

DAWN - Newsletter of the North Angus and Angus & Dundee Members' Centres

Number 91 - May 2006

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Introduction

At the time of writing, spells of chilly winter weather hadn't yet given way to spring but with luck the summer will be good for our native animals and plants, warm and dry at times but with enough rain to sustain wildlife. There's a varied and entertaining programme of events in the months ahead and we look forward to meeting many of you at them. Natural history is not just a matter of observations and enjoyment, though. Our wildlife needs all the help it can get. Please help us conserve our native plants and animals. Why not take part in some of the surveys? Join one of the activities groups. If you can spare the time, please make an effort to become an *active* member of the Scottish Wildlife Trust.

Pattern and Colour in Nature

Thursday 24th November 2005

Chairman Brian Ballinger introduced Dr Edith and Professor Richard Cormack. It was a very snowy evening, particularly in North Angus and a number of members expected were not able to come. The two Cormacks delivered an excellent, highly civilised and instructive duet, taking turns to describe a wide range of fascinating patterns and colours in the natural world.

The pair held their audience in the Meffan Institute spellbound for over an hour while they narrated an incisive description of what can be learned from careful observations of the world around us. They reported on the changes in landscapes over the seasons, from spring and summer and leading into

colder weather. Their descriptions were illustrated with a series of wonderful slides of scenes from Britain and abroad, particularly North America. Obviously our lecturers had collected the slides over many years and spent some considerable time compiling them into a concise and flowing sequence.

We also learned about camouflage and shading in animals, bright colourations acting as warnings to predators and to attract mates. Professor Cormack is a mathematician and he demonstrated the fascinating mathematical patterns in leaf growth and flower



development. One of his photographs of the face of a sunflower showed regular spiral patterns.

These turn out to follow a particular series, named after a renaissance Italian mathematician, and known as a Fibonacci series. The pattern is

1,1,2,3,5,8,13 and so on. Each number is generated by adding together the two previous numbers. Amazingly, a number of flowers and leaf insertion points on stems follow such patterns. It seems that these arrangements space out the leaves and flower parts in the most efficient way to allow effective access by light and pollinating insects, respectively.

The two lecturers richly deserved the vote of thanks followed by a hearty round of applause.

Before the lecture Dr Penny and Margaret Rogers had sold raffle tickets to raise funds for the members' centre. Afterwards the raffle was drawn and prizes collected, allowing the opportunity for the usual light-hearted comments and banter between the audience, Brian Ballinger and Bob Jaffrey. It had been an excellent evening, well worth the trip up to Forfar.

Montrose Basin

Saturday 4th February 2006

A fine cold but calm and clear day welcomed a party of 24 members and friends of a wide range of ages to Montrose Basin Visitors' Centre. We were so lucky; the previous week had been very cold and misty. As someone said, "We could have been bird watching by feel". The group joined together in as few cars as possible and moved on to the Old Mill car park near Bridge of Dun, to the southwest of the Basin.

As soon as the party arrived, Andy Wakelin, the excursion organiser and leader, introduced the farmer, Grant Baird, and Angus ranger Richard Averiss. They led the party out over the flat ground towards the reserve and the Shelduck hide. We could see in the distance the Wigeon hide, which had recently been vandalised but has now been repaired. Grant told us about the conservation work done on the farm to reduce the damaging impact of intensive farming. This work included wide conservation edges left around all the fields and zones of long grass, as beetle banks, to encourage a variety of insects and other invertebrates, birds and small mammals. All the large ditches that drain the flat land were protected by

wide grassy margins that prevent the influx of too much silt into the ditch and also help to keep fertiliser and pesticides out of the water. The ingress of salt water from the basin at high tide back along the ditches was prevented, as we soon saw, by large flap valves. Nearby, one of the party noticed numerous soft gelatinous brackets of Jew's ear fungus (*Auricularia auriculae-judae*) lined up along the trunk of a large partly-fallen elder. The upper branches of a small oak tree close by supported clusters of the hard round spheres of marble galls. These galls are caused by a tiny cynipid wasp laying its eggs in a bud and the small grub induces the tree to form the gall as a surrounding protective structure.

Further on, Grant described the use of sacrificial fields of rape to divert the geese and swans, particularly, away from the planted crops. However, this ploy had proved expensive, at an annual cost of around £3,000, and a cheaper alternative was being tried. In

the flooded field right next to the mud flats, waste chaff containing grain was left in piles to attract the birds. In the distance we could see the white dots of the swans and, as we approached, the birds proved to be clustered into several groups. The whooper swans, as Grant and Richard explained, turned out to be very aggressive to the mute swans. If the chaff was dumped in only one pile the whoopers would completely dominate it. To prevent this, we could see that the chaff was dispersed into several well separated piles. As they pointed out, the mutes formed a



Dabchicks in view for the party at the Shelduck Hide. Can you see yourself?

Photo: Andy Wakelin

group in the centre with several smaller clumps of whooper swans around about. Each species was able to feed with little disturbance by the other.

By this time, we had walked past the flooded field and reached the shelduck hide. It wasn't large enough to accommodate us all at the same time but we were able to take turns to go inside and look out over the Lurgies, the lower-most reaches of the South Esk. However, the rest of the party were able to use the hide for shelter and search the mudflats and surrounding fields for interesting sightings. Richard



soon reported that red-headed mergansers could be seen some distance upstream in the Lurgies and we

all trained our binoculars and telescopes up the river to get a good view of the bird diving for food. We picked out a number of ducks but then Liz Houghton spotted three dabchicks and Alban drew our attention to them. Soon we realised that there weren't three but four. As usual, they're shy secretive birds and difficult to obtain good views. Eventually, however, everyone was able to get clear sightings. Meanwhile both Andy Wakelin and Dundee and Angus members' centre chairman, Brian Ballinger, were busy with their digital cameras capturing views of the members in action with telescopes and binoculars.

We all greatly enjoyed the outing. There was so much to see and learn. Little Emily in her carrying frame must have broken a record for youngest family member attending, at only six months of age. But she was very good, only starting to feel hunger pangs at the same time as the rest of us. We soon made our way back and had an excellent lunch in the George Hotel in Montrose. It had been a most informative and fascinating day.



squirrels could become extinct in mainland Britain within 20 years.

What can be done? A number of projects have been set up in an attempt to halt the decline in populations, but much more information is needed. Which forest areas in Scotland offer the most secure habitats?

Where are the healthiest populations of red squirrels? And where are populations of grey squirrels moving into prime red squirrel habitats? Can you help?

Please contact and send your records to: The Scottish Squirrel Survey (Dr Mel Tonkin), c/o Scottish Wildlife Trust, Cramond House, Cramond Glebe Road, Edinburgh EH4 6NS - or email mtonkin@swt.org.uk; alternatively contact Dundee Ranger Service (Tel. 01382 431848), Chris McGregor, Angus Squirrel contact (Tel. 01575 530333) or Perth and Kinross Red Squirrel Group (Tel. 01250 872710).

Red Squirrels

Which is the only large city in Britain with a resident population of red squirrels? The answer, you may be surprised to learn, is Dundee. And did you know that healthy populations of these squirrels still survive in Fife and Angus? We are fortunate indeed that Tayside harbours reasonable numbers of these wonderful and charismatic native mammals. Anyone who has been able to watch red squirrels for even a short time cannot fail to have been captivated by their appearance, with attractive tufted ears in winter, and by their antics in the tree tops.

Although their red colouring may vary from a strong red to an almost dark grey shade or a very pale straw colour and their tails often bleach almost blonde in summer, they are easy to distinguish from that invading species, the alien grey squirrel. Grey squirrels are distinctly larger, never have tufted ears and are much bolder and more approachable. Since greys were introduced from North America they've gradually taken over most of the woodlands of England and over the last 40 years have invaded Scotland.

Scientists don't yet understand the complex interactions between the two species and cannot explain the reductions in red squirrel populations. The changes could be caused by direct competition for food, particularly in deciduous woodland, but are more likely to be due to the effects of habitats, variations in food supplies, disease and climatic factors. However, we do know that red squirrels have been in decline for many years and Tayside is a frontline area in the battle to conserve the species. The situation is so serious that some authorities even consider that red

Wildlife Week 3rd-11th June

Celebrate this nationally observed Week with us by joining in our events:

Saturday 3rd & Sunday 4th June *Binocular Fair.*

A chance to test out a large selection of optical equipment from our superb Viewing Gallery.

Montrose Basin Wildlife Centre 10:30am - 5pm

Saturday 10th June Outing to Den of Airlie (see Diary Dates on next page)

Saturday 10th June *Pondamonium! For Children*

Discover the variety of creatures living in a freshwater pond. Montrose Basin Wildlife Centre 10am-12noon

Sunday 11th June *Family Walk*

View the wildfowl of Montrose Basin from the Shelduck hide. Meet at Old mill car park 2pm-4pm.

Phone Montrose Basin Wildlife Centre on 01674 373336 for details

Flag Days

Please note these Dates for your Diary :

3rd June	Brechin
1st July	Kirriemuir
5th Aug	Monifieth
12th Aug	Montrose
9th Sept	Carnoustie
23rd Sept	Carnoustie
TBA	Dundee
TBA	Broughty Ferry

Can you lend a hand and a morning or an afternoon? Please get in touch with any of the Members' Centre committee or at any SWT centre. We need as much help as we can get!

Dates for your Diary

Members' Centres Events

- Monday 8th May** *Annual General Meeting* for the A&DMC, & Members' Show
At the Meffan Institute, Forfar, at 7:30 pm including a display of members' specimens and prints. Bring your own – please!
- Sunday 14th May** *The Beauty of Bluebells* Outing to Darroch and Kinclaven woods.
Meet 2 pm car park Angus Hotel, Blairgowrie (NO 181 452). Fine displays of spring plants and birds. Led by Jim Cook Approx 2½ hrs
- Saturday 10th June** *Wildlife Week: Outing to Den of Airlie*: Joint with Fife & Kinross MC
Led by Dr Hugh Ingram. Outing to explore the spectrum of natural features at the confluence of the Rivers Melgam and Isla.
Meet 10 am at small car park by River Melgam (NO 299 527)
NB: will involve rough walking: stout boots must be worn. Approx 3 hrs
- Sunday 2nd July** Outing to Corrie Fee Led by Ranger and Brian Ballinger. Meet 10 am car park at top of Glen Clova (NO 284 761) Plants and birds in mountain habitat. NB: very rough hill walking, stout boots and water/windproof clothing essential. Bring lunch. Approx 5 hrs
- Sunday 13th August** Barry Buddon Outing Led by Bob McCurley and Jim Cook. Meet 10 am at Car Park at Monifieth Playing Fields (NO 503 324). Bring lunch. Approx 4-6 hrs
- Saturday 21st October** Outing to Lintrathen Loch Led by James Ivory and Bob Jaffray. Meet at 10 am at original hide car park (NO 276 555). Winter birds - especially geese and whooper swans. Stout footwear advised. Approx 2½ hrs
- Thursday 23rd Nov** "Ospreys and Orchids - Our Perthshire Reserves" Presentation by Uwe Stoneman
Conservation Manager at Loch of the Lowes. At 7:30 pm in Meffan Institute, Forfar
Admission £3.50/Junior £1.

Montrose Basin Events

NOTE! - New Opening Hours

There are new opening times and new entrance fees at the Wildlife Centre. It will open daily from 15th March to 15th November from 10:30am to 5pm. Between 16th November and 14th March it will open **only** on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays from 10:30am to 4pm.

The World "Wild" Web

The Angus and Dundee Members' Centre website is at
myweb.tiscali.co.uk/adbswt
and you can email on
adbswt@tiscali.co.uk

The SWT's home Web Pages are at
www.swt.org.uk

Dundee Conservation Volunteers

Contact John Whyman on (01382) 432648 (daytime), or 07940 165997 (mobile) for details of the current programme. A Sunday activity occurs once a month. The SWT minibus leaves Seagate Bus Station at 0930hrs to the activity destination. Wear old clothes and stout boots. Bring waterproofs and lunch.

It's your chance to help conserve wildlife actively!



(SWT Family Membership includes children's **WATCH** membership)

Group	Meeting Place	Phone
Dundee	Various Parks (Ranger)	01382 435911
Forfar	Forfar Loch (Craig Borland)	01307 461118
Letham	4 Park Road (Lucy Ainsworth)	01307 818438
Montrose	Wildlife Centre (Karen van Eeden)	01674 676336

September 2006 - Newsletter Copy Deadline - 28th July 2006

If you have any report or item of news or details of future events for October, November, December 2006 and January 2007 that should be included in the next newsletter, please send it as soon as possible to the editor at the address below: Jim Cook, Science Section, Dundee College, Old Glamis Road, Dundee DD3 8LE. My email address is j.cook@dundecoll.ac.uk