

COUNTRY DIARY

RECENT mild, showery weather has provided near-perfect conditions for the rapid growth of toadstools in our region's woodlands, with fine new specimens sometimes appearing overnight.

We have several thousand species of fungi in Britain and identifying them all is a major challenge, even for experts, but many of the major groups of toadstools have distinctive features. Milkcaps exude droplets of white liquid when the gills under the cap are damaged, and the woolly milkcap which you can find now in birch woods has a cap that seems to be covered in long, tangled hairs. The boletes have pores under their cap, instead of the more familiar radiating gills, while waxcaps often have caps that tend to look permanently wet or greasy. The amanitas, that include the deadly poisonous death cap, have a bulbous swelling at the base of the stem and a frilly ring below the cap, while many inkcaps quickly dissolve into sticky liquid at maturity. If you are contemplating eating any wild toadstools, it's essential to use a good field guide – and never eat any toadstools if you are uncertain of their identity.

The stinkhorn, a species that you're unlikely to want to eat and will smell long before you see it, grows exceptionally quickly. It starts life as an egg-shaped gelatinous object buried just below the surface, then elongates at around an inch an hour. At maturity the toadstool tip is covered with brown gooey spores that emit an appalling stench and attract every blowfly in the vicinity. The flies feed on the spores, which pass through their digestive tract unharmed, and they carry others away on their feet so within an hour most of the spores have been dispersed. For pictures and more information about this unusual fungus, visit cabinetofcuriosities-greenfingers.blogspot.com/2010/09/stenchn.html

Phil Gates

BIRDWATCH

MIGRATION activity slowed considerably with the switch to strong westerly winds. So after last week's column concentrated on a remarkable East Yorkshire "double" – eastern olivaceous warbler and brown flycatcher – this one focuses on the best of the rest.

East Yorkshire continued to hog the limelight, with four other national rarities – a great snipe at Spurn, a booted warbler at Grimston (both on the 4th) and then, last weekend, a European roller at Easington, near Spurn, and a western Bonelli's warbler at Bempton RSPB reserve.

It wasn't a total monopoly, however; during 10th-12th, a broad-billed sandpiper was at South Gare, Teesmouth, and the Bonaparte's gull lingering on Weirsides appeared again at Whitburn. Meanwhile, almost everywhere, from north Northumberland to Humberside, shared in the extensive range of unusual songbirds.

Particularly outstanding were 17 barred warblers at 12 sites, 11 common rosefinches and six ortolan buntings (each at four sites). Also reported were five icterine warblers, five greenish warblers, six firecrests, three red-breasted flycatchers and three red-backed shrikes, plus a red-rumped Swallow and two bluethroats. There were, in addition, some sizeable counts of commoner visitors, such as redstarts, whinchats, wheatears and spotted flycatchers.

Above-average numbers of Lapland buntings, especially for early autumn, were another significant feature, with sightings at 20 North East coastal locations. Most involved up to ten, but Spurn beat all with 19 on Sunday. With as many as 250 on some northern Scottish islands, more are certainly on the way.

A bird of prey surge on the 3rd included 30 common buzzards flying in from over the sea at Flamborough but Spurn did even better with 70. More offbeat honey buzzards were also moving, with one and three respectively at these sites, another passing over Bywell in the Tyne valley. The following week produced reports of seven marsh harriers, seven ospreys and five hobbies.

Brian Unwin

WALKS



By
Mark Reid

POINTS OF INTEREST

FROM the former coal mining town of Easington Colliery, a path leads quickly out onto the cliff-tops above the North Sea. The walk northwards along this coastline is wonderful, with numerous bays and sheer cliffs that add interest. Of particular note is Shippersea Bay, with its limestone cliffs and sea stack, as well as Hawthorn Dene. The Durham coastline is renowned for its deep, narrow, thickly wooded valleys known locally as denes, and Hawthorn Dene is one of the finest. Protected as a nature reserve by Durham Wildlife Trust and the National Trust, this narrow valley is renowned for its semi-natural woodland. The mouth of the dene is a dramatic limestone gorge with outcrops, caves, overhanging trees and the impressive Hawthorn Dene Railway Viaduct with its huge brick arch. The Durham coastal railway was built in 1905 by the North Eastern Railway Co. to service the numerous collieries between Seaham and Hartlepool.

Rising above Hawthorn Dene is the prominent landmark of Beacon Hill with its Ordnance Survey Trig Point. The views from this small hilltop are superb with the vast sweep of Durham coastline laid out before you from Sunderland to Tees Mouth. The name of this hill gives a clue to its history for this was most probably the site of a Roman signal station, built almost 2,000 years ago as part of a string of stations along the North-East coastline to provide an early warning of invading Saxon invaders. Centuries ago, burning beacons were lit here to warn sailing ships of the dangerous cliffs below and the site was later used as a warning beacon during the Napoleonic Wars.

THE WALK

1 From the Coastal Footpath car park at Easington Colliery, walk back along the driveway to reach the road where you turn left passing the play area to reach the main road through the town (on a bend). Carry straight on along Station Road and follow this heading out of Easington Colliery then, just as you reach the edge of the town (Grants Houses road sign) take the turning to the left then almost immediately branch off along a footpath (signpost Coastal Footpath) that leads beneath a brick railway bridge. Follow this clear tarmac footpath straight on through woodland, with Fox Holes Dene down to your right, to reach the cliffs above the North Sea (blue railings).

2 As you reach the cliffs (and blue railings), follow the cliff-top coastal path bending round to the left then straight on for about 500 metres, with the cliffs and North Sea to your right, then follow the path curving round to the left heading inland towards another brick railway bridge, however, about 100 metres before this bridge turn right off the tarmac path along a clear gravel/grassy path that leads back along the cliff-top. Follow this clear cliff-top path straight on for 0.75 km to reach a metal bridlegate in a fence at the end of the clear gravel path. Do not head

Easington Colliery & the Coastal Footpath

WALKFACTS

Distance: 7.5 km (4.75 miles)

Time: Allow 2 hours

Maps: OS Explorer Sheet 308 Durham & Sunderland

Parking: Coastal Footpath car park at Easington Colliery; Grid Ref NZ 438 441.

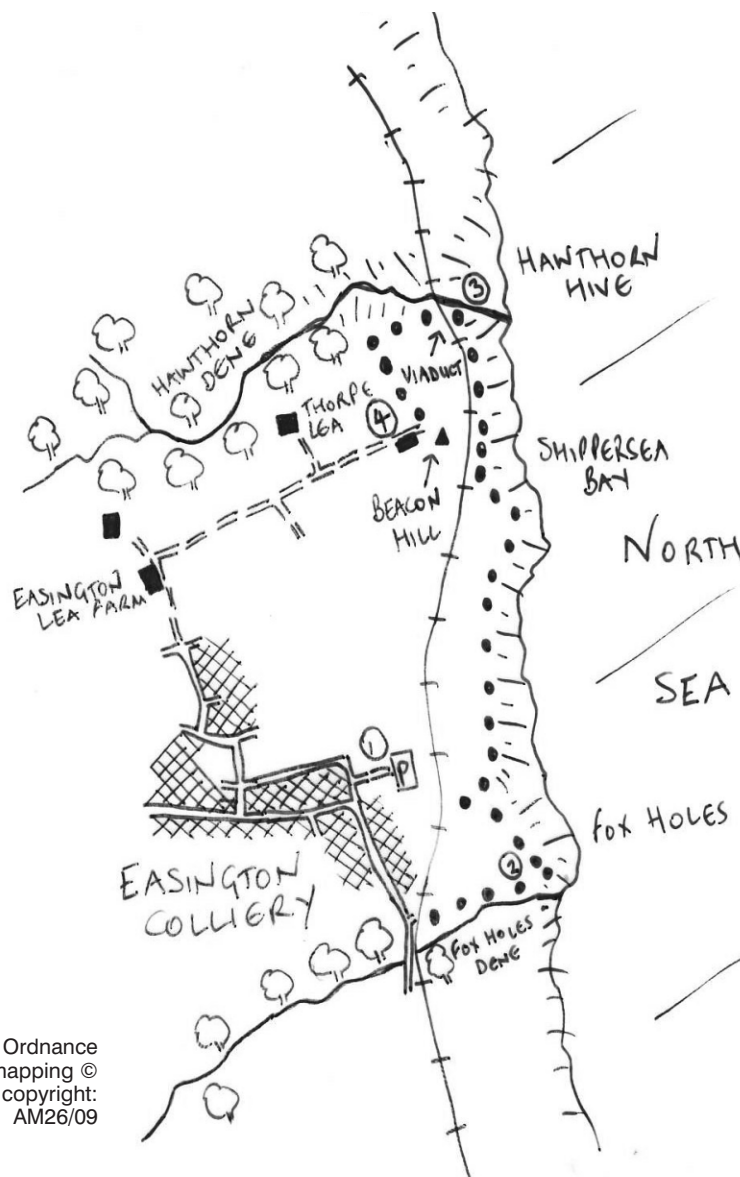
Refreshments: Easington Colliery. No facilities en route.

Terrain: Clear cliff-top path leads to Hawthorn Dene, from where there is a short section through woodland before field paths then tracks and roads lead back into Easington Colliery.

How to get there: Easington Colliery lies along the B1283 to the north of Peterlee. To reach the Coastal Footpath car park, follow the main road down through Easington Colliery then, where the road bends sharp right at the bottom of the high street, turn left then right after the play area to reach the car park.

Caution: This walk involves a long stretch along the top of high and crumbling sea cliffs – keep to the path at all times and take extra care if accompanied by children or dogs.

Based on Ordnance Survey mapping © Crown copyright: AM26/09



through this bridlegate, but bear right along the grassy cliff-top path alongside the fence on your left for 0.5 km then, as you reach the picturesque Shippersea Bay, follow the path bending left to join a clear gravel path beside the railway line (National Trust sign Shippersea Bay). Turn right along this path (ignore the path down over the railway) to quickly reach a gate, after which follow the clear cliff-top path straight on alongside the railway on your left for 600 metres to reach Hawthorn Dene Viaduct.

3 As you approach the viaduct, follow the path straight on gently dropping down (railway on your left) then bending left beneath the first of the viaduct's arches. After the passing beneath the viaduct, follow the path straight on heading up into Hawthorn Dene (ignore the path to the right after a short distance) through sparse woodland then, as you enter more dense woodland, follow the path gently rising up and curving up to the left to reach a kissing gate at the top of the woods that leads out onto a field. Head through the kissing gate and walk straight on along the field edge on your right gently rising up to reach a gate to your right just before the top of the

Beacon Hill (National Trust Beacon Hill sign and barn with a red corrugate metal roof just to your right). Our route turns right through this gate; however, just ahead is the Trig Point on top of Beacon Hill and a fine viewpoint.

4 Turn right through the gate just before the top of Beacon Hill and follow the clear enclosed track straight on for 1.25 km (ignore tracks off to the right and left) to reach a T-junction with another clear stony track where you turn left passing Easington Lea Farm on your right and follow this track straight on to join a road on a sharp bend on the outskirts of Easington Colliery. Head straight on along the road, with houses on your left, down to reach a T-junction, with the cemetery in front of you. Turn left along this road then first right, with the cemetery on your right (blue sign Easington Colliery, The Coast), and follow this road down then, where the cemetery ends on your right, take the road turning to the left (blue sign The Coast). Follow this road down back to reach the Coastal Path parking area.

■ While every effort is made to ensure that walks are accessible and are rights of way, The Northern Echo cannot guarantee that fields, paths or pubs will be open. If you are walking in the countryside, please remember the Country Code.

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