

TWIC Spring Conference Report, May 2014

By Natalie Harmsworth

The Wildlife Information Centre (TWIC) Spring Conference “Recording in 2014 – What’s new?” was held at the Scottish Borders Council Headquarters in Newtown St Boswells on Saturday 10th May. This bi-annual conference is an opportunity from recorders across the region to learn about different aspects of biological recording and a chance for TWIC to thank all those organisations and individuals who contribute data to the local record centre through the year. The event was again well attended, with delegates travelling from as far afield as Aberdeenshire. **Graeme Wilson**, Manager at The Wildlife Information Centre, welcomed everyone to the event. TWIC Directors, **Ian Young** and **Sarah Eno** chaired the morning and afternoon sessions respectively.

Barbara Sumner, Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) Midlothian Recorder, spoke first on the Scarce, Rare & Extinct Plants of Midlothian (VC 83). Founded in 1836, the BSBI is the leading scientific society in Britain and Ireland for the study of plant distribution and taxonomy. A major focus of the society is recording and mapping the distribution of vascular plants in Britain and Ireland, for the production of periodic Atlases. The next Atlas due for completion in the early 2020s. The society also undertakes project work, such as the Scarce Plants Project and Rare Plant Registers. The BSBI aims to produce a Rare Plant Register (RPR) for every vice-county of the British Isles. The purpose of the RPR is to provide information on the occurrence of the rarest plants in the vice-county. The vice-county of Midlothian encompasses most of Midlothian, about fifty percent of West Lothian and the City of Edinburgh Council areas, as well as a chunk of the Scottish Borders and East Lothian Local Authority areas. Barbara outlined the criteria for inclusion in the RPR and gave examples of species that fall into each of the three categories (Scarce, Rare and Extinct). Importantly, only native plants or plants introduced prior to AD 1500 that are self-sown are included in the register. Currently, 300 – 400 species are listed as scarce or rare in the Midlothian vascular plant flora, with a further 100 – 200 species considered extinct. The register is a culmination of many months of work by Barbara and would not have been possible without the many individuals, particularly current and previous Midlothian (VC 83) Recorders, who submitted records over the years. The RPR is a valuable resource to conservationists and planners and will also be of interest to the keen amateur naturalist. To view the RPR see www.bsbi.org.uk/rare_plants.html. For further information on the work of the BSBI visit their [website](#) and like them on their [Facebook page](#).



Herb Paris (*Paris quadrifolia*) is rare in Midlothian vice-county.
Photo: Natalie Harmsworth.

Louise Christensen, intern at TWIC and PhD student at the University of Aberdeen, introduced TWIC’s Record a Raptor survey. Three raptors have been chosen for this survey: Buzzard, Kestrel and Red Kite. Birds of prey are important components of healthy, functioning ecosystems. However, despite their ecological importance, raptors are often involved in wildlife conflicts and are subjected to wildlife persecution. Buzzards are currently the most common bird of prey in Scotland. However, 20 years ago they were quite rare. In contrast, Kestrels used to be widespread in the Lothians and Borders, but have recently declined in numbers. A 57% decline in Scottish Kestrel populations has been reported by the British Trust for Ornithology (*Breeding Bird Survey*) since the mid-90s. Red Kites went extinct as a breeding species in Scotland in the late 19th century. Since then, Red Kites have been reintroduced into several areas in Scotland and England during the 1980s, and populations have slowly begun expanding. Although Red Kites are currently a rare sight in the Lothians and Scottish Borders, they could potentially establish here in the not too distant future, so it is worth keeping an eye-out for soaring birds with distinctive forked tails. It is hoped that this survey will promote a wider appreciation of raptors in the general public as well as providing valuable information on their current distribution. To take part in this survey, return one of the survey postcards to TWIC or submit your sighting [online](#), where you can also find more information



The front of the Red Kite postcard.
Photo: Dean Bricknell Photography,
www.deanbricknellphotography.com

about the survey and each of the three species. If you are able to take a photograph of any suspected Red Kite sightings and email it to recordaraptor@wildlifeinformation.co.uk, TWIC will be able to confirm your sighting. All records will be shared with the Lothian and Borders Raptor Study Group, Scottish Ornithologists Club (SOC) and Forestry Commission Scotland.

After the break, **Christine Tansey**, PhD student at the University of Edinburgh, gave a presentation on the Track a Tree project, a project supported by the Woodland Trust. The project aims to record the progress of spring in UK woodlands. Rather than simply recording what is present, the study collects information on seasonal biological events and the timing of those events in relation to variations in weather and climate. Spring phenological events include tree budburst, trees coming into leaf and the flowering of woodland ground flora. Phenology has a long history and is important for seasonally dependant activities such as agriculture. Phenology is influenced by environmental variables, such as temperature. With global warming, there may be a shift in phenological events that are cued by temperature. If species respond differently, interacting species may be affected. Recording phenology across large spatial scales can help tell us how the seasonal timings of woodlands might change under global warming. The UK Phenology Network was established in 1998 as a citizen science project to collect information on spring and autumn events. Analysis of the UK Phenology Network data revealed a number of design weaknesses. The Track a Tree project attempts to address these weaknesses by providing a measure of recorder effort (repeat visits), collecting data on individual trees over time and collecting data on woodland communities and environmental variables. Following the pilot study in 2013, the Track a Tree study was launched earlier this year. Christine intends to use the data generated from this project to answer two key questions: 1. Is the order of spring the same everywhere? 2. How much can individual trees vary their spring timing? In order to answer these questions, volunteers are needed across the UK to record observations of woodland trees and flowering plants during successive springs. Early results from the project neatly demonstrate the onset of spring across the UK. For further information on the project, including how to get involved in Track a Tree 2015, visit the [Track a Tree website](#) and like their [Facebook page](#).



Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) flower and catkins. Photo: John Harmsworth.

During the open mike session, **Katherine White** spoke on behalf of Edinburgh Natural History Society (ENHS), a small friendly group with an emphasis on enjoying all branches of natural history. The group would welcome new members. A list of forthcoming excursions and indoor meetings are published on their [website](#). **Natalie Harmsworth**, Lothians and Borders Mammal Group (LaBMaG), advertised the forthcoming small mammal trapping sessions and said the group had 10 hedgehog tunnels to lend to volunteers. For further information on the group, visit their [Facebook page](#) or email labmammalgroup@gmail.com to be put on the email list. Natalie is also the Records Ecologist for TWIC and announced that a plant surveying and identification workshop was planned for Saturday 7th June at Vogrie Country Park and would be led by Plantlife expert, Davie Black. The 2014 TWIC excursion programme and other events will be published on the [TWIC website](#). **David Long**, Trustee for Borders Forest Trust (BFT), and **Reuben Singleton** said that the 2000 ha Talla and Gameshope estate in the Scottish Borders had been acquired by BFT and would be managed for conservation. Recorders are encouraged to visit the site in order to generate baseline data prior to changes in grazing management. A number of sites within the Talla area are listed by Scottish Borders Council as proposed Local Biodiversity Sites (pLBS), so additional records for these sites would also be valuable. For further information, contact Nicola Hunt, Woodland Habitats Projects Manager at BFT (email: nic@bordersforesttrust.org).

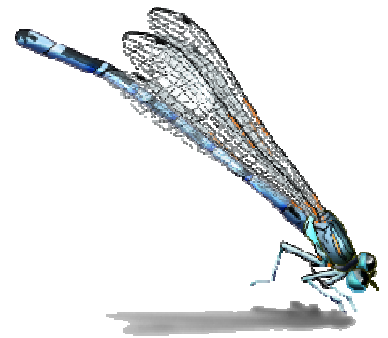
The first speaker after lunch was **James Stead**, Froglife's Scottish Dragon Finder Project Officer. James' presentation covered the Scottish Dragon Finder project. Froglife was established in 1989 and is a national amphibian and reptile conservation charity based in Peterborough, with offices in London and Glasgow. The Scottish Dragon Finder project is a 4.5 year Scotland-wide project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The project aims to conserve reptile and amphibians through on-the-ground conservation work, education and awareness raising. The project is divided into a number of smaller projects. The first of these, Dragon Tails, is aimed at schools and youth groups. School sessions introduce children to amphibians and reptiles and



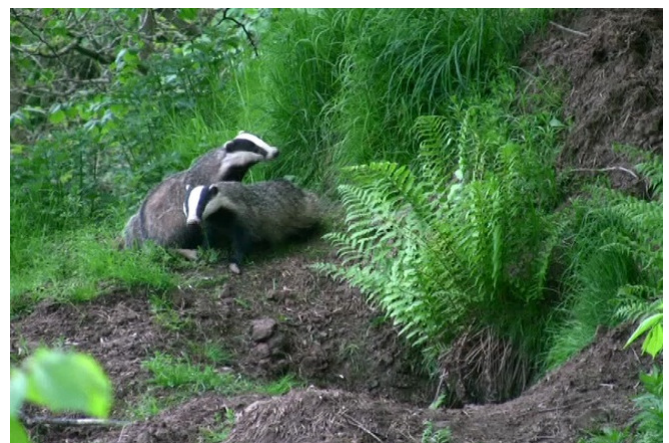
Common Toads (*Bufo bufo*). Photo: Rebecca Brassey.

educate them away from the negative image of the species. A script-writing competition based on amphibians and reptiles aims to engage youth groups across the region and educate other youngsters about the species. Dragons in your Gardens is a partnership project with Trellis Scotland. Workshops on wildlife gardening will be held across Scotland as well as a smaller number of 'train the trainers' events. Dragons on the Move will involve a number of outdoor roadshows (pond dipping and searching for reptile refugia), indoor crafting activities and activities with swimming clubs. Dragons on the Hills attempts to address the under-recording of amphibians and reptiles in the Scottish uplands, by engaging outdoor enthusiasts such as hill walkers who spend time in upland habitats. 9 workshops are planned, 2 in the Lothians and Borders area. The Dragon Finder project will also deliver habitat creation, restoration and/or enhancement of 63 reptile and amphibian habitats across 24 sites in Scotland and will provide training for volunteers. Froglife are offering two 18-month paid traineeships, which will be delivered through The Conservation Volunteers. To engage younger people to get involved in amphibian and reptile recording, Froglife have launched a free Dragon Finder app (supported by iPhone, Android, Blackberry and Symbian phones). Records can also be submitted [online](#) or by email to James.Stead@froglife.org. If you see any dead or sick amphibians and reptiles in your garden, Froglife request that you report them to the Garden Wildlife Health website through the Dragon Finder app.

Daniele Muir, Scotland Officer for the British Dragonfly Society (BDS), spoke on the topic of Dragonfly Recording and Conservation in Scotland. The BDS was founded in 1983 and seeks to raise awareness of dragonflies and their conservation. Recording is a key component of the work of BDS as it is the records that help us understand the importance of sites and provide the basis for conservation action. Daniele outlined the life-cycle of a dragonfly, which is a three-stage life cycle from egg to larva to adult. The majority of the life-cycle is spent as larvae. Dragonflies are divided into two sub-orders, damselflies (Zygoptera) and dragonflies (Anisoptera). In general, damselflies hold their wings together at rest, have eyes positioned on either side of the head like a hammer, are small (about the length of a matchstick) and have a weak flight. In contrast, dragonflies are larger (about the length of a cigar), have a strong and purposeful flight, hold their wings out from their body when at rest and have eyes that meet in the centre. Currently, much of the focus of the Scotland Officer's work is on 'hot spots' and 'key sites'. 'Hot spots' have been selected to focus dragonfly activities. These sites have local population centres nearby, good access and good dragonfly populations. Training sessions for volunteers and 'train the trainer' events are planned at these hot spots. 'Key sites' hold important dragonfly species and are a focus for management. An example are sites holding important populations of the Red data book species, Northern Damselfly, in the Scottish Highlands. The first BDS conference was in April in Perth and was well attended. BDS have also published a new leaflet in order to encourage the public to get involved in dragonfly recording. This attractive leaflet includes illustration of some distinctive species, identification tips and a recording sheet. DragonflyWatch is the current recording initiative of BDS and has three tiers: dragonfly spot (casual sightings), complete site lists and systematic recording at key sites. The main outputs of recording are the production of Atlases and phenology data, evidence of population changes and breeding, site monitoring and site evaluation. The new Atlas of Dragonflies in Britain and Ireland will be available from the end of May 2014. Further information on this and all of the activities of BDS, including how to submit records, can be found on the [BDS website](#).



The final speaker of the day, **Chris Sydes** (Lothian and Borders Badger Group) covered the use of trail cameras (cams) and demonstrated their utility using his own footage. Trail cams originated in America and were used to detect large mammals such as bears. They are designed to allow you to get very close to wildlife without disturbing it. The camera is watching 24/7 and captures activity when it occurs. Trail cam are particularly useful for studying large mammals. Chris principally uses cameras at Badger setts. Trail cam footage gives you data such as counts of adults and cubs and provides useful information on behaviour. With experience, it is possible to identify individuals and interactions between individuals. Trail cams have limitations, e.g. they cannot pick up fast moving animals, so they are not useful for all species. For instance, Chris detected a single Stoat from his footage from 3 cameras running constantly for a year. Despite this, it is possible to capture unusual sighting with trail cams, e.g.



Badgers (*Meles meles*). Photo: Chris Sydes.

Fallow deer. Chris provided advice on the different models available on the market and battery and memory card requirements. Trail cams have to be supported by a tree (or similar). It is important to think about camera viewpoint, since an animal can easily move out of shot before the cam awakes. Vegetation will trigger a cam in wind, resulting in null records. It is possible to use cameras at night using infra-red footage. Photographs from trail cams are now high quality. Null records from photos are also easily assessed, but there are a high proportion of null records. Films last up to 1 minute and are now available in High Definition (HD). An advantage of films over photos are that they can result in less null records and are sometimes more readily understood. However, they have the disadvantage of being much more time-consuming to process. When setting out a trail cam in the field, permission of the landowner should be sought. It is also important to be aware of the legislation when using trail cams. For instance, a licence is needed if you want to put a trail cam on a Schedule 1 bird's nest, such as a Barn Owl. There is always the possibility of theft of the trail cam. However, the discovery of cameras is slim and there are casings available to increase security. Chris encouraged recorders to use trail cams in the countryside, not just the confines of their back garden!

Sarah Eno, TWIC Chair, thanked everyone for attending the event. She gave a special thanks to TWIC staff for organising the event, the speakers for their inspiring presentations and to Scottish Borders Council for providing the venue. She said that it was good to see that organisations were making efforts to engage younger people and people from different backgrounds in biological recording.