

# SOC - SCOTLAND'S BIRD CLUB

## Highland Bird News

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## EDITORIAL

Another SOC Highland Branch indoor meeting season draws to a close. This last meeting follows the most glorious spell of fine, warm and sunny April weather that I can remember. Global warming? It felt like global baking as I sat on the top of Baosbheinn last Friday, not a breath of wind and the only sounds the scratchy song of a newly arrived **Ring Ouzel**, followed by the delightful tinkling of an unseen **Snow Bunting**. With such a background, it felt particularly good to be slaking the remains of a bottle of Fanta Limon, a last liquid reminder of Family McNee's visit to Turgutreis in the south-east corner of Turkey. [Yes, you can take open bottles of liquid on the plane back to the UK, but try doing it **from** the UK!] The equivalent birds a few days earlier had been **Blue Rock Thrush** and **Cretschmar's Bunting**, but the Highland ones were just as fine.

Never having been to Turkey before and the destination and timing having more to do with family bonding than solo birding, our little holiday was not expected to bring a huge list and it didn't. It was clearly early in terms of migration - no shrikes, for instance - and few species were noted heading north, but it was a real delight to sit atop the hill behind the very touristy village and watch a **Long-legged Buzzard** float above the crag, mobbed by the local **Hoodies**, as the Muslim call to prayer filled the air. One other highlight might be worth mentioning and illustrating. The picture below is of the sole standing column from the Temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. And what is that on its top? Yes, a **White Stork** nest, with the bird carefully arranging its "furniture". Man proposes, but Nature disposes!



**Chiffchaffs, Willow Warblers, Swallows** et al have arrived in Highland and lots more is to come. To all Highland Branch members, have much good birding in what remains of the Spring and during the Summer and see you again in September. Remember to keep your pencils sharp and your notebooks crammed full of good records for that nice Recorder!

*AL McNEE*

PS If you're reading this and have made a contribution to the newsletters of this season, many thanks. If you're reading this and haven't made a contribution to the newsletters of this season, please consider doing so. It's our branch and our newsletter, but it doesn't fill itself!

## SOC OUTING TO THE EAST COAST, SATURDAY 13<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY

The forecast was atrocious for the Saturday, but I was out the evening of the 12<sup>th</sup>, with several members who were coming on the outing, so we decided to go ahead anyway. I had been stuck in the office at Waterston House most of the week, so I needed a good blow to clear the head!

Thirteen of us, a few slightly tired from the previous evening, met on a rather damp morning and decided to head east to where the male **Smew** had been seen, beyond Elgin, then make our way back towards Inverness. We drove along the A96, clocking up **Rooks, Jackdaws, Curlew, Wood Pigeons, Herring and Common Gulls**, a **Buzzard** and a flock of **Starlings**. Just before Llanbryde, there is a turning to your right and part way down there a dirt track leads off to the left, to Loch na-Bo. We parked, had a long distance view of the Smew, donned our waterproofs and set off round the loch to the dam. This is when I found that I had left my waterproof trousers at home! The woods were very quiet, no calls, but on the loch, **Wigeon** in splendid plumage were mewing away. What a lovely sound that is. **Tufted Ducks, Goldeneye, Coots, Mute and Whooper Swans, Mallard** and a wee **Dabchick** were all there too. A **Grey Heron** flew past and a **Cormorant** was perched on a dead tree stump, drying its wings. Common Gulls and **Black-headed Gulls** were resting on the water. However, the male Smew took place of honour – what a magnificently handsome bird he is. He swam and dived, in full view and we all had excellent views. Up here in the north we often get the odd male Smew in winter, never several. I wonder where the rest of them over-winter. We then had a wander in the woods but they were remarkably silent, with just a couple of sightings of a **Wren, Long-Tailed Tits** and a **Treecreeper**.

The next stop was Loch Oire, but there was nothing new there except a family of Mute Swans with wonderfully brown mottled cygnets. They obviously were used to being fed at the layby!

Then it was off to seek the Snow Goose, last seen near Kingston. En route, we saw a **Mistle Thrush, Blackbird**, several **Pheasants**, a flock of wee birds including **Greenfinches, Chaffinches** and a lovely **Yellowhammer** and finally a flock of **Fieldfares**. We had just been discussing the seemingly lack of them and so they turned up just to say hello! We stopped by a field of **Greylag Geese** but alas no white goose to be seen.

At Kingston, the sun was shining and we walked over the shingle to do a bit of sea watching. Lots of wonderful **Long-tailed Ducks, Common Scoter** and **Eider** were all riding the swell. A pair of **Scaup** was spotted and two **Red-throated Divers** came quite close in. We sat on the beach for lunch apart from Ann and Lynda who were determined to find a **Velvet Scoter** – they were duly rewarded - and some others managed to see the two birds too. Long-tailed Ducks are among my favourite birds and the light was just perfect. Several flew right past, very close in shore, which was just great. A couple of wet-suited people were also enjoying the waves, quite high with the on shore winds. After lunch, as we made our way back, past reed beds and a ditch, Lynda saw a flash of blue – a **Kingfisher!** We stopped and searched but it was lying low or gone further down the ditch.

On we went, this time to Loch Spynie, by the back roads adding **House Sparrow, Collared Dove, Dunnock**, a flock of **Goldfinches** and some **Redwings** in a distant tree to our growing list. At the hide, **Coal, Blue** and **Great Tits** were feeding at the feeders and on the loch we saw **Moorhens** and **Teal** along with the Wigeon, Mallard, Swans and Tufties. **Goldcrests** were heard but not seen. By now it was getting a bit colder and darker and it was decided to have one more stop at Hopeman for waders. We were sheltered in the woods before because it was really Baltic at Hopeman! However, it was worth the cold as we saw **Ringed Plover, Oystercatchers, Redshank Stonechat, Pied Wagtails** and just as the light was really fading, a lone **Purple Sandpiper**.

As we left Hopeman, heading for home, the heavens really opened – what timing! I had not needed my waterproof trousers after all. We had had a superb days outing, with 58 species seen and one heard, different kinds of habitats, ranging from lochs, bogs, open sea, sandy beach, rocky shore, woodlands and agricultural fields. My thanks to Ann who was really the leader for the day, not me. It was the kind of outing where beginners learnt a lot about birds and their habitats and others could appreciate why we like to watch birds.

I woke up to snow the next morning, so it was lucky we chose the Saturday for the January outing!

*Janet Crummy*

## OUTING TO CARRBRIDGE, 11 FEBRUARY 2007

Not many members (3) turned out for this foray into the Carrbridge hinterland. Winterland was a more apt description earlier in the week, but the snows which had made some of the side roads almost impassable just the day before had largely disappeared. The first stop was just beyond the dual carriageway at Daviot, at the turn off to the Farr windmills. There was more hearing than seeing in the conifer plantation, but at the first clearing there was an early sighting of two **Black Grouse** which darted off as soon as we saw them. **Crossbills** were only heard. The next proper stop (not counting stops outside Carrbridge gardens to accumulate finches, tits and pigeons) was at Dalnahallnach, up the Dulnain River, where all was quiet. A pair of Black Grouse was eventually flushed and a **Buzzard** put in an appearance. Downriver, at a promising spot at Inverlaidnan a solitary **Mistle Thrush** was the sole success.



Downriver from Carrbridge, at Duthil there is a goose roost, and more than 70, all **Greylag**, were spread over several fields. Then it was off up to wilder country at Lochindorb, where before lunch there were close sightings of **Red Grouse**, then **Mallard** and **Goldeneye** on the loch. After prolonged searching failed to reveal

anything more interesting, we descended to Nairn and Kingsteps where we could guarantee to bump up the tally for the day with the usual suspects, **Sanderling**, **Bar-tailed Godwit** and other waders and ducks, plus a solitary **Redwing** at the car park. All in all, the day was rather bleak, perhaps as much in terms of the species recorded (mid 40s) as the weather, which only really got unpleasant at the end with squally showers on the beach. Roll on Spring.

*Alex Joss*

# BIRDING ON SKIS

Let me say at the beginning that skiing is not the best way to go birding. However, if you are hooked on both activities you have to make the best of it. In 2006 in the French Alps Greta Fraser and I had a short but interesting list of birds seen from chairlifts – **Snow Finches, Alpine Accentors, Nutcrackers** and lots and lots of **Alpine Choughs**.

This year we went to Whistler in British Columbia to try out North American snow. Instead of Choughs the common bird on the slopes was the Whisky Jack – it took me some days to find out that this was the **Grey Jay**. It frequents cafes and will eat out of your hand. Then we saw 2 skeins of geese flying over. I said: “I wonder what kind of geese they have here”. Greta managed not to sound too scathing when she replied: “**Canada Geese**”. Apart from a **Raven**, we thought that was all we were going to see above the snowline but on the last afternoon of skiing we stopped for a very well-earned hot chocolate (we had been up for an early breakfast and then skied through lunch). We were then treated to excellent views of a bird we had been looking for for days – **Clark’s Nutcracker** – 2 of them. They made an already good day superb.

In the village we saw **Starlings, House Sparrows** and **American Robins** along with various dark birds we couldn’t put names to.

Our flight home wasn’t till the evening so we chose to leave Whistler after breakfast in order to spend a few hours in Vancouver with a few stops en route. One of the stops was at a place where Bald Eagles congregate in the winter. A census is taken every year on Jan 1<sup>st</sup> – a few years ago there was a record total of 3000 and this year there were over 1000. There were none when we got there. Later we did see an eagle from the moving coach – if it was a bald-headed it was a young one as there was little white on it. At another stopping place we had good views of a beautiful bird called the varied thrush skulking in the undergrowth and a **Dark-eyed Junco** singing away at the top of a tree. En route we had frustrating glimpses of ducks on rivers and in rafts on the sea – the only one I could identify was a **Bufflehead**. In and around Vancouver we saw some more species – apart from crows and the universal feral pigeons we saw **Peregrine, Redhead, Mallard, Heron, Cormorant, Diver** and **Merganser** – and Greta saw a **Chickadee** – sounds much more fun than a tit. The last few of these we couldn’t completely identify but all this combined to verify the reports I had heard that BC is a good place for birding – I would certainly like to go back with more time and a pair of binoculars along with my skis.

*Ann Sime*

## Skye Weekend

The first outdoor meet of the 07/08 season will be to Skye. To make the most of this, it will be a weekend outing. We will be based in Broadford and Bob McMillan, who spoke to us last autumn on the birds of Skye, will be accompanying us. He has already come up with a suggested itinerary. The dates are 7-9 September. Please contact me on 01463 790249 for further information.

Ann

PPS – Many thanks to all the trip report writers this session. The articles have all shown the value of doing some communal birding in good company. Perhaps one slightly worrying aspect that has come through recently is the rather low attendance at some outings. Please do your best to attend – it’s good fun, loads of birds are usually seen and it is always a good reward for the often meticulous preparation our leaders have put in, to have a decent turnout. [Yes, I know – I’m one to talk!]

*Al*