

# Blaydon Burn Blurb

Welcome to the spring edition of the Friends of Blaydon Burn newsletter. Lee sends his regards from 'The Other Side', and is enjoying his new, and very busy, job. With one year of the funded project remaining, the Council decided that the most efficient way to maintain momentum in the project was to second a member of staff from the Council's Countryside Ranger Service. As a result, I took up the Blaydon Burn Project Officer's post on 1 April 2009.

After one year, I will be seconded back to my previous post in the Ranger Service, which will coincide with the site itself being transferred to the Ranger Service for long-term management. I will therefore retain long-term involvement in the site, and my secondment at this stage will help to ensure a smooth transition in management of the site between the two council departments. In plainer text, I'm afraid you're stuck with me!

The change in staffing has resulted in a temporary lull in some works on site (hence no volunteer tasks in the period). However, there has been a huge effort by Jayne and myself to clear away large amounts of litter and fly-tipping, resulting in the collection of 106 black bin liners full of bottles, cans and food wrappers. Also removed from site were a set of traffic lights, two bicycles, a pile of steel cable and wire, some road traffic signs, a skateboard, a number of house for sale signs, metal drums, lots of glass, a tractor tyre...a cuddly toy, fondue set and a holiday to the Bahamas!

## **Patience rewarded!**

Having patiently waited for the ground to dry out, the land surrounding Herds House Lane pond was finally firm enough for machinery to reach the pond edge and remove the old wooden sluice. A replacement sluice system has since been installed, allowing water levels on the pond to be more carefully controlled. At present, you may have noticed the water level is almost a foot higher - let's hope the local amphibian population enjoy their improved surroundings!

From May onwards, look out for flashes of iridescent



**Common blue damselfly**

blues and reds, as dragonflies and damselflies will shortly be emerging from the pond to zip across the water at speeds of up to 30mph(!) in search of midges and other small insects.

There are over 40 species of dragonfly and damselfly in the UK, but the most commonly noted in our area are the common blue damselfly, blue-tailed damselfly, large red damselfly, common darter dragonfly and southern hawker dragonfly. As can be seen from the photographs, damselflies can be easily recognised from dragonflies as they mostly fold their wings across their abdomen when at rest, whereas dragonflies leave their wings open.

The southern hawker dragonfly is so called because of its hunting method, as it can remain on the wing for long periods of time whilst patrolling, or hawking, a stretch of river or hedgerow. In contrast, common darter dragonflies remain perched for much of the time and merely dart out to snatch passing prey.



**Southern hawker dragonfly**



**Large red damselfly**

Both dragonflies and damselflies are visual hunters, so have exceptional eyesight with which to observe their prey. Their large compound eyes are made up of 30,000 facets or lenses (ommatidia), allowing them to see in colour as well as ultraviolet light and polarised light. This enables reflections of light to be seen on water.

Once emerged from their aquatic larval stage, damselflies live as flying adults for around two weeks, and dragonflies for approximately two months, so make the most of them while you can!

### **Timb-eeeeeeer!**

As I'm sure you'll agree, the most notable change in the Burn has been the felling of two areas of trees earlier in the year. Firstly, thinning work has taken place on an area of species-rich grassland by the Ryton-Crawcrook bypass, within the Blaydon Burn Site of Nature Conservation Importance. The positive results are already evident, as wild flowers such as cowslips have sprung up in larger numbers than previous years. Now that the thick scrub has been removed, sunlight can penetrate to the ground, and it is hoped

that any wildflower seeds currently lying dormant will take advantage of the improved conditions and battle their way into flower.

Secondly, an area of sycamore and willow trees around the Mill Pond has been felled. Although drastic in appearance, this work is necessary to facilitate the de-silting of the pond, by allowing access to the water with heavy machinery. Once breeding season is over, the digger can be brought in and the Mill Pond reinstated...watch this space! Once work on the pond has been completed, the area will be allowed to return to woodland.

### Forthcoming works

To avoid disturbance to wildlife during the breeding season, forthcoming works concentrate mainly on access improvements. Orders have been placed for fencing projects, which will take place over the next few months. Many of the proposed fences and associated self-closing gates are strategically placed to prevent fly tipping and motorbike access to the site, whilst others will allow parts of the site to be grazed with Exmoor ponies.



**Grazing Exmoor pony (with dry stomach!)**

These ponies are a rare breed, which we have chosen because of their hardiness and their ability to do well on conservation sites. Without management by grazing, more dominant rank grasses would develop and the area would eventually turn into scrub and woodland. This would result in

the loss of many of the interesting and rare plants from this area, as well as other species that require grassland habitats.

Exmoor ponies are perfectly adapted for harsh conditions, as their coat is designed to shed water in a way that leaves the underside dry, thus keeping vital organs warm even in the wettest weather. The coat also develops two layers in the winter, a downy layer near the skin for warmth, and a coarser, greasy layer over the top for waterproofing. This system is so effective Exmoor ponies can even collect a layer of snow on their backs as there is insufficient heat penetrating the coat to melt it! Despite their only predator in recent history being man, Exmoor ponies have retained their excellent camouflage coloration to blend in with the heather moorland that they would usually frequent.

Most importantly for conservation grazing, Exmoors have evolved incisors that meet cleanly and have a most effective bite – this even endures into old age. As a result the ponies do not damage plants as readily as other breeds and instead, neatly graze around many wildflowers, allowing the plants to flourish and increase in number.

## **Task Days**

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

### **Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> May**

Practical task: Grass cut ready for the festival.

Meet at 10:30am at the events field (Cowen's Lower Yard, near Black Bull Pub).

### **Monday 1<sup>st</sup> June**

Practical task: Litter pick ready for the festival.

Meet at 10am at the middle stone bridge.

### **Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> June**

Practical task: Site tidy up and final preparations for the Blaydon Burn Festival.

Meet at 10:30am at the events field (Cowen's Lower Yard, near Black Bull Pub).

### **Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> June**

Blaydon Burn Festival!!

All hands on deck for this event! Help is required all day to man stalls but is particularly important in the morning for setting up, and from 4pm onwards to clear away.

## **Tuesday 7th July**

Practical task

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

Further details will be forwarded before each task.

If you are available to work on any of these dates please feel free to come along. Please ring me before hand for further details and just to let me know you will be there.

## **Nature Notes**

It is at this time of the year that newts are making their way to the ponds to breed. Having spent the winter hibernating under logs and stones, in crevices in walls, and in amongst vegetation, these amphibians make the risky journey across more open habitat to find a suitable mate.

There are three native species of newt in the UK: smooth (or common) newts, palmate newts and great crested newts, all of which are declining in numbers. In fact, amphibians are declining faster than any other group of vertebrates, and there are two main reasons for this.

Firstly, amphibians live part of their lives on land, part in water, and so are sensitive to anything that adversely affects either kind of habitat. For example, the deliberate filling of ponds, and the destruction of terrestrial habitat

has been widespread, to make way for roads and building developments. Since WWII, 80% of breeding ponds have been wiped out, and during a period of farming intensification in the 1970s and 80s, hedgerows with their associated wet ditches were grubbed out to create large fields and increase the available space for crops. Therefore, in Britain, conservation effort has mostly focussed on the ponds in which newts breed, but it is equally important to conserve the terrestrial habitat in which these animals spend much the greater part of their lives. It is known that amphibians range quite far from their breeding ponds, meaning that amphibians require more extensive areas of terrestrial habitat than was previously realised.

Secondly, amphibians, in all their life stages, lack a protective outer layer. Their eggs have no shell and as both larvae and adults their skin is thin



**Great crested newt**

and moist. This makes amphibians very vulnerable to a variety of environmental threats. The lack of a shell around their eggs means that they are readily penetrated by ultraviolet radiation (resulting from reduced ozone in the earth's atmosphere), which damages their chromosomes and causes them to develop abnormally.

Amphibian larvae are very sensitive to agricultural chemicals, such as pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers, which, if they do not kill them, often stunt their growth. One widely used herbicide, atrazine, disrupts the reproductive development of amphibians, causing males to develop female



**Great crested newt, developing in the egg**

characteristics. In addition, adult amphibians use their thin skin for gas exchange to breathe, making them susceptible to chemical pollutants.

Newts start returning to their ponds during February and March, although the main breeding period is in April and May. In all three species there is an elaborate courtship ritual

in which the male dances in front of the female, undulating his crest and showing off his fine colours. After mating, the female lays her eggs singly, using her hind feet to fold the leaf of an underwater plant around each one.

The newt tadpoles, known as efts, hatch in about two weeks and are miniature replicas of their parents, but with feathery external gills. From hatching, they are carnivorous, preying on small aquatic insects, frog and toad tadpoles, and even each other. They in turn are preyed upon by other water creatures, and by the time they are ready to leave the pond in August, their numbers are much reduced.

If you are interested in learning more about identifying British amphibians, there will be a talk and demonstration at Thornley Woodlands Centre on Wednesday 27 May from 7pm. To book a place, please call 01207 545212 or contact Fran Mudd on 0191 433 3525 (only 6 places left!)

If you would like to contribute to the next Blaydon Burn Blurb, with articles, pictures, wildlife and wildflower sightings or just suggestions for articles please contact me at francesmudd@gateshead.gov.uk or on 0191 433 3525.

Fran Mudd  
Blaydon Burn Project Officer