

**SOC - SCOTLAND'S BIRD CLUB**

**Highland Bird News**

**No 108**

**NOVEMBER 2007**



## EDITORIAL

Clocks turned back, the nights "fair drawin' in", the temptation is to be depressed and feel like waiting for the New Year and check how much is in the Christmas Club coffers and how many days till you can start a new Year List. But no, let's be having none of that! It's November 2007 and, therefore, the start of a 4-year survey of Scotland's - OK, the UK's - birds. It's Atlas Time! This is your chance to really make your birding count - literally! Every piece of birdwatching you do can now count to a greater knowledge of the state of our birds, breeding and wintering. This being Highland, there are umpteen places to do some atlas work and to make a contribution that may be unique and vital. Our chairman, Simon, Hugh Insley and Bob Swann - all stalwarts of the Highland birding scene - are deeply involved in this massive project. Simon is co-ordinating the Ross-shire effort, Hugh the Inverness-shire and Bob is the organizer for the whole of Scotland. You can take on whole 10K squares or just be a roving recorder. Speak to Simon, Hugh or Bob or go on-line at [www.birdatlas.net](http://www.birdatlas.net) for more information.

Sometimes I've been a little complaining of the rather limited group who contribute to this newsletter, so it's very pleasing to have 2 new contributors to No 108. Read on and appreciate the wise words of Margaret Fraser and Maureen Macdonald who recount island visits by some of our membership, plus Alex Joss has again discovered the Muse and writes about the latest trip he led.

So what has been happening in Highland in terms of good birds recently? Well, the last couple of months have seen quite a few Sabine's Gulls, Sooty Shearwaters and all four skua species off our coasts and a fine and unexpected adult male Red-footed Falcon at Tarbat Ness. Landbird migration this autumn seems to have been far from spectacular. It is often commented on in recent years that the migration season is getting longer and longer, so there is still plenty of time and opportunity to turn up some good bird somewhere. Why not set that as a challenge when you are doing some atlassing!

*Al McNee*

*Welcome to tonight's speaker, David Catt.*

**STOP PRESS!**

*The new Highland Bird Report has arrived - a bargain at £8!*

## SOC Highland Branch Outings 2007-08

- 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!*

## **TIP TIP-OFF FROM THE POLICE**

The first clue was noted last session at a talk given by a retired police officer now living on Skye. Full of knowledge and enthusiasm, he sowed the seed. Skye is a great place for birdwatching and a weekend visit is well worth consideration. As a result, 10 members set off under the able leadership of our secretary, Ann Sime.

The first surprise for me was the instruction – comfort stop, Achnasheen. After I had wound up the window and the brain had started to function, I thought, Achnasheen? Skye? Now I am giving my age away. When I travelled to Skye there was only one road and that was down Loch Ness by Invermoriston, etc! However, eight of us set off on a dreich morning with a fair old wind blowing. The visibility was poor and there was quite a swell on the lochs – not good for birdwatching and, apart from the inevitable **Buzzard**, a **Sparrowhawk** and a few **Starlings**, little else was seen.

As we neared Skye, the weather improved and our three cars turned left, before Broadford, making for Armadale, but by a circuitous route. Now, unless you are very familiar with the island, I would advise you to get out your OS maps of South and North Skye.

We had our first official stop just short of Claire Macdonald's hotel and looked out over the Sound of Sleat. Next we turned right on a narrow, winding road which wound round the coast. We stopped at Ord. This was new ground for me and what a beautiful spot it was. The weather had brightened and the **Kittiwakes** were dancing in the sunlight, finches flitted in the trees and, at last, we were able to add some birds to our list. The Cuillins were shedding their mantle of mist and the scene was quite atmospheric. On then by Tokavaig and Tarskavaig where we stopped to watch a **Red-throated Diver**, before rejoining the main road to Armadale. As we approached Armadale, we stood by the sea wall and watched a male **Otter** fishing, plus some Porpoises.

The list was growing, albeit slowly, eg **Swallows**, **Tufted Duck**, **Redshank**, **Curlew**, **Grey** and **Pied Wagtails**, **Red Kite**, **Mute Swan** and **Buzzard**. Time was moving on and, as we had been invited to an art exhibition of wildlife paintings on Isleornsay, we thought we had better acquaint ourselves with our B&Bs. Tidied up, we re-assembled. By now, Al and Jenny had caught up with us and we made our way to Isleornsay. Here, Derek Robertson was exhibiting his work, armed with a glass of wine and some most attractive and tasty canapés, we viewed his work. At least three of the party went home with lighter wallets, while the rest of us just drooled. From there we made our way back to the Broadford Hotel for sustenance and very nice it was too!

Saturday, and we collected at the main car park in Broadford and were joined by the “polis” and decided to travel north, eventually landing at Neist Point. Stopping to

look out over Loch Ainort, we spotted **Eider**, **Black Guillemot** in winter plumage, **Teal**, **Shag**, **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Common Scoter**, **Goosander**, **Razorbill** and **Little Grebe**.

Next, we took the old road round the coast to stop at Sconser quarry where a Brent Goose had been spotted the day before. Sure enough, here was a pale-bellied **Brent Goose**, a flock of 8 **Turnstones** and also a delightful family of Mergansers sheltering in the lea of some rocks. Continuing northwards, we turned off at Sligachan and on up Glen Drynoch to Bracadale where we did the weekend shop.

The weather was deteriorating again, the hills shrouded in mist, yet exuding a mystical magic and majesty that spells S-K-Y-E.

Further north to Lonmore, we turned off and travelled north-westerly. A quick stop at Loch Mor produced a **Black Swan** before reaching Neist Point. Donning waterproofs and suitable footwear, lunch on our backs, we set off down a very steep track. Visibility at this point was almost nil, but while eating lunch we had a magnificent view of 2 **Minke Whales** and a few **Manx Shearwaters** were seen off the point.

Time to move on again, retracing our way back to Glendale for a quick comfort stop and onwards and upwards to Dunvegan. Here, a quick cuppa was rewarded with the sighting of 6 **Crossbills** in the café car park. Still heading north, adding **Whimbrel** and **Knot** to our list, we stopped at Loch Suardal to view the one and only breeding **Moorhen** on Skye. Yet another diversion took us to Roag and here was one of our highlights, 100+ **Twite** – a great sight! The sun now decided to show itself and so provided a magnificent view of Macleod's Tables, the shadows accentuating the table effect.



*Neist Point*

On to Caroy to pay homage to the resident **Greylag Geese** and then Struan where some eagle-eyed [get it?] person spotted 2 **Golden Eagles** soaring high above the hills. Still some way to go, we wound our way back, stopping at Loch nan Eilean to satisfy the needs of the botany-mined members of the group. Here we found **Pipewort**. This is a rare aquatic plant which is widespread in the north-east of North America, but in Europe is confined to the north-western mainland of Scotland and the Hebrides.

So that was Saturday and what a day it was. Sunday, we rose to another grey, misty day. Our plan was to visit Elgol, but with visibility so poor, we decided to delay decisions and visit Harrapool and Waterloo. Here, we added **Bar-tailed Godwit**, watched a

**Sparrowhawk** raise a large flock of waders, spotted **Bonxie** and **Ringed Plover** and then the sight of the weekend – **White-tailed Eagle!**



The sky seemed to be lifting, so we decided to give Elgol a go, but some way up the road, the mists descended once again and so we aborted our attempts and decided to make for home.

In all, 70 species were noted – some very notable! This was a splendid weekend. Good birding, good company, good food and excellent organisation. Many thanks to Ann for overall organisation of the trip, including fixing the accommodation and booking the hotel for 2 good dinners, plus to Bob McMillan – the policeman! -for giving up a large part of his weekend to guide us round an island he clearly loves and knows so well.

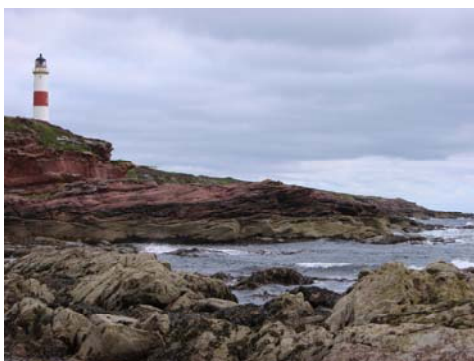
*Margaret Fraser*

## Summer Still at Tarbat Ness, 6 October 2007

The weather forecast for the Inverness area was not auspicious, but just north of there it was a different story. Dark showers passed on either side, leaving our party of 10 in an island of light and calm. The rendezvous at Fowls Ferry yielded very few birds, as did a stop at Loch Eye. Among the many swans, all **Mute**, on the latter were some **Little Grebes**, **Mallard** and an odd, apparently stripy swan. After much perusal, it was decided that the two symmetrical black stripes running across the leading edge of its wings and over its shoulders were not feather colour variations, but extraneous pieces of man-made material or vegetation. There was another stop just south of Inver to investigate a very pale (actually white-fronted) **Buzzard** which was obligingly reluctant to move from its perch on a low tower in some brick buildings. Again much perusal led to the conclusion that it was just ordinary, with disappointingly smooth legs.

At Inver the waders were kept on the move, usually away from us, by walkers and dogs but eventually we saw what there was around, the expected **Redshank**, **Oystercatcher**, **Curlew**, **Lapwing**, **Dunlin** and a goodly number of **Knot**. Moving downstream round the village, we had good views of a **Peregrine** flying low over the water to land on the far shore, and two **Wheatears** on the near shore. At Tarbat Ness itself, during lunch, viewing conditions were perfect, almost flat calm and beautifully lit. We could look for miles to identify what was there - virtually nothing. There were a few **Gannet**, mostly immature, **Shag**, **Herring Gulls**, the odd **Razorbill**, a glimpse of a diver, and two each of **Common** and **Velvet Scoter**. Delaying the departure to converse with Bob Swann added three **Purple Sandpipers** to the tally.

The party returned through Easter Ross at varying speeds and those few that remained had very long views of **Shelduck**, swans and **Greylag Geese** at the Nigg Bay hide, then very pleasant, late afternoon sunshine at Alness Business Park, but no out of the ordinary birds. The total for the day therefore just crept up to the 50 mark. This had been a search for winter visitors (and every thrush was minutely examined, only to be confirmed as a **Mistle**), but this part of the country was still very much in summer mode. Apart from the wheatears, several **Swallows** were noted on the outward and return journeys. There was even mention in the Nigg hide visitors' book of an **Osprey** seen the day before attacking six otters and a sheep, but I don't think they were being serious, because it was then said to have been eaten by a cow.



*Alex Joss*

## VISIT TO SHETLAND AND FAIR ISLE

In October 2006, Ann decided that she would like to visit Shetland and Fair Isle the following year during the migration period. However, instead of going on her own, Ann thought it would be a good idea to invite some friends and acquaintances with a similar interest in ornithology to accompany her. Apart from the company, there would be the benefit of extra eyes for spotting the birds. The Fair Isle Observatory was contacted and accommodation for eight people was booked. Ann then made enquiries with Hugh Harrop re accommodation, transport and a local guide for 2 days in Shetland, prior to our visit to Fair Isle. A fantastic deal covering all three was offered and snapped up.

On Friday 5 October, all eight of us met up at Dalcross Airport. There was no fog in Shetland, so fingers crossed, our 9.50am flight to Sumburgh should leave on time, which it did. Even the local birds turned out, as a couple of **Kestrels** were seen hovering as the plane taxied along the runway before take-off.



After lunch at the Sumburgh House Hotel, Ann suggested that we took a walk to Sumburgh Head. On the way, we encountered **Curlew**, **Great Black-backed Gull**, Kittiwake, Redshank, Ringed Plover, Roc Dove, Oystercatcher, Sanderling, Shag, “Shetland” **Wren**, **Skylark**, **Starling** and **Turnstone**. In one of the local walled gardens, where a lot of the summer flowers were still in bloom, Lynda spotted a **Goldcrest** and a **Yellow-browed Warbler** which both showed well. After some time, we continued on our way. As we approached the cliffs, **Fulmar** and **Gannet** were spotted. It was interesting to note that all the Gannets were adults. Near to the top, a flock of **Twite** was observed, the pink rump fully visible on several of the birds. Access through one of the gates to another part of the cliff was denied, however. Ann managed to find another way on and was rewarded with a view of a **Ring Ouzel**. During our descent, which took some time, stopping to admire the breathtaking views, we were amazed at the number of Goldcrests on the cliffs, not exactly the location where we expect to find them.

We were collected promptly at 9.00am on the Saturday morning by Mickey Maher, our local guide for the next 2 days in Shetland. We enjoyed his company and the benefit of his local knowledge. We visited Grutness, Scatness, Loch of Spiggie, Levenwick, Loch of Tingwall and Scalloway mention a few. The highlights of visiting these places were the sightings of **Blackcap, Dunlin and Killdeer** [which was fabulous], **Little Stint, Red Grouse, Mute and Whooper Swans**, the latter entertaining us with their display. **Moorhen, Eider, Long-tailed Duck, Pintail, Pochard, Scaup, Teal, Tufted Ducks and Wigeon** were all seen during our travels as were **Curlew Sandpiper, Herring Gull, Lapwing, Lesser Black-backed Gull and Little Auk**. We were also lucky to spot **Red-breasted Merganser, Red-throated Diver, Little Grebe and Slavonian Grebe**. A joy for us all at Scalloway was observing the **Arctic Terns** fishing close to the shore, **Black Guillemot, Black-headed Gull, Guillemot, and Razorbill**. During our travels, we had sightings of **Chaffinch, Fieldfare, Greylag Goose, Hooded Crow, House Sparrow, Meadow Pipit, Redwing and Siskin**. On Sunday, Mickey pointed out an Otter swimming close to the shore. Janet and Cathy enjoyed a good view of it as it came ashore. You surely cannot go to Shetland without seeing one, after Simon King's reports earlier this year in Spring Watch. Another of the highlights of these 2 days had to be the sighting of the drake **Ring-necked Duck** at Loch of Tingwall as well as a large flock of **Golden Plover** nearby.

Come Monday morning, we were all collected from the hotel by Bob Fray, with some of us dropped at Tingwall Airport for our flight to Fair Isle, the remainder of the group proceeded to Whalsay where they were got a good view of the **Icterine Warbler** which had been reported to be in the area.

By Monday afternoon, we were all on the picturesque and tranquil Fair Isle together with Jenny and Al McNea. John Carruthers joined us on Tuesday, having secured the last available seat on the plane from Inverness. It felt as if we were on another planet, not many cars, no traffic lights and all the local people giving you a wave as they passed by. For the next five and a half days, the song "These boots are made for walking" came to mind because walk we did, around the coastline, up the hills and long the roads from North Light to South Light. The accommodation at the observatory was comfortable and Phil, the chef, kept our stamina up with his satisfying, nutritious meals. All we had to worry about was getting up in the morning, finding the birds and remembering them all for the evening log before bedtime.

This is a list of the birds that were seen, though maybe not by everyone:

*Arctic Redpoll, Barnacle Goose, Brambling, Bluethroat, Chiffchaff, Cormorant, Garden Warbler, Greenshank, Grey Heron, Jack Snipe, Kestrel, Lapland Bunting, Lesser Whitethroat, Little Bunting, Long-eared Owl, Merlin, Northern Wheatear, Peregrine, Pin-footed Goose, Purple Sandpiper, Raven, Richard's Pipit, Robin, Rock Pipit, Short-eared Owl, Snipe, Snow Bunting, Song Thrush, Woodcock.*





South Light, Fair Isle

One species deserves a special mention. One of our group, no names mentioned, required to partake of some fresh air after the evening meal. Outside the door, a slight movement was detected, rangers were summoned. The movement turned out to be that of a young **Storm Petrel** which still had some down in the lower part of its body. This was a chance not to be missed and everyone took it in turn to go to the ringing room to have a look at this amazing bird, with gentle features, such slender legs and webbed feet. It was a real privilege to observe it as it was ringed. The rangers took it down to the harbour later in the evening and released it.

We must all give Al a special thank you for being our non-paid professional “pisher”. Without his assistance, we possibly would not have seen the Little Bunting or the Bluethroat.

Saturday morning saw us depart Fair Isle for Sumburgh where Ann took the wheel of our hired vehicle for the next 2 days. After lunch, we returned to Sumburgh Head to look for the Pallas’s Warbler, without success. However, as the saying goes, every cloud has a silver lining. Returning from Sumburgh Head, people with scopes focussed on a field on our left were spotted. They appeared to be looking at something of interest. As quickly as possible, we proceeded to Sumburgh Farm to join the group who were with Hugh Harrop. They were looking at a rarity, a **White’s Thrush**. This sighting lifted our spirits, with everyone having a good view of the bird. Hugh then received information that a **Red-flanked Bluetail** was at Scatness.

We duly followed Hugh's group and were rewarded with a good sighting of this species, another tick. We were on a roll, and reports came through that a **Pechora Pipit** was at Toab. Needless to say, we were en route. With the help of one of the local birders and the bird was flushed and it rewarded us by positioning itself on a fence wire, enabling us to have a close look at the whitish stripes along the mantle-sides.

First thing on Sunday morning, we set off once again to Sumburgh Head where we proved that persistence pays. We saw the **Pallas's Warbler** – a good start to the day. Ann then drove us to Lerwick, stopping at various places on the way, where **Great Skua** and **Manx Shearwater** were added. During the lunch stop, Greta reported a sighting of a **Long-tailed Tit** on the outskirts of Lerwick. This is very rare for Shetland. Ann will relay this information to Hugh for recording. No other new species were recorded, but we returned to the hotel well satisfied with our overall list. The combined Shetland and Fair Isle list totalled 102 species.



*Teuchters twitching on Fair Isle*



*Storm Petrel in the hand*

We all returned to Inverness at various times of Monday. On behalf of Janet, Carol, Cathy, Greta, Lynda, David and myself thank you most sincerely Ann for inviting us to join you for this memorable trip. We are quite a modest bunch really and you will not catch us bragging. With a list like this, it may not be advisable to give us the chance!!

*Maureen MacDonald*

Next meeting – Tuesday, 4th December at 7.45 pm in Culloden Library

**Jacqui Kaye on BTO SCOTLAND & GARDEN BIRD WATCH**