

East Lothian Council Countryside Rangers

January 2020

MUD in your EYE



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More intelligent than most mammals?

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Heavens above



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Welcome to the 43rd Edition of
'Mud in Your Eye'

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 East Lothian Countryside
Ranger Service

Published by East Lothian Council's
Countryside Rangers

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The Wildline Project



As part of a brand new project funded by Scottish Natural Heritage, The Scottish Seabird Centre has recently launched The Wildline Project, aimed at greatly extending the long-term positive benefits conservation work has brought to local habitats and wildlife.

As well as complementing the work undertaken by the award winning SOS Puffin Project on the islands in the Firth of Forth, the project will be working alongside East Lothian Council Countryside Rangers to identify 5 key coastal sites where invasive species control will take place, improving and restoring habitats for nesting seabirds and an array of other wildlife.

Much of this work is likely to take place on private land, to complement work already being carried out by the Ranger Service in areas managed by East Lothian Council.

Are you interested in joining the team?

No previous conservation experience is necessary, but as the focus of this project is practical habitat management (often in remote locations), a reasonable level of physical fitness is required. The time and date of volunteer work parties will vary and spaces (where numbers are limited) will be reserved on a first-come first-served basis.

To find out more about this opportunity or to join the team, please email the project Volunteer Coordinator at:

volunteercoordinator@seabird.org.

Scottish
Seabird
Centre



Scottish Natural Heritage
Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba
nature.scot

See Volunteers Update - pages 14-15 and 16.

Wildlife Art

A Rangers notebook is unlikely to be filled with gallery worthy sketches of East Lothian's wildlife, but as Laura Gressani, Exhibitions co-ordinator for the Scottish Ornithologists' Club describes, we are lucky to have others more adept at capturing our wildlife and landscapes in our midst.



Red Admiral butterflies by Darren Woodhead.

“Wildlife artists tend to be specialists and to focus exclusively on depicting wildlife and nature. They are often highly skilled naturalists as well as artists, many hold degrees in biology or animal behaviour as well as art qualifications. Indeed, simply finding their subjects, requires wildlife artists to have a deep understanding of the habitat and behaviour of the animal they depict.”

“Their daily life can also be physically demanding, spending hours out in the field, sitting among gannets on the Bass Rock, or observing waders in Aberlady Bay, they work outside throughout the year. “

“A number of art and conservation charities support their work such as the Society of Wildlife Artists or the Artists for Nature Foundation. These organisations promote the work of wildlife artists while harnessing their skill to raise awareness of conservation needs. Many artists themselves see their work as about being inspired by, and caring for, wildlife.”

“There is definitely more to wildlife art than producing pretty pictures, it is also about having a positive impact on wildlife, through conservation or by interesting others in the beauty of nature.”

“East Lothian is home to top wildlife artists such as Darren Woodhead, and to one of the few galleries in Scotland specialising in wildlife art. The Scottish Ornithologists’ Club is a charity promoting the study, enjoyment and protection of birds in Scotland. Its headquarters, Waterston House in Aberlady, houses a purpose-built art gallery showing the work of artists from Scotland and the rest of the UK. Exhibitions change regularly, the gallery is open daily and entry is free.” (see below for forthcoming exhibitions).



Darren Woodhead	Wildlife and Landscapes of East Lothian	until 15 January 2020
Scottish Nature Photography Awards	Open Photography Competition	18 January - 19 February
Kindred Spirits	Group Exhibition focusing on exotic animals	22 February – 1 April
John Threlfall and Esther Tyson	Joint exhibition by two of the UK’s top wildlife artists	4 April – 13 May

Crows – or Corvids to you!

The onset of winter can be a miserable time for some people. It's getting colder, darker, closer to Christmas and all that. However, despite the lack of pretty flowers and butterflies, there is still plenty of wildlife out there to celebrate. It may just be me, but I find the bleakness of winter and its associated wildlife somehow deeply evocative and inspiring. A particular favourite are crows, although they are not to everyone's taste.



Jackdaws are noticeably smaller than rooks .

Crows are sometimes regarded as cruel, opportunistic or just plain evil, which seems a bit harsh given that they're just trying to make a living (like all of us really.)

A quick word to clarify the terminology here. Some people, myself included, use the term “crow” to refer to a single species, the carrion crow. It also applies as a term for the whole crow family, which includes carrion crows, hooded crows, rooks, ravens, jackdaws, magpies, jays and choughs. The crow family should really be referred to as corvids. This not only avoids confusion, but also makes you sound all scientific and clever.

Rooks and carrion crows are similar in size and shape.



Crows! - Continued



Magpie - "One for Sorrow".

They can be told apart by the rook's light-grey face and bill, which contrasts with the all black plumage of the carrion crow. Rooks also have scruffy-looking leg feathers, giving them the appearance of wearing baggy trousers. Sadly, it's not always possible to get such a good view of birds; they may be flying overhead, or in bad light or just far away. So, a decent rule of thumb is that if there are a lot of them,

they're probably rooks; if there are only a few, they're more likely to be carrion crows, which are less social. This doesn't always work, since carrion crows will form flocks, but it's not bad as a guideline. Large flocks of corvids are actually likely to contain more than one species, often rooks and jackdaws.

Crows! – Continued



Jays – the most colourful members of the crow family.



Raven – the biggest member of the crow family.

The presence of the latter can be indicated by their harsh tchack-tchack call, from which they get their name. Jackdaws are noticeably smaller than rooks and have a silvery-grey sheen to the back of the head, neck and throat. They also have light grey eyes, unlike other UK corvids which have black eyes.

Ravens are big - much bigger than our other corvids and even larger than buzzards. In flight their size and distinctive wedge-shaped tails are good clues to their identification. If you're lucky enough to see one close up you'll notice its huge bill – perfect for tearing apart raw meat. Incidentally, the name is said to derive from the Old Norse *hraf*n, from the bird's cry.

Crows! – Continued

OK, so much for the (nearly) all black corvids, now let's get a bit more colourful. Jays are a beautiful sight, with a pinkish-brown body and an almost iridescent blue patch on the wings. In flight, their white rump above a black tail is obvious. Even if you don't see a jay, there's a fair chance that they'll make their presence known with a loud raucous screeching call.

Corvids, generally, are not fussy eaters. They have been recorded shoving their bills into cowpats to pick out insect larvae.

Carrion crows, jackdaws and magpies will eat pretty much anything, while rooks tend to feed on grain, seeds and invertebrates. This ability to eat a range of food is part of the reason they are so successful. It's also partly why some people really don't like them. Corvids, especially magpies, will take other bird's eggs or young from the nest, which can be a distressing sight for bird lovers. However, the RSPB and other

authorities have undertaken extensive research, which suggests that magpie predation does not have a significant effect on songbird numbers.

Now let's consider the positives. Corvids are, without doubt, the most intelligent of our birds. There isn't room here to cover all the experimental work, but many experts would argue that corvids are more intelligent than most mammals. New Caledonian crows (native to the Pacific island of New Caledonia, surprisingly) have been shown to have levels of tool use which surpass any species other than ourselves. Corvids also exhibit complex social behaviour and communication skills. So, instead of demonising our crows, perhaps we should respect them as the intelligent, resourceful and, dare I say it, beautiful birds that they are.



Carrion crows – not fussy eaters.

Heaven's Above – it's Gemini

Above and to the left of the familiar constellation of Orion in the southern sky is Gemini, the twins. This constellation is noted for its two bright stars Castor and Pollux, which are quite close together in the sky, the other stars in the constellation being rather faint.

If you are looking for them, sometime after 11pm, then the red coloured Pollux sits slightly below the white coloured Castor. In Greek mythology, they were the sons of Leda, the Spartan Queen. Pollux, or Polydeuces, was fathered by the god Zeus who seduced Leda, appearing to her in the form of a swan. Castor was the mortal son of Leda and her husband Tyndareus. Although only half brothers, they were said to be inseparable. Zeus granted them both immortality and placed them in the heavens as Gemini.

I have discussed multiple star systems in previous articles and the fact that a single star in a solar system is relatively unusual. Castor, however, is exceptional in being a six star system. There are three pairs of binary stars all revolving around a common centre of mass. What you are looking at, therefore, is really six stars in one! Pollux on the other hand is a single red giant, about nine times the radius of the sun. In 2006, a planet was discovered to be orbiting Pollux. Named Thestias, it is thought to be a gas giant, twice the size of Jupiter and orbiting Pollux about the same distance from it as Mars is from the Sun.



Gemini Continued

At only 34 light years away, in galactic terms it is a near neighbour.

Over 4000 exoplanets (planets out with our

solar system) have now been discovered orbiting distant stars in our galaxy.



Haddington to Athelstaneford

Start: Haddington centre

Finish: Athelstaneford

Distance: 7.5 km / 4.5 miles (one way)

Time: 2 - 2½ hours (one way)

Terrain: A variety of pavements, paths, grass and farm tracks.

Directions: From the centre of Haddington follow Market Street and turn left up Hardgate at the traffic lights. Follow Dunbar road as it curves right and then carefully negotiate the roundabouts under the A1. Please take care as vehicles travel very fast here. Follow the path on the road signposted to Camptoun from the second roundabout. The path crosses the road and then goes into a woodland strip as it climbs up the hill. The path will eventually emerge back alongside the road for about 100 metres, before going through a gate into a grass field. This field may contain cattle in the warmer months.

Keep walking up the field and then swing right and walk up onto the ridge of the hills. The route continues through a gate and then follows a track towards Barney Mains Farm. Here, look out for a sign diverting you to the right around the farm. You should continue to follow the ridge of the hills, past Barnes Castle and eventually you will come across a sign just before a wall starts. Turn left

towards Athelstaneford. At the bottom of the slope continue along the burn, through a gate and over a bridge. Follow the path into Athelstaneford.



Haddington to Athelstaneford - Continued

Points of interest:

- 1. Haddington** – There has been a settlement here for over 1000 years.
Lovely market town with various shops, pubs and hotels.
- 2. Kae Heughs** – A great example of an Iron Age hillfort with the shapes of the ramparts and other structures still visible.
- 3. Barnes Castle** – Building work started on this castle in the late 1500s, but it was never completed after the death of its owner, Sir John Seton of Barnes.
- 4. Athelstaneford** – Said to be where the Scottish Saltire was first adopted. The National Flag Heritage Centre is in the doocot behind the church.

Public transport:

The 121 North Berwick to Haddington bus passes through Athelstaneford every two hours.

Local Services: There are shops, cafes, restaurants and public toilets in Haddington.



Haddington to Athelstaneford path.



Volunteer Round Up

DUNBAR CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS AT TRAPRAIN LAW

Another morning of hard graft for Dunbar Conservation volunteers at Traprain Law. Carrying up sandbags to divert water off an archaeologically sensitive area of path and fencing it off over winter to prevent further damage. A more permanent solution is hoped to be in place by the spring/summer. Thanks to everyone for their hard work!



Pirri pirri Removal at Yellowcraig

This plant, native to New Zealand, has become a serious pest in parts of the UK, spreading over coastal grasslands and out-competing other native species. The burrs can get tangled in fur, which not only leads to the spread of seeds, but can also mean hours of grooming your pet dog!

First, you need to find it and mark out where it is. Then the process of removal of plants occurs. This is done carefully to reduce disturbance to other dune grassland species. It helps, of course, to have good weather during such an operation. On the day in question, however, the wind came up and the heavens opened, leading to rain soaked volunteers, damp sandwiches and soggy biscuits! Despite this, a fair amount of the plant was removed from the dunes, although more sessions will be needed if we are to eradicate it completely.

Many thanks to those who braved the weather to assist with this task.



volunteer diary dates

Where	Day	Date	Time	Action
Aberlady	Wed	08 Jan	09:30 - 15:00	Sea buckthorn control
Yellowcraig	Thu	09 Jan	09:45 - 15:00	Dune Scrub removal
Aberlady	Sun	19 Jan	09:30 - 15:00	Beach clean
North Berwick	Tue	21 Jan	10:00 - 12:30	Tree planting
Dunbar	Wed	29 Jan	10:00 - 12:30	tbd
Levenhall Musselburgh	Tue	28 Jan	10:00_13:00	Path surface work
Aberlady	Wed	05 Feb	09:30 - 15:00	Sea buckthorn control
Yellowcraig	Thu	06 Feb	09:45 - 15:00	Dune scrub removal
Aberlady	Sun	16 Feb	09:30 - 15:00	Sea buckthorn control
North Berwick	Tue	18 Feb	10:00 - 12:30	tbd
Dunbar	Wed	26 Feb	10:00 - 12:30	A winter tidy
Tyne Team	Thu	27 Feb	10:00 - 12:30	Sea buckthorn control
Levenhall Musselburgh	Tue	25 Feb	10:00 - 13:00	Sea buckthorn control

For information on all events please contact ranger@eastlothian.gov.uk

