

SOC - SCOTLAND'S BIRD CLUB

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EDITORIAL

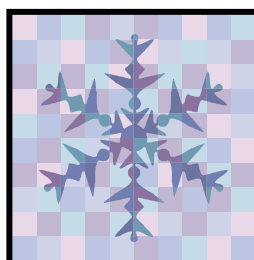
The weather has been playing its regular tricks of cold, then mild; rain, then snow; calm, then windy. Will we never again get a really cold, old-fashioned winter? Mind you, there are plenty of folks who prefer the more temperate conditions, knowing they can get around easily and probably most of our birds - if they had the opportunity to voice their opinions - might back that up.

So is it the weather, or some other factor or factors that have brought about the deluge of two species within the last few weeks? One deluge was more routine than the other, namely the very large influx of one of our most beautiful winter birds, **Waxwing**. After all, it is to be expected that every 6-8 years or so, we will get a sudden rush of these superbly plumaged birds into the Highland area. What is much less expected is the unprecedented number of lingering **Grey Phalaropes** which appeared in Highland, the vast majority of them in the narrows off An Aird between Skye and Raasay. There was about a fortnight to get to the site and see sweeps of these superb, twirling little waders, feeding on small items from the surface of the water, pecking like miniature sewing machines. Even more unexpected was hearing their delightful contact calls as they did so. Why an eventual high count of 197 - yes, 197! - of them should congregate at one spot for so long is a real mystery, though weather conditions must have played a significant part. Normally, Grey Phalarope is a passage migrant, seen off headlands or the Minch boat, fleetingly as they had south. One if you're lucky, two or three during a long seawatch exceptionally. So this gathering was a truly historical ornithological Highland event.

Other than that, things seem to have been fairly quiet, good birds being a Lesser Whitethroat which dallied on Skye for a few days and a very likely-sounding Nuthatch in a Kingsmills garden last week. These, taken together with the usual winter fare of divers, sea duck, loads of geese and so on, are good reasons to get out birding, even on the less pleasant of days.

Of course, the other big reason to get out is the national atlas. If you can do some Timed Tetrad Visits, great, but remember also that even your casual birdwatching sightings can be entered as Roving Records on the website, www.bto.org/birdatlas/.

To everyone in the branch, enjoy your winter birding and have a Merry Christmas and a Happy and bird-filled New Year!



Al McNee

SOC HIGHLAND WEEKEND TRIP TO WESTRAY

Our annual spring weekend trip this year was to Westray and Papa Westray, two of the most northern of the Orkney Islands. Twenty-four of us, including Sinclair and Kathleen, met up at Gill's Bay, Caithness to catch the ferry at 1 pm. Several cars and one minibus were driven up, some leaving early to make a full morning's birdwatching before the ferry and others just meandering up. We left the cars on the pier and, with only the minibus, started our jaunt over the wild Pentland Firth to Saint Margaret's Hope on South Ronaldsay. Actually, it was lovely and calm and you could see the swirls on the water surface where the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea meet and I can imagine that it can be exceedingly dangerous for smaller craft when the weather is bad and the seas are running high! At the pier we collected a hired minibus and drove straight across the various islands to Kirkwall, in time for the next ferry to Westray. The first bird seen on Orkney was the inevitable **Starling!** **Greylag Geese**, **Skylark**, **Swallow**, **Mute Swan**, **Hoodies** and **House Sparrow** were also seen. The sun shone and we had a lovely crossing to Westray, watching **Gannets**, **Guillemots**, **Arctic** and **Sandwich Terns**, various gulls, **Tysties** and the odd **Puffin**. We drove up to Pierowall, where half of us stayed at the Barn Hostel and the rest at the Pierowall Hotel. Westray is one of the largest of the North Isles of Orkney and is generally a prosperous island, with good farmland and the bulk of Orkney's pelagic fishing fleet. It is lovely and green, with wonderful cliffs, home to many thousands of seabirds, on its west side, culminating in Noup Head, now an RSPB reserve, 3 or 4 hills and some beautiful white sandy beaches.

On Friday, our first day, we headed south to Kirbist, having looked at some marshy areas for **Reed Buntings**, **Sedge Warblers** and **Greylags** on Loch Saintear. A **Red-throated Diver** had been seen there before breakfast, but with the sun in our eyes we couldn't find it again. A **Buzzard** flew over, causing quite a lot of excitement, as it is rare on Westray. At Kirbist, about a third of the party set off up the west side, climbing over styles, following the cliffs, while another group walked along Mae Sand, around the rocks of Kirk Taing to meet the bus at Ness of Tuquoy. The first group had a lovely walk, enriched with good views of Guillemots, **Razorbills**, Gannets, Puffins, **Shags** and fantastic scenery and rock formations. The second group had great views of a pair of **Great Northern Divers**, **Oystercatchers**, Arctic Terns diving close inshore, **Purple Sandpipers**, **Wheatears**, **Wrens**, **Pied Wagtails**, **Sanderling** running in and out with the waves and **Redshanks**. The third group saw **Common Sandpipers**, Shags, Great Northern Divers, Red-breasted Mergansers and Eider, as well as Ravens and Hoodies. We collected Sinclair's minibus (I drove it) and had lunch overlooking the Bay of Tuquoy, where we added **Turnstone**, **Snipe**, **Dunlin** and **Bar-tailed Godwit** to the growing list. We then drove north to Noup Head to meet the walkers and sat and watched the amazing cliffs, covered in seabirds. Sadly, numbers of Guillemots and Razorbills nesting are well down and only the odd Puffin was seen, but it has been a success story for the Gannet. Only ten years ago, 3 or 4 pairs were nesting at Noup Head and now we counted at least 100 nests. I am sure this is to do with the fall in the Sand Eel population which the smaller birds are dependent on while the Gannets fly much further distances and dive much deeper and so are feeding on different fish, which are still abundant. Back to Pierowall, passing a sheep giving birth to the second twin (I had spotted the first being born as I drove up earlier!) and we relaxed with a glass of wine before dinner at the hotel. The hotel was changing hands so there was a bit of confusion over payments for meals, etc – quite entertaining in a way! Kathleen ended up being the waitress!

On Saturday, we took the ferry across to Papa Westray, usually just known as Papa. It has minor fame as the destination of the world's shortest scheduled flight – 2 minutes from Westray! The island is 4.5 miles from North to South and is a really friendly place with everyone knowing each other – just a big spread-out village! The North Hill is an RSPB reserve, with a large Arctic

Tern colony and also **Arctic Skuas** and **Bonxies**. *Primula scotica*, the Scottish Primrose, flourishes there along with Spring Squill and Thrift. The Knap of Howar consists of 2 small, almost figure-of-eight buildings and is considered to be 800 years older than Skara Brae. Saint Boniface Kirk is a handsome simple church, recently restored with interesting gravestones. Saint Tredwell's Loch has a sad and dark past but is a good place for waders. We all went our own ways, four of us going on a guided tour of the historical sites, taking in birds en route and ending up at the reserve in the north, others walked to the loch and up to the north end, getting a taxi back and one couple walked the whole way round the island. Birds seen on this day included **Curlew**, **Lapwing**, Bar-tailed Godwits, Purple Sandpipers, Sanderling, Red-breasted Merganser, **Eider**, **Shelduck**, **Shoveler**, **Fulmar**, Arctic Skua, Bonxie, Swallow, Mallard, Shag, Redshank, Snipe, Skylark and Arctic Tern. A good day was had by all, and most of us saw the *Primula scotica*, thanks to the RSPB ranger who led a walk along the cliffs, ending at the flower site, which was just full of the tiny pink flowers. I opted to join the historic tour and 5 people who had come from Kirkwall joined us. Amazingly, my husband Mike had made some wrought iron pieces for one of the couples, purchased by the other couple and they had been to our house in Tomatin – what a small world! There was a ceilidh in the evening to celebrate the new ownership, so it was a late night for some.

The next day, the four who missed the Primroses had a private tour with a local farmer who had some growing on his land, some of us stopped at Loch of Burness to look for the **Little Grebe**, duly found – at its most northern site in the UK, before meeting up with others at Noltland Castle, an impressive keep, with a **Raven's** nest on the top. It was very interesting. We had lovely views of Reed Bunting near the loch and Arctic Terns, Mallard, **Moorhen**, **Coot**, **Common Gull**, **Pochard** and some of us thought that one group of terns were **Common Terns**. On to Grobust and a lovely sandy beach with skerries leading out into the sea. A couple of Great Northern Divers were in the bay, Redshank called from the rocks, and **Ringed Plover** fed in the seaweed. There were fossils on a large slab of rock at the far end. Lunch spot was out the NE headland at the Bay of Skail, where we sat in the shelter of the dunes, watching the flocks of waders – Dunlin and Redshank mostly. We headed on to the “airport” and watched the plane take off from Papa and land almost at once in Westray! Impressive! It then took off and headed south to Kirkwall. The islands, really just rocks, in the Papa Sound have a population of sheep, which only graze on seaweed, and they are meant to taste very good! Then it was off again, down to where we had seen the Sedge Warbler before. Sinclair and a couple of others headed for the chambered cairn on the side of Fitty Hill, while the rest of drove slowly past the Letto Sands, across to Loch of Swartmill where we were rewarded with a flock of about 15 Knot – very nice. We also had really good views of Sandwich Terns, both flying and at rest on a sandy spit. A family of 12 Mallard ducklings was feeding along the far side of the loch. We then drove down the coast a wee bit to Rack Wick and walked out to the Point of Burrian in search of Puffins. Ten years ago there were lots, but, alas, their numbers are very much depleted now. However, we did see about 20, several on the sea and some landing on the top of a stack at the point. One was having a wee battle with a Guillemot over a hole in the cliff – the latter was just too near the entrance for the Puffin's liking! A pair of **Twite** flitted among the boulders and the Red and White Champion in the evening sun. We made our way back to Pierowall, to a final meal at the hotel. The fish and chips are very good!

The next day was spent, driving back to catch the ferries with a short stop in Kirkwall and on back to Inverness. We had a really good trip, the weather was kind, the sun shone and we had only one shower while we were out and about and that only caught three of us! I am sure that many of us would like to go back to visit the islands again. Thank you to Anne and Sinclair for organising the trip.

Janet Crummy

SOME RECENT GOOD HIGHLAND BIRDS



Waxwing in Inverness

Glaucous Gull at Brora

Iceland Gull at Gedintailor, Skye

Grey Phalaropes off Gedintailor, Skye

A Tale of Two Mornings – 23/25 September

The “Local Birding” outing on 25th September was preceded by a “recce” on the 23rd. It was interesting to compare the two trips. The weather was dry on both days, but the Thursday was duller and cooler. On the recce, the birds seemed easier to find while on the official outing we felt we had to work for our birds. However the total number of species seen on each day was very similar although the actual species seen differed slightly.

The first port of call was Clava Cairns – **Crossbills** and **Bullfinches** on Tuesday – tits, **Chaffinches** and **Goldcrests** on Thursday. We then drove under the railway viaduct (shortly afterwards seeing a pair of **Magpies**) before heading a short distance up the track, which eventually leads to Beinn Bhuidhe Mhor. There we saw a flock of **Mistle Thrushes**. Next we headed east towards Galcantray – **Long-tailed Tits** on Tuesday, **Yellowhammers** and **Lesser Black-backed Gull** (s-sp *Graellsii*) – before making for Croy and Loch Flemington. At one spot there had been felling of trees leaving a single tall dead tree. On the recce this held 5 species including **Great Spotted Woodpecker** but nothing 2 days later. However on scrub nearby on the Thursday we were delighted to see a very active flock of Yellowhammers plus some **Stonechats** and **Dunnocks**. Loch Flemington held a **Whooper Swan** one day, **Little** and **Slavonian Grebes** the next. Our route now took us to Gollanfield another good spot for Yellowhammers – on the Thursday we also had a flock of **Linnets**. We explored some of the back roads by Ardersier before stopping to scan the shore. There we saw some active **Pied Wagtails** amongst the seaweed before we turned our attention to the ducks and waders. We added **Wigeon**, **Teal**, **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Curlew**, **Lapwing**, **Redshank** and a solitary **Dunlin** to our lists before heading back to Inverness having had 2 very enjoyable morning’s birding.

Lynda Graham

UP THE EAST COAST – SATURDAY, 25TH NOVEMBER

Leaving from the Foulis Storehouse lay-by, twelve people in 5 vehicles headed north to Stoneyfield Lochs which is reported to be the U.K.'s most northerly fishery. We did see some fish pursued by three **Otters** but birds were more scarce. We had hoped to see grebe, duck and little things but, alas no, however we did see some **Red-legged Partridge**.

The convoy then moved to The Mound where we spent some 30 minutes watching. Here we saw 3 splendid **Greenshank**, **Wigeon**, **Teal**, **Bar-tailed Godwit**, and **Greylag Geese**. We also admired the hovering skills of a **Common Kestrel** and the Red Deer silhouetted against the skyline.

En route to Brora 300 geese, every one of them Greylag, were spotted in a distant field. After a brief stop for ice cream etc, we made our way to Brora harbour where Lynda had promised us all a big surprise ... We scanned the roof top but only an Eagle Owl sat there motionless (plastic of course) but the real bird had flown. We set up scopes beside the shore and soon we were rewarded with excellent views of our mystery bird, a **Glaucous Gull**. This, along with Iceland Gull, are the only two white-winged gulls seen commonly in Scotland.

After lunch by the sea in the sun we took a stroll along the beach and were delighted by a sighting of an unusual goose. Upon closer examination it was identified as a **Pale-bellied Brent Goose** on migration from Iceland to its wintering grounds in Ireland. We also watched 60 **Sanderling** mechanically running amongst the incoming waves. Further off-shore, **Guillemot**, **Gannet**, **Kittiwake**, **Red-throated Diver**, **Cormorant** and **Shag** were evident.

As we headed homeward, we stopped at Golspie ford and walked to the shore again. The sea buckthorn with its olive leaves and orange berries made a dense cover for illusive lbs including a **Wren**. A **Dipper** was fleetingly glimpsed as we passed back by the ford.

We then stopped off at Little Ferry and it was little use for birdwatching as all the life was on the other side of the water. Round we went to the other side of Loch Fleet spotting, on the estuary, a flock of Greylag and 3 **Barnacle Geese** which were ably picked out by Rosie. Here we watched numerous seals basking on the sand banks, Greylag Geese, **Black-tailed Godwit**, Bar-tailed Godwit and ducks. After this fine display we called it a day and went home.

The final species count was 56. Thank you, Lynda, for a great day out.

LOCAL BIRDING ON THURSDAY, 6TH NOVEMBER

A gloomy morning greeted the seven of us at 9.15am. Lynda rallied the troops into two vehicles in her usual efficient manner with instructions to meet up at the car-park overlooking Munloch Bay where our eighth member awaited. A few **Pink-footed Geese** were feeding in a neighbouring field while a fly-past of 30+ called overhead. The ducks in the bay were predominantly Wigeon interspersed with a few **Teal** and a solitary **Goldeneye** and **Red-breasted Merganser**. Today waders here were in short supply with one or two **Bar-tailed Godwit**, **Redshank** and **Curlew**. Turning inland a **Great Spotted Woodpecker** was sighted on a fence post while a flock of **Fieldfare** flitted from tree to tree and a mixture of **Greylag** and **Pink-feet** grazed in the field opposite. En route to Avoch via the Corrachie road frequent short stops provided sightings of more feeding flocks of **Fieldfare** and **Redwing** with the odd **Mistle Thrush**, **Robin** and **Starling** on the telegraph wires. Lynda favoured parking at the farm at the top of the road for a quick scan of the nearby trees. What did she hope to surprise us with? **Waxwing!** Her excitement as the six flew into a tree scared them off temporarily but they conveniently returned to feed voraciously on the same apple tree; we were enthralled by the sheer clarity of their colouring even to the 'red wax' on their secondaries – what a picture and a most uplifting experience on a grey morning!

Trees were scanned for **Tree Sparrow** among the thrushes and eventually one was 'ticked' as we paraded the country road, and a further flock of thirteen Waxwings flew into a roadside tree as we made our way down to Avoch.

As time marched on only 'whistle-stops' were made at Avoch and Cromarty; the harbours were quite empty with only the odd **Shag** and **Red-breasted Merganser** in evidence.

Our next venue when 'scopes were used was along the bay from Cromarty. Here splendid views of the faithful **Scaup** were appreciated, many showing their distinctive white band at the base of their beaks. Udale Bay Hide was our last stop of the morning; despite a distant tide the highlight here was a group of 300+ **Golden Plover** feeding on a far-off sandbar, their golden colouring distinguishable in the improving sunlight. Small number of **Bar-tailed Godwit**, **Curlew**, **Dunlin** and **Redshank** were also picked out.

The grey morning turned out not so grey, giving us a count of 57. (Such birds as **Mallard** and **House Sparrow** were not 'ticked' until lunchtime!).

A big 'thank-you' to sharp-eyed Lynda for leading us on a varied itinerary and for providing us with our first Waxwings of the year.

Greta Fraser

SOC HIGHLAND ABROAD

A select band of SOC Highland Branch members got together at the McNee's house on Tuesday 18th November for a chin-wag and with the aim of identifying possible future foreign destinations.

A wide range of interesting possibilities was put forward by Mark Finn – amongst which were Hungary, Slovakia, the Azores, Ghana and Iran. The advantages and disadvantages of each possibility were keenly discussed, but eventually we narrowed the selection down to the following: a trip of about 14 days to Ethiopia in late March and early April 2010, plus a 4-day trip to the Camargue in February 2009 and/or January 2010.

Now, all we have to do is to see whether or not folk are interested in these choices sufficiently to make a trip or trips viable. Let us know if you are interested.

Mark has trip reports and bird lists from previous sojourns and is very willing to send paper copy or e-mail attachments of these to anyone interested, plus approximate trip costs.

For more information, have a word with Al or Mark. Alternatively, go to www.birdwatchingbreaks.com.

NEXT OUTING

Saturday, 6th December – Winter Ducks. Meet at 9.00 am at Inverness Retail Park, near Pizza Hut. Leader – John Carruthers.

NEXT MEETING

Tuesday, 13th January – “Thirty Years of Wader and Wildfowl Studies in the Moray Firth”. Speaker is Simon Foster.