

**Berwick Wildlife Group's visit to Paxton.**

**Saturday 5th May 2007.**

**Leaders - Richard Wales of the Red Squirrels in South Scotland project and assistant estate manager Andrew Binns.**

On a sunny spring afternoon, Berwick Wildlife Group were guided on a walk through Paxton woodlands by Richard Wales of the Red Squirrels in South Scotland project and assistant estate manager Andrew Binns. The walk took the group through mixed woodland, green beech, Douglas fir, Scots pine, birch and sycamore. Years ago, below the road bridge, beneath which is the Victorian beehive ice-house, the stream was dammed to make a pool for curling. This is no longer there.

Last autumn Paxton woodland was subject to management, clearing and brashing to increase light on the woodland floor. Beneath the trees, blossoming and in leaf, were banks of red campion, stitchwort, primroses and bluebells. The pungent scent of ramsons filled the air at one point. Green leaves and white flowers will make an excellent pesto when cooked quickly in a little olive oil.

On the path beneath conifers were squirreled cones. Red squirrels strip the cones and leave little ragged bracts along the length. Mice on the other hand nibble the cone neatly in a spiral. Woodpeckers leave cones looking as if they had been hit with a hammer. Red campions, a catkin and a sycamore flower make the perfect red squirrel lunch. Flowers, berries, young buds, meat and of course ripe nut kernels are on a squirrels menu. Greys seek out young birds to eat, reds are more opportunistic but will eat meat when they find it. High above the pathway in moss-lined dreys young squirrels are being raised. You can see dreys in February before they are hidden by leaves. Young squirrels, kittens as they are called, leave the drey soon and are independent in 10 to 14 weeks.

Two days before the Group visited Paxton a grey squirrel had been seen at the squirrel hide. Richard explained the dangerous relationships between greys and reds. Greys compete for the same resources as reds, and they may occupy the same dreys at different times. However the greys carry squirrel pox virus, and if a red squirrel contracts this it will die within 15 days.

As the group walked downhill mixed woodland gave way to the briary banks of the Tweed. A watchtower for salmon was discovered. Andrew has helped net the salmon off the nearby shingle beach for the past five years. The tell-tale sign of a v-shaped ripple in the water means salmon are there. Pausing by the children's nature pond the party sighted tadpoles and young newts. The sun was hot now and all kinds of Ephemeroptera buzzed about the pond. Andrew said that Great Crested Newts could be seen in the formal garden pond, but in the heat of the afternoon they lingered cool, under the pondweed.

By the hide the group stood silent, searching the canopy, the branches and the feeding posts hoping to see red squirrels, but to no avail. It was mid- afternoon, too early for the evening foraging. Squirrels at Paxton are fed at 10.00am and the hide is open all year, the best times to see squirrels being early morning or evening.

Berwick Wildlife Group enjoyed a splendid walk with Richard and Andrew, learning a lot about the woodlands and the squirrels.

Elizabeth.