

Berwick Wildlife Group's walk to Needles Eye.
Saturday 9th June 2007.
Leaders - Malcolm Hutcheson and Fiona Aungier.

A cloudy grey day with a cool north-east wind greeted the hardier members of the Berwick Wildlife Group on the morning of Saturday 9th June for their walk to Needles Eye.

The small group began by walking round Sharpers head, noting some common flowers including both Creeping Buttercups with their sepals cupping the petals and Bulbous Buttercups with their sepals turned back towards the stem. Two years ago a rare creamy-white form of the Bulbous Buttercup was observed here but there are none now, perhaps because the genetic changes which cause the difference in petal-colour also affect the viability of the seed. In one of the buttercups two worker bumblebees (a Red-tailed and an Early Bumblebee) had succumbed to the cold wet weather. Bumblebees can only fly when their wing-muscles reach a temperature of 30oC (86oF), and as haar drifts inland may be cooled so suddenly they cannot keep their temperature high enough to make it back to the nest.

In Dodd's Well were 6 Eiders and a group of 10 Goosanders, with the resident pairs of House Martins which breed on the cliffs here. Also of note were two Painted Lady butterflies (more of which later). Two more members joined the group here, adding to our observations for the day.

A walk up the gully to cross to the cliff path again was interrupted by some members picking up the strange fishing-reel sound of a Grasshopper Warbler, seen singing from the centre of a small willow-bush.

Once again on the cliff path flowers abounded, including Red Campion and maritime plants like Scurvey Grass, Thrift, Sea Plantain, the glaucous-blue version of Creeping Fescue and a tuft of compact Crested Hair-grass. Passing around the last cornfield before Needles Eye we saw a female Yellow Wagtail feeding in a wet patch, which flew off into the centre of the growing crop – perhaps feeding young? A Dunlin flew overhead and across the railway, to spiral down to feed at the edge of the large flooded area at the bottom of the new Ramparts Industrial Estate. Perhaps this is a natural indicator for what should happen here, as conservation is beneficial to all of us?

The cries of Kittiwakes on the cliffs at Needles Eye brought us to the sight we came to see. Around 1,000 Kittiwakes were on the breeding ledges along with 40+ Guillemots, 25+ Razorbills and a nesting pair of Cormorants. Also on the ledges were 7 Puffins, perhaps resting victims of the violent rainstorm on the Farne Islands two days earlier.

Before we headed back to Berwick the final highlight was the dark red spikes of the Northern Marsh Orchid with the lavender-flowered Wood Vetch, and bright yellow Bird's-foot Trefoil and Kidney Vetch. By now the number of Painted Lady butterflies we had seen reached around 20, most of them on the footpath with outstretched wings trying to gather energy from the briefest glimpse of sun. It is amazing how nature perseveres, as each of these insects had been stopped in their tracks by the cold day, having already travelled great distances from southern England and Europe. Some bumblebees, too, had warmed up to flying temperature, with a number of Red-tailed Bumbles and a Common Carder Bee on the Red Campion, and a dozen or so Garden Bumblebees on the Vetches, their long tongues enabling them to reach the nectar at the base of these flowers.

Malcolm.