

National Butterfly Week - Berwick Wildlife Group's Butterfly Walk.

Cocklawburn, 21st July 2007.

Leader - Malcolm Hutcheson.

The threat of heavy rain over Northumberland, following the heavy rainfall and widespread flooding in the Midlands, Lincolnshire and the upper Severn Valley the previous day, did not deter nine Group members turning out hoping the dull, dry morning would produce something of interest to see. We decided that the walk should be shortened as the chance of seeing any butterflies on the wing was negligible. The eventual outcome of the walk in the damp, grey conditions proved never-the-less to be interesting.

The wet June/early July has made all plant growth lush and vigorous and a surprising amount of colour was still showing in the Cocklawburn fixed dunes. The yellow of the vetches with Kidney Vetch, Hop Trefoil and Yellow Vetchling contrasted with large patches of blood-purple Bloody Cranesbill mixed with patches of pink Restharrow. A group of white "garden escape" Shasta daisies were noted and further along a patch of Meadowsweet giving off a light fragrance in the cool, damp air.

The sea looked grey, cold and choppy, more like a March or November day than mid July. However a constant stream of Gannets were seen, along with good numbers of Terns, mainly Sandwich Terns, all moving southwards. The first sluggish butterfly was disturbed, a near-black Ringlet and then another, a Meadow Brown, which dived into the grass and closed its wings tight – as if to keep out the cold.

We then moved on to the pond where in an adjacent small clear pool were lots of tadpoles, both frog and toad, in various stages of maturity. Several young Common Newts were also noted here. Attention was diverted skywards to a passing Whimbrel calling overhead, bringing to mind the Shetland name of "Seven Whistler" for this bird. Some noteworthy waterside plants were seen including the bright blue Water Forget-me-not, Lesser Spearwort, and the floating white flowers of Water Crowfoot among the leaves of Pondweed on the water.

We decided to proceed back through the dunes to a large hollow out of the cold wind, where a mat flowers covers a large dry gravelly area. Here clumps of pink Thyme were in various stages of flowering and fruiting, with yellow Hawksbit, more vetches, Storksills, and Doves-foot Cranesbill. Dotted through all this were small Long-headed Poppies and yellow Biting Stonecrop, making a wonderful natural picture. Also noted here were the blue spikes of Vipers Bugloss and the small straw-coloured Carline Thistle which is an indicator of calcareous soils. In this hollow were several red and black Six-spot Burnet moths on Thistle buds and the black and yellow striped caterpillars of the Cinnabar Moth, vigorously feeding and stripping the leaves off several Ragwort plants – nature's answer to the control of an agricultural weed!

As it got colder and wetter we agreed to "call it a day" and head back home still full of enthusiasm. The Group will be returning to Cocklawburn again on September 1st for the final Butterfly Walk of the year, hoping for a sunny day in an 'Indian Summer' with lots of butterflies on the wing. See you there, perhaps?

Malcolm Hutcheson.