

Seabirds and Spring Flowers – the Reverse Route - 20th May 2006.

Leader: Kevin Rideout, Ranger, St Abb's Head National Nature Reserve.

"I think what we'll do, is do the walk in reverse order" Reverse order? There were 10 furrowed brows and a good few raised eyebrows – most unexpected! However we started by listening to bird song in the car park. Yellowhammer, blackbird and another, a lesser whitethroat. Then we were on our way at a brisk pace along the road to the St Abb's Head Reserve boundary.

Here, at the foot of a telegraph pole, the bird recorders' book was revealed, secreted in a wooden box. Last entry, May 17th and a bullfinch had been recorded. A certain members heart leapt! An area of mixed woodland lay before us and behind it the Mire Loch. Above the tree line the lighthouse keepers' walled garden was clearly visible, sheltered from the onshore winds. The Loch was built many years ago, stocked with trout and serviced by a fishing lodge which has seen better days. The loch today has mostly perch and an odd pike, also eels. "How do they return to sea?" The eels slither their way across the piece of land between the loch and the beach. Amazing.

The track along the west side of the loch passes through mixed woodland and gorse. The latter's perfume of coconut was intoxicating. Spring flowers edged the route, primroses, dog violet, celandines and cuckoo-flower. Pausing in a sheltered clearing we listened to the songs of chiffchaff, wren, willow warbler and reed bunting. The breeze rustled the reed beds, the new growth a bright green against the dead heads from last year.



We climbed gently up from the reedbeds to Pettico Wick, the gusting wind suddenly becoming severe. It was cold. Looking north the coastline was dramatic. We looked down towards the sea by an old landing stage, used to bring supplies to the lighthouse keepers. Male eider, asleep, sheltered from the severe onshore blast. Continuing up the road built to replace the need for supplies transported by sea, we marvelled at the hardy flowers clinging to

the rocky slopes. Lichens, beds of pink thrift, stonecrop, white sea campion, gorse, and the tiny spring sandwort, a rarity here.



An icy blast greeted our group as we reached the top of the road, onshore from a roiling sea. As we sat trying to shelter from the winds Kevin explained about the habits of the seabirds we were watching. Hundreds of nesting birds were clinging to tiny ledges on the cliffs. Fantastic control in flight was demonstrated supremely by the kittiwakes, their feet acting as rudders! Fulmar, guillemots, and a rare glimpse of a puffin entertained us in their mastery of the severe wind. The sea below was boiling with feeding birds. Skull comparison and egg design intrigued us, the latter shaped so they cannot roll off the ledges. Seabirds when hatched are more developed than other birds, they can stand straight away. They leave the nesting ledges at night when there is a full tide. So on a June evening, if you've a mind and conditions are right, you just might witness this alarming leap into the sea.



The weather won, we were literally driven along the cliff path by severe onshore winds, but at our backs. Reaching Kiln Hill we sheltered from the wind. Today this area is fenced, protecting the habitat of the Northern Brown Argus. Climbing the steep hill after Kiln Hill we were treated to a spectacular view of St Abbs village. The walk was nearly complete. And now we understood why walking "the route in reverse" was a wise decision.

Elizabeth, 24th May 2006