

Teesdale U3A – Monthly Meeting – May 2019

We are very fortunate to live in a designated 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' (AONB) and Rebecca Barrett from the North Pennines AONB was the speaker at the May Meeting. The area is within the boundary enclosed by the A69, the M6, the A66 and the North Durham coalfield. It is one of 46 AONB's in the UK and the 2nd largest. AONB's are run by a Partnership of statutory and voluntary organisations and the North Pennine one is based in Stanhope in Weardale. They are described as having exceptional landscape whose distinctive character and natural beauty are precious enough to be safeguarded in the national interest.

Rebecca described the landscape and wildlife in various sections of the AONB from the moor top through grasslands and hay meadows to the rivers. There have been significant changes to the landscape over the centuries due to climate change, mining and particularly, more intensive farming methods, which have led to a significant reduction in wild life. She described how they were working with farmers to preserve the landscape and to encourage and develop wild life.

She stressed the importance of the blanket bog, where sphagnum moss partially degrades to becomes peat, a process which began after the last Ice Age. Peat is particularly important as it is an excellent store of carbon. Heather forms in the drier soils and is a good home to the red grouse. Burning the heather helps to give the birds access to shoots. The culling of predators is controversial but does protect the game birds. There are grasslands with low density farming which encourage eg curlew, lapwing and smaller mammals.

Over 40% of the upland hay meadows are found in the North Pennines and cutting, grazing and manuring takes place in the traditional way. They are very rich in northern species such as wood cranes bill, melancholy thistle and 9 different species of lady's mantle, 3 of which are not found anywhere else in the UK. The area is home to approximately 1000 breeding pairs of black grouse which are especially associated with the moorland edge. Teesdale is famous among naturalists for the 'Teesdale Assemblage' of plants found together, that occur widely separated in other locations. These include the unique Teesdale violet and the Spring Gentian.

This was an interesting and comprehensive presentation, richly illustrated with beautiful photographs of the area. Rebecca was an excellent ambassador for the AONB and we now have a much better understanding of the importance of diversity and the need to support actions to encourage it. The vote of thanks was given by Rose Pugh.

The next meeting is on Thursday 27th June when Maria Glott will speak on the 'Saltaire Village Experience'. For more information about Teesdale U3A contact Ian Reid tel: 01833 631304