

SOC - SCOTLAND'S BIRD CLUB

Highland Bird News

No 109

FEBRUARY 2008



EDITORIAL

This February issue was supposed to be published in January, but the delay has meant that we have even more material to read. I am grateful to all our contributors and urge others to let their Muse run riot. It doesn't have to be on a par with William Shakespeare and don't be worried about dodgy grammar and spelling, as I can get a Mr Bill Gates on the case right away.

No doubt most of you have not been out much recently, too busy reading the new Birds of Scotland [BS3]. I managed to get my copy home, open at a completely random page, close it and put both volumes on a shelf in my study bookcase. Then? Nothing! I have been so otherwise pre-occupied that both volumes have been unopened for 4 weeks. This shocking state of affairs won't last long, though, especially now that BS3 has won the *Birdwatch* magazine Book of the Year award, a tremendous reward for the designers and editors especially. If you haven't yet got your copy, it can be ordered from Waterston House.

The new initiative of running a Thursday outing as well as the regular monthly weekend one seems to be meeting with approval and good birds, locations and sociability have featured on each trip. Congratulations to the organizers/leaders. If you have any suggestions for outings, such as new locations, timing, birds to be targeted etc, anything at all, please speak to any of the committee members, so that future plans for outings can be made with your views in mind.

It seems to have been a fairly quiet birding start to 2008 in the Highland area, with just a handful of Waxwings [Glenmore], some scattered Glaucous and Iceland Gulls [up to 8 in Mallaig] and a female Ring-necked Duck [Loch Morlich]. The 11 Common Cranes remain near Spynie, Moray & Nairn, and seen by quite a few folk from the branch. Could they please be encouraged to move 25 miles west so that a good Highland welcome would await them?

Lastly, have I received your 2007 Highland bird records? If yes, thanks. If no, then you'll be feeling very guilty. If you supply these fine records of yours by the end of February, this guilt will vanish as surely as "five minutes ago" follows "you should have been here" when twitching.

Al McNee

*A warm Highland welcome to tonight's
speaker, Bob Scott.*

HIGHLAND BIRD REPORT 2005

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

Copies from Al McNee.

SOC Highland Branch Outings 2008

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 these outings. The leaders put a lot of work into making the trips a success, good birding is almost guaranteed and the company is great!

MINCH PELAGIC

I am musing over the possibility of a pelagic trip in early September. Pelagic trips are being run by Hebridean Whale Cruises from Gairloch whose website is <http://www.hebridean-whale-cruises.com/>. Full details are on the website, but essentially the trip runs as follows [as on the SOC website] –

Hebridean Voyages is introducing pelagic 'chumming' cruises in the North Minch from 2008. These will run from late April-June for the spring migration, and late August-October for the autumn migration. The 10-hour offshore trips will be in a covered vessel, with about 8 hours chumming time for up to 11 people. Weather permitting the cruises will take in hotspots for Shearwaters, Petrels, rare Gulls, Skuas and maybe "something really unexpected". The North Minch is well renowned as a pelagic highway, and fishermen sometimes report the famous Black-browed Albatross feeding at the back of their boats.

The cruises will depart from Gairloch Harbour between 0700 and 0800 on the MV Kerry.

The cost of hiring the boat for the day is £400 and it takes 11 passengers, so say £40 for 10 hours – not bad. If you are interested in this, please see me and I will make enquiries.

Al McNee

Local Birding in November

For the 2007-08 session, it was decided that we would try a couple of mid-week, half-day field trips as well as the usual full-day ones held at the weekend, and on Thursday 22nd November we had the first, led by Ann Sime.

Eleven people in all met at the Munlochy Bay overlook and the tide was just right. Hundreds of **Wigeon** were swimming in the bay or feeding in the nearby fields, as well as **Teal** and **Mallard**. We estimated there were about fifteen hundred geese, with about 90% of the flock **Greylag**, and the rest **Pink-Foot**. Nothing unusual in that, you may say, but Ann and I had done a recce the day before, found a similarly-sized flock in the adjacent field, but on that occasion the figures were reversed and 90% were Pink-foot with only a smaller number of Greylag. It just shows that it's always worth checking. Birds are reputed to be creatures of habit but this was obviously a different

bunch compared to the careful scanning of the up 3 **Barnacle Geese** shore. A large group of **Godwits** were in the were treated to some displays of about a they wheeled around, fresh patch of mud as We had a stop at where we saw some **tailed Ducks, Some Mergansers**, flights of



day before. Some flock also turned very close to **Bar-tailed** shallows and we wonderful aerial hundred **Knot** as then landed on a the tide moved. Chanonry Point beautiful **Long-Red-breasted Turnstones**, and

a flock of **Dunlin** trying to match the aerobatics of the Knot. At Udale the water was very high so it was decided to spend a while at Newhall Point until conditions were better. Groups of various finches and thrushes were seen on the journey, but the largest was a flock of about 100 **Greenfinches** sitting together on wires, their colours lovely in the light. Lots more waders at Newhall, and also a small flock of **Scaup**, mainly females. Back at Udale, it was surprising how far out the tide had gone in only an hour but we still saw plenty of ducks and waders.

But the best sighting was kept for last. As we were leaving Udale for the journey home, the silhouette of a lone bird was seen on top of a bush. As we drove closer it was obvious this bird had a crest. What a find! It was a beautiful **Waxwing**, feeding voraciously on berries and quite unconcerned as we approached on foot. We managed to get so close that binoculars were redundant. The details of feathering and the colours were remarkable – certainly the best view I have ever had of this very special bird. An excellent end to a good morning's birding.

The half-day outing was certainly a success and will probably become a permanent feature of the programme. Thanks to Ann for leading the trip and especially for arranging the finale.

Lynda Graham

West of Strathbeg! 10 November 2007

The recent winds had played havoc with the Strathbeg hides, which were thus closed for repair. That being so, we all agreed to look for geese much nearer home. The dire weather forecast lived up to expectations when the party of nine left Inverness to reassemble at the Udale hide. There were indeed prodigious numbers of geese but half of them left on our arrival, never to be seen again, leaving only **Greylag** and a solitary **Pinkfoot**. However, we spent quite a time in the hide while the rain drenched the misty, still waters, because they teemed with a variety of ducks and waders. There were large numbers of **Wigeon**, a few **Teal** and **Mallard**, also many **Oystercatchers** and a few **Lapwing** and **Dunlin** among the **Knot** and **Bar-tailed Godwits**. A small family of **Whoopers** was also present. The generally poor visibility was not a problem as the tide had pushed them all in close. Our party increased briefly by a third at this point when the chairman and family dropped in for a short visit.

There were a few brief stops along the coast to Cromarty, during which the main highlights were a few rafts of **Scaup** (one of which had a **Slavonian Grebe** tagged to it) and the odd **Red-breasted Merganser** or **Goldeneye**. The rain intensified at Cromarty, but we had excellent close views of **Red-throated Divers**, some **Eider** and a **Rock Pipit**. The journey up over and through the clouds on the spine of the Black Isle included a few impromptu stops to study the thrushes and wee birds. The trees and wires were stocked with a fine variety, **Fieldfare**, **Mistle**, **Yellowhammer**, **Linnet**, and the other finches. There was also a male **Merlin** on a bale.

The star performing venue, however, was unscheduled but the result of an inspirational decision to have lunch at Chanonry point. The rain ceased and the light brightened as we arrived, which allowed the full battery of scopes and binos to be trained on relatively calm waters. At first, there was to-ing and fro-ing of **Long-tailed Ducks**, **Shags**, **Turnstones** and **Ringed Plovers**, with the odd **Guillemot** and **Razorbill** further out, then entered stage left the leading performer, a **Leach's Petrel**. As it flew purposefully all the way up the firth until it became too small to see, almost everybody had clear, lengthy views of it, and there were probably one or two more further away. The journey back to Inverness added to the raptor list, **Kestrel**, **Buzzard** and **Red Kite**, while a short stop at the Munlochry hide added many, many more **Wigeon** and **Curlew**, but also some **Pinkfeet**.

A short and increasingly dreich afternoon was spent combing the southern shores of the Moray Firth for geese, from the Longman as far as Ardersier and finishing at Loch Flemington, but not one was seen. There were one or two **Goosander**, **Teal**, **Little Grebe**, another family of Whoopers, and many more Wigeon. We gave up when the wind rose and the body temperature fell, but all present left feeling virtuous and very grateful to our leader, Al McNee, for compelling us to persevere against such awful weather and finding a very respectable total of 64 species.

Alex Joss

JANUARY OUTING – NOT THE BEAULY FIRTH!

Wind, rain, ice and cold – great ingredients for a January bird outing! The outline plan of a trip around the Beaulay Firth was out of the question, far too icy. So the day developed almost of its own volition, as there were keen people among the seven who had ventured out.

Milton was the first stop, sheet ice precluded walking, but here were **Scaup** to be seen. On then to Nairn West Golf Club and a careful wander westwards along the slippery shore path. Greet views of **Bar-tailed Godwits** feeding close by and other waders. **Long-tailed Duck, Eider, Red-breasted Mergansers** and more, close, Scaup on the sea and eventually the “professional” leader among us found 30+ **Brent Geese** at Great distance. On to Nairn harbour, where almost 40 **Snow Buntings** overflowed as we took mid-morning coffee.

A wander out among the dunes was not overly productive, but a few **Sanderling** on the beach added interest. On then to Findhorn for lunch and a were set up – we need them as birds there were, out in the and **Velvet Scoters** in small **Slavonian Grebes**, a couple of and a few more Long-taileds. A produced little of note, so on tot Flemington still well iced. The to be standing on the water, but planted on the submerged ice.



small battery of scopes nothing was close. But choppy water, **Common** numbers, a few **Red-throated Divers** few minutes at the hide the last stop at Loch **Mute Swans** appeared in fact had feet firmly A fair assortment of

ducks, with **Wigeon** calling well, was a welcome sight, as were the **Moorhens** and **Coot** and a bush full of **Yellowhammers**. As we drove away, six **Whooper Swans** in a field edged out “tally” up to the sixty mark, with far more non-passerines than passerines. From a poor beginning, we manage a fair, if short, day’s birding and some excellent camaraderie. A good day.

David Galloway

Local birding – Thursday 17th January

A small band of hardy souls got together for a morning's birding. The weather in January can be glorious – or not! This was one of those “not” days. Lynda took us over to North Kessock with the intention of following the coast along to Redcastle. The weather actually was not quite as bad as we had feared (although it seemed to be keeping a lot of the smaller birds out of sight) – it was cold and overcast but with very little rain. The main hazard was ice whenever we wanted to get out of cars. We drove slowly along stopping now and again to check all the **Wigeon** on the shore in the faint hope of an American cousin – no luck on that front but we picked out **Teal, Grey Heron, Redshank, Curlew** and **Oystercatcher**. Further out on the water were **Goldeneye, red-throated diver, red-breasted merganser** and **shag**. Then Keith picked out a very distant **Slavonian Grebe**. Looking inland we found a field where cattle were being fed. The presence of the cattle may account for the multitude of birds in the area. A large flock of corvids (mainly **Jackdaws**) was feeding around the feet of the cattle. There was also a huge flock of **Chaffinches** flying to-and-fro between the field and the surrounding trees. Next some lbjs were spotted on the ground – Twite – 80 of them. Only they weren't quite Twite, as Keith pointed out – they were **Skylarks**. Somewhat chastened we proceeded on our way, noting the small group of **Greylag Geese** in the next field. A break for coffee was taken at Redcastle in the hope of seeing flocks of waders there but the tide was not favourable. It was then decided to head for Strathpeffer in the hope of seeing the reported flock of Bramblings at Kinellan. En route we found some **Fieldfares** at Kinnahaird then we had the great satisfaction of parking across the road from a tree full of **Bramblings** – no effort required! The perfect end to an enjoyable morning's birding.

Thanks to Lynda for leading. We shall need to see about adding more of these shorter outings to the programme.

Ann Sime

Mr McNee's superior photography. Perhaps a small prize might be in order if anyone can identify this. Yes, it is a bird!

