



# Blaydon Burn Blurb

When taking a walk through the burn I notice the trees are beginning to show their beautiful rusty red and orange shades, the days are getting shorter and there's a crisp chill to the air. I can't believe that summer has been and gone and Autumn is here already! So what's been happening in Blaydon Burn...?

## FOBB Bat Survey

On a fine night way back in July, a group of twelve Friends gathered in Blaydon Burn to survey a number of known bat roosts. The star of the show, however, was Bovril, a young pipistrelle bat orphaned last year and taken in by Durham Bat Group to be hand reared. Bovril posed for a few photos, and after a short talk the group spread out along the burn and pointed their bat detectors (hand held devices that convert the high frequencies of noise emitted by a bat when echolocating into a sound that is audible to the human ear) at walls, bridges, tunnels and anything else you could think of to shake a bat detector at! Throughout the evening three species of bat were recorded. Large numbers of common pipistrelle and soprano pipistrelle bats were seen and heard flying along the main path in a south-westerly direction, feeding



**Daubenton's bat, characteristically skimming the water**

on the abundant insects that hover on the edge of the tree canopy.

Daubentons bats were heard flying from a tunnel north of Hobby's Mill pond, suggesting a possible roost in this area. Unfortunately, no bats were seen to emerge from other structures that were surveyed, which was disappointing as it was only a few years ago that the stone features were discovered to contain common and

soprano pipistrelle bats. Bats are known to move between a number of roosts, so it could be that the bats simply weren't home on the night of the survey. Also, we know that the cracks in which the bats were roosting are becoming larger as the structures get older, so one possible explanation for the lack of emergence is that the cracks are now very draughty, so are unsuitable as roost sites. In addition, young saplings have started to regenerate in front of the

stone structures used by the bats, which could be obstructing the flight path of roost entrances. As a consequence of the survey, it has been decided that the saplings should be removed this winter. Groups and individuals from a number of school and community organisations have been invited to help with this work, including Newcastle University Conservation Society, St. Thomas More School, Houghall College, the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, Gateshead Countryside Volunteers and, of course, the Friends of Blaydon Burn. This work will also benefit the woodland flora, as more light will reach the ground.

## **Bits & Pieces**

This summer the stone bridge in the centre of Blaydon Burn has been professionally repaired, and an old, rotten, wooden bridge spanning a tributary of Blaydon Burn has been replaced with a new structure after becoming unsafe. Along the main path, drainage works have taken place to prevent grey water collected from the A695, which bisects the site, from escaping the inspection chamber, flowing down the footpath and causing erosion. The eroded areas of path have recently been resurfaced.

Meadow works have been carried out, with students from Emmanuel College visiting Blaydon Burn as part of their annual Environment Day. Two large areas of bracken were cleared to reveal a number of orchids, struggling to compete. It is hoped that with repeated management over forthcoming years, wild flowers will seed and spread across the south facing bankside. Numerous butterflies already frequent the site, basking on patches of now bare ground, and a bug hunt with the school revealed a host of invertebrates living in the vicinity. Gateshead Countryside Volunteers cut the remaining meadows that are not subject to grazing, and a second field at Blaydon Meadows has been successfully re-seeded.

## **Hobby's Mill Pond**

Named after an 18<sup>th</sup> century miller, Hobby's pond was created after 1713 to power Path Head Mill, 110m downstream. By 1914 the pond had become a reservoir, and was used by Priestman Collieries to supply water to the workers houses, known as Ottovale Terrace, above the valley to the east.

In 2007, ponds were added to the list of priority habitats in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. This plan describes and commits to the protection of the UK's biological resources. It is the Government's response to the Convention on Biological Diversity, which was signed at the Earth Summit in Rio, 1992. There are now 65 priority habitats and 1150 priority species which Gateshead Council, amongst many others, has committed to protect and enhance. Ponds have been added to this action plan because over one third of ponds have disappeared from the UK since the second world war, and many

of the remaining ponds are polluted. The single most important feature of a wildlife pond is a clean water source, and we are fortunate that Blaydon Burn contains water of particularly good quality. Ponds are important for many creatures, especially invertebrates such as dragonflies and damselflies, which spend most of their life cycle (up to seven years) as a nymph underwater, before emerging to spend only a few weeks as a flying adult.



**Left: Dragonfly nymph.** Note the dark patches across the back of the nymph from which the wings will unfold upon emerging from the water.

**Right: Emerging dragonfly with empty case (exuvia).** The wings are not yet fully extended, and once dry will fall open.



Here in 2009 the 'pond' had become full of silt and was more of a narrow channel, with no open water to harbour aquatic invertebrates and the many other creatures that rely on ponds for their survival. For two days a 40-tonne excavator worked on site and we now have two ponds! A sluice will be installed, bringing the water level up to cover the muddy banks. As you can see from the photos below, the change is quite dramatic, but it won't be long before the vegetation grows back. The spoil removed from the ponds will shortly be spread further up the burn, where the soil is currently very thin.



**Before**



**During**



**After**

## **The long awaited leaflet!**

Design of the Blaydon Burn leaflet is well under way, with the first draft complete, detailing the wildlife and history associated with the burn. Artwork, including a map and pictures of various creatures and notable archaeological features, has been produced by a local artist. Quotes have been sought from design studios and discussions are underway to finalise arrangements and agree costs. One area of the leaflet that has so far eluded everyone concerned is the front cover picture! Do you have a photo of sunny Blaydon Burn that could be used on the front page to draw attention to the leaflet and inspire people to visit? If so, please email [francesmudd@gateshead.gov.uk](mailto:francesmudd@gateshead.gov.uk). Upon completion of the leaflet, the maps, text and artwork will then be used to produce A1 interpretation panels to be positioned at site entrances.

## **Access Improvements**

You may have noticed a number of new fences and gates being installed at the bottom of Twizell Avenue and Valley Crescent. It is hoped that these metal structures will help to cut down on the number of motorbikes entering Blaydon Burn from Winlaton. Should the project be successful, vandalism to internal fences should also cease, allowing ponies to graze



the meadows and wild flowers to prosper. This work is particularly important for the Site of Nature Conservation Importance below St. Thomas More School, which requires grazing pressure over the winter months to keep the coarse grasses in check, and allow the hundreds of common spotted orchids to flower. Ground nesting birds, such as skylark, also prefer the grass to be grazed and require minimum disturbance in order to breed.

## **Practical Task Days**

Throughout the winter season a large number of task days have been scheduled, in which woodland management works will be carried out. Priorities include widening areas of the main ride to benefit ground flora, and felling of encroaching vegetation along those access tracks that have not yet received management during the project period. Areas of woodland that have previously been felled, but which have regenerated, particularly those

obscuring archaeological features of interest, will be cut and re-treated with herbicide. In order to continue with the restoration of the meadow within the SNCI, time will also be spent controlling ash saplings that have flourished following the removal of scrub. The western edge of Herds House Lane pond will also be cleared, thus completing the restoration of this area.

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

**Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> October**

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

**Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> November**

Scrub bashing

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

**Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> November**

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

**Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> November**

Blaydon Burn clean-up (yey!) – bring waders if you have them, or wellies as we will be working in the burn itself.

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

**Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> November**

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

**Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> November**

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

**Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> December**

Scrub bashing

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

**Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> December**

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

**Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> January**

To be confirmed.

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

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 or just to let me know you will be there.

## Nature Notes

Whilst digging out Hobby's Mill Pond, a fluffy little critter swam across the water and ran up to my feet. Upon realising this was a rather silly idea, the tiny fur ball then turned 180° and ran for cover under a clump of mud. It wasn't until I inspected the photos that I realised he/she is a water shrew. Water shrews are not considered to be endangered, but they are protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1982, and are seen only rarely due to their shy nature and low population densities.



Water shrews have appeared in a previous FOBB newsletter, but it seems they have not previously been found at Hobby's Mill Pond:

*“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.” (L. Rankin, December 2008)*

**As always, 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](mailto:francesmudd@gateshead.gov.uk) or on 0191 433 3525.**

**Fran Mudd  
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