

East Lothian Council Countryside Rangers

December 2021



MUD in your EYE



Community
Wombling free –
litter we welcome Pages 4/6

Poetry



Heavens above



Goldcrest



Cover: Acceptable leaf litter covers the forest floor.



Hare coursing 3

The importance of leaf litter 4-6

Our winter quiz 7

The goldcrest 8

Poetry corner - in praise of the goldcrest 9

Heaven's Above - Navigating the night sky 10-11

Volunteers - tools and dates 12-13

Welcome to the 54th Edition of
'Mud in Your Eye'

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

 @ELCrangers

 East Lothian Countryside
Ranger Service

Published by East Lothian Council's
Countryside Rangers

Editorial

I love the run up to Christmas. Glorious autumn colours, the cold fresh breezes, skeins of pink-footed geese overhead and winter waders gathering on our shores. Wintering sea ducks come into the Forth and common seals are beginning to pup. A lot of our resident bird species are joined by visitors from overseas and can be very active, trying to find enough food to get them through the winter. So despite the change in weather there is a lot to see during the coming season. Take a look at our articles too, which will hopefully have you listening out for goldcrests, delving into leaf litter or staring up at the night sky. Happy Christmas!



Hare coursing

Hare coursing is the deliberate hunting of hares with dogs, and historically was a sport throughout the UK. Hare coursing is now a criminal offence, irrespective of whether or not permission has been granted from the landowner.



Our magnificent native hare.

The dogs used for hare coursing are usually of lurcher or greyhound breed who hunt on sight rather than scent. When crops are harvested, perpetrators will often travel long distances to use stubble fields, as this allows good visibility for the dogs to observe hares. Hare coursing is more prevalent from August to April due to the harvest. The dogs are usually controlled using a slip lead and will be released upon sight of a hare, and will pursue and kill it if they catch it.

There is legislation in place which allows police to robustly deal with this barbaric and cruel act, however it is crucial for as much information as possible with regards to the perpetrators to be gathered to assist with this.

If you witness hare coursing taking place, or even if you have a suspicion that it is, call 101 for police or 999 in an emergency, and from a safe distance observe:

- How many people there are taking part – and a description of them where possible
- How many dogs there are? What breed and colour they are?
- Are there vehicles involved? Registration numbers/make/model and colour where possible.

However, if you are unable to safely get this information, do not put yourself in any danger, and call the police.

Underground, overground, Wombling free - leaf litter!

As countryside rangers we spend a depressing amount of time picking up litter – you know, things that the everyday folks leave behind, to quote the Wombles. I may be showing my age there. However, there's one kind of litter that even we can't object to, and that's leaf litter.



Beech leaf litter - a hugely valuable woodland asset.

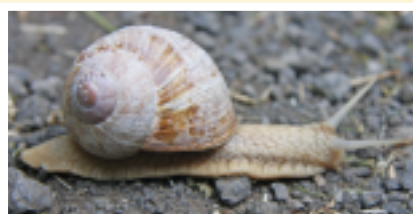
This is the layer of dead and decaying plant material which carpets the ground in woodlands and other habitats. As the name suggests, leaves make up a large proportion of this, but it may also contain twigs, cones, flowers, bark, seeds and nuts. It forms an incredibly important part of any ecosystem, but is often overlooked as just something to walk about on.

The value of leaf litter to woodland animals cannot be overstated. Toads, hedgehogs and other species will use leaves as shelter over the winter months. Whether they're truly hibernating or simply lying low, the cover provides insulation against the cold above. In addition, invertebrates will use leaf litter not only as shelter, but as an important source of food.



The little pill woodlouse, a beneficiary of leaf litter.

Earthworms, woodlice and millipedes will all happily graze amongst fallen leaves and their presence attracts the attention of other, less herbivorous, beasties. Predators ranging from spiders to badgers can find plenty of grub (and, in some cases grubs) to sustain them over the winter.



Another beneficiary of leaf litter.

Leaf litter Continued



Beechwood-sickener, thrives on leaf litter.

The interaction between leaf litter and invertebrates is one which is vital to the health of woodlands. I hinted that some of these creatures are herbivores, but perhaps it's better to highlight the detritivores. This group includes woodlice, worms, slugs and snails and they play a huge part in the breakdown and recycling of plant material. This process puts vital nutrients back into the soil, promoting the growth of the living plants.

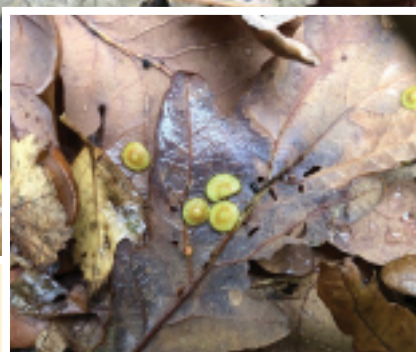
The presence, and breakdown, of leaf litter not only helps the soil chemically, but also improves the soil's physical structure. This allows better aeration of the soil and also increased absorption and retention of moisture. There's also convincing evidence that a healthy layer of leaf litter will reduce soil erosion from surface water run-off and wind.

So much for the science, what could you expect to find in amongst the leaf litter in East Lothian's woodlands? Well, at the risk of stating the bleeding obvious, it depends on where you are. Fungi are regularly found growing in leaf litter, indeed they are important decomposers themselves; but they are a particular feature of beech woods. Beech trees produce a very dense litter layer, which breaks down slowly. This tends to inhibit the growth of plants, but specialised fungi can thrive in these conditions. In many cases these fungi, such as the beechwood sickener (nice name), have a symbiotic relationship with the trees. In fact, beech trees are almost totally reliant on fungi for the uptake of nutrients.

Leaf litter Continued



Sycamore litter.



Spangles & oak.

Scots pine, being evergreen, produces leaf litter all year round, rather than the sudden autumnal burst experienced in deciduous woodland. As a result, some very specialised flora can be found in pine woods - Twinflower and Creeping lady's-tresses are rare and beautiful wildflowers found almost exclusively under pines. To be honest, you may have to venture a bit further north to see either of these. Closer to home, the litter around oaks is worth taking a look at.

As well as leaves, twigs and acorns, you may spot lots of small yellow-brown discs. These are spangle galls and are growths caused by the eggs of a tiny species of wasp. Each gall contains a single wasp larvae, which will feed on the leaf while still attached. However, the larvae continue developing after leaf fall and will emerge as adults in the spring. Just one more reason to love oak woods.

Mud in your eye Winter quiz

1. Which small bird is traditionally associated with winter?
2. Why would Christmas Eve be the best time to ask your dog a question?
3. Which colourful bird is associated with the term Halcyon Days?
4. How many animals are there in the song 'The twelve days of Christmas'?
5. In the same song, what is a Collie Bird?
6. Which biblical character is supposed to have planted the Holy Thorn at Glastonbury, which bloomed on Christmas Day?
7. Bringing in smooth leaved holly leaves or prickly holly leaves was supposed to determine which of the husband or wife will be head of the house for the coming year. But which type of leaf is associated with the husband and which with the wife?
8. In the poem 'The Night Before Christmas', how many reindeer were pulling Santa's sleigh? How many can you name?
9. If a woman picks sage on Christmas Eve, what is she supposed to dream about that night?
10. How does a squirrel's tail determine whether we have a harsh or mild winter?



Answers can be found on page 9

The Goldcrest – our smallest bird

Ever walk through a woodland and hear a high pitched *siii* noise a bit like a squeaky wheelbarrow coming from the forest canopy? Chances are you’ve just heard a goldcrest. The high pitch makes it harder to hear as you get older so count yourself lucky if you are among those who can still hear them.



The diminutive goldcrest.

Goldcrests are the UK’s smallest bird and adults weigh in at only 4 – 6g, the equivalent of a 20p coin. Wren-like in size and shape, they are named after the crest of brightly coloured feathers at the top of their heads, which looks a bit like a funky mohawk. This is yellow on the females but more orange on the males whereas the rest of the body is a green/brown colour.

Despite its small size, its golden crown may have earned it the title of ‘King of the Birds’ in European folklore. This is reflected by its latin name *Regulus regulus*, which comes from ‘rex’ which means ‘king’. There is some confusion with one of our other small birds, the wren, regarding the title of ‘King of the Birds’ which is not helped by the goldcrest’s colloquial name of gold-crested wren.

The UK has a large population of breeding goldcrests that are here year round although in autumn this is augmented by a steady stream of birds escaping from the harsh winters in Scandinavia, Poland and Russia. With the wind behind them, goldcrests can fly 160 – 500 miles in one day on migration and birds with the biggest fat stores may only make 1 or 2 stops on their journey before reaching their destination. The birds are often so exhausted and underweight by the time they arrive that

they have been known to land on or near to humans in the search for food on their clothes.

An old English name for the goldcrest is ‘woodcock pilot’ as the two migrating species would typically arrive within a few days of each other. It was thought that due to the goldcrest’s diminutive size, it was unable to cross the North Sea by itself and instead it hitched a ride on the back of a woodcock. Although this has since been proven to be false, it does conjure up a funny image of a goldcrest sat on a woodcock’s back saying ‘left a bit’, ‘right a bit’.

The Gold-Crested Wren - by Charles Tennyson Turner

When my hand closed upon thee, worn and spent
With idly dashing on the window-pane,
Or clinging to the cornice — I, that meant
At once to free thee, could not but detain;
I dropt my pen, I left the unfinish'd lay,
To give thee back to freedom; but I took —
Oh, charm of sweet occasion! — one brief look
At thy bright eyes and innocent dismay;
Then forth I sent thee on thy homeward quest,
My lesson learnt — thy beauty got by heart:
And if, at times, my sonnet-muse would rest
Short of her topmost skill, her little best,
The memory of thy delicate gold crest
Shall plead for one last touch, — the crown of Art.



Charles Tennyson Turner (4 July 1808 – 25 April 1879) was an English poet. He was born in Somersby, Lincolnshire and was an elder brother of Alfred Lord Tennyson.

Winter quiz answers

1. The Wren – In many villages at Christmas, wrens were carried around from door to door by children who begged for money, often reciting or singing a rhyme in return. For one such song, see 'Pleased to Meet the King' by Steeleye Span.
2. Animals were supposed to be able to speak for a very short time at midnight on Christmas Eve.
3. Kingfisher – It stems from a Classical Myth, where Alcyone and her husband were transformed into Kingfishers. Their nests by the sea were in danger of being washed away, so the gods allowed a period of calm during the winter for them to nest safely.
4. 184 – That's a lot of geese, swans, hens, collie birds, turtle doves and partridges.
5. Blackbird is most commonly associated with the name Collie.
6. Joseph of Arimathea – He owned the tomb in which Jesus was laid after the crucifixion. One legend says he also brought over the Holy Grail, although where he hid that is anyone's guess!
7. Prickly holly leaves are associated with the husband and smooth leaved ones with the wife. Of course, bringing in a mixture of the two results in a more harmonious household!
8. Eight. They are Dancer, Prancer, Donner, Blitzen, Cupid, Arrow, Dasher and Vixen.
9. She would dream of her future husband! Another way to achieve this for a specific man, was to carve his initials into a holly leaf and sleep with it under your pillow. It was made more potent by wearing a borrowed wedding ring on the third finger of your left hand.
10. The bushier the tail, the worse the weather.

Heavens Above - Navigating the night sky.

When trying to find your way around the autumn/winter night sky, one of the best constellations to start with is Cassiopeia. Its five main stars form a fairly obvious W shape almost directly overhead in the night sky just now. If you look at the right hand three stars, they form a V shape that can act as an arrow to point you down to Mirach, one of the brightest stars in the constellation of Andromeda. About two thirds of the way down this line and just to the right is M31, the Andromeda galaxy, seen as a grey smudge in a dark sky with little light pollution. At 2.5 million light years away it is the furthest object that can be seen with the naked eye. The constellation of Andromeda is joined to that of Pegasus, the winged horse. Four of the brightest stars form a distinctive square to the right of Andromeda.

Going back to Cassiopeia, the second and third stars from the left form a line pointing left to the T-shaped group of stars in Perseus. Finally the last two stars on the right form a line pointing up to the constellation of Cepheus, the King of Ethiopia. The annotated illustration shows this part of the night sky around 11pm in mid-November.

The constellations are connected in another way. The characters they represent are all in one of the Ancient Greek myths. Cassiopeia, the Ethiopian Queen, was very vain and thought of herself as being very beautiful. She also bragged that her daughter Andromeda was lovelier than all of the sea nymphs.

Poseidon, the god of the sea and father of the sea nymphs, was very angry about this, so he sent a sea monster to ravage the Ethiopian coast. The only way Cepheus, the Ethiopian King, could stop the monster was to sacrifice his



Navigating the night sky.

– Continued

daughter Andromeda. She was tied to a sea rock with chains to await her fate. Meanwhile, Perseus was returning from killing the gorgon Medusa, flying home on the winged horse Pegasus. He heard the screams of Andromeda and flew

down to rescue her, killing the monster by showing it the head of Medusa, turning it instantly to stone. The legend ends with the marriage of Perseus and Andromeda.





Volunteers – Confusion Corner: Tool Time

“Hand me your chopper please”, “I’m sorry?”

“The grubber, you know the digging axe thingummy” ... “Ahhhh” you say, “the mattock.”

Whether or not you know it by its proper name, if you have tried it then you’ll know just how useful this tool is. This tool of choice for many a conservationist has a long history, with very similar tools used as far back as the Bronze Age. If you didn’t have one in your garden shed before a day’s buckthorn digging you soon will afterwards. This fantastic, although somewhat energy sapping tool is at one with its operator when cleaving the soil and has even been associated (somewhat loosely admittedly) with flensing the blubber from dead whales. Two types exist, the pick mattock for stony ground, and the chopping mattock. If you need to remove a stubborn tree stump the latter is the perfect choice, with the adze being the perfect design to slice stubborn roots. Worn smooth with volunteer energy measured in the hundreds of days, the handles are testament to their value and longevity. Stick one on your Christmas list, you won’t be the first! **You know who you are JB!**



Ranger wielding a mattock.



The mattock – the gift that goes on giving.

volunteer diary dates

Where	Day	Date	Time	Action
Yellowcraig	Thu	04 Nov	09:45-15:00	Sea buckthorn control
Yellowcraig	Thu	11 Nov	09:45-15:00	Turfing and bench
Yellowcraig	Thu	18 Nov	09:45-15:00	Pirri-pirri control
North Berwick	Tue	23 Nov	10:00-12:30	tbd
Dunbar	Wed	24 Nov	10:00-12:30	tbd
Yellowcraig	Thu	25 Nov	09:45-15:00	Turfing & path repair
Levenhall Links	Tue	30 Nov	09:30-15:00	Tree planting
North Berwick	Tue	21 Dec	10:00-12:30	Litter pick and festive treats!

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

