


<b>WT Galloway Group Newsletter – March 2017</b>		
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## Welcome to the March Edition of the Galloway SWT Newsletter.

### Day to Day Work on Our Reserves: a Report from the Coalface

Here are a few examples of what we have been doing to manage SWT nature reserves to protect the biodiversity, and ensure safety for visitors.

After the storms in October, some trees at Carstramon and Stenhouse Wood were leaning dangerously onto roads and telephone cables. We had to fell them, using a winch to make sure they fell into the wood so they wouldn't damage the cables or cause an obstruction on the roads.

There are some trees such as birch, sitka spruce and willow, growing on the peat bog at Carsegowan, so we've had to fell them as they were obscuring the view from the hide, and they can dry up the bog. Bogs are important for wildlife because they support specialist organisms like sphagnum mosses and sundew. They are also important for tackling climate change, because they store carbon. This is a roe deer jaw that Chris found on the bog.



At Feoch Meadows, we put in a new metal fence and constructed a wooden slip hurdle. This took many days because the access to this site is difficult and the ATV got stuck in mud, and its chain broke. This took a whole day to get out, but in the end we managed to put in the fence and slip hurdle. There are lots of resident birds of prey, so there are always plenty of pellets, which I have been dissecting. Mostly, each pellet contains one or two field vole skeletons, and sometimes a small bird that is perhaps a meadow pipit.

The boardwalk at Fountainbleu & Ladypark needed some repairs, and while we were there, we picked up some of the litter and removed it. It is close to an area of housing development so there are lots of visitors, for example dog walkers. There was a golden plover calling from a nearby field that is going to be turned into housing. These are some of the mushrooms we found on the reserve. The first one is horsehoof and the second one is bracket.



One week we were at Cander Moss in South Lanarkshire. As with Carsegowan, we were removing trees from the marsh. Although it is next to a motorway, it has a good variety of birds. We flushed lots of snipe and there was a pair of kestrels hunting.

There have been some sightings of grey squirrels near Blackcraig, so we put traps out for them. This is necessary because it could only take a couple of grey squirrels to spread squirrel pox to the red squirrels in Galloway. The traps are checked every day and any greys found will be shot quickly and humanely. We've also started work on extending the path network in Blackcraig Wood to make it safer for visitors. It is slippery, so we are going to make wooden steps to make it less slippery. To do this, we had to find oak of just the right size to make them. The steps will be made out of the heartwood, which is in the centre of a mature oak. The heartwood is very tough and won't rot quickly. This is a well-camouflaged spider that Chris found at Blackcraig Wood. We haven't yet identified the species. The strange-looking fungus is called purple jelly-disc.



When there is heavy rain, we sometimes work in the workshop. I have been learning how to service chainsaws and brushcutters. They need to be cleaned often, otherwise they get clogged up with sawdust and oil, and they need to be sharpened, because sometimes if they hit a stone then all the points on the chain are blunted. I've also learnt how to sharpen axes and billhooks using a whetstone. We've also designed and made a nice set of drawers using wood and upcycled fish trays found on the shore, so this will create more space to put tools in the workshop.

**Aliya Hashmi** [Aliya is working with Chris Archbold, our Reserves Project Officer, on a one-year placement, funded by Community Jobs Scotland. Her photos can be seen in colour on our website and on our Facebook page. Ed.]



## **GREY SQUIRREL CONTROL IN STENHOUSE WOOD**

Last spring I spend a wonderful half hour watching two red squirrels feeding in trees beside the main path in Stenhouse Wood. Their red coats glowed in the morning sunshine as they effortlessly moved through the thin branches of the trees and I marvelled at their ability to move through the wood.

Unfortunately the sustainability of our red squirrel population here in SW Scotland is threatened by the large population of grey squirrels. For the last three years I have taken part in the squirrel survey in the area around Stenhouse Wood and near Dunscore / Moniaive, and grey squirrels have been recorded in nearly all the sample sites. As convenor of Stenhouse Wood, I volunteered to be trained to control greys in the reserve. This involves setting up four live traps in the wood. Operating the traps involves identifying at least three consecutive days to bait and check traps at least daily. On the first day I will disinfect the traps, check that the waterproof covers are intact (these keep any trapped squirrels dry in bad weather), bait the traps (with peanuts, maize and sunflower seeds) and set them. When I return, I check the traps (which spring closed if a squirrel triggers the release mechanism). Any squirrel that has become trapped has plenty of food and shelter. If it is a red squirrel, I will carefully release it. This requires care as I do not wish to be bitten! Usually the red squirrel bolts out of the trap and into the nearest tree where they usually stop and look back. I often think that they are swearing at me! If it is a grey squirrel I will use a piece of wood to restrict the space it has in the trap and then shoot it with an air rifle. This is quick and minimises the distress to the animal. Over the last three years I have controlled at least 20 grey squirrels but they are still seen frequently in the area. Two years ago I was asked to take blood samples from the dead grey squirrels and send them for analysis. One sample did show that the grey was carrying squirrel pox which is deadly to reds.

To many people killing squirrels seems the wrong thing for a SWT Reserve convenor to be doing and I definitely do not enjoy this part of grey squirrel control. I have never been "into" shooting or hunting but recognise that we must control the grey squirrels if we hope to maintain our native red squirrel population. Grey squirrel control continues to be required in this area and with the efforts of voluntary and professional trappers I hope that we can continue to enjoy the sight of our red squirrels here in SW Scotland for many years to come.

**Colin Mitchell (Convenor)**

## **Roadside Verges: A Refuge for Wildlife?**

Some members have asked why Dumfries & Galloway Council cut our roadside verges so early and so often. After all, these are potentially an important wild flower habitat which, if sensitively maintained, can provide a refuge not only for native plants but also for insects, birds and small mammals. The conservation organisation, Plantlife, has been campaigning on the issue for some time (see <http://plantlife.love-wildflowers.org.uk/roadvergecampaign>). The Galloway Group Committee decided we should talk to Peter Norman, Biodiversity Officer at the Council, about this, and I had an informative if ultimately rather depressing chat with him.

Council policy is that all A roads under its management (i.e. excluding trunk roads such as the A75) are cut to a width of 1 metre twice, first in May-June (this is a legal requirement), then in August-September. All other roads are cut once, to the same width, during the intervening period (June to August). Pollinating insects obviously need plants to flower and flowering plants need to set seed if they are to survive, so, as Plantlife argues, verges should not be cut before late summer; ideally, the crop should then be removed in order to reduce competition from vigorous grasses (actually it's a bit more complex since different soil types produce different plant communities, which benefit from different mowing regimes – which only makes the problem worse!). The main factors making it difficult for the Council to do this are, firstly, legal requirements and safety considerations, and, secondly, cost pressures.

Obviously, removing the crop would add considerably to the expense (though it happens here and there in other areas), but so too would delaying the cut on all non-A roads until August because this would require recruiting more operatives. One might think that the Council could be asked to leave selected, particularly important stretches until later – though this would depend on having sensitive and careful operators, which is by no means guaranteed. Another suggestion is that they might even agree to transfer management of some selected areas to local volunteers; the argument given against this is that there would be problems of health and safety and of insurance (though it does happen in some other areas: see, e.g. <https://new.devon.gov.uk/environment/wildlife/managing-verges-for-wildlife>).

Is it worth trying to do anything, then? If so, what?

- Members could monitor Council performance. Are they conforming to their own policy or, perhaps, cutting more or earlier than they say?
- We could suggest to the Council that they ask operators to leave specific patches alone – or on A roads leave them until the second cut. And we could offer, through our members, to propose which locations to select.
- We might suggest sowing the grass parasite, yellow rattle, in selected locations to reduce grass competition. We could even offer to do the sowing. We could go further and propose sowing appropriate wild flowers along with the rattle. This would have to be coupled with an appropriate mowing regime, ie no cutting before the seed is set.
- If we were prepared to be politically ambitious, we could challenge D&G's health and safety policy and propose a community engagement scheme similar to Devon's. The recent Community Empowerment Act in Scotland provides mechanisms for this in principle. Of course this would depend on local communities stepping up.

Most of these would demand collective action. So we would need you, our members, to tell us you support the idea and would be prepared to be involved. The final suggestion would go further: it would require local communities, e.g. the community where *you* live, to step up and say they were able and prepared to do this.

Whether we pursue any or all of these possibilities, please – if you haven't already done this – go to the Plantlife website given above and sign and send the letter they provide to D&G Council. If, on reading this newsletter, we all do this, perhaps it will have some effect.

One final point: as a (small) farmer, I am well aware (as is Peter Norman) that paying so much attention to road verges is to an extent a symptom of desperation arising from the biological catastrophe that is our farmland. In the context of Brexit and the changes to the financial support of agriculture that are coming, not to mention the Scottish Government's imminent Good Food Nation Bill, there is ample opportunity for lobbying government and MSPs. Let's tell them that we demand food produced in ways that embrace rather than ignoring our complete dependence on other species.

**Richard Middleton**

Many thanks to this month's contributors. Please send any articles for future issues to the editor, Richard Middleton at our email, [swtgalloway@gmail.com](mailto:swtgalloway@gmail.com). The deadline for the next issue will be at the end of May.