

FIELD vole populations tend to peak in the countryside in autumn, so there's a better chance of catching a glimpse of one of these tiny furry mammals now than at any other time of year.

Field voles are commonest in rough grassland, where they breed in spherical nests of woven dried grass, concealed in grass tussocks.

Life is hazardous for these bite-sized mammals, which are hunted by kestrels, owls, adders, stoats, weasels and foxes, so they tend to be most active after dark.

In autumn, when there's an abundance of tempting food about, they sometimes forage in daylight.

On several occasions I've watched them climbing knapweed stems to reach the ripe seeds or caught sight of them taking rosehips or blackberries from low-hanging shoots.

Although they don't hibernate, building up body weight now is an important strategy for surviving the coming winter.

When they move around in daylight, they remain concealed by using networks of surface tunnels in the grass. These are most obvious after periods of snow in winter, when a thaw will reveal the maze of runways – often close to hedgerows – where voles have been foraging under the snow. Life is hazardous from now until spring and many of the autumn population won't survive until April.

Voles have blunter noses than field mice, more rotund bodies and much smaller ears. There are two common species in our region and they are not easy to tell apart. The bank vole often occurs in woodland and hedgerows, while the smaller field vole is more often found in grassland, but both species favour young conifer plantations in the early years before the tree canopy closes and shades out the tussocky grass below, which offers food and shelter.

Phil Gates

Birdwatch

MY weather pattern-influenced forecast of a large-scale arrival of migrants – including rarities from eastern Russia – proved to be absolutely correct.

Numerically, the star has been red-flanked bluetail, a robin-like bird with looks to match its exotic name. Eighteen have been recorded in England and Scotland – seven during September 27 to 30 and 11 more from October 8 to 12.

That may not sound like many until you consider this beauty's previous occurrences here. After the first record in Lincolnshire in 1903, it took until 1998 (one on the Farne Islands) for the all-time total to reach 18.

Amazingly, the number recorded over those 95 years has been equalled in only over a fortnight this autumn.

It's already a record breaker – the previous all-time high tally was 12 in 2008 – and even more may appear over the coming weeks depending on what happens to the high pressure systems that drifted them westwards to us instead of south to their normal winter territories in southern China and Japan, Taiwan and south-east Asia.

The species tends to not linger after crossing the North Sea, and only one of the three logged in our region since Friday has remained longer than a day. Discovered on Saturday in willows north of the nature reserve pool on the mainland opposite St Mary's Island, Whitley Bay, North Tyneside, it was still flashing its finery at dusk on Tuesday. Those at Newbiggin, Northumberland, on Saturday and at Huntcliff, near Saltburn, on Sunday were more typical one-day wonders.

Two other major rarities from the east were Pallas' grasshopper warbler at Whitburn (Saturday) and olive-backed pipit on the Farnes (Tuesday). Monday brought North American surprises – a red-eyed vireo at Seaton Carew and a report of a common nighthawk at Horden. Also notable are 40-plus yellow-browed warblers, five dusky warblers and three Radde's warblers.

Brian Unwin

Alnmouth to Embleton

Walks

by Mark Reid

THE walk from Alnmouth to Embleton along the Northumberland coastline is one of the finest walks in the country, with sweeping bays, rocky headlands, fishing villages and a ruined castle.

1 From the centre of Alnmouth, up along Northumberland Street, passing the church on your right, then turn right along The Wynd, with an old drinking fountain on the corner.

Follow the road down then, where it bends right, take the road left (signed "Parking") across Alnmouth Common (playing fields and golf course to your right).

Follow this lane down then turn left just after the ornate drinking fountain across a small parking area (signed "Foxton Hall, Coast Path") then, almost immediately, head on along the left-hand grassy path, running parallel to the clearer track, which climbs the bank, passing some Second World War concrete blocks painted as dice onto the top of the bank, where the path levels out by an old pillbox.

Head straight on along the top of the ridge along the clear wide grassy track that soon becomes a footpath that leads on alongside the fence on your left down across the golf course.

At the end of the golf course, where the wide grassy path bends sharply round to the right, carry straight on up to the top of the small bank ahead, with the sea down to your right.

Follow the clear coastal path straight on along the top of a small bank, with the sea to your right and golf course to your left.

Where the path divides as you approach the clubhouse, bear left along the clearly marked path across the golf course to join a metalled lane just to the left of the clubhouse. Turn right along the lane, with the clubhouse on your right, then as you reach the small parking area to the side of the clubhouse, follow the path on the left of the wall down along the edge of the golf course to join a clear track that leads to the beach. Turn left along the beach for 0.75km beneath low crumbly cliffs to reach some concrete steps at Seaton Point.

2 At the top of the steps turn right (signed "Boulmer") along the cliff-top path passing seaside huts to quickly reach a rough track where you turn left to reach a gravel track at Seaton House.

Turn right along the track and follow it into Seaton Point Caravan Site then, where the track divides, follow the left-hand grassy track alongside the fence on your left heading along the edge of the caravan site then bending round to the left to reach a gate at the end of the site.

Head straight on along the clear coastal path to reach a kissing gate to your right by two large navigational posts. After the gate, turn left across the beach then up to the road at Boulmer opposite the lifeboat station.

Turn right along the road through the village passing the Fishing Boat Inn then, where the road turns sharply left, continue straight on along the road (signed "Boulmer Steel"). This road soon becomes a track, which you follow straight on for 0.75km along the coast to reach a bridle-gate that leads over a footbridge (on the beach), after which bear left back onto the grassy track.

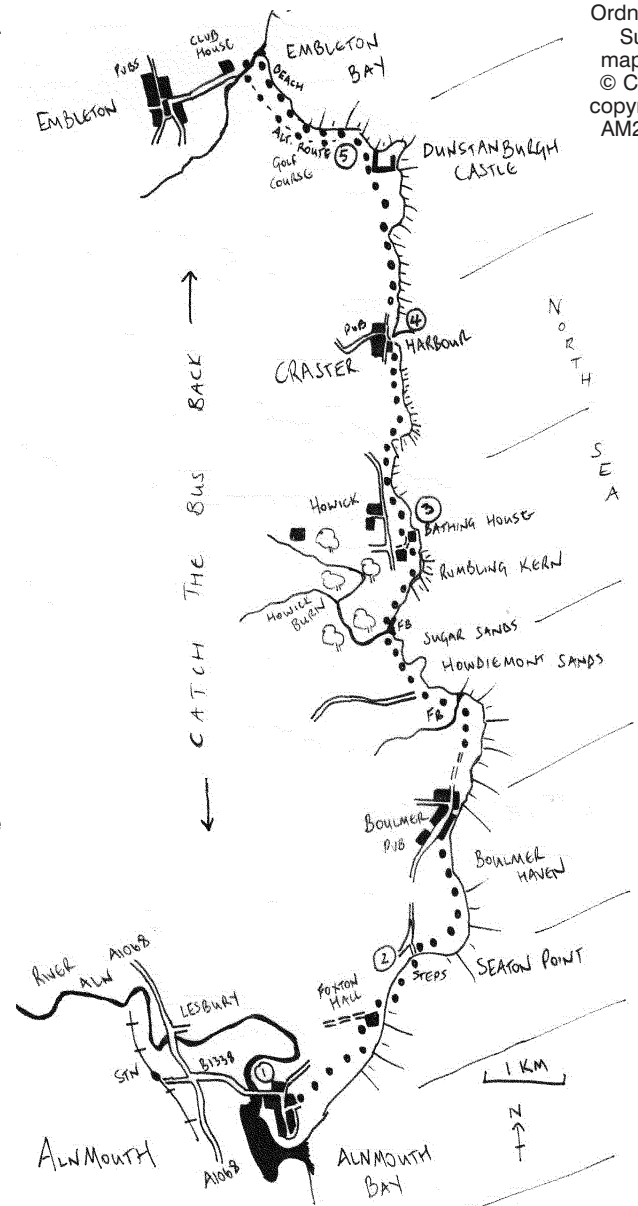
Continue straight on along the grassy track, with sand dunes on your right, which leads on over the small parking area for Howdiemont Sands (ignore the lane to the left). Carry straight on along the track climbing up slightly then levelling out, with Sugar Sands down to your right, before dropping down to reach a large footbridge across Howick Burn.

Just after this footbridge, take the path that branches off this track to the right (by the two stone gateposts). The clear coastal path leads on through gorse and trees then emerges to run along a grassy bank with the rocky foreshore to your right, passing below Sea Houses Farm with the sea-carved outcrops of Rumbling Kern on your right on to join a track near to the conspicuous Bathing House on the edge of the rocky coastline. Head straight on (to the right) along this track to reach the Bathing House.

3 Head straight on passing the Bathing House on your right along the clear coastal path, which runs alongside the road for a while then continues on, following the coastline before

FACT FILE

- **Distance:** 18km (11.25m).
- **Time:** 6 hours.
- **Maps:** OS Explorer 332.
- **Start/parking:** On-street parking in Alnmouth.
- **Refreshments:** Pubs at Alnmouth, Boulmer, Craster and Embleton.
- **Terrain:** Beach and coastal walking all the way, with some sections across sand dunes, low cliffs and beaches as well as tracks and lanes.
- **How to get there:** Alnmouth lies just off the A1068 in Northumberland.
- **Linear Walk:** This is a linear walk. There is a bus service between Embleton and Alnmouth Station. For bus information call 0871-200-2233. Check times before setting off. Catch the bus to Alnmouth Station (bus stop along the main road beyond the Dunstanburgh Castle Hotel at Embleton). From Alnmouth Station, follow the main road over Duchess Bridge across the River Aln back into Alnmouth.
- **Caution:** Beach walking can be tiring, especially if the sand is soft. Extra care must be taken during bad weather and high tides. Do not attempt to walk across a beach or coastline at high tide or when it is submerged with water. The Right of Way from Foxton Hall to Seaton House heads along the beach for 0.75km (beneath low crumbly cliffs), which may become impassable during certain high tides. Check tide times and plan your walk carefully.



climbing up onto the cliffs of Cullernose Point.

Follow the path, bending to the right across the top of the cliffs, then round to the left along the grassy coastal path once again heading towards Craster. As you approach Craster, the path skirts to the left around the small inlet of Hole o' the Dike to quickly reach the top of this inlet where the path forks. Head right through a gate just to the right of the houses. Follow the clear coastal path into Craster, passing a play area and houses (keep to the coastal path) and through the beer garden of the Jolly Fisherman to join a track beside the south Harbour Wall.

4 Head left along this track to quickly reach the road, with the pub on your left, where you turn right down through Craster skirting to the right around the Harbour along Dunstanburgh Road (signposted "Dunstanburgh Castle") that leads to a gate and the coastal footpath.

A clear path leads straight on with the rocky coastline on your right all the way to Dunstanburgh Castle. As you approach the castle, you pass through a gate in a fence/end of a stone wall, with the sea just to your right, immediately after which follow the grassy path branching to the left. Follow this left-hand path passing beneath low rocky outcrops (boggy ground) then straight on beneath the castle ramparts (with the castle ruins to your right). Follow the path as it bears round to the right beneath Lilburn Tower to reach the coastline again and a gate at Dunstanburgh Castle Golf Course.

Choice of routes:

5 Beach route: After this gate (by the golf green) the path divides. Follow the path to the right, with the golf course on your left and the rocky foreshore on your right.

Pass a pillbox, then continue on over low sand dunes (keep to the clear path) passing a second pillbox, then drop down to reach the southern end of Embleton Bay.

Walk north on the beach for about 0.75km then, just before you reach Embleton Burn, which cuts through the sand dunes, head left along the clear path through the dunes, over a footbridge across the burn, then up across the golf course to join the bottom of a lane beside the clubhouse. Follow the lane into Embleton.

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