

DRUMOIG WILDLIFE NEWSLETTER NUMBER 10 – SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2022



The view from Tentsmuir Point taken by Paul Edwards

It's hard to believe that this is the 10th edition of the Drumoig Wildlife Newsletter in its current format. The previous nine editions have now filled 100 pages – my thanks to the contributors and to others who have given me information or an idea which I have been able to develop.

September saw the first reasonable monthly amount of rainfall for the whole year at 68.7mm but, despite this, the reed beds were still muddy rather than waterlogged.

October has also seen a rainfall closer to average with a total of 70.5mm (that's almost 3 inches in old money). But temperatures in the second half of October were well above normal with morning temperatures often being in the 12 to 15C range.

THE WEATHER ROUNDUP.....	1
THE LAST BUTTERFLIES.....	1
A WEASEL & A SPARROWHAWK.....	2
THE RAMBLERS RETURN AGAIN.....	5
MORE ON MUSHROOMS/TOADSTOOLS.....	9
ROSE HIP SYRUP.....	10
FORDELHILL CARROTS.....	11
THE NEW HOUSING DEVELOPMENT.....	12
EARLY WINTER NIGHT SKY – Steve Norrie.....	13

THE LAST BUTTERFLIES AND MOTHS.

As September progressed the butterfly population began to dwindle. I spotted this small white butterfly in our back garden.



The Small White Butterfly is similar to the larger “cabbage” White Butterfly. There are considerable variations so that it has 2 or 3 dark spots on its upper wing surface and black or grey tips to the wings. Like its larger cousin it feeds on brassica and is common in gardens and allotments.

I also came across this moth which seemed to reside on our garage wall for several days. I had difficulty identifying it but Christine Edwards came to the rescue and identified it as a Garden Carpet Moth.



The adults are found at rest on walls or fences during the day and fly at dusk. They feed on a variety of garden plants including Garlic Mustard, Shepherd’s Purse, wild horse-radish, Hairy Bitter-cress, alyssum and cabbages.....none of which I am aware of in our garden!!

A WEASEL & A SPARROWHAWK have been spotted in Euan MacGregor’s garden in Craigie Hill.

Euan wrote:-

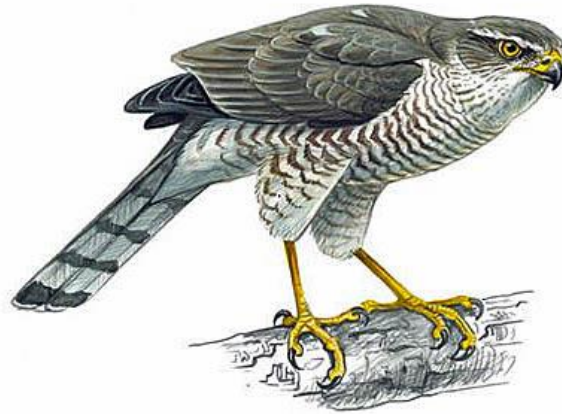
“About a month ago, we were sitting in the sun lounge when a sparrowhawk (I think) dived into the hedge at the top end of the garden after a sparrow. I couldn't see if it got it or not, but it disappeared into the shrubs so I think it might have. Then, a few days later I saw an odd animal crossing Craigie Hill. I knew it wasn't a squirrel but couldn't make out what it was. However, a few hours later we saw a weasel on our lawn. It was quite long, perhaps 9 inches, very glossy brown with a long, low body and a short, pointed tail and it scampered over the grass for a couple of minutes. Unfortunately, by the time I got a camera it had disappeared.

Then, later that same day the sparrowhawk returned and landed in a bush near the sun lounge. Again, I couldn't see if it caught anything, but we do have a lot of very fat sparrows in the hedge. They are eating us out of house and home and seem to try to eat their body weight in seed daily. This morning I went out of the back door to put the birdseed out on the bird table when I saw the sparrowhawk on top of the same bush but this time it definitely got a sparrow. It flew off with it in its claws. We also had a red squirrel in the garden this morning for a few minutes.”

My first reaction to this story was that I hadn’t twigged that sparrowhawk’s may feed on sparrows!!! I had always assumed that the name reflected the fact that sparrowhawks were smaller than most other birds of prey. The RSPB handbook says that the male (which is smaller than the female) feeds on smaller birds such as the chaffinch, yellowhammer and great tit but the female takes on bigger birds such as a starling or blackbird or even a woodpigeon.



Male sparrowhawk
(Images courtesy of the RSPB website)



Female sparrowhawk

Sparrowhawks have bright yellow or orange eyes which, apart from their size, helps to distinguish them from other birds of prey.

And so we come to Euan's weasel....or was it a stoat? My father had the answer – “ A weasel is weasely distinguished whereas a stoat is stoatally different”!

Stoats and weasels come from the family known as mustelids. They are both small, brown, fast and ferocious and are related to badgers, pine martens, polecats and otters.

Stoats (*Mustela erminea*) have a 25cm-long brown body with a pale belly and have a longer tail than a weasel with a black tip. They must eat 25% of their body weight per day and feed on mice, rats and rabbits, despite the latter being considerably bigger than they are. In northern Britain they have white coats in winter (ermine) which in days of yore was used to trim the robes of the nobility and royalty.



Courtesy of Wikipedia

An erect stoat

Weasels (*Mustela nivalis*) are slightly smaller than stoats with a body length of approximately 20 cm and are the world's smallest carnivore. They feed on voles and mice and tend to be quicker and lower to the ground than stoats.



Weasel - Courtesy of Wikipedia

Euan's "weasel" was probably..... a weasel, as it didn't appear to have any white on its back which is the other distinguishing feature. In practice, as Euan said, unless you have them side by side, it is quite difficult to distinguish them apart as they don't usually hang around to help us humans with identification!!

And what about ferrets, I hear you ask? **Ferrets** (*Mustela furo*) are also of the Mustelid family but have an interesting history. The name derives from the Latin "furittas" – little thief – and they have been known since ancient times. They have always been a domesticated animal and probably derive from a domesticated form of the wild European polecat. They are about 50 cm long so are well over twice the size of a stoat or weasel and have always been used as rat or rabbit catchers. You may well have seen the occasional ferret on a lead and they apparently make good pets, so much so that there are thought to be 5 million as pets in the USA!!!



A friendly ferret!

THE RAMBLERS RETURN – AGAIN!

After a long gap, the ever-young ramblers group got going again in October with a walk along Tayport beach to Tentsmuir Point and back through the forest for well earned refreshment at the Larick Centre. Our intrepid team leader was Neil Sibbit.



Neil (left) was expedition leader.

Along the way we saw much evidence of the devastation from Storm Arwen with fallen trees in numerous locations.



Through the damp parts of the forest there were numerous varieties of fungi and lichens. Thanks to Paul & Christine Edwards we think the following pictures are of a fungus called Blackish Purple Russula



My photo



Paul's photo

According to Wikipedia this is probably edible but I have to say, I wouldn't risk trying it!! WildFoodUK also says it might be edible – the test is to put a minute amount on the tongue and chew it – if it burns like chili then its poisonous! If it tastes mushroomy it's probably OK. My advice is ***DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME!!!***

There were also plenty of lichens on trees and on the moist forest floor.



Christine and Paul came to the rescue again. We think this one is called Dog Pelt lichen (*Peltigera canina*) and is probably a cousin of the dog lichen which was infesting our lawn when we first arrived. Lichen is not a single organism and is a symbiotic relationship between a fungus and algae &/or cyanobacterium – a fact that will put you top of the class in a quiz! There are over 20,000 known species.

We managed to reach the sandbanks at Tentsmuir Point and could see plenty of seals at a distance but not close enough to photograph. The tides at this point can be quite tricky and several people have drowned trying to take a closer look at the seals.



The sand dunes at Tentsmuir Point.



Marram grass – the stabiliser of sand dunes. The deep matted roots stabilise the sand and allow other plants to establish.

Samphire. Many years ago we were walking over the dunes near Tentsmuir Point and a chap came up to us and started extolling the virtues of Samphire. Before we knew it we had picked some strands of Samphire and were cooking it for tea!



On this occasion we were unable to find any. So, what is Samphire? There are several varieties but the commonest is Marsh Samphire which grows in salt marshes or on beaches. It is a low growing, succulent plant and tastes vaguely like asparagus. The name apparently comes from a corruption of “St. Pierre”, the patron saint of fishermen. It even gets a mention in King Lear, so has been on the culinary menu for centuries but has had a recent revival in Yuppie and Michelin starred restaurants. If you’re interested, you wash it and then steam or boil it and serve with a dash of butter. Or, you could eat it raw!

Paul had the advantage of a powerful telephoto lens and managed to get the following pictures of a guillemot and a curlew:-



Guillemot.



Curlew.

Paul was so inspired by our ramble that he and Christine went back on the 18th October. Paul commented as follows:-

“On the 18 October we were lucky to see three Little Egrets at the Tayport estuary. These birds are still a rare sighting in Scotland. In 2011 the Fife Coast and Countryside Trust reported four birds landing at the Eden Estuary Local Nature Reserve, which was at that time the largest flock seen in Scotland for 42 years. It was the first location in Scotland to document the bird since their last recorded sighting in Mull in October 1969.”



MORE ON MUSHROOMS/TOADSTOOLS.

Steve Norrie sent me this picture of a Fly Agaric toadstool suggesting that it could be mistaken for a Marguerita pizza!! The Fly agaric is, of course, poisonous so check with Steve before you order a pizza looking like this!



This is the season for mushrooms & toadstools. Last year I reported that my granddaughter & I collected over 250 from our front garden alone! Our “crop” this year has been much less. If you look around the golf course (or even your garden) at this time of year you will find an infinite variety. Here is a cluster on the golf course which I saw recently.



This may be a variety of Inkcap but there are many more varieties if you look for them!

ROSE HIP SYRUP.

Never heard of it? – then you must be a lot younger than me!!

We have a dog-rose bush (*Rosa canina*) growing at the bottom of our garden which prompted me to think that you never hear of Rose hip syrup these days.



Rose hip syrup was a necessary part of my childhood but it seemed to fade out of existence in the 1950's. It was well known to be high in Vitamin C and during World War 2 it came into its own. Weight for weight it contains 20 times the amount of Vitamin C as oranges, which were in extremely short supply in WW2. It is also a source of Vitamins A, D & E so you can see it was a very valuable commodity in wartime. I wondered how it was produced – did they have dog-rose fields or farms? The answer is ...no! In 1941 they had a National Week for collecting dog-rose berries (hips) in late September. Scouts, Guides and other groups scoured the hedgerows and collected a 200-ton haul which translated into 600,000 bottles of Rose hip syrup. I seem to remember that it was provided free to every child by the government later in the 1940's.

It also has anti-inflammatory properties and can be used in a variety of ways and is available from health food shops. However, you do need to be beware of the hairs inside the berries – they are the ingredient of itching powder!!



Rose hips, close-up, which are related to apples: The interior showing the seeds & hairs.

There are various recipes on the internet but you will be relieved to hear that all of them involve straining through muslin to remove the seeds, pulp and hairs! For 500ml of rose hip juice you need 325 grammes of sugar, so how they managed that in wartime, I don't know.

THE NOT SO HUMBLE CARROT

Residents may have noticed the very large field of carrots on Fordelhill Farm which stretches all the way down to St Michaels on the left-hand side of the A914.



Carrots are one of the most popular root vegetables in the UK with some 50,000 hectares grown from the lighter sand lands of East Anglia through Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire to Scotland. It's estimated 5 billion carrots are consumed nationwide and home-grown carrots supply over 90% of requirements and are harvested for approximately 11 months of the year.

The production of carrots requires mainly good free draining land and current farming practice ensures the land earmarked for carrot production is first made into large raised beds, these are then de-stoned using machines which separate out the stones and clods and deposit them between the growing beds. This gives the crop a good firm stone free bed and helps produce long straight carrots and avoids the roots "forking". The carrots are then sown in a number of rows within the bed. Harvesting commences around June in East Anglia, progressing North through the summer and Autumn. A high percentage of Scottish grown carrots are overwintered before being harvested.

Residents will have noticed the very large stacks of straw bales (not hay bales!) surrounding the Fordelhill field, these will be used to cover the carrots before winter frosts set in. I was hoping to have some pictures of the process but the mild weather has delayed the straw covering operation.



Nevertheless, the process is as follows. A tractor pulled machine with anything up to 6 large straw bales straddles the beds and initially unrolls a sheet of black plastic to cover the carrots, it then breaks up the bales of straw and covers the beds with about 12/15 inches of straw, on top of the black plastic. This operation has a double benefit, the straw as mentioned protects the crop from winter frost and snow and the plastic prevents

regrowth in the carrots in the spring. Regrowth would spoil the flavour and cause the carrots to become “woody”.

Harvesting of the crop can take place anytime up to May the following year and is carried out with a machine similar to a potato harvester, the carrots are then sent to a pack house, similar to Kettle Produce at Freuchie, where they are washed, graded and packed before onward distribution to retailers.



In my youth, living on the north side of the Tay and before large scale carrot production, Carnoustie carrots were always the best locally available, mainly due to the very light sandy soil in the area of the town. In those bygone days the carrots which were not consumed before winter were lifted and stored in straw covered earthen clamps until required - changed days!

THE NEW HOUSING DEVELOPMENT.

Everyone will have noticed that the new development is cracking on at a great pace. Alec Burden has again provided some stunning drone shots which shows how far it has progressed. At the time of writing, foundation work has started on the Driving Range side of Forgan Drive and, weather permitting, things look on schedule for completion by early summer 2023.



The new development from the south with the driving range top centre



22 new houses under development or completed on the Pickletillum site

EARLY WINTER NIGHT SKY – Steve Norrie.

Mars is now approaching opposition and looking very impressive as a bright red object in the eastern sky. It's roughly every two years that Mars comes closer to the earth and although not as near as last time is still a great image to view through binoculars or a telescope. Jupiter still dominates the early evening sky and rises to a nice viewable altitude – both these planets offer astro-imagers great opportunities.

If planets are not enough then the Leonid meteor shower in mid-November may be of interest though you will have to stay up late to catch it. These micro meteors are the dust trail of the

comet 55P/Temple Tuttle and are some of the fastest crashing into the earth's upper atmosphere at some 71 kilometres per second!

Familiar objects now coming into view are the constellations of Pleiades or Seven Sisters and the great square of Pegasus from which one can find the Andromeda galaxy – go to Mirach at the tail of Pegasus and turn right for half the distance of the tail and with binoculars you will find a fuzzy mass which is in fact M31 - our nearest spiral galaxy. It is heading towards us but don't hold your breath as our sun will have gone supernova by then.....

Still waiting for the latest Moon rocket to launch – perhaps next report.



North America nebula – from Drumoig.

As always, many thanks to our contributors but this newsletter will not happen unless you, the members, contribute. Please, please, please send me any observations, comments or photographs – there's always something of interest happening around Drumoig!

Martin Hepworth: kaymarthep1@aol.com