**RSPB Aylesbeare Common Reserve**



# **February 2015 newsletter**

I am writing this on a bitingly cold day at the beginning of February, while my colleagues are out with some students from Bicton College doing a bit of controlled burning. “Swaling” as it is known (at least round here) is just one of the different management techniques which we use to create a patchwork of habitats, with variation in the age of the vegetation from bare earth right through to over-mature and woody gorse and heather. And today is almost perfect for this sort of activity: dry, with very little wind, so it will be possible to light the vegetation, but no wind to drive the flames out of control.

Preparations have already been made by mowing firebreaks around the area to be burnt, using a special mower which picks up the debris. If the debris is left lying then the fire can easily cross the fire not-break! Also the tractors will be standing by with the big sprayers to damp down any run-away flames, as well as all those staff, volunteers and students armed with rakes and fire beaters to put out any stray sparks.

The little herd of Dartmoor and Exmoor ponies are stolidly surviving the winter and keeping the vegetation under control. We now have GPS tracking on one, so I can find out where they are from the comfort of the office! If the person who is persistently tying one of the gates open is reading this – shame on you! You are endangering the lives of the ponies and setting up potential road accidents – how can I make this any clearer? If anyone finds an open gate, please close it and let us know. If there are no grazing animals on site we will remove the gates.

This is the time of year, the real dead of winter, when the birds have eaten most of the food in the wild areas but before the new growth and spring insects start to appear, is when you are most likely to get unusual birds in your garden. Check the goldfinches to make sure siskins haven’t joined them, and make sure that chaffinch isn’t a brambling, and if you live near the heath you might be lucky enough to get lesser redpoll and linnets. I am assuming you have a bird book to hand, as if I start describing them all this will be a book as well. Or you can go to the RSPB website [www.rspb.org.uk/discoverandenjoynature/discoverandlearn/birdguide/](http://www.rspb.org.uk/discoverandenjoynature/discoverandlearn/birdguide/) and see what they look like and even find out how they sound!

The feeders outside our office have had a jay bouncing on top of them to make the seed spill out this morning and a nuthatch is scaring the smaller birds away. At least, I have only seen one nuthatch. There could be a whole flock of nuthatches taking orderly turns at the feeder but, because I have only seen one at any one time, I can only definitely say there is one. This is where birdwatching gets tricky: trying to estimate numbers of birds when you can’t make them stay still.

Doing Big Garden Birdwatch back in January made me realise how hard it is accurately to count small things that are whizzing about all the time! My little flock of about 20 house sparrows drove me nuts. But there are some tricks: eg if the males and females are different, like the sparrows or like blackcaps where the males have the eponymous black cap, but the females have a brown one, so I know I have two blackcaps, though I don’t see them together. Or if they have very characteristic behaviour, like the robins: the males are very aggressive, so if I see two happily feeding together, I’m pretty sure that’s a male and a female. But if one is chasing another and only stopping for a threatening sing, those are pretty likely to be two males. So I have at least three, because I’ve seen both activities. Large numbers can be estimated by counting a small block, then estimating how many blocks are there. However, if I was faced with counting a huge flock of whirling starlings I would probably just enjoy watching it and find a real expert to do the counting!