

East Lothian Council Countryside Rangers

November 2020



# MUD in your EYE

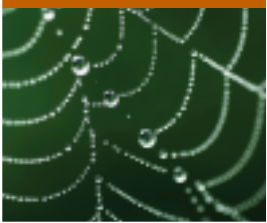


Wildlife

## The mysterious world of holly

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### Quiz



### Heavens above



### Snow Bunting





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Welcome to the 48th Edition of  
'Mud in Your Eye'

We'd love to hear from you!  
Email: [ranger@eastlothian.gov.uk](mailto:ranger@eastlothian.gov.uk)  
or follow us...

 @ELCrangers

 East Lothian Countryside  
Ranger Service

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Countryside Rangers

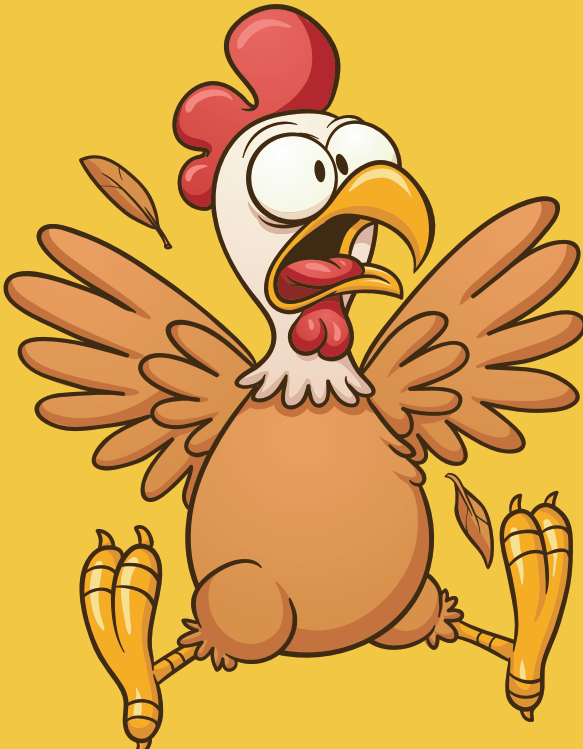
## Editorial

Congratulations are due to East Lothian Conservation Volunteers for winning the Scottish Land and Estates 'Helping it Happen' award for their project targeting giant hogweed along the River Tyne. You can read the whole story on pages 14-15.

We find ourselves in that transition period as autumn merges into winter. A time when darkness arrives earlier and earlier in a way that surprises me every year, despite my age and the fact I should be used to it by now! Despite the shorter, colder days, there are still plenty of wildlife watching opportunities out there. Winter visitors continue to arrive, our coasts support flocks of wintering waders and wildfowl and there are even some groups you may not expect to see at this time of year. Check out the article on moths for two such species. The darker evenings mean that it's a great time for stargazing without the need to stay up to some ungodly hour to get the best views of the night sky. With Jupiter and Saturn appearing side by side this December, there is some good planet watching to be had too. With a poignant poem, quirky quiz and fascinating folklore, there is hopefully something for everyone in this edition.

# Mud in your eye Winter quiz

1. Why do Bolivians bring a rooster to midnight mass on Christmas Eve?
2. Why do Poles decorate their Christmas trees with spider's webs?
3. In the sixth century, the Christian Council of Braga banned which two plants from home decorations during winter?
4. What were the oldest artificial Christmas trees made from?
5. What do scientists think caused Rudolph's nose to be bright red?
6. What is Chionophobia?
7. What colour is snow?
8. Why do Czech women throw shoes at their houses on Christmas Day?
9. Why do Norwegians hide their brooms over the Christmas period?
10. In a more recently begun tradition, what do many Japanese eat on Christmas Day?



**Answers can be found on page 4**

# Hare today and possibly gone tomorrow!

**Hare coursing involves chasing and killing hares with dogs. The dogs are usually 'sight' hounds i.e. dogs that hunt by sight rather than smell such as lurchers, greyhounds and whippets.**

Hare coursers will drive around the countryside and on spotting a hare they will stop and park their vehicles. They will then walk across the field with the dogs on slip leads which can be released when the hare runs off. Sometimes bets are made on which dog will make the kill and those involved in hare coursing are often linked to wider criminality. Hare Coursing was banned in Scotland in 2002, yet this illegal activity still takes place.

During the month of September, officers from Police Scotland, East Lothian Council, NFU, Forth District Salmon Fisheries Board and East Lothian Angling association, under the auspices of East Lothian Partnership Against Rural Crime (ELPARC) have carried out a number of enforcement days.



*The beautiful brown hare - under threat.*

## Winter quiz answers

1. Bolivians celebrate Misa del Gallo or "Mass of the Rooster" on Christmas Eve. The belief is that a rooster was the first animal to announce the birth of Jesus.
2. In Poland, spiders or spider webs are common Christmas tree decorations because according to legend, a spider wove a blanket for Baby Jesus. In fact, Polish people consider spiders to be symbols of goodness and prosperity at Christmas.
3. Because of their pagan associations, both the holly (associated with the masculine principle) and the ivy (the feminine) and other green boughs in home decoration were banned by the sixth-century Christian Council of Braga.
4. The oldest artificial Christmas trees date back to the late 1800s and were made of green raffia or dyed goose feathers. Later, the Addis Brush Company used their machinery that wove toilet brushes to create pine-like branches for artificial Christmas trees that were less flammable and could hold heavier decorations.
5. A parasite infection. Or could be just a case of a bad cold!
6. The persistent fear of snow, or becoming trapped by it.
7. Snow is in fact translucent. It appears white, because snowflakes scatter all wavelengths of light equally, and, as we all know, all the colours of light mixed together appear white.
8. To determine if they will be married that year. If the shoe lands with the heel pointing at the house, they will remain single.
9. To stop witches from stealing them to ride on!
10. KFC! In 1974, KFC launched a Kentucky for Christmas campaign in Japan, which was highly successful. Now, families will book seats months in advance or wait for hours in queues on Christmas Day to get their fried chicken. Must be one of the most successful advertising campaigns ever!

## Hare today and possibly gone tomorrow! –

Using dogs to hunt hares is not a sport, it's a crime.

Keep your eyes open; report any suspicious activity.



End Wildlife Crime. For more information on how to report Wildlife Crime visit [scotland.police.uk](http://scotland.police.uk)



This has included high visibility patrols, unmarked spotter vehicles, walking the river banks and even through the river itself and engagement with local farmers. Further enforcement days are planned throughout the year. Should any member of the public observe persons hare coursing and / or poaching, **please report to police on 101.**



*An active police presence in East Lothian.*

# Holly – a prickly customer

Holly is a familiar symbol of Christmas. It is quite unusual for a native British tree in that it is a broad-leaved evergreen. Holly is dioecious, that is each plant has only male or female flowers, and not both like many other species. So, any tree bearing the familiar red berries will be a female.



*Steeped in mythology, holly was associated with thunder gods such as Thor and Taranis....*

These berries are an important source of winter food for birds, insects and some mammals, although they are poisonous to humans.

The custom of bringing holly into the home predates Christianity. It was thought to protect against witchcraft and goblins. It was also a fertility symbol, perhaps because of its shiny leaves and bright berries remaining throughout the winter when most other plants look so lifeless.

Like many pagan symbols, holly was absorbed into Christian imagery - the spiny leaves representing the crown of thorns and the berries the blood of Christ.

In England, it used to be planted near to houses to ward off witches and lightning, and to repel poison. In Ireland, however, it was considered unlucky to plant a Holly near to a house. It was certainly considered unlucky to cut it down in many places, as it was thought to be associated with fairies, who would likely cast nasty spells against you if you carried out such an act.



## Holly - a prickly customer - Continued



*...also an important source of winter food for birds.*

Much of the mythology of Holly surrounds its evergreen nature, and the colour of its berries. The evergreen leaves symbolise endurance over winter and the promise of spring. The red berries are said to ward off evil. The red juice of the berry being potent because of its resemblance to blood.

There are some even stranger pieces of folklore surrounding holly though. It was said that miners from the Forest of Dean area would only take an oath on the bible if they were holding a stick of holly in the other hand. In some parts of Britain, the prickly leaves are known as he-holly and the smooth ones as she-holly.

An old country saying states that if smooth leaved holly is brought into the house first at yuletide, the wife will rule the household in the coming year, and if prickly holly is first, the husband will rule. No doubt the race was on!

Finally, Holly was thought especially lucky for men, and if they carried a leaf or berry it is said that they would rapidly become attractive to women. I can't say that it's ever worked for me!

# Heaven's Above – Jupiter, Saturn and the Orion Nebula

**I have talked a lot about Jupiter in recent months, but I make no apology for doing it again. On December 21st, Jupiter will be conjunction with Saturn, which means they will be occupying almost the same space in the night sky.**

This is a rare event. The last one was 20 years ago, so it's a fabulous opportunity to see these two giant planets together in the sky. Now I have to admit, you may have to work a bit to get a proper look. They will appear very low in the southern sky just after sunset in the constellation of Capricorn. From here they will very quickly disappear below the horizon, so you will need to find a good spot with uninterrupted views. Jupiter will be the brightest object in the night sky, and although dimmer, Saturn will be at least as bright as the brightest stars, so the two planets will be easy to spot. Saturn's rings should just be visible as an elongation to the planet itself.

A rather easier sight this time of year is the constellation of Orion. In particular it is worth looking at M42, otherwise known as the Orion Nebula. It is visible with the naked eye, but is well worth looking at through a pair of binoculars or a small telescope. It lies just below Orion's Belt in the line of stars that make up the sword. The nebula is a massive gas cloud that lies 1,500 light years away. It is lit by the light of the stars known as the Trapezium, which is a cluster of young stars formed from the gas in the surrounding nebula.



**Jupiter**



# Jupiter, Saturn and the Orion Nebula – Continued

Nebulae are made of dust and gases—mostly hydrogen and helium. Although the dust and gases in a nebula can be very spread out, gravity can slowly begin to pull them together into clumps. As these clumps get bigger their gravity gets stronger. Eventually, the clump of dust and gas gets so big that it collapses from its own gravity. The collapse causes the

material at the centre of the cloud to heat up, and this hot core is the beginning of a star. So by looking at the nebulae you are watching stars being born!



# Poets' Corner

As people apparently enjoyed the introduction of poetry in the last issue, we thought it would be good to continue the theme of poems expressing the oncoming season. The following poem is particularly relevant in that it beautifully describes the transition of nature from autumn to winter.



*Butterdean near Hodges Farm.*

The warm colours of the leaves soon to be replaced by the pale, white, winter snow. It is also poignant, given that we are entering November, the month of remembrance, in that it was penned by Wilfred Owen. Owen, born in 1893, was known as one of the war poets. His poems were often realistic depictions of what it was like to serve in the First World War.

Sadly, he died on November 4th 1918 whilst crossing the Sambre-Oise canal, only a week before the armistice.

## Poets' Corner – Continued



Garleton Hill in snow, from Gullane Hill.

### Winter Song by Wilfred Owen

*The browns, the olives, and the yellows died,  
And were swept up to heaven; where they glowed  
Each dawn and set of sun till Christmastide,  
And when the land lay pale for them, pale-snowed,  
Fell back, and down the snow-drifts flamed and flowed.  
From off your face, into the winds of winter,  
The sun-brown and the summer-gold are blowing;  
But they shall gleam with spiritual glinter,  
When paler beauty on your brows falls snowing,  
And through those snows my looks shall be soft-going.*

# Snow bunting

**Some species are so closely associated with winter that they have become part and parcel of folklore. Holly, ivy and robins perched on snow covered logs are all integral to our winter imagery and mythology. Others are less obvious, but winter aconite, winter heliotope, (big clue in the names there), fieldfare, redwing and assorted geese are very much tied in with the cold, dark months.**

The snow bunting is a real cold weather specialist. It has been recorded breeding further north than any other bird species, nesting in high alpine habitats, rocky coasts, open moors and tundra. Snow bunting can be found breeding in high latitudes around the world, from northern Eurasia to Alaska, Canada and Greenland. There is even a tiny breeding population in Scotland, centred around the Cairngorms, numbering maybe sixty or so pairs.

However, these numbers are boosted by many passage migrants and winter visitors from Scandinavia and Iceland.

In appearance the snow bunting is a little larger than a house sparrow. If you're ever fortunate enough to see one of these birds during summer you're in for a real treat. The males are unmistakable, with white head and breast contrasting with a black back and wing tips. Females are a little less striking, their heads and backs being more grey-brown and mottled. In East Lothian we're far more likely to see birds in autumn/winter plumage, which is less dramatic but still rather nice. Both sexes develop a warm buff colour about the face, crown and shoulders, and sandy yellow backs with dark streaks. In flight the birds show very clear white markings on the wings and tail.



*Cold weather specialist - Rebecca Reynolds.*

The snow bunting is an omnivore feeding mostly on seeds, including grasses, but also on invertebrates such as flies, wasps and spiders. The young are fed almost exclusively on invertebrates. This is not uncommon, even in otherwise predominantly vegetarian species, as it provides a high protein diet for the rapidly growing juveniles.

Despite the name, the snow bunting is no longer considered to be a true bunting. It was classified as a member of the bunting family, the Emberizidae, which includes familiar species like the reed bunting and yellowhammer. However, it's now grouped with the longspurs in the Calcaridae, a small family consisting of only six species, four of which are only found in North America. Indeed the snow bunting is the only family member regularly breeding in the UK, although its close relative the Lapland longspur (or Lapland bunting for the traditionalists) has bred here and can occasionally be seen on migration.



## Snow bunting – Continued

This bird's many and varied names mostly reflect its ability to thrive in wintery conditions. In Gaelic, the terms *Bigein sneachda* and *Eun-ant-sneachda* mean “chirper of the snow” and “bird of the snow” respectively. Similarly, regional Scots names include snowflake and snowbird. In Shetland the bird is known as snawfowl, derived from the Old Norse *snaefugl*, reflecting the islands' long links to Scandinavia.

Even the snow bunting's scientific name, *Plectrophenax nivalis*, is linked to its hardiness. The first bit, the genus name, is derived from two Greek words – *plektron* meaning spur, and *phenax* or imposter. This is linked to the bird's long hind claw, a feature common to the longspurs (no great surprise there). The species name, *nivalis*, means “of the snow” in Latin.

As mentioned earlier, your chances of seeing a summer plumage snow bunting are pretty slim – in fact they're effectively zero. However, these birds are definitely worth looking out for over the coming winter months. You may spot them almost anywhere along the coastline, but your best bet is in dunes and rough grassland areas. Snow bunting often occur in small groups, maybe only one or two, sometimes as many as half a dozen. However, if you're really fortunate, you may occasionally see a larger flock. These take the form of a rolling, tumbling cloud as they move across the ground searching for seeds, the birds to the rear of the flock leapfrogging those in front. Combined with the flashes of white from the birds' plumage, this really does give the impression of a flurry of snowflakes and will brighten up any drab winter's day.



'Of the snow', The Snowbunting - A.Marlard



Snowbunting in summer plumage - Drew Avery



# National Award for East Lothian Conservation

East Lothian Conservation Volunteers (ELCV) have won an award for their River Tyne Giant Hogweed Eradication project, in the Scottish Land and Estates 2020 'Helping it Happen Award' Scheme.



*Map of all giant hogweed sightings.*



*Giant hogweed.*

The judges said this was “a brilliant initiative and a great example of landowners and volunteers working together to enhance the environment”. We are proud to accept this award on behalf of all the volunteer landowners and spotters, who have put in an enormous amount of work again during this year.

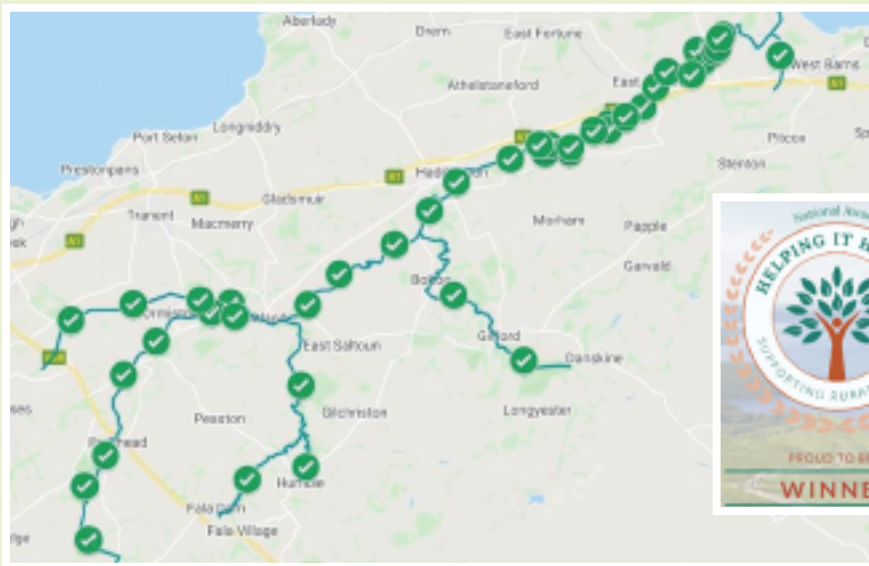
Last year we started what seemed like a hugely ambitious project of removing all Giant Hogweed from the River Tyne and its tributaries in East and Mid Lothian. The project involves 70 farmers and 20 spotters and covers a river length in excess of 48 miles. Each one is a volunteer and does all the removal work in their own time and at their own expense. We have been grateful this year again for some sponsorship from

Bayer UK and a supply of Roundup for use by our licensed sprayer farmers.

After a difficult start to the year when the spotters were unable to travel to the river, due to COVID 19 restrictions, there was a small but critical time slot when they were able to operate and removed the last few plants missed by the landowners. There was a particularly bad spot discovered only late in the season, upstream of last year's operations at Cousland. But with help from our spotter volunteers we removed and sprayed these flowering plants at a critical time. Now with the farmer and his neighbour on board they will continue the good work next year.

## National Award for East Lothian Conservation Volunteers - Continued

*Map of giant hogweed removal in 2020.*



*Japanese knotweed.*

Despite all the difficulties posed by this year we have once again achieved our objective of no flowering plants remaining on our River Tyne. Whilst the final goal will take several years, we have placed green ticks for this year on our map along the whole length of the river and its tributaries. If you do ever see any plants please report them to us, with a precise location, by email to [\*\*hogweed@elcv.org.uk\*\*](mailto:hogweed@elcv.org.uk).

The landowners have continued with the removal of Japanese Knotweed along the length of the River Tyne and started spraying Himalayan Balsam from some areas of the river (where time permits) as they go through removing Giant Hogweed. We have again benefitted from the GPS on-line mapping tool developed by one of our volunteers, which helps landowners to establish which areas of the river to search for plants. And none of this would happen at all without the constant and inspiring drive of the project coordinator James Wyllie.

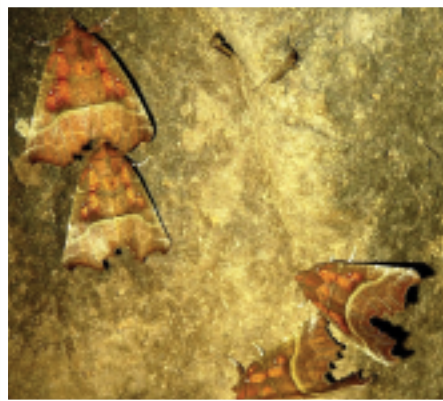
See full details of this whole project at [www.elcv.org.uk/tasks/invasives/the-program](http://www.elcv.org.uk/tasks/invasives/the-program).

# Winter moths

**With over 800 species of macro moths (micro-moths are well over double that number), there is a bewildering array of ornate, colourful and just downright impressive species that would rival many a butterfly in the visual appeal stakes.**



*December moth.*



*Herald moths hibernating - A. Marland.*

Armed with such technical equipment as a lamp and a white sheet (laundered if inviting friends), a winter mothing session gives you a good chance of identifying with 'ease' some of the few on the wing in the winter. Winter mothing also suits those trying to keep to school-run timings, as you shouldn't have to spend hours picking through a moth trap or flicking through a guide book.

A very manageable thirteen species are regularly encountered in November, and even the most unambitious should be able to get to grips with the two species frequently encountered in December. Beware though, others will occasionally appear.

Most common, is the well-insulated form of the December moth. Somewhat confusingly, this species flies anytime from October and is not quite as frequent in

December as it is in November! Individuals are readily attracted to lights and are on the wing with the sole purpose of mating. They are even unable to feed, which is not surprising given the lack of nectar sources at this time of year.

Our other commonly encountered moth in December, as well as November when it will be feeding on ivy or a treacle-drizzled fence post, is the beautiful herald moth. This species is also easily found by day if you have access to a cool cellar or out on a winter visit to an old castle, where they will hibernate out the coldest months. These richly coloured stunners are a real treat. To help get you started visit the fantastically useful Butterfly Conservation 'Moths by Month' page which can be found at:

**[www.eastscotland-butterflies.org.uk/VC82.html](http://www.eastscotland-butterflies.org.uk/VC82.html)**