

# Spring 2012 NEWSLETTER



*Caerostris darwini*  
(Darwin Bark Spider)

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**Contents**

Chairman's News	2 - 3
Update from The Reserves Manager	3 - 4
Biodiversity Top 10	5 - 6
A Brief History of SWT Aberdeen	7 - 10
Final Winter Talks	10
Summer Outings	11
Contacts for Members	12

**Chairman's News**

The article in this newsletter from past Chair, Esther Woodward, is a wonderful reminder of 40 years of the history behind this SWT Aberdeen branch and now Member Centre. Esther evokes memories of volunteers working on big wildlife projects, roughing it in bothies and obviously having a wonderful time doing it. She reminds us of the great energy and enthusiasm of past Chairs and ordinary SWT members supported by able area officers and the conservation battles they sometimes fought. I didn't know myself all about how we came to acquire the reserves we have today in the North East and so I have been educated by Esther – who hasn't?

Times have changed again and SWT nationally have had to tighten belts and reduce staffing so that our reserves will now be managed from Dundee. This has meant the redundancy of our greatly respected volunteer organiser, Mike Stevens, who has provided so much skill and flair in organising volunteer effort for our reserves maintenance. I understand Mike is still willing to help even in his own time and we should be thankful for his dedication. We are lucky that we have some enthusiastic reserves convenors who can keep SWT well informed of what needs to be done and steer the required effort.

The Aberdeen MC committee really does need some help from you, the members, to keep an active Member Centre going and we really could do with some additional volunteers for the committee. We are not asking you to do any big jobs – just to help out with ideas. Please let me know if you are willing to give it a try! One idea we have had is to form a network of species and habitat "experts" to respond to planning applications for developments which might threaten wildlife sites. This means we would be effective without burdening just one or two people. If you are interested in joining this network let me know that too. ([roger@owen25.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:roger@owen25.fsnet.co.uk))

Meanwhile the MC committee are putting together the programme of outings for this coming summer: botanical recording trips; a walk through the Muir of Dinnet and Dinnet Oakwoods and spotting damsel and dragonflies on the Red Moss of Netherley are on the cards! We hope you will give these outings a lot of support.

**Roger Owen - Chair Aberdeen Member Centre**

## **Update from the Reserves Manager**

**Rab Potter**

### **North East Co-ordinator and Work on Aberdeenshire reserves**

As you may have heard, after a recent re-structure we are to lose the post of North East Co-ordinator (Mike Stevens). Mike has worked tirelessly on Aberdeenshire reserves for many years now and on a personal level it is very sad to see him leave the Trust's employment. I wish him well for the future.

How we are going to get the work done on the reserves is still in the final stages of discussion however it looks like the work will be carried out as follows;

- Red Moss of Netherley and Coulnacraig Meadow will be covered by the team based in Dundee.
- Gight Wood and Longhaven Cliffs will require me to find contractors to carry out the work.

The loss of Mike also means that staff (that's me now) will not be "on the ground" as often as Mike was, and therefore I would welcome a call or an email from any member if they can see issues arising on any of the Aberdeenshire reserves. (Please remember I still have Moray, Angus and Perthshire reserves as well to look after!)

### **Red Moss of Netherley**

We are in the final stages (after many meetings and much communication) to receive Scottish Rural Development Project (SRDP) funding to construct more small dams within the bog and two much larger dams on large ditches draining the centre of the bog. The Aberdeen Western Periphery Bypass Mitigation Fund people have also contacted us again. We have re-submitted our application to provide the shortfall in SRDP funding and also to allow us to control scrub and heather on the site as well as get a few surveys carried out by professionals. We **could** have around £30,000 to spend on this site in the next three years.

SNH have also commissioned a consultant to speak to all the other landowners of the whole SSSI with a view to managing the whole site as a peat bog – not just the SWT part! This in the final stages and I have heard through the grapevine that 4 out of the 5 other owners are receptive to these ideas, so I could soon be spending time consulting with these other owners soon

### **Coulnacraig Meadow**

Little to report here apart from we are still keeping an eye on the neighbouring land use

### **Gight Wood**

Again we are at the final stages of receiving SRDP funding to remove non-native trees from the wood and try to help natural regeneration of native species. We will also be coppicing the hazel stand at the far end of the reserve on a five year cycle as part of this funding.

A recent Site Safety Inspection, which I now have to do on all reserves, threw up a few extra bits of maintenance on the footpath. A Tree Safety Survey (which I also have to do regularly now) has shown that there are several large trees which need to be monitored. The most worrying part of this survey was finding that almost all the ash on the left hand side going down to Hagberry Pot, have some type of root disease and we may have to fell them before they fall on somebody. I am waiting to see what fungal fruiting bodies appear on them and will re-visit them with a Tree Safety expert.

### **Longhaven Cliffs**

After many trials and tribulations and much hard work from Mike and his volunteers, we have just about completed the upgrade of the footpath along the whole length of the reserve. We just have Interpretation Boards and a few signs to erect. This £40,000 project has enabled us to provide a level walking surface along the whole 4 kilometres of cliffs within the reserve. The path I believe blends in well with the surroundings, and I would encourage you to try it for yourselves. The trick now is going to be maintaining this path once a suitable contractor has been found!

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**Biodiversity Top 10****Bob Daly**

In an attempt to gain more interest in biodiversity, a university in the US has started producing a 'top 10' list of new-to-science animal species each year, the candidate species being judged by an international panel of scientists. So, without further ado (cue the Top of the Pops theme tune), here is the 2011 top ten (in no particular order – it's either in the top 10 or it isn't):-

1. Darwin's Bark Spider (*Caerostris darwini*). An orb-weaving spider found in Ranamafana National Park in Madagascar. The silk spun is more than two times stronger than any other known spider silk making it the 'toughest biological material ever studied' (10 times stronger than a piece of Kevlar of the same size). The webs produced are the largest of the orb-style webs at 2.8m diameter and they can put 'bridgelines' across rivers and lakes up to 25m in length. [I visited this park back in 2006 - and survived.]
2. Eternal Light Mushroom (*Mycena luxeterna*). Originating in the few remaining bits of Atlantic forest habitat near Sao Paulo in Brazil, this fungi emits a very bright, greenish-yellow bioluminescence from a gel covering its stems. The light is emitted 24 hours per day and this is 'one of the most visually-striking' of the 71 known bioluminescent species (out of 1.5 million fungi species worldwide). [Grow a few of these and you could save on your lighting bills.]
3. *Halomonas titanicae*. An iron-oxide consuming, halophilic bacteria discovered on 'rusticles' (the corrosion equivalent of icicles) on the Titanic – hence the name. [I could use these on my car.]
4. Golden Spotted Monitor Lizard (*Varanus bitatawa*). One has to wonder how this 2 metre long, brightly coloured (blue/black mottled with yellow/green) lizard from the Philippines has not been spotted before. Obviously the biologists that had surveyed the area didn't look up in the trees which is where it hangs out. Despite its large size it weighs in at only 10Kg. The latin name comes from the name the hunters of the local Agta tribe used for it (new to science maybe but not new to human knowledge).
5. *Glomeremus orchidophilus*. A so-called 'raspy' cricket from Reunion, an island in the Indian Ocean, which is the only member of the Orthoptera (crickets and grasshoppers) which pollinates flowers – specifically a particular green/white flowered orchid (*Angraecum cadetii*). Unlike most crickets which are effectively nomadic - not overnighing in nests - this one does use a specific nest and this is thought to be key to it being able to repeatedly navigate its way around the same flowers. The orchid is closely related to the Comet Orchid which has an incredibly long nectar spur and which Darwin predicted would be pollinated by an insect with an equally long tongue. He was proved right when a hawk moth with a 14" proboscis was found to be the culprit. Hawk moths are rare on Reunion which is why scientists were studying this one.

6. Walter's Duiker (*Philantomba walteri*). This antelope was first found in a West African bushmeat market back in 1968 (it doesn't say if it was alive or dead) so it has clearly taken a while to identify it as a new species. Let's hope there are still some left. It originates in Benin/Togo. There are about a dozen different Duiker species and some are extremely small (1 foot at the shoulder). This enables them to hide in the most impenetrable vegetation. No prizes for guessing who first discovered this one.
7. *Tyrannobdella rex* (good name). This 'T.rex' leech was discovered 'feeding from the nasal mucous membrane of a little girl in Peru'. It's single armed jaw armed with large, sharp teeth make it unique amongst leeches and also makes it look like a sawn-off piranha. Not to be sniffed at. A true king of the leeches as the name implies.
8. The Rogue mushroom (*Psathyrella aquatica*) is an underwater mushroom. It is a gilled mushroom which actually fruits underwater, the only known mushroom species to do so. It is found in the headwaters of the Rogue River in southern Oregon. One has to wonder whether it can spread upstream (downstream should be easy enough) – maybe the spores attach to, or are ingested by, fish swimming upriver.
9. The Leaproach (*Saltoblattella montistabularis*) is a cockroach which jumps. Having legs not dissimilar to those of a grasshopper it can match them for jumping ability. Other modifications which facilitate this are its slim body shape compared to other cockroaches, its hemispherical eyes (normally kidney shaped) and an extra fixation point for stabilizing its long antenna. Jumping cockroaches were known to exist back in the Jurassic period but this is the only one in existence today. It was discovered in the Table Mountain National Park in Cape Town, South Africa and the second part of the Latin name is derived from the old Latin name for Table Mountain. Given how well studied this area is one wonders what else could be hiding. I know they have been putting out movement-triggered cameras in the hills around the wine-growing areas not far from Cape Town and have been surprised at the number of leopards appearing, sometimes in broad daylight – they were barely known to exist there before. A typical sequence of photos would be: walkers legs, walkers legs, leopard, walkers leg...
10. The Louisiana Pancake Batfish (*Halieutichthys intermedius*) is 'flat like a pancake, spikey, hops on its fins and has huge bulging eyes', also described as 'remarkably hideous (in a good way)'. Having seen a photo of it I would add you only need to think of seaside mother-in-law postcards to get the picture. It was discovered just before the Gulf oil spill which covered all of its known range so let's hope there are some left.

How's about that, then. You will notice there are no new Scottish species in the top ten. Are there any new Scottish species? We could try volunteering the Vegetarian Haggis though I'm not sure the judges would go for it.

## **A Brief History of SWT Aberdeen 1971 - 2011**

Esther Woodward, past Chair

I was asked to write something about past activities of the Aberdeen Members Group (formerly Branch).

SWT has moved from a members-run organisation to a more staff-led set-up. In my early days in Aberdeen there were about half-a-dozen staff nationally and a definite dominance of "Central Belt" activity where most of the members lived. We, in Aberdeen, felt very much in the outback though dedicated Chairmen and Members of Council trekked regularly to Edinburgh to find out what was going on. As Area Officers began to be appointed in other locations the Branch Committee waged a campaign for a local officer, stressing our distance from the Edinburgh Hub. We were eventually successful in the appointment of Rick Goater who was a great support. Various fine folk filled that job thereafter but our current officer, although extremely hardworking, has to cover a huge area and is based at Loch of the Lowes - miles away. (Editors note: and now we are being covered from SWT Dundee).

In the 1980s we seemed to have a good stock of energetic and knowledgeable 30/40ish members - sadly thin on the ground today. At that time we had one vast Reserve "Glenmuick" (6350 acres) by agreement with Balmoral Estate. We suspect that initially the Estate wanted assistance to help their Ranger in handling the steadily increasing number of visitors (i.e. car parking attendants!). However, the Branch gradually became more actively involved beyond the weekly summer patrol duties undertaken by volunteers. The car park at Spltal of Glenmuick is a round trip of 100 miles from Aberdeen so not exactly handy.

A small visitor centre was set up beside the essential toilets but it was only manned when volunteers could attend. With increasing foot pressure, the unsurfaced paths on the Estate began to suffer especially at the north end of the loch. A path maintenance group took on drainage and surfacing repairs. To screen the initial small car park a couple of tree belts were established necessitating learning how to erect deer fencing. Native trees were planted and obtained from the then SWT Tree Nursery at Drum Castle, which also was run by volunteers. We also produced the first Reserve Booklet, written by the then Branch Chairman and beautifully illustrated by the Balmoral Ranger, Neil Cook. We were keen to try to restore some of the native pine and birch woodland around the loch. After protracted negotiations with the Estate a plan for two enclosures was agreed. One was on the on the south side of the Dubh Loch burn which made for severe logistical problems. Eventually some tree cover was established partly by planting of suitable stock but mainly by natural regeneration. As we became more involved we looked for somewhere to stay overnight to reduce travel time and expense. The Estate offered the lease of the Allt na Guibshach bothy and stable at the foot of the Lochnagar path. This was basic

shelter with no mod. cons. but a keen team of volunteers undertook works which resulted in a wood burning stove (rescued from a tip), piped water and a gas supply from tanks in the stable, together with some furniture. Shutters were added to the window to keep the Bothy secure. Sleeping quarters were communal in the loft over the stable. I have happy memories of cosy nights in front of the stove, and in the autumn of being surrounded by roaring stags! The Bothy proved useful for visiting scientists carrying out surveys and research on the Reserve. One poor geologist who had been staying there officially for a couple of weeks, found himself being grilled by Heavy Security who thought he was a potential assassin when the Royals were in residence on the Estate! All this came to a sad and unwelcome end later when the Estate did not wish to renew the 25 years agreement with the Trust.

Happily, new Reserves were later acquired at Gight, Longhaven and Coulnacraig and local Committees were set up to manage these. Volunteer work parties undertook practical management to maintain and enhance the habitats. Later on a part of Netherley Moss was bought, as we wanted to have a Reserve nearer to Aberdeen. However the responsibility of owning an active peat bog did not make it ideal for casual access, although work parties were organised to carry out works to make access safer and to carry out detailed biological surveys. The area, being part of an SSSI, was fairly well documented by Scottish Natural Heritage.

### **Local Reserves**

We were lucky in the acquisition of new Reserves at low cost. The steep sided broadleaved woods of Braes of Gight were purchased for a minimal price from the Forestry Commission whose commercial conifer plantations were mainly on the other side of the River Ythan gorge. Gight was a wonderfully rich woodland but needed some real management. Volunteers helped clear sycamore scrub and new paths, but mainly reared trees from acorns, cherries, and other tree seeds from the woodland which were planted in their thousands back into the woods.

The involvement of local SWT members in Planning Enquiries also gained us the magnificent sea-cliff reserve at Longhaven, near Peterhead. We were part of a group protesting against the proposal for a super-quarry on the granite cliffs there. When this was defeated, we were offered the cliffs and some adjacent maritime heath and grassland to help ensure that these were never quarried again. Less management is needed at Longhaven but we did put great effort into converting an adjacent disused pipe storage yard into a new wildlife area.

The small field of Coulnacraig was “given” to us by an owner who appreciated its unusual orchid community. He had other botanically rich fields on his land. So we took it over at the cost of a “peppercorn” and lawyers fees, the latter turning out to be quite substantial.



## **Habitat Surveys**

Grampian Regional Council Planning Department had carried out a generalised mapping of habitats throughout the Region. They also had set up a system of second-tier (below SSSI status) wildlife sites within their Study of Environmentally Sensitive Areas (SESA).

This resulted in the quaintly named SINS sites (Sites of Interest to Natural Science) which were incorporated in Structure and Local Plans. These are currently being reviewed with the assistance of the local Records Centre .

A programme of habitat survey within Grampian had been set up by SWT using volunteers and teams under the various Government Training schemes for training the unemployed. The SWT Habitat Survey teams worked in conjunction with Gordon District Council Planning Dept. by surveying areas where development might have to be accommodated. Later on SWT nationally undertook a Scottish Wildlife Action Programme (SWAP) using professional surveyors. This produced excellent and wide-ranging surveys which have been very valuable in themselves. Part of the SWAP system necessitated use of an Assessment Panel of SWT members who scrutinised the Surveyors reports and recommended which were to be nominated as Listed Wildlife Sites. Efforts were made to encourage skilled SWT members to carry out their own surveys but this did not readily take off.

## **South Allans**

The Branch Committee cast around for another project to interest the members and bring them together. Miss Marion Smith, a local ardent conservationist, owned a primitive 2 up 2 down cottage called South Allans on the fringes of Aberdeen. It was situated in an area of sand and gravel deposits and she fought a running battle against the extractors who were trying to encroach on her on all sides. When she sadly died she left the cottage and its garden to the local SWT Branch with the request that they continue to repel the developers.

The Branch was delighted to have a property within easy reach of Aberdeen where a great proportion of its members lived. We had always felt the lack of an accessible property where active members could meet together more frequently on weekday evenings. Necessary repairs were made to the cottage and associated structures with skilled friends being drafted in to show us how. Plans were drawn up to maintain and enhance Marion's garden which was overgrown, woolly and wildlife-friendly but an oasis in a sea of arable and grazing land and gravel workings. Wildlife friendly plants were reared and donated. It was fun to learn how to strim to discourage the thugs of the plant world and to cut grass paths. Thankfully health and safety was not as rigorous in those days.

A grant application was made successfully to the Nature Conservancy Council to create a pond to be fed by a rainwater system from the cottage roof. The pond was designed using a butyl liner with attention paid to shallow margins and associated marshland areas. Most of us had never had the opportunity to tackle a project such as this and the learning curve was steep.

The cottage was made wind and water tight. There were several outbuildings including one which we labelled Fort Knox because of its armoured door. It appeared to have housed a dynamo presumably prior to the connection of electricity from the Grid. Interest was starting in Wind Generation and a lecturer from Robert Gordon's College was drafted in to see if his students could design and implement a project to provide electrical power but this never came to fruition. The cottage had no particular function except as a rain shelter but later on an SWT Habitat Survey Team was installed - it wasn't the best of accommodation for them but it was good to see the place used.

The work on the garden was maturing nicely when a bombshell fell. SWT Headquarters in a time of financial stress decided to sell the property - and to our distress to a sand and gravel company. They saw it as a way of realising finance from the legacy - we were incensed that Marion's wishes were being disregarded. An argument ensued but SWT lawyers ruled that there was no legal restriction in the Will on selling the cottage. We knew that there was a moral one but we could not prevail and so it all was given up much to the chagrin of those who had devoted many hours to the project!

## **Final Winter Talks 2011**

Please note the additional indoor meeting in May.

**Thursday 15th March**  
**Grace Banks - The birds in your locality**

**Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> April: AGM then**  
**Andrew Turner - Wildlife Crime**

**Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> May**  
**Maggie Keegan SWT HQ – SWT and the Planning System**

All meetings take place at:- Main Lecture Theatre, Zoology Building, University of Aberdeen, Tillydrone Avenue, at 7.30 pm. For further details contact: Rodney Payne 01569 763742. Tea and coffee (and tray bakes!) afterwards £1.00.

## **RSPB Friends of Strathbeg – Bird Food Sales**

Latest prices and order forms will be available to download from [www.swtaberdeen.org.uk](http://www.swtaberdeen.org.uk).

## AGM

Just a reminder that the AGM is on Thursday 19th April at the Zoology Building, University of Aberdeen commencing at 7:30. This will be followed by a talk by Andrew Turner on Wildlife Crime. We do need new committee members; please think about helping with Member Centre organisation. Any nominations should be sent to Rodney Payne as soon as possible.

## Summer Outings 2012

**Sat 12<sup>th</sup> May 10:00am**

**Muir of Dinnet & Dinnet Oak Woods with Mark Young**

**Car Parking at Burn o'Vat Visitor Centre NO429997**

Packed lunch & stout footwear. Booking essential.

Further details/booking contact: Maureen Borthwick 01224 733920

**Sat 16<sup>th</sup> June 10:00am**

**Botanical Outing with David Welch**

**Corbie Den, Maryculter – NJ857001**

**Car Parking at the Mill Inn (East side)**

Packed lunch & stout footwear. Booking essential.

Further details/booking contact: David Elston 01224 868153

**Sun 18<sup>th</sup> July 10:00am**

**Insects of Woodlands, Riverbanks & Flower Meadows with Jenni Stockan**

**Houghton Country Park, Alford**

**Car Parking at NJ580167**

Packed lunch & stout footwear. Booking essential.

Further details/booking contact: Rodney Payne 01569 763742

**Sat 11<sup>th</sup> August 10:00am**

**Red Moss of Netherley with Reserve Conveners**

**Meet at lay-by on Netherley-Cookney Road NO858933**

Packed lunch & Welling boots recommended (walking stick optional!). Booking essential.

Further details/booking contact: Roger Owen 01569 762479

**September meeting date to be confirmed**

**Geology of the Ythan Estuary with Stuart Archer**

Packed lunch and stout footwear

Booking essential

Further details and booking contact: Rodney Payne 01569 763742

## Delivery of Newsletters

Every newsletter delivered by hand saves the branch the cost of a stamp. There are already a band of volunteers who deliver a bundle of newsletters in their area, but we could do with wider coverage. So if there is anyone who would like an evening or two of exercise twice a year please contact Gavin For

## Contacts for Members

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