

## **Blaydon Burn Blurb**

Welcome to a wintry edition of the Friends of Blaydon Burn newsletter. The year has flown by and the festive season is upon us. It's been another busy year with another hugely successful festival and packed programme of work. As far as weather goes summer never really happened (apart from the usual mini-heat wave during the festival!) and winter has arrived early!

As the year draws to a close thoughts inevitably turn to the New Year. As the Blaydon Burn project draws into its final year I can see a very busy year ahead with a vast programme of works and events further raising the profile of our fantastic site. The only thing I can't guarantee is the weather!

Some of you will be aware that I will be leaving Gateshead Council and returning 'North of the River' to become Community Wildlife Officer with Newcastle City Council. Before I leave there will be one more task day on January 10<sup>th</sup>, giving us all an opportunity to work off some of the excess pounds gained over the festive period.

I would like to thank you all for your hard work in making the burn a better place for people and for wildlife. The burn has changed considerably both in appearance and peoples perceptions over the last few years. A lot has been achieved but there is potential for so much more. Keep up the good work and look after the burn for me!

### **Busy at Barlow**

The usually tranquil area of Barlow Burn has been a hive of activity in recent weeks as the rumble of heavy machinery and the whining of chainsaws filled the air.

Work began on a new bridleway running from Longridge Road along the boundary of the former Burnhills landfill site and out onto Barlow Lane. Once completed this bridleway will link Blaydon Burn and the Keelman's way to the wider countryside west of Gateshead.

The bridleway will also improve access to the Barlow Burn East SNCI (Site of Nature Conservation Importance). This hidden gem has a variety of habitats including mature wet woodland, wet grassland, fen/swamp and semi natural ancient woodland.

Typical wildlife and wildflower sightings would include bullfinch, reed bunting, several dragonfly species, common toad, common frog, northern marsh orchid, blue bell, marsh marigold, roe deer and water shrew.

As well as the bridleway work has been undertaken on an old silting lagoon, which over the years has become overgrown with reedmace (*Typha latifolia*) and was in danger of drying out completely. The photograph on the following page shows the extent of the reedmace encroachment.



Before

From the 1<sup>st</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> of December Thompson's of Prudhoe provided a 23 metre reach excavator (the same machine that was used at Herds House Lane in February this year) and SITA kindly paid for the hire of two dumpers to remove silt and vegetation from the lagoons and restore the open water habitat.



After

As you can see the results are dramatic to say the least! The barren banksides will soon grow over and amphibians will quickly take advantage of the new open water habitat. Some planting will be carried out to introduce more favourable plant species such as sedges, rushes and phragmites reeds, which are more wildlife friendly and less invasive than the typha. This summer will be interesting as the new pond habitat develops.

## **Forthcoming works**

Due to the miserable weather and the amount of water on site some of the autumn works have been delayed longer than I would have hoped.

Preparation work on the pond at Herds House Lane finally began with the removal of the old dam to allow the water levels to drop so the new dam can be built. However, the fields are still too wet to allow access for the heavy machinery and work has been postponed until the site either dries out or we get another extended period of hard frosts.

An inspection of the culvert at the old Hobby's Mill Dam revealed extensive damage to the metal grill covering the culvert that carries the burn under the path. After a visit with the council's drainage engineers it was decided that the grill is to be replaced by a sluice system allowing the water level in the mill pond to be raised by up to 45 centimetres. This will create a larger area wetland and hopefully expand the swamp/fen area found just upstream from the dam. The sluice will also allow the water level to be raised and lowered for maintenance to the grill and removal of rubbish from the pond.

Before this work is done more silt will be dredged from the pond to create an area of deeper water. The silt from this will be transported up the valley to the area where we have recently been clearing out the willow. The willow branches will be fed through a chipper and the wood chips used as a mulch layer to choke any brambles or nettles which may begin to choke the clearing, the silt from the millpond will then be spread over the top of this mulching layer.

Once the silt has dried out it will be planted up with a mixture of hazel and oak and a woodland wildflower seed mix containing species such as red campion, herb robert and wild garlic.

The silt and mulch layer will provide a thicker soil layer and a much better growth medium than the thin soils that currently cover the area. The mixture of dense hazel stands and oak will also be a better habitat than the spindly willow trees that were there previously.

## **Nature Notes**

Winter can be a fairly quiet time in the burn for the resident wildlife. When the sun sits low in the sky the valley sees little sunlight and remains a 'frost pocket' on even the sunniest days. While the hoar frost looks stunning it can make things difficult for small birds such as blue tits and the diminutive goldcrest. However, along the top of the valley where the sun offers some warmth considerable numbers of small insect eating birds.

In recent weeks mixed flocks of goldcrests, blue tits, great tits, coal tits, long tailed tits and the occasional nuthatch have been feeding in the trees on the upper slopes of the valley.



**Goldcrest**

The goldcrest is one of my favourite birds. This tiny bird measures only 9cm from beak to tail and weighs only 7 grammes! Listen out for its high-pitched 'zeezeezee' calls as it flits among tree branches. The goldcrest is resident all year but migrants from Scandinavia and continental Europe boost numbers in the autumn and winter. How these miniscule bundles of feathers cross the North Sea still amazes me.

The curlew flocks have also returned to Blaydon Burn meadows. The flock usually averages around 30-40 birds but I have recorded a maximum count of 81 birds. The best place to view these large waders without disturbing them is from the entrance to the meadows just off Herds House Lane.

The wet conditions have left plenty of muddy puddles around Blaydon Burn that can give a valuable insight into the comings and goings of wildlife in the burn. As well as being able to track the movement of dogs and dog walkers (and motorbikes!) through the burn there is always the possibility of something a little more unusual among the wellie and paw prints.

Roe deer are common in the area and their split hoof footprints can be seen at a number of muddy spots along the main track through the burn. These heart shaped prints are 4-5cms long and three centimetres wide.



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**Water Shrew**

The elusive water shrew can be much easier to see at this time of year as the vegetation around ponds and rivers dies back. All shrews have an incredibly

high metabolic rate and spend most of their time frantically scrabbling around in the undergrowth searching for insects and earthworms to fuel their frenetic lifestyle. They need to eat up to half their body weight every day to survive.

The species is the largest of the shrews found in Britain with a body up to 96mm long and a tail up to 77mm long. Its relatively large size and dark colour can lead to it being mis-identified as a mole at first glance. The thing to look for is a water shrew has a clearly visible silvery grey/white underbelly and lacks the oversized pink, shovel like front feet of the mole.

Water shrews as their name suggest prefer watery habitats such as streams and ponds and are more than capable swimmers and will happily feed on aquatic invertebrates such as fresh water shrimps and caddis fly larvae. They also have a mildly venomous bite that allows them to subdue larger prey such as small frogs, small fish and newts.

They have a wide distribution across mainland Britain but their numbers are limited because of their preference for clean and clear water habitats. They are also solitary animals and fiercely territorial living at densities of less than 9 individuals per hectare even in perfect habitat conditions.

Water shrews have been seen on the pond at Herds Lane and the silting lagoon at Barlow. It is highly likely that they are also found along the banks of the burn itself, feeding on the freshwater shrimps that can be found in good numbers in some of the pools on the burn.

**All that remains is for me to wish you all a Merry Christmas and a prosperous New Year!!**