

COUNTRY DIARY

THIS is turning out to be a tough winter for wild mammals in the countryside, struggling to find food under a blanket of snow.

In some ways it's easier for the small herbivores, like field mice and voles, because once a deep layer of snow has settled they develop a network of tunnels through the grass below and can move around and feed unseen. The extent of their tunnel networks, which often radiate outwards from hedges and woodland edges, only becomes apparent when a thaw sets in. Life is much tougher for their predators such as weasels but that's when the acute hearing of these hyperactive little carnivores becomes their best asset. Weasels don't have particularly good eyesight but their hearing is so sensitive that they can hear mice squeaking and scuttling around under the snow, and then follow them into their tunnels. I put this to the test last week when I used a 'weasel charming' trick that never fails to lure them out into the open. The trick is to bite your bottom lip and then suck air in between your teeth, which seems to simulate the kind of sounds made by distressed small mammals or nestlings. The sound always attracts the predator's curiosity and it works with stoats and weasels – both will always investigate where it's coming from.

We saw the weasel weaving its sinuous way between the snow-covered bramble stems along a hedge bottom and as soon as I started to make the noise it stopped and turned around. Then it raced towards me, stopping just a few yards away before realising that the mousey-sounds were coming from an animal that was too big to tackle. It paused just long enough for me to take a photo – which you can see by visiting <http://cabinetofcuriosities-greenfingers.blogspot.com/2010/01/weasel-charming.html>

Phil Gates

BIRDWATCH

HARD weather movements of hungry birds into marginally milder coastal areas have featured in recent days as the coldest spell for a decade continued.

Many Redwings and Meadow Pipits were among those driven from inland wintering haunts into localities with at least some ice-free patches while the largest flock of Fieldfares involved 100 at the South Gare.

Birders right along the coast reported big flocks of Skylarks, including 500 at Saltburn, although no other gathering matched 2,000 in stubble at Bamburgh, by far Northumberland's biggest gathering since February 1986 when 7,000 were in coastal fields at Boulmer.

Some Skylark flocks may have drifted southwards from Scotland although they could be from the near Continent where conditions are similarly harsh. Many Lapwings and Golden Plover were also on the coast and other species needing soft ground to feed, including Snipe and Woodcock were also reported. On a two-mile walk through my own local patch of coastal fields and dunes I flushed eight Woodcocks, an indication of just how many have fled frozen woodlands.

Bad weather is bad news for birds and the British Trust for Ornithology has appealed this week for everyone to avoid disturbing feeding birds. They really do need every minute they can get to feed and survive.

Iced-up reedbeds forced skulking species into the open with Bitterns at Saltholme, Coatham Marsh, Haverton Pond and East Chevington. Water Rails, usually heard but not seen, were prominent at several waters with three feeding in the open at Holy Island Lough and Gosforth Park.

Pinkfeet, probably also displaced by the freezing conditions, were on the move with one flock of 80 at Saltholme being accompanied by five Taiga Bean Geese.

Snow Buntings remained prominent, particularly at the South Gare. A small group of Lapland Buntings continued to show at High Newton, Northumberland, while a single frequented the South Gare.

Ian Kerr

WALKS



By
Mark Reid

POINTS OF INTEREST

TO the south of Hawes lies the secluded valley of Sleddale, hemmed in by the lofty fells of Dodd Fell Hill and Drumaldrace. An old 'green' lane leads into this valley to join the banks of Duerley Beck, a small upland stream that soon changes character as it plunges over 30-ft into a tree-shaded ravine. This is Aysgill Force, an impressive cascade indeed whose name is derived from the Old Norse words 'ays' and 'gill' that mean 'the waterfall in a ravine where ash trees grow'.

THE WALK

1 From the Dales Countryside Museum at Hawes, walk up to quickly reach the main road where you turn right following the 'one way' system towards the town centre (signpost Sedbergh, Ingleton) up to emerge into the along Market Place. Walk up through the Market Place passing the Fountain Hotel and then the Board Hotel then turn right along a lane to the right side of Littlefairs builders merchants. Follow the lane down then, at the houses, turn left to a small gate beside a garage. Head across the field (passing the house on your left) and through the small wall-gate ahead, after which bear right down across two fields then pass through a tunnel through the embankment beneath the old railway line. Head straight on to reach the River Ure. Turn left along the riverbank (river on your right) and follow this riverside path straight on then, as you reach the end of the field, bear very slightly left to reach a squeeze-stile in a wall across your path. After this squeeze-stile, carry straight on alongside the fence and wooded riverbank on your right then, where the river bends away, carry straight on gently bearing left (signpost) to soon reach the A684. Caution: path emerges onto a busy road.

2 Turn left along the road (take care – walk on the wide verge on the left-hand side of the road) passing a row of three cottages on your right then Halfway House (B&B) and its entrance driveway then take the track to the right opposite The Greens (signpost Appersett Viaduct) and follow this track up then bending to the left and passing in front of Thorns farmhouse. Where the track ends just as you have passed the farmhouse, follow the edge of the field round to the right alongside the wall on your right (passing another house just behind Thorns farmhouse) then follow this wall bending round to the left (with the wooded stream of Spillian Green Sike with its waterfalls just beyond this wall) to reach a squeeze-stile in the corner of the field. Cross the squeeze-stile then carry on across the field alongside the stream (Spillian Green Sike) on your right (ignore ford across this stream) and follow this gently bearing right to reach a squeeze-stile in the top corner of the field set amongst a copse of trees (just to the left of a gateway in the wall). After this squeeze-stile, head straight on to quickly reach a stone-slab footbridge across Spillian Green Sike then continue straight on with the wall on your left to reach another squeeze-stile in the field corner, after which head straight on across the next field to reach a gate/squeeze-stile to the left of the abandoned Spillian Green farmhouse. After the squeeze-stile beside the old farmhouse, walk straight on across the next field and through a squeeze-stile beside two gates to the left of a barn, after which head straight on bearing very

WALKFACTS

Distance: 8 km (5 miles)

Time: 3 hours

Maps: OS Explorer Sheet OL30 Yorkshire Dales Northern

Parking: Dales Countryside Museum, Hawes

Refreshments: Plenty of pubs and cafes at Hawes.

Terrain: Field paths and a riverside path leads to the A684 at Thorns. After a short section of road walking, field paths and tracks lead off to join the B6255, from where field paths and country lanes lead up to reach Low Bands Farm. There is then a fairly steep climb up to Gaudy Lane before rough pastures lead down to join a track through Sleddale. An old walled track leads up into Sleddale before turning back alongside Duerley Beck, passing Aysgill Force (waterfall) along a riverside path through woodland, with steep drops to the side of the path in places. The remainder of this walk follows field paths to Gayle and back to Hawes

How to get there: Hawes lies on the main A684 between Leyburn and Sedbergh.

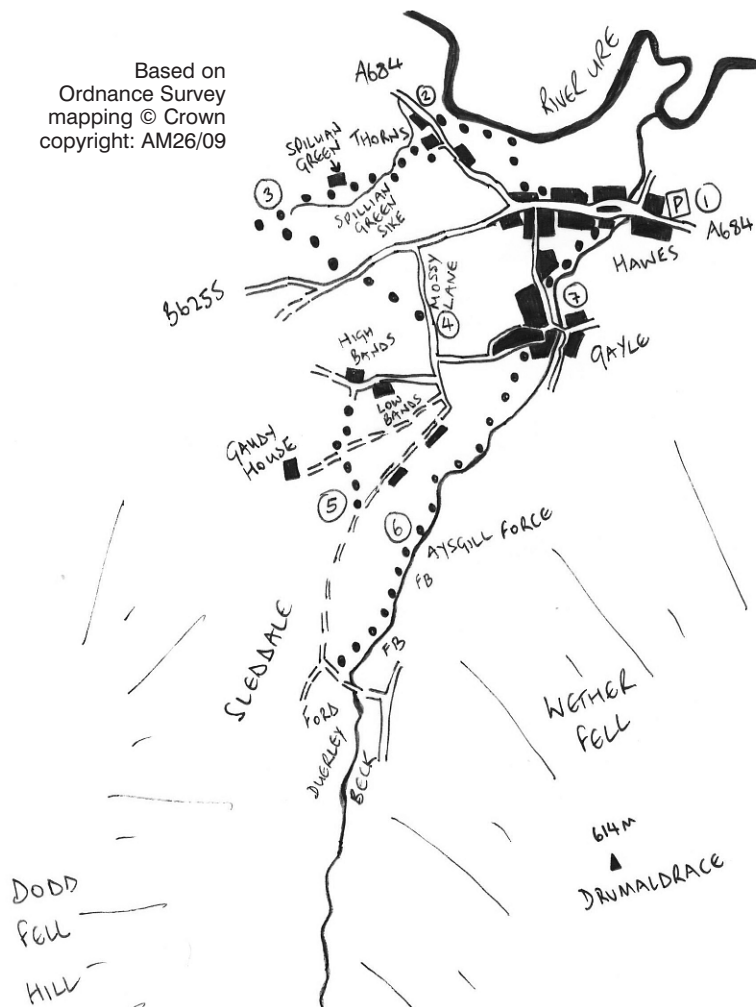
Caution: This walk crosses two busy roads – take care crossing these roads.

slightly left across the middle of the field to re-join Spillian Green Sike on your left halfway across the field which you follow to reach a stile set in a gateway in the wall (signpost) towards the top left corner of the field near an old lime kiln (roofless barn just across to your right).

3 Cross the stile and head straight on (signpost Lanacarr Lane) up to quickly reach a bridge-gate in a fence then up across the hillside and through a large gap in a wall. After the wall-gap, turn left (alongside the wall on your left) to quickly join a grassy track – follow this track straight on then bending round to the right (following the wall on your left all the way) on to join the B6255. At the road, turn left (take care) then almost immediately take the footpath to the right (signpost Gayle, Hawes). Head up passing just to the right of the ruined barn, immediately after which head left through a squeeze-stile in a tumbledown wall, after which the path forks – bear to the right across the middle of the field (ignore clear path straight on) to reach a small wall-gate (25 metres to the right of the telegraph pole in the corner of the field). After the wall-gate, head to the left to quickly reach another squeeze-stile in the wall (to the left of the gateway in the wall) then head diagonally to the right across the middle of the field to reach a small wall-gate towards the far bottom corner of the field that leads onto Mossy Lane.

4 Turn right along Mossy Lane (take care) and follow this for 400 metres then take the first road turning to the right and follow this up passing Low Bands Farm just after which you reach High Bands Farm (metalled lane becomes a stony track). As you reach High Bands farmhouse, turn left down along a stony track through a metal gate (signpost) then head straight on keeping close to the wall on your left (ignore the stony track up to your right) through another gate, after which continue straight on climbing up across the narrow field to reach another gate beside a barn.

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After this gate, bear up to the right over a wall stile after which bear to the left up across the field and over a ladder stile that leads onto a metalled lane (Gaudy Lane). At the lane take the path opposite through a squeeze-stile, then head straight on bearing slightly to the right across the field and through a gate in a fence, after which bear to the right to quickly reach a small wall-gate then head left across the middle of the field down to reach a stile in the bottom far corner of the field that leads onto a rough stony track.

5 Turn right through the gate across the track and follow the stony track gently dropping down into Sleddale, passing through two more gates – after the second gate, continue on for 150 metres then turn left through a gate along a clear, rutted track and follow this down heading towards a ford across Duerley Beck. Some distance before you reach the ford take the footpath to the left at the signpost, and follow the path across the field (with the stream just on your right) to soon reach a squeeze stile beside a gate (with Duerley Beck just to your right). After this squeeze-stile, continue straight on passing to the right of a barn – ignore the footbridge to the right. Cross the ladder-stile over the wall just after the barn, then head straight on alongside the wall and stream on your right heading downstream to soon cross another ladder-stile. After this ladder-stile, carry straight on along the riverside path over more stiles to reach a junction of paths beside another footbridge (signpost). Do not cross this footbridge but continue straight on along the riverside path (Duerley Beck on your right) to soon reach the dramatic Aysgill Force waterfall. Caution – the path alongside Duerley Beck from this point onwards is narrow with steep drops in places.

6 Continue on along the narrow path along the side of the steep, wooded ravine (take care) with Duerley Beck down to your right,

then out of the woods and carry on across fields still with the small ravine and stream on your right. Continue on along the path back into woodland gently rising up to quickly reach a small gate in a fence, after which follow the narrow path straight on across the steep riverbank (landslip) to reach another small gate in a fence at the other side of the landslip (saplings) that leads out onto fields again. Follow the path along the riverbank on your right across some more fields then, where the field becomes enclosed by woodland and the wooded riverbank in front of you, follow the path to the left steeply up a bank (wooden steps) to a wall-gate. Head straight on across the field to another wall-gate (signpost) and continue on towards the spire of Hawes Church in the distance down to reach the road on the edge of Gayle. Turn right and follow this road into Gayle to reach the main road beside the road-bridge in the centre of Gayle.

7 Turn left along the main road towards Hawes then take the footpath to the right (signpost Pennine Way, Hawes) just before Wensleydale Creamery along a flagged footpath that leads to Hawes Church. As you reach the church, head through the left-hand of the three gates that leads onto an enclosed flagged path with railings on your right – follow this path down through the churchyard (church on your right) and through a passageway to emerge at the bottom of the Hawes Market Place.

Mark Reid
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guidebooks.
innway.co.uk

NAVIGATION SKILLS COURSES

Weekend Navigation Skills courses in the Yorkshire Dales throughout 2010.
teamwalking.co.uk

■ 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.
www.northernecho.co.uk/leisure/walks