

Ryburgh Wildlife Group

July 2025 Newsletter

July brings us high summer, school holidays and Wimbledon. Hopefully it might bring some rain and colour back to rather brown grasslands.

It's not just a matter of visual appearance. Grasses are tough plants and will bounce back from prolonged lack of water but spare a thought for organisms that depend on grass like the caterpillars of grassland butterflies such as skippers and browns. Desiccated grasses leave little food for growing caterpillars who might end up turning into a smaller than usual pupa which in turn might impact their chances of becoming an adult insect next year. We will have to wait and see next year for the impact of low rainfall on our butterflies.

The previous newsletter was a combined May and June issue as I was going to be on holiday when I would normally have produced it. That holiday included a trip to Shetland, the most northerly part of the British Isles. Lerwick is over 650 miles north of Ryburgh and it was interesting to see how much less advanced Shetland wildlife was compared to Norfolk. Many birds were still pairing up and collecting nest material whereas some of their more southerly counterparts were already feeding chicks. The Shetland Starling was, however, well advanced. Almost every stone wall held hungry chicks demanding food from their parents.



Proud Puffin with nest material. Photo by Julie Bunker.

Shetland is also the last bit of land before the Arctic and we were lucky to see waders that breed in the high arctic tundra, like Knot, Purple Sandpiper and Turnstone, in their summer plumages stocking up on food before their long journey northwards. It won't be very long before some of these waders head back southwards to our coastline for the autumn and winter.

Earlier on I referred to the starling as a "Shetland Starling". They, along with wrens, have been classified as belonging to sub-species as reflected in their Latin names. Shetland Starling is *Sturnus vulgaris zetlandicus* and the Shetland Wren is *Troglodytes troglodytes zetlandicus*. Until 1974 Shetland was officially known as Zetland. The post codes also start ZE.

Whilst in Shetland we learnt about various fascinating avian survival or defence strategies. Storm Petrels are tiny ocean-going birds that are about the size of sparrows and only come on to the land to breed. Being so small they would be easy targets for gulls or skuas, so to minimise the risk of predation, they stay at sea until dusk falls and then they stream inland in the darkness in their thousands to find their nest sites in stone walls, buildings and even on rocky beaches. Mousa, an uninhabited island owned by the RSPB just off Mainland, has 11,000 breeding pairs of these birds. One of the buildings the birds used was an Iron Age circular dry-stone tower called a Broch. It was a magical sight watching these tiny birds flying around you almost bat-like trying to find their home in the dark.



Mousa Broch and beach, home to Storm Petrels. Photo by Julie Bunker.

Red-necked Phalaropes are arctic breeders but several pairs breed in Shetland. Very small, wader-like birds. The female has, unusually, the more colourful plumage. Once she's laid her eggs, she heads off back to the sea, or possibly another male, leaving the original male to hatch the eggs and look after the chicks. He can only be in one place at a time so when the chicks hatch, he separates them and leaves them in different locations up to half a mile

apart. That way, if a predator does find a chick, it's likely to be just one lost chick and not the whole brood.



Red-necked Phalarope. Photo by Tansy Webber

I don't know about you, but sea bird colonies are magical places. A mixture of simultaneous harmony, thousands of birds of different species nesting side by side, and noise.

Hermaness, the most northerly place of the British Isles has a colony of around 30,000 breeding pairs of Gannets. If you include the juveniles that are not old enough to breed, that's well over 60,000 individuals. To put it into some size comparison, Kings Lynn had a human population of around 43,000 in 2024. Despite their size Gannets are harried by gull-sized Great Skuas to regurgitate in the air, any fish the Gannets may have caught. To minimise the risk, Gannets swallow the fish they catch under water rather than carrying them back in the bills Puffin style. Nevertheless, the Great Skuas simply harry the Gannets mercilessly and wait for the fish to be regurgitated before they dash in and catch it mid-air. Nature at its best.

Numbers of Gannets and Great Skuas were badly hit by the recent bird flu outbreaks but thankfully the numbers are starting to increase again.

Shetland isn't all about birds. There are some interesting flowers too. The Keen of Hamar on Unst, the most northerly island in the archipelago, is a place with almost no soil just shattered serpentine rock but which holds many interesting flowers. Little clumps of Moss Campion add a bit of colour to the place, but the star of the show is Edmondston's Chickweed, also known as the Shetland Mouse-ear. It grows only at two places in the world: the Keen of Hamar and one other site on Unst. It made me feel very lucky to have seen it.

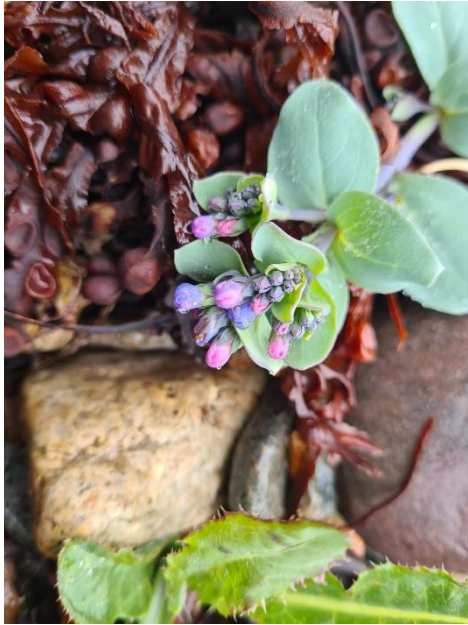


Keen of Hamar. Photo by David Cooling.



Edmondston's Chickweed -Unst. Photo by Dave Fairhurst

Oysterplant is another interesting and rare plant that is only found on coastal shores. It has pink coloured flower buds that turn blue as the flowers open. The leaves are supposed to taste like oysters – they don't.



Oysterplant. Photo by Julie Bunker

Some other interesting plants, not necessarily rare, we saw were: Common Butterwort – an insect eating plant that has greasy leaves which trap its prey; Frog Orchid; and Lesser Twayblade – a member of the orchid family whose tiny flowers resemble elfin like figures.



Photos by Dave Fairhurst

Left to right, Common Butterwort, Frog Orchid, Lesser Twayblade.

Insects are dying: here are 25 easy and effective ways you can help protect them. This link below was sent to me by one of our members. It's an article from the Guardian newspaper. It's worth a read. You might find some new ideas in it.

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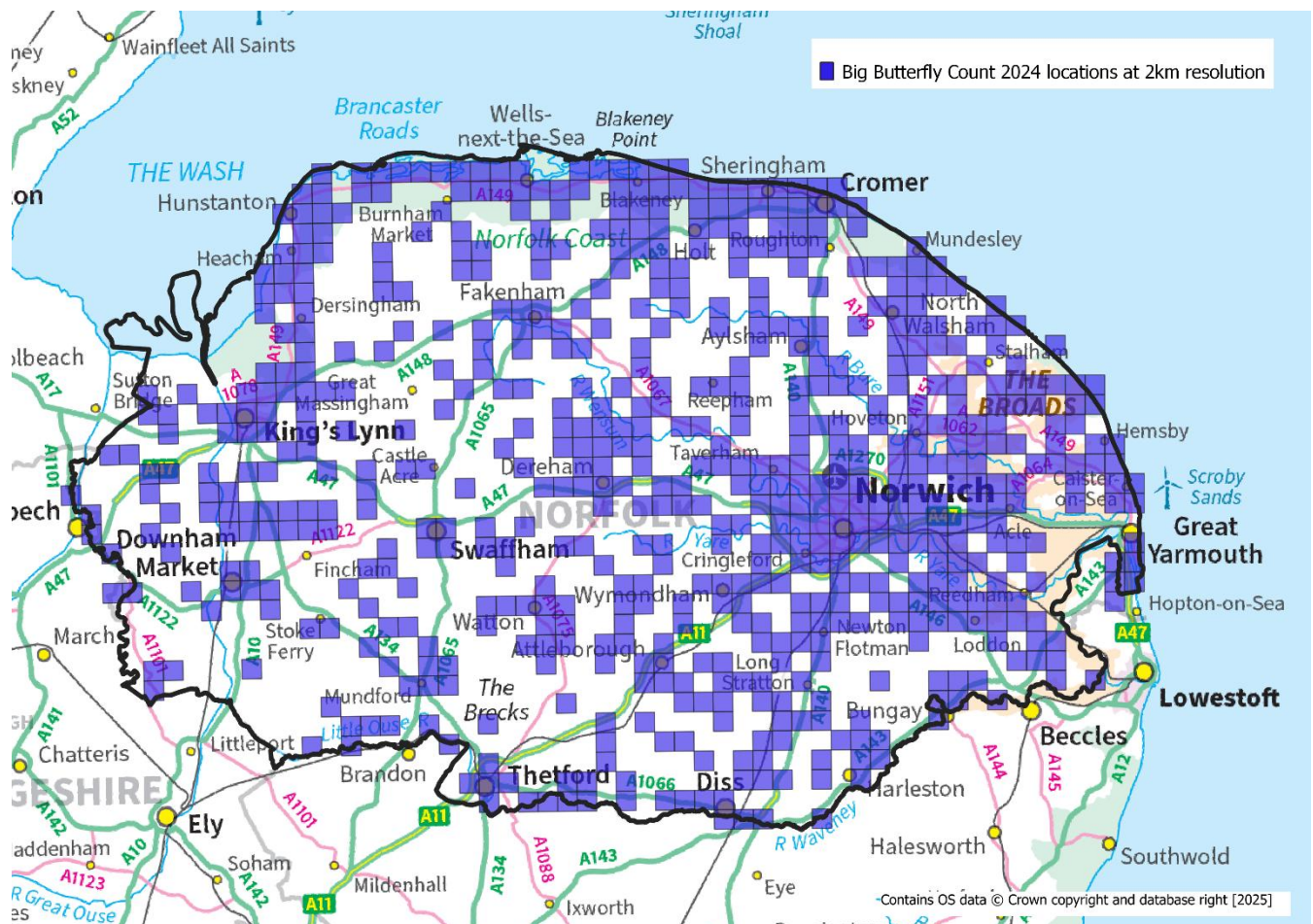
Talking of insects the Big Butterfly Count starts later this month. It runs between the 18th of July and 10th of August.

Butterfly Conservation believes that “Counting butterflies can be described as taking the pulse of nature and we depend on you, our citizen scientists, to help us assess how much help nature needs. The data from this and other counts will also help us to identify important trends in species that will assist us in planning how to protect butterflies from extinction, as well as understanding the effect of climate change on wildlife.

We thank the 2329 people who took part in the Big Butterfly Count 2024 in Norfolk during the summer counting 27,885 butterflies and day-flying moths.

Gatekeeper was our number 1, jumping from 4 th place in 2023. Despite this its numbers were still down by over a quarter. Our chart topper last year Peacock fell to number 5 with its numbers down by an average of 70% per count, Red Admiral at number 2 in 2023 slipped to number 6 with a 75% reduction.

We achieved good coverage for Norfolk, but there are a few gaps (see map). Can you help us fill these in 2025?”



Dates for your diary

July

Tuesday 8th - Morning walk round Foxley Wood reserve looking for high-summer butterflies, notably Purple Emperor, White Admiral and Silver-washed Fritillary.

Meet at the reserve car park at 9.00am, finished by 11.30am. No dogs. £5 members, £10 non-members.

Sunday 27th - Members social afternoon and BBQ. Members £10, non-members £15, children 5-12 £5, under 5 free. Please bring your own drink and chair. In the late afternoon walk I will lead a walk to some oak trees in the nearby vicinity looking for Purple Hairstreak butterflies. Do come along and hopefully watch these silvery little insects flying around the tops of the oak trees. Binoculars essential.

August

Thursday 14th - 10.00am to 12.30pm Ryburgh community wildlife projects - this is a Norfolk Wildlife Trust event. Booking is via their website

<https://www.norfolkwildlifetrust.org.uk/events/2025-08-14-wilder-communities-community-focus-ryburgh-community-wildlife-projects>

Sunday 24th afternoon visit to Warham Camp to admire the flowers and Chalkhill Blue butterflies. There will also be a short talk on the archaeology and history of the site.

To register for any of these events please contact Gill Waldron by email at info.ryburghwildlife@gmail.com .

David

Membership Secretary