do, removing the rank vegetation and allowing a wider variety of wild flower and grass species to flourish. Most wildflower species prefer an open grass sward and do not tolerate competition from the more vigorous plants and grasses, grazing or cutting removes these more competitive species and allows the wildflowers to continue to grow.

Wildflowers thrive in poor soils with a low nutrient content. Removing the cuttings prevents the rotting vegetation acting like compost and re-introducing nutrients to the soil, which would allow rank vegetation such as nettles and thistles to become established.

Grazing is not always a practical option and cutting and removal by mechanical means or by hand is often the best option. There are other methods but more about them at a later date.

Forthcoming works

Access improvement works are continuing in the Burn with more steps to be replaced and motorcycle access controls to be constructed at several entrances to the site.

The plans for a dam and sluice for the pond at Bewes Hill/Herd's House Lane have been drawn up and construction will begin in the next month or so. The dam and sluice will raise the current water level by approximately 15-25 centimetres, creating more open water and pond margin habitat. The sluice will allow the water level to be lowered for dredging and vegetation removal making management much easier. All we need now is a dry spell so we can get the machinery on site!

Autumn Visitors

The swallows, house martins and warblers of the summer have now departed our shores for their winter break and are being replaced visitors from colder climes hoping to take advantage of our relatively mild winters. The abundance of berries in our hedgerows and woodlands provide valuable winter food for our resident blackbirds and thrushes and winter visitors such as fieldfares and redwings.

Fieldfares are large, colourful thrushes, which roam the winter countryside in noisy chuckling and cackling flocks. These sociable birds can often form large flocks made up of hundreds of birds.



Redwings are a smaller more delicate thrush, a shade smaller than a blackbird. The distinctive orangey-red patches on its flank give the bird its name.

fot. Jurek Grzesiak



Another winter visitor to Blaydon Burn can be found feeding on earthworms on Blaydon Burn Meadows.



The curlew is a large wading bird with a distinctive long curved beak. Its long legs and long beak allow it to probe into deep mud for tasty invertebrates such as worms. The birds feeding on the meadows have a regular lunchtime routine and seem to arrive in numbers around 12:30 and small groups continue to fly in during the early afternoon. The most I have counted on site so far is 65, if anyone has counted more let me know.

White Letter Hairstreak



Size: wingspan 25-35mm (1-1.5 inches in old money!)

Food plants: Caterpillars are found only on elm trees particularly English Elm, Wych Elm and Small Leaved Elm.

Adult butterflies spend much of their lives in the elm canopy but can occasionally be found taking nectar from brambles and thistles in the late morning or late afternoon.

On the wing: Adult butterflies can be seen from late May into mid July.

The White Letter Hairstreak was once widespread across Britain but with the arrival of Dutch Elm disease in the 1970's and the decimation of elm populations this attractive small butterfly came under severe threat. Research in the mid 1980's indicated that the butterfly was in danger of extinction in Britain, but surveys revealed that the butterfly was still widespread but in much smaller numbers. By the early 2000's the situation had worsened with the White letter Hairstreak now considered a rarity.

In Blaydon Burn a small colony was found during survey work in 2005 in a stand of Wych Elm. There are several stands of these trees in the Blaydon Burn Valley, which may contain further populations. It was hoped that sightings of the adult butterfly during the summer of 2008 would allow further populations to be identified. However, the wonderful British summer was replaced by a monsoon and only one adult was spotted. This is not necessarily bad news. Other survey methods, particularly surveying of the elm trees for eggs, will give a better idea of the state of the populations in Blaydon Burn.

White letter hairstreaks requires the elms to be mature enough to flower, unfortunately trees of this age are more vulnerable to Dutch elm disease so in order to ensure the survival of this rare insect a management strategy must be devised for the existing elm trees in the burn. The main option would be coppicing of the trees on a rotation allowing varying ages of trees and the availability of flowering plants at all times. A second option is the planting of small stands of disease resistant elms from Europe or North America. Recent research has shown that the butterfly will use these alien species as a suitable food plant.

It is hoped that by using a combination of coppicing and planting disease resistant species that the future of the White Letter hairstreak in Blaydon Burn will be secured.

Japanese Knotweed



Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*) was introduced from Asia to Europe in the mid-nineteenth century as an ornamental and fodder plant. Since then it has spread rapidly to form a familiar (but unwelcome) sight throughout the Britain.

The Plant and the Problem.

Japanese knotweed is a fantastically successful invasive species. Basically the plant is a giant herb growing rapidly from the early spring to reach heights of over 2 metres only to die back when after the first frosts of autumn. Once the plant has died back the bamboo like stems remain. The following spring sees the plants re-growing from the extensive root system forming the familiar dense thickets. As the dead stems and leaves accumulate a deep organic layer is formed, preventing native species from germinating. Once present on a site the area infested rapidly increases creating a monoculture of knotweed stands.

What makes the spread of this plant even more remarkable is the fact that Japanese Knotweed is a dioecious plant, requiring both male and female plants to reproduce sexually, but in Europe there are only female plants! The European infestation of Japanese Knotweed stems (if you pardon the pun!) from the ability of the plant to regenerate vegetatively from fragments of stem or rhizome. A fragment of rhizome weighing as little as 0.7g can produce new plants! Fly tipping and transportation of contaminated soil has helped the spread of the remarkable plant.

Japanese knotweed thrives on disturbed soils such as construction sites and brown-field sites and rapidly colonises these areas once it has been introduced.

The spread of knotweed is aided by the plants extensive root system, which extends up to 7m laterally from the plant and at depths of up to three metres! Digging this weed out is not really an option unless you have some serious machinery and can afford the disposal of the soil as contaminated waste!

Did you know that not only are the plants in Europe all female they are all cloned from a single plant!

If you see any Japanese knotweed in Blaydon Burn please do not try to cut it, pull it out or do anything to it. The treatment of Japanese knotweed is a skilled operation and should only be undertaken by qualified operators!

Work is about to be started treating the main stands of knotweed in the burn. The best method of treatment is cutting the stems of the plant and directly injecting herbicide into the cut stem. Successful treatment of well-established stands can take over 5 years of continual cutting and herbicide application.

Work in the burn will be started in the coming weeks as the plant goes in senescence (dying back and drawing all nutrients into the rhizomes and roots system for next year). By applying the herbicide at this time of year it ensures that the roots and rhizomes receive a dosage of herbicide weakening the plant. Each year of treatment weakens the root system further until the plant is no longer able to grow.

Chemical treatment is the only option available for treatment as mechanical removal of the soil and disposal of the soil as contaminated waste is prohibitively expensive.

Over the next five years we will see a marked decrease in this invasive species and the return of native species to the infested areas.
If you have any further questions on Japanese Knotweed in Blaydon Burn please contact Lee Rankin (Blaydon Burn Project Officer) on 0191 4333525.