

SOC - SCOTLAND'S BIRD CLUB

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EDITORIAL

It's the penultimate day of November. Already, there's been more than a hint of winter and, just over a week ago, there was nearly an inch of snow in Inverness - well, at Chez McNee, perhaps some few hundred feet above central Inversneckie and a bit colder. It was surprising that the snow lay on the ground for over a day, but it did. Now, however, much milder weather has arrived and yesterday was almost balmy.

Many thanks to all who sympathized with my condition. That well known saying, "Fools rush in, where angels fear to pedal", comes to mind. A broken collarbone is treated by doing nothing, essentially, so I am the ideal patient. The downsides are not being able to drive, not being able to sleep and having to do one's birdwatching one-handed. Better now.

But what state are our feathered friends in, more importantly? Various reports have come to me of a serious crisis for geese. Apparently numbers have crashed, Pinkfeet breeding has been almost completely unsuccessful and certainly there are far fewer around than is the norm. Mark Finn has seen about 60 at Udale where there are normally 2-3,000.

As for other species of a wintry tendency, there appear to be few white-winged gulls - only 2 reported at Mallaig; the Ring-billed Gull is back yet again at Dingwall Leisure Centre; a couple of Waxwings turned up, but quickly moved on.

With this being the last month of the year, you'll all be finalizing your 2006 records for submission to the Highland Recorder, a fearsome individual if not supplied promptly with the new gen. But let's not end on a low note. May you all enjoy a most pleasant end to the year and lots of good birding in 2007. Santa might bring you a nice bird book, new bins or just a bottle of Mortlach to toast your 2007 lifers! Jenny and I are likely to be starting our '07 record-keeping by counting pigeons in St Mark's Square, on our way to Teatro La Fenice. But we'll be thinking about you! Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.



Al McNee

OUTING TO BRORA - SATURDAY, 7 OCTOBER

The five members who attended this Saturday outing had the last laugh in terms of the quality of birds seen. The rendezvous with our leader, Simon, took place in Dingwall, where we started with a brief tour of the town's now notorious water features, the burn and pond. Nothing unusual there, some members of the duck, pigeon and corvid families, a **Moorhen**, but no Ring-billed Gull.

We then moved north in 2 cars, via the back roads and Alness to the Mound. Here the light was particularly good, and time was spent picking out the various ducks and geese at the west end of the inlet. The geese were supplemented by a continuous influx of newcomers, and we identified **Pinkfoot**, **Canada** and **Greylag**, but mainly the latter. The unusual ones were a pair of Canada-Greylag hybrids.



On arrival at Brora, everything was close in, due to an exceptionally high tide. Lengthy scanning of the sea did eventually produce small numbers of expected seabirds: **Cormorant**, **Shag**, **Gannet**, **Razorbill**, **Guillemot**, **Eider**, **Sandwich Tern** and long sightings of a shearwater and a diver (probable Red-throated). However, it was the close-ins we were paying most attention to, especially the gulls. **Kittiwakes** and **Herring Gulls** were plentiful and nearby. However, prospecting southwards, Simon eventually picked out a **Laughing Gull** in a very distant group of Herring Gulls on the shoreline. This group were frequently on the move, possibly due to the proximity to a popular coastal footpath, and in time we were able to have a closer look when they moved round to the north of us. As the tide moved out, more birds colonised the rock outcrops as they were exposed.

Among the various waders, such as **Sanderling** and **Ringed Plover**, and gulls, one juvenile **Little Gull** was noted, with difficulty. All in all it was a good day to be out. There was a lot of threatening weather all around and a bit of wind, but most of the time we enjoyed bright, clear conditions. Our total for the day was respectably in the mid fifties, of which 12.5% were gulls; Herring, Black-headed, Common, Great Black-backed, Kittiwake, Little and Laughing; if the Ring-billed had done the decent thing it could have been 14%!

COLONSAY WEEKEND

Twenty-one members assembled at Sinclair Dunnet's house by 9.00am on 19 May. Our driver ably packed away copious luggage in a trailer with one minor hiccup – hearing a 'ticking' from somewhere in the 'bogey' he established its whereabouts, yanked out the offending bag to discover the culprit was an electric tooth-brush! Finger points at no one!

First stop was near Invermoriston where **Dipper** and **Grey Wagtail** were spotted as we crossed a quaint little bridge over a gurgling burn. On to the Well of The Seven Heads where Sinclair filled us in with the historical events leading to the erection of the monument. Janet updated the story by pointing out that Mike, her husband, had made the railing depicting the seven heads – so, well worth a visit whatever your interest! Can't recall any birds ticked during this brief interlude but it was appreciated by everyone and injected the tourist holiday spirit.

As time was in our favour, the Oban to Colonsay ferry being 5.30-ish our route took us to Gairloch and down a single-track road through Glen Loy, which demanded some tricky driving. Fun was had by all down this glen – 2 mini-buses (not forgetting the trailer) reigned supreme over all oncomers! However, our drivers knew what they were about and found us a glorious lunch spot by the River Loy where a **Common Sandpiper** flitted among the rocks at the edge of the stream. A heavy shower sent us scrambling back to the vehicles, except one member who had the foresight to raise an umbrella. Ever heard of a 'birder' with a 'brolly'? He (sorry, She) has perhaps set a new trend. Our next stop was near Neptune's Staircase. It took the form of a drive under the canal, the only drawback being that the larger vehicle + trailer didn't make it! Its passengers had a walk through followed by a quick reconnoitre of the canal. Here **Spotted Flycatcher** and Grey Wagtail were noted.

Our last stop before Oban was recommended by our secretary, Ann. Cuil Bay, for those unfamiliar with the area, is about 2km off the A828 at Duror - an idyllic little bay with a stony beach that gave us Common Sandpiper and **Redshank**. Incorporating tourism with bird watching plays havoc with time-keeping and necessitated only the briefest of stops unfortunately.

Our evening meal was purchased on the ferry and the rest of the two-hour crossing was spent sea-watching while battling with the elements. Serious birding came up with **Great Skua**, **Gannet**, **Arctic Tern**, **Fulmar**, **Kittiwake**, **Common** and **Black Guillemots**, **Razorbill**, **Puffin**,

Shag, Manx Shearwater and – wait for it – no less than 10 **Great Northern Divers**, one of which was swimming within the harbour at Scalasaig.

The majority of us were accommodated in 4 self-catering cottages all within a radius of 500 yards. On arrival several members opted for a walk to the beach at Kiloran Bay – apparently the most photographed view of the Isle of Colonsay. The sun set over the bay to the noisy singsong of thousands of Kittiwakes while a pair of **Eider** (nick-named the ‘Colonsay duck’) bobbed silently on the lazy tide. **Corncrake** was heard calling but sighted by only the two Janets. All-in-all, a worthy introduction to Colonsay.

Saturday morning dawned bright and clear, with early morning midgies. It also brought out **Treecreeper, Goldcrest, Willow Warbler**, a family of **Goldfinches** and Corncrake ‘crekking’ in the background. After a quick round-up of the troops and a visit to the one and only shop at Scalasaig, we headed north and then west to Port Mor, stopping en route to scan East Loch Fada. **Dabchick, Teal** and **Grey Heron** were picked up there and a nearby lochan gave **Shelduck** and **Great Black-backed Gull**. A break was taken at the bookshop where Janet acted as shopkeeper, having obtained the key from the owner – can’t imagine that at Waterstone’s. Lengthy birding continued at the golf course where we wandered leisurely but with meticulous scrutiny along the shoreline and around the course. Here, mention must be made of both the flora and fauna enjoyed by everyone, not least the abundance of Springsquill which in its profusion coloured the windswept grassland. Heath Spotted Orchids were also dotted here and there – the location was a botanist’s paradise as well as a ‘birder’s roost’! After some lengthy debate at least 2 **Little Terns** were spotted among the colony of arctic tern. Ann’s telescope was in demand – great views were also enjoyed a male **Linnet** wearing his full summer plumage and quite striking in the bright sunlight as were **Dunlin** and Redshank. We were reluctant to leave this coastline where time seemed to stand still – such an isolated and secluded spot. I think it’s safe to say the nearest bit of land would be the rock on which the Dubh Artach lighthouse stands out in the Atlantic.

Sinclair rustled up his merry band for the next location, Oronsay, the island to the south of Colonsay and accessible only by the Strand at low tide. Janet had sussed out low tide times so all hinged on whether or not the low ‘neap’ tide would be low enough for us to wade across. The wait enabled an exploration of the north side of the strand and gave us our first sighting of **Chough**, swooping and swirling in, out and over the cliffs. Good views were also had of the very distinctive red bills and red legs. It was surprising to see them in such close harmonious

proximity to **Ravens**. They, plus at the water's edge, 4 or 5 Dunlin with their pronounced black bellies, kept us entertained as the tide receded. A strong wind off the sea conspired against our patience and eventually a number of members took off socks and boots and 'went for it'!

The Oronsay experience was fascinating, frustrating and fulsome. From a birder's point of view it was frustrating inasmuch as the visit was time-barred. **Canada** and **Greylag Geese**, **Rock Doves** and the odd **House Martin** were readily seen as we scurried to the Priory. It was unquestionably the highlight of the visit to this remote location. Suffice to say (I think I speak for all) those who had the privilege to see it would not hesitate to return with more time to explore this historic site. The visit was restricted to 2 hours. Wearily, we clambered on board our transport taking us straight to the hotel in Scarasaig where we all did justice to a beautiful meal enhanced by a bottle of wine (between 2) with the compliments of the proprietors!

Sunday morning saw two of us on the hunt for a sight of the elusive Corncrake. He no longer 'crekked' from the earlier haunts, but heard close to the roadside. Hooray, we thought. All that's needed here is some patience – time we had aplenty as our pick-up time was planned for 10.00 and here we were ensconced among the nettles and brambles at 8.00. He frustrated, tantalised and 'played hooky' with us and needless to say he remained undetected. Even the cows shook their heads at us! Making our way back to the rendezvous point, we were rewarded with extended sightings of **Sedge Warbler**, **Reed Warbler** and a fleeting fly-past of **Siskin**.

The group's favoured stop was the western end of Kiloran Bay where the Uragaig cliff provided superb views of the usual sea birds including skua and a couple of Puffins. This proved to be another idyllic venue – a colourful carpet of Springsquill, Thrift and Sea Scurvy. Many photographs were taken. Again, Choughs were winging to and fro and (as explained to me) had been feeding on the slugs from the many cowpats! Each little cove seemed to be home to 'the Colonsay duck'. A short circuit took us back to the vehicles, where sheltered 'crannies' provided much needed lunch-stops. Some brave souls doffed boots to have a quick paddle in the Atlantic waters. Janet put a stop to any further shenanigans as she and Sinclair had come up with yet another plan. It was suggested we make our way back to Scalasaig (on foot) and Sinclair would pick us up at pre-determined locations and times. This worked extremely well and was an ideal finale on such a glorious sunny afternoon. A leisurely stroll with varied stops gave all a good sighting of **Red-throated Diver** on Loch Turraman and for many, a second opportunity to 'tick off' some of the birds missed earlier. We 'took over' The Pantry for afternoon tea before joining the queue for the evening crossing at 20.30.

The 'land-leg' from Oban was accomplished speedily and quietly, arriving at Culduthel Gardens at 1300 approximately.

In addition to the 78 species seen on the island (a comprehensive list maintained by Ann), a further 4 were seen en route to Oban with a further 12 from the boat, bringing the total for the weekend to 94. Apologies for many omissions in the narrative!

A special thank-you is extended to our leader, Janet, for her valiant efforts before and during our weekend and to Sinclair and Kathleen for their patient forbearance from beginning to end.

It was again a memorable and thoroughly enjoyable weekend. Where to next year, Janet?

Greta Fraser

[Apologies for the delay in the appearance of this article – the fault of the Editor!]

BITS AND PIECES

- For those of you with internet access, Highland Bird News will now be available on the SOC website as a downloadable PDF file. There are two advantages – at least: firstly our Highland and other members who are unable to come to the meetings can keep up to date on-line; secondly, all relevant items will be shown in full colour, not possible on the photocopied version. The SOC website is www.the-soc.zenwebhosting.com/. From there, navigate to the relevant page. The SOC website is excellent nowadays, with a range of articles, photos and bird news.
- Other sites I've come across that may be of interest include: www.surfbirds.com [loads of stuff!]; www.1000birds.com for some American birds and www.scottelowitzphotography.com for some of the most stunning photos of waders you will ever see!
- The RSPB has just announced the purchase of the Bierbza Marshes, its first foreign land purchase, the area being of critical importance for the Aquatic Warbler. Well done, the RSPB!
- OUTING: Sunday 10th December - Round Inverness with David Galloway, 9am opposite the Pizza Hut. Go on, get your year-list topped up!
- NEXT MEETING – Jan 9, Dick Hewitt on Ascension and the Falkland Islands. Unmissable!