

SOC - SCOTLAND'S BIRD CLUB

Highland Bird News

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to everyone at the start of a new season for the SOC Highland Branch. Not just a new series of meeting and outings, but a new venue. The branch committee took the decision to move to Culloden Library for a combination of reasons that included affordability, parking, convenience, access and facilities. It is hoped by us all that this venue will prove suitable to the overwhelming majority of members, but we will only know your opinions if you offer them, so please be sure to let committee members know your views later in the season.

If ever there was a good summer to be taking a few weeks away from the Inverness area, the summer of 2007 was it! Every week seemed to be dull, wet, miserable and cold for the time of year. Jenny and I headed off to the Pyrenees during the first week of July for an intensive spell of butterfly watching. The weather was excellent, but in that we were fortunate as the previous month had been fairly cool and dull, so it wasn't just the Highlands or even the UK that had disappointing summer conditions. To see over 70 species of butterfly - including a bewildering range of blues - many of them breathtakingly beautiful and seen in amidst quite stunning mountain scenery was very special. After our return, the next three weeks went by, much of it spent counting goose pimples when out in the garden, and then I was off for a quite brilliant fortnight in Southern Kenya with over 400 species of birds and many mammals. I took over 1500 photographs and hope to have the least bad ones organised in time for my January talk. However **you** spent the summer of 2007, I hope you got plenty of enjoyment and weather conducive to whatever you were doing.

The 2007/08 season opens with the welcome return of Roy Dennis, surely Scotland's most famous and well-respected birding personality, a past Chairman of our branch and someone who has made a huge contribution to Highland ornithology. Roy will be talking about one of the world's best known bird observatories, Fair Isle, where he was the Warden from 1963 to 1970 and is currently Chair of the Fair Isle Bird Observatory Trust [FIBOT]. A very apposite talk, with several of the branch membership heading there in just under 5 weeks! Enjoy this evening's talk - it's sure to be riveting.

Al McNee

SOC Highland Branch Outings 2007-08

- 7-9 Sept** *Skye Weekend* Leader: Ann Sime
Tel: 01463 790249
- Sat 6 Oct** *Tarbat Ness & Inver area* Leader:
Alex Joss Tel: 01463 221661
- Sat 10 Nov** *Loch of Strathbeg* Leader: Al McNee
Tel: 01463 220493
- Thurs 22 Nov** *Local Birding* Leader: Ann Sime
Tel: 01463 790249
- Sun 9 Dec** *Sea Ducks* Leader: John Carruthers
Tel: 01381 621545
- Sun 13 Jan** *Where The Birds Are!* Leader: Dave
Galloway Tel: 01381 621126
- Thurs 17 Jan** *Local Birding* Leader: Lynda Graham
Tel: 01463 791292
- Sat 9 Feb** *Strathconon Eagles* Leader: Simon Cohen.
Tel: 01349 864147
- Sun 9 Mar** *Dava Moor to Findhorn Bay* Leader: Janet
Crummy Tel: 01808 511261
- Sat 19 Apr** *Breeding Waders of Speyside* Leader: Keith
Duncan Contact - Ann Sime 01463 790249
- 15-19 May** *Westray and Papa Westray*
Leaders: Sinclair Dunnett and Ann Sime.
Tel: 01463 790249
- Sat 21 June** *Handa* Leader and time to be confirmed.

Please try and support the branch's outings. The leaders put a lot of work into making the trips a success, good birding is almost guaranteed and the company is great!

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 were 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 carpark. 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

HIGHLAND SOC OUTING to TIREE May 2007

This year, I decided that I would like to visit the island of Tiree, as I had never been there, and so organised our now annual weekend trip in May. Fourteen members met in Inverness and headed off to Tomatin to meet up with another four. We had one minibus and one car. On our way to Oban, we stopped at Gercask Loch, through the village of Laggan, and had our picnic. An **Osprey** was hovering over the loch, but sadly, did not dive down for a fish. He flew back and forth most of the time we were there. **Common Gulls** were nesting on an island, and **Common Sandpipers** were flitting along the shore. At the far end, several **Pinkfeet** were grazing. **Tufted Duck, Goldeneye** and **Mallard** were all present and **Lapwings** displayed over the other side of the loch. A **Willow Warbler** called from the scrubby woodland, **Meadow Pipits, Pied Wagtails** and **Wood Pigeons** were all seen. A **Grey Heron** slowly flew over the loch. A good picnic spot!

On the road again, to Spean Bridge and a comfort stop. **Blue Tits, Greenfinches, Swallows** all around and a pair of **Grey Wagtails** flitted down the river. We watched a female **Mallard** with 4 ducklings battle their way up the river, using the quiet pools at the side to rest before tackling the next set of rapids. The next stop was at Coullis Bay, where we saw **Mute Swans, Canada Geese, Wheatear, Great Northern Diver, Chaffinch, Eider, Great Black-backed Gulls, Curlew** and grazing with the **Canada Geese** and some sheep, a blue phase **Snow Goose**. Wonderful, although we were later told, it was probably an escapee!

Thursday morning was a real west coast dreich day – the rain poured down and we could hardly see the other side of the bay! After having 5 weeks of lovely weather in April and early May, this was a horrible shock. Anyway, after a good CalMac breakfast, we ventured on deck, the skies lightened and we were rewarded with a **Sea Eagle** sighting, followed closely by a **Golden Eagle, Tysties, Gannets, Razorbills, Guillemots, Eiders, Red-breasted Mergansers**, and further out, past Tobermory and round the corner, hundreds of **Manx Shearwaters**. The islands were incredibly clear, now the rain had passed over. I don't remember seeing them that well before. As we left Coll, a **Bonxie** settled in the water, **Arctic Terns** flew past and a **Puffin** drifted past the ferry. I thought I spied an otter in the waves by the shore, and seals popped up every so often for a look. In the end, it was a very successful and pleasant crossing. Funnily enough, on the boat was Edmund Fellowes, going out to Tiree to photograph **Sanderling** in summer plumage and **Corncrakes**. He came up to Highland to talk to us recently and he is on the management committee.

Now we had reached our destination – blue skies, white sands, turquoise seas – just what you imagine the islands are like. We started a new list of birds, starting with the inevitable **Starling!** Every island we sail to seems to have a population of these birds, no matter what size of island! The unusual and probably uniquely shaped white painted houses, with their tarred felt roofs were a real treat to see. It was like being in a different country! We meandered slowly along the coast heading for Hynish, spotting **Oystercatchers, Lapwings** with young chicks, **Ravens, Pied Wagtails** and **Linnets**, with **Skylarks** calling from above. We stopped for lunch at Sorobaidh Bay, going down a wee sandy track, into which the minibus got a bit bogged down – woops, not a good suggestion! However, Sinclair just donned his boiler suit, let out the tyres and then had his lunch with us on the beach – obviously not too bothered. A young **Mute Swan**, probably sick, stood in the wee stream, while **Redshank** and **Ringed Plover** fed in the seaweed. Out to sea, on a rocky outcrop, there were about 20 **Sanderling** in summer plumage – a treat as we usually see them in winter. We had to look through the scopes, so hoped we would have nearer views later on. We helped push the bus back up the track, over a rather narrow bridge and then the local booby found us! Oh well, I guess he was pleased for something different to do on a Thursday afternoon! Most of us then walked along the beach, while the transport drove round to meet us. It was just beautiful and several of paddled. Out at sea, another **Great Northern Diver** rode the swell and at the far end, in amongst the rocks were **Turnstones** and **Redshank**. Then we had a wonderful aerial display from a flock of **Dunlin**, round and round, almost landing, then deciding against it and back round us, back to the rocks and round again. They eventually landed briefly after about 10 minutes, but not for long. However we had excellent views of them in summer plumage. As we headed for the bus, a **Corncrake** was heard but despite our best efforts not seen – what a surprise! We all met up at a lovely shop selling pottery, paintings, and material pictures depicting the wonderful blues found on these islands. Several members

left a little bit lighter in the pocket! On to Hynish, where we were staying at the Alan Stevenson House. It was right at the pier with lovely views out to sea. A pair of **Mergansers** was feeding in the bay and a sedge warbler displayed in the reeds. A **Shelduck** potted in the next inlet and a reed bunting called from the patch of yellow flag. It was an idyllic place to stay. The **Corncrake** was seen before dinner, so everyone went out after, but it was only seen by one other, despite surrounding it in a field! Then it was off to bed, feeling very happy and content. Greta saw a **Peregrine**.

The next day was a little drizzly. We had arranged for the RSPB warden to come over. John Bowler showed us on the map where the best places to see various birds were and then accompanied us for the morning. We set off back to Balemartine and took the road to Balephuill. We stopped to let a Land Rover pass, then realised there was a **Corncrake** just over the fence. It croaked then set off over a mound and out of sight. Unfortunately, not all of us saw it and none of the ones in the car. On to John's house, a traditionally built one, just about finished, and we got out to listen for the grass hopper warbler John had heard the evening before. Sadly, it did not like the rain which was quite heavy now. Never mind, we had wonderful views of **Stonechats**, **Corncrakes** and a **Willow Warbler** called in the scrub beside the house. One of our trip still had missed the **Corncrake**, so we were determined to find one for him before Sunday! We then went to Loch a' Phuill where we were rewarded in spite of the weather with a marvellous spectacle of hundreds of **Dunlin** in summer plumage. John said that because of the lovely weather of the past month, many of the waders had already passed through, so were happy to see these. On the loch were **Whooper Swans**, **Common Gulls**, **Greylag Geese**, **Teal** and **Mallard**, while **Little Terns** fed close in at the shore near us. **Sand Martins** passed over, but with the cold damp weather, we did not stay out long. It was difficult to see the birds in the scopes. On our way back to the east coast, John pointed out **Whimbrel** and stopped at a patch of whin where migrants often stop. **Linnets** and **Twite** flitted around and a couple of **Rock Doves** had taken up residence in the old kirk. We had coffee and home baking at the café in the community hall and thanked John for his company and information, not only about birds but about the community and life on the island. We had lunch past the airport and pier, at Gott Bay. It was still pretty cold but most of braved the elements and were rewarded with more waders and divers. We carried on along the coast, then over to Vaul on the north coast. We walked to a well preserved broch and watched divers, **Guillemots** and **Razorbills**. **Meadow Pipits** and **Pied Wagtails** were all around and a large flock of **Greylag Geese** obviously had chosen the area as home. It was very lush in places and the wild flowers were lovely. In the rocks were spring squill, lousewort, milkwort and mountain everlasting. Bogbean and marsh marigold were abundant in the ditches and we saw two orchids, early purple and heath spotted. Some of us walked to the ringing stone, some botanised, and some sea watched. They saw **Red-throated Divers** and a line of 12 **Great Northern Divers**, as well as watching seals. We headed back to base, and then we separated after dinner, going our own ways to look for birds or just relax. Carol, Jill and I drove off to an area said to be good for **Corncrakes** and indeed it was. One called almost at my feet, and then we saw two different calling birds out in the open – great.

Saturday was bright and a wee bit breezy. We walked part of the road, listening for warblers and we had superb views of **Sedge Warbler** and heard **Grasshopper Warbler**. Ann and Lynda thought they had seen it too. Meanwhile we traced a **Corncrake** for David to patch of nettles. I saw it but alas not him!. We took the road north towards Loch Bhasapoll, stopping to listen and look in all the wee pools for the **Garganey** drake that John said was around. We were lucky. Most managed to see it before it flew off just as I focussed on it! Still, a good tick! In the distance we saw what looked like a harrier – great, but no, alas, it was a splendid decoy in a bid to keep the geese off the fields! – very realistic. On to the loch, and stopped at the wind surfing school. Explanation boards told us where the windsurfers could go, where to fish and where the bird sanctuary and hide was. They also explained how the loch was formed, why it was good for birds etc and where different species could be seen. **Arctic Terns** and **Black-headed Gulls** nested to the north and we made our way to the hide. We stepped out and it was just magic. **Sedge Warblers** galore, all displaying, all over the huge reed beds. **Reed Buntings** called from posts and reed tops. Then three otters were seen, playing in the loch, close to the shore. It was an adult and two more or less full grown cubs and they played catching tails, diving down and up under mum etc. It was great to watch them. A male **Shoveler** fed along the edge of a grassy spit into the loch and **Tufted Duck**, mergansers and swans wee out in the loch. A lone **Grey Heron** silently flapped past. We went into the hide, but really you saw just as much outside. We ate our picnic in this idyllic spot then continued along the road. George saw the **Golden Plover** in the field, then Ann spotted the **Corncrake** which flew up on

the other side of the minibus. It settled on a mound at the side of the barn and at last David saw his crane – mission accomplished! We all had excellent views of it. Two buzzards were added to the list before we retraced our steps past the loch and on to Balephetrish Bay. Edmund was there, so we exchanged notes. We stayed for a while, sea watching, and watching the waders running as if by clockwork along the shore. Starlings were nesting in the banks. A bit further on, we stopped the bus just beside where the little terns were fishing and had some wonderful views of them. Two were on the sand and a third, obviously a male, with a sand eel, tried to endear himself but to no avail. They were not interested. He tried several times, coming in to land near them. Others came in too and we had the best views I have ever seen of **Little Terns**.

Back on the bus, we slowly drove back to base, after a stop to see a **Greenland White-fronted Goose**. It had a lump under its bill; so presumable was not feeding enough to be fit for travelling north to breed. We drove over to the west side, looking in all the pools again – what a lovely coastline that is and we could see the Skerryvore Lighthouse, 10½ nautical miles to the south west of the island. After dinner, we went to look round the museum dedicated to the lighthouse and its history – built in in the 1830s, with Alan Stevenson as the engineer. He used Hynish as his base, with a dry dock and quarry near by. A fascinating history. Then we all went to watch the sunset on the west coast where we had been earlier – just magic and then as the sun dipped below the horizon, we saw the green glow, not a flash, but a definite glow. What an end to a perfect day.

We packed up the bus, said our goodbyes and headed off to Loch a' Phuill again to look for the huge flock of **Dunlin** – this time in sunlight. However, the wind was so strong that looking down a scope facing into wind was near by impossible and so we walked with some in the minibus, over to the sand dunes of Balephuill Bay. **Sand Martins** were nesting along the stream banks and on the beach were a flock of **Whimbrel**. The sea was blue, the sand golden and not a cloud in the sky. We just chilled out until we had to go for the ferry. Quite a few of collected stones, others looked for machair flowers and some just sat and enjoyed the sun. Then it was time to head for the ferry. Edmund was hopping over to Coll for a couple of days but he was happy – he had spent 3 hours in his hide to get some wonderful shots of **Corncrakes** – there is dedication for you! The sun shone and we sat out for most of the way. The **Sea Eagle** was fishing above a fishing boat in the same spot as on the way, so most of us saw it this time. The sides of the cliffs were covered in bluebells and it was a really calm crossing. We saw where we had stayed in Mull two years ago. No more birds to add to the list, but that did not matter. At Oban, we parted company, the car heading for Tomatin and the bus to Inverness.

We had seen 68 different species on Tiree and another 14 on the way down. I also had 32 flowers on my list for Tiree. It had been a great trip as usual – good company, good accommodation, and good weather after all. Thank you to Sinclair and Carol for driving and the rest for their friendship.

Janet Crummy



BIRD LIST FOR SOC HIGHLAND TRIP TO TIREE MAY 2007

[In no particular order!!!]

Starling, House Sparrow, Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Pied Wagtail, Skylark, Swallow, Redshank, Snipe, Raven, Curlew, Shag, Mute Swan, Sanderling, Linnet, Ringed Plover, Dunlin, Corncrake, Sedge Warbler, Turnstone, Herring Gull, Black-headed Gull, Great Northern Diver, Red-breasted Merganser, Meadow Pipit, Blackbird, House Martin, Song Thrush, Shelduck, Arctic Tern, Northern Wheatear, Reed Bunting, Twite, Common Gull, Willow Warbler, Stonechat, Greylag Goose, Peregrine, Little Tern, Whimbrel, Whooper Swan, Sand Martin, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Teal, Hooded Crow, Rock Dove, Bar-tailed Godwit, Red-throated Diver, Guillemot, Grasshopper Warbler, Garganey (male), Cuckoo (heard), Tufted Duck, Shoveler, Golden Plover, Moorhen, Greenland White-fronted Goose, Eider, Razorbill, Buzzard, Kittiwake, Mallard, Pochard, Grey Heron, Rock Pipit, Goldeneye, Fulmar, Black Guillemot and Great Black-backed Gull.

PLANT LIST FOR SOC HIGHLAND TRIP TO TIREE MAY 2007

[Also in no particular order!!!]

Birdsfoot Trefoil, Scurvy Speedwell, Daisy, Buttercup, Wild Garlic, Sea Campion, Stitchwort, Wild Carrot, Mountain Everlasting, Bogbean, Marsh Marigold, Heath, Spotted Orchid, Butterwort, Creeping Tormentil, Sundew, Field and Cinquefoil Leaves.



Grass, Thrift, Vetch sp. Dandelion, Bluebell, Dock, Violet, Lousewort, Milkwort, Lady's Smock, Early Purple Orchid, Spring Squill, Willow, Bog Cotton, Horsetail, Yellow Flag

Next meeting – Tuesday, 2nd October at 7.45 pm in Culloden Library

SOC/BTO – BIRD ATLAS 2007-2011