

SOC - SCOTLAND'S BIRD CLUB

Highland Bird News

No 112

APRIL 2009



EDITORIAL

It's the end of the SOC season, but only the second newsletter for 2008/09. Many apologies for this, but there have been a few exceptional difficulties recently. I'll try and do more and better next season. So this issue is a bit of a catch-up, mostly of trip reports. There certainly has been a varied and successful series of these and many thanks to everyone who has taken the time to compile them and to submit supporting photographs.

Meantime, have a great late spring and summer and see you all in September.

Al McNeer

ATLASSING The BTO atlas is now in its second spring/summer period. I know that many of the club members are already heavily involved, but if you haven't got round to doing some atlas work then why not take up the challenge? Even the most casual birding can yield useful information and sightings can be recorded as "roving records". For example, returning from atlassing earlier this month, I spotted a Shelduck coming in to land near Aberchalder. Even a single record like this is very useful as it may indicate possible breeding of this species in an area where this may not normally happen. You can record roving records on-line or in paper form.

FAIR ISLE It was announced at the beginning of April that Fair Isle Bird Observatory Trust has been awarded its largest grant so far for the rebuilding of the observatory, over £2million from the Scottish Rural Development Programme. This is the last big grant that was being sought and allows the go-ahead to be given for the demolition of the old "Obs" and building of the new. You may remember that I did a sponsored birdwatch on New Year's Day? Well, I saw 60 species and had a pleasant day - male Blackcap in the garden was the best bird! - and in so doing the SOC Highland Branch members supported this vital new project for Scottish ornithology to the tune of £275. I have now collected the monies from you all and a cheque for this amount has been sent to Fair Isle. Over £100,000 still needs to be raised, but contributions, big and small, are being made from every corner of the globe. I am sure that Roy Dennis, our best-known SOC branch member and Chairman of FIBOT, will be delighted at your generosity. SOC Highland Branch, as a donor of over £250, will have its name on public display in the New Observatory.

FOREIGN TRIP With regards to the mooted branch trip to Ethiopia at the end of March 2010, this trip will now not be going ahead. An alternative to this trip - either a visit to Poland for Owl and Woodpecker species or a visit to Syria - is a possibility as both are being planned for the same time of year by Birdwatching Breaks, Mark Finn's firm with whom we were planning to go to Ethiopia. SOC Highland Branch members have an opportunity to have exclusive priority booking and rates for these trips. If you would like any details on this, please get in touch with me as soon as possible. A minimum number of 6 participants will be required for any trip to go ahead.

GAIRLOCH PELAGIC - 13 SEPTEMBER 2008

Leaving the house a little bleary-eyed at 0615am, I awoke with a start as I opened the field gate to the strath road - flying low over the field not 40 yards away was a **Barn Owl**. Would this a good omen for the day?

The drive to Gairloch was not productive for sightings - no Red Kites were evident as we crossed the Black Isle, but **Jackdaws** and **Rooks** foraged in the fields while gulls flew overhead. Further on, a **Pheasant** or two were seen stalking around the grass verges and a **Buzzard** stared intently at us from a tree as we passed by while a **Hoodie** or two flapped over. A pair of **Mute Swans** ignored us and there was no Golden Eagle to be seen soaring over Beinn Eighe.

A party of ten gathered on the Gairloch harbour wall, dressed warmly and well prepared for rain as clouds were lowering and a sea mist loomed over the horizon. While waiting for the chum to be brought aboard, several **Grey Herons** were sighted in the shallows and **Greater Black-backed Gulls** floated by on the tide. A lone **Common Seal** kept a close eye on us as we cast off from the dockside.



We

headed west out onto Gairloch and watched several **Shags** fishing. A **Whimbrel** was perched on the rocks. Small rafts of **Guillemots** floated past and some **Gannets** flew overhead. A lone **Bonxie** was spotted a distance away and a couple of **Harbour Porpoises** were seen swimming in the opposite direction. As the land receded in the mist and we headed out over the swell and through the murk, a few **Razorbills** were spotted and some **Storm Petrels** occasionally flew past while a group of **Manx Shearwaters** provided a close escort. An **Arctic Skua** shot past and almost simultaneously a fin broke the surface which grabbed everyone's attention - a **Minke Whale** was surfacing four or five times before sounding. Floating by lazily on or near the surface were scores of varying sized **Lion's Mane Jellyfish** and a solitary **Great Northern Diver**. Many adult and juvenile **Kittiwakes** kept pace with our boat and settled on the water by us as we slowed, stopped and dropped anchor.



Just discernable through the mists was The Old Man of Storr on the north-east coast of Skye. The skipper spooned out the chum over the sea and we sat with the boat gently rising and falling on the swell as we waited for the birds to appear through the gloom.

We could hear the Guillemots calling and several largish rafts of them were seen but at a distance. Storm Petrels passed by and a few Bonxies joined the Kittiwakes but there was no chum-induced feeding frenzy. Clearly the mist and calm meant that the chum could be neither seen nor smelt from any distance. Our skipper attempted to entice the birds closer by catching Mackerel, slicing them and casting the fresh pieces overboard, whereupon the Bonxies fought amongst themselves for the bigger bits while the Kittiwake, Manx Shearwaters and a Razorbill or two hoovered up the detritus.



Eventually our patience was rewarded with a small flight of **Dunlin** passing by but nothing else turned up. As our skipper had heard on the radio that a number of fishing vessels were near he offered to find them to see if anything interesting was following in their wake. We weighed anchor as several **Fulmars** flew around us. When we found the first trawler, we saw only a solitary **Little Gull** flying with other gulls so we chugged on to the next when suddenly, through the gloom, a young three-metre **Basking Shark** was gliding towards us and as it silently slid by with barely a ripple - the white gape of its open mouth was clearly visible beneath the calm surface.



Patches of disturbance on the calm and smooth sea surface betrayed occasional shoals of fish - Mackerel? - that were prey for the four or five **Risso's Dolphins** that were spotted a cable or two's distance from us.

We steamed back towards Gairloch and saw a few **Black Guillemots** but very much closer inshore, **Red-throated** and **Black-throated Divers** dabbled about while sitting on a rock a **Cormorant** dried its feathers. A small group of Eiders called quietly and several **Oystercatchers** were studiously and voraciously feeding in the seaweed.



Returning to dockside we were met by the friendly seal hoping for their easy meal - to be thrown any mackerel, whole or pieces - bait that had not been used for the birds.

This had been a great day afloat - even if the Barn Owl had failed to be a prescient omen for plenty of sighting successes. Thanks are due, as usual, to Al for organising the event and to our skipper for doing his cheerful best for us.

Carol James

Photos: Gannet, Minke Whale and Basking Shark, Carol James; Manx Shearwater and Rossi's Dolphin, Al McNee

LOCAL BIRDING - 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 Godwits**, **Redshank** and **Curlew**. Turning inland, a **Great Spotted Woodpecker** was sighted on a fence post while a flock of **Fieldfares** flitted from tree to tree and a mixture of **Greylags** 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 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

Not the Findhorn Valley - 7 February 2009

The original venue (Findhorn Valley) had failed a pitch inspection on the previous afternoon. The amount of snow on the road necessitated the assistance of a local farmer with a tow rope very early in the inspection, therefore it was decided to stick to passable roads near the coast! Nevertheless, 6 members turned out to benefit from greatly improved weather conditions. It was often quite sunny, especially in the morning, and the light quality was excellent. The first stop was the Alturlie road, very productive because a **Sparrowhawk** kindly disturbed a large flock of mixed finches, mainly **Chaffinch** but also **Linnet**, **Goldfinch** and **Lesser Redpoll**. Three of the latter obligingly perched on a nearby fence. There were also a sizeable group of **Fieldfare** (but no Redwing) and a couple of **Red Kites** took a passing interest from on high. Large flocks of **Scaup** and **Wigeon** were in the water, along with three **Brent Geese**. Moving along the A96 to Loch Flemington, two or three fields were full of **Greylag** and **Pink-feet**. In the field beside the loch, a group of six **Grey Partridge** were immediately spotted, and in the loch there were **Whooper** and **Mute Swans**, along with the expected **Coot**, **Moorhen** and **Tufted Duck**.

A brief visit to Milton of Culloden added few new species, so we proceeded over the Black Isle, with one or two roadside stops to pick up **Yellowhammer**, **Reed Bunting** and **Tree Sparrow**, to Udale Bay. As this was not a planned visit, the tide, of course, was in the wrong position, but lunch was had in the cold confines of the hide. The best bird, however, was a smoker's **Peregrine**, only seen by the member who left the hide for some sustenance other than food or drink. At Cromarty harbour, **Eider**, **Shag** and **Guillemot** were added, along with **Fulmar** scanned on the opposite shore cliffs. Snow flurries were more frequent now as the route was retraced back to Dingwall pier, where at last some redwing and [lots of] **Lapwing** were discerned. Redcastle and the inner firth received a cursory glance on the homeward drive, made with increased urgency to pre-empt the final whistle at Caley Park. A total of 68 species seen, plus a **Wren** heard but not seen, was more than anticipated by those who had looked out the window at heavy, falling snow when they got up in the morning.

Alex Joss

SCONE – 10th MARCH

A bright, dry and mild morning greeted the small band of eight on Tuesday, 10th March - a welcome 'tonic' following the adverse weather conditions of the weekend. The main objective of the day was Scone Palace grounds which necessitated an 8am start. A diversion off the A9 was made at Dalwhinnie for a speculative search for an elusive **Great Grey Shrike** which apparently had been reported several days ago. To our utter amazement – there it was – sitting on a bush-top! While we 'oohed and aahed' from inside the cars, it conveniently flew down to perch on a nearby post which provided an even better sighting. Well done, Mark! Our appetite now whetted, the next stop was Ballinluig – for 'bacon butties'.

En route to Scone, displaying **Lapwing**, a field of **Curlew** and **Oystercatcher** with the ubiquitous **Woodpigeon**, gull and corvid were seen and heard. On arrival at the little car park at the entrance to Scone Palace our group was enhanced by two members from the local club who were familiar with the venue. Before we were let loose in the grounds, Lynda, our leader for the day, invited us to listen to the Hawfinch call on a CD player. Despite the bright sunny morning it took some wandering before Ann spotted our first **Hawfinch** of the day. Thereafter several flitted above the tree canopy culminating in a pair perching high on a bare deciduous tree and providing us with excellent views. As this opportunity was a 'first' for one or two members some time was engaged in commenting on their varying features, ie white-barred wings and differently shaded beaks. The exploratory two-hour ramble in this location also gave us several **Treecreepers** as well as a fund of our regulars, eg **Siskin**, **Goldfinch**, **Long-tailed Tit** to name but a few.

Onward to Loch of Lowes where the bird of this visit was the **Great Crested Grebe** whose early summer plumage was enriched by the good sunlight. **Teal**, **Goldeneye**, **Tufted Duck** and **Coot** were also added. Our final scheduled stop was Dunkeld where our leader lured us from the car park with the possibility of a Nuthatch. Even her technical prowess (with the CD player) failed to entice this rarity but the group is now very familiar with its varied calls! This delightful short circuit walk, while lacking in birds today was greatly appreciated.

Thanks to Lynda for providing such a good programme and to Ann and Gibb, our drivers. It was undoubtedly a 'quality day' and ended with a total of 46 species.

Greta Fraser

Trip to Islay - 18-22 March 2009

Twenty-two of us were driven from Inverness by Sinclair and Kathy Dunnett and we picked up two more in Fort Augustus. Then it was on to Appin and a lunch break overlooking the spectacular Castle Stalker. Between Kilninver and Kilmelford Janet Crummy spotted a **White-tailed Sea Eagle** sitting in a roadside tree, but it's a twisty road so no one else could verify it. Another stop was taken at Kilmartin and those who wished took a short walk. The path led past the Chambered Cairns one of which had been restored so that entry was possible. A **Great Spotted Woodpecker** was heard and then seen flying off. Two **Grey Wagtails** and a **Pied Wagtail** were bobbing around and some of us saw a **Dipper** in the burn. **Ravens, Lapwings, Curlews** and **Pheasants** were also seen.

Wigeon, Redshank, Turnstone and **Great Black-backed Gull** were all observed as we drove down Loch Fyne before reaching Tarbert where the buses re-fuelled. It was a beautiful evening and the boats in the harbour looked stunning. On then to Kennacraig and, whilst awaiting the ferry, some excitement was generated with regard to inhabitants of the rocks making up the pier. The general consensus was definitely **Mink** and possibly **Otter** too. A solitary **Mute Swan** and car occupants in the ferry queue were astonished at our antics! However just before boarding ourselves three divers (**Red-throated, Black-throated** and **Great Northern**) were viewed from the pier and, once on board, we had an even better view of a solitary Great Northern.

The crossing was uneventful and although some enthusiasts remained on deck there was a cold wind and dusk was upon us so the majority duly partook of the traditional MacBrayne's meal of fish and chips. It was completely dark on our arrival at the Machrie Hotel but we could hear the geese even if we had to wait until morning to see them.

Ironically, first to be seen were **Greylags** but followed immediately by the **Barnacles**. What a We were to see them throughout the trip, on fields, on mudflats, sand dunes and in the sky. From time to a few **White-fronted Geese** would be amongst them even rarer was a sighting of a **Pink-foot**. **Shelduck** their distance, as did the gulls, but they alerted us to fact that a predator was around when they all took off in a hurry. A **Peregrine Falcon** was the culprit. We



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for the Loch Gruinart Reserve and it was out with the telescopes for a good look down on the water. This part of the island is very low lying and considerable care and attention has been given to making sure the sea does not split the island in half. **House Sparrows, Blackbirds** and **Coal Tits** flitted around along with **Rooks, Jackdaws** and **Wood Pigeons**.

It was decided to postpone a visit to the hide until after our picnic at Ardnave, so we went up there full of anticipation re **Choughs**. We were well rewarded with several and a **Wheatear** which we were sure would be the first to be recorded on Islay this year. However, we were wrong as they had been seen earlier in the week. **Mallard, Tufted Duck** and **Whooper Swans** entertained us on the little loch with the Whoopers being far from white in the peaty water.



Skylarks were singing their hearts out and parachuting spectacularly. No shortage of them on Islay!

Then to the hide which was soon filled to capacity and barely room for telescopes but everyone had their chance and were well pleased with all they found. Outstanding were the **Pintails** and the **Shovelers** as the sunlight was catching them and they looked fabulous. **Moorhen, Greenshank, Teal** and one pair of **Gadwall** were seen. **Snipe** were around and one landed very close to the hide giving photographic opportunities. Geese were not so plentiful here so we had time to catch up on some of the smaller birds such as a **Chiffchaff, Linnet, Wren, Robin, Goldcrest, Siskin, Reed Bunting, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Stonechat** and **Song Thrush**. **Redwings** and **Mistle Thrushes** were around too and just as we left, two **Collared Doves** flew out of a tree in the car-park.

Another was seen on Bruichladdich a pair of **Red-whoose** highlighted by very close to then flew off the end of the of Great throated **Cormorants Common** took us on a down to the



goose, **Brent** this time, Loch Indaal and at we had a superb view of **breasted Mergansers** plumage was the sun. They were the shore initially but so we walked down to pier to get better sights Northern and Red-Divers, several and a couple of **Scoters**. Sinclair then tour of The Rhinn southern end at Port

Wemys where we had excellent views of very large seals. It was still sunny and dry but hazy so we couldn't see Ireland in spite of the mobile phone network assuring us we were already there! **Buzzards** proliferated on the tops of fence posts, telephone post and electricity pylons. We stopped off near Bridgend on the way home to witness the dramatic evening flight home of the Barnacles. They came over in waves and we could track them easily with the naked eye. We had had to time this carefully so it was now getting dark for our return to the hotel but we took the single track road which by-passes Bowmore and not far from the airport had our one and only sighting of a **Short-eared Owl**.

Friday saw one party leave with Sinclair for the early ferry to Jura and the larger bus left with Kathy a little later. **Gannets** and **Guillemots** were spotted on the short crossing but Buzzards were the dominant bird and it wasn't long until the bus didn't stop when one was sighted! However our treat was two **Kestrels** and several **Hen Harriers** and one male bird gave us a really good display. At Craighouse, by the hotel, most of us saw **Long-tailed Tits, Dunnock, Yellowhammer** and **Goldfinch** nearby and down on the water were **Eider, Shag** and **Cormorant**. Sinclair was lucky (or clever?) enough to see a **Water Rail** and a small group who went up to the very end of road past Ardlussa had a magnificent view of 31 Whooper Swans which initially appeared as a white mass on the water and then they separated and eventually took off. Plenty **Red Deer** were seen and photographed, 23 very entertaining pigs and we tried in vain to find otters on our way back to the ferry. Once on Islay again and on our way back from Ballygrant we realised what we were looking at was not yet another Buzzard but a **Golden Eagle**! We stopped beside buildings to have a really good look and then saw the signs indicating it was a centre for model aeroplanes. Our eagle definitely had no string attached nor was it radio controlled!

Our final day came upon us very quickly and it was hard to decide where best to go. Alex had done an early morning recce and spotted a single **Snow Bunting**. We re-visited the Nature Reserve (but not the hide) and then went to search for waders at the other side of Loch Gruinart. Although the tide was coming in the birds were a long way out and quite tricky to pick out. **Bar-tailed Godwit**, **Knot**, Redshank, Curlew, Peewit, **Oystercatcher**, **Ringed Plover** and a couple of **Sanderling** were positively identified. It was still dry and sunny but the wind was chilly so lunch was taken at the Old Tweed Mill on the River Sorn, not far from Bridgend, and in the shelter there it was lovely. Grey Wagtails were spotted and afterwards we went up to Ballygrant in search of Sand Martins which we did not find but there were Tufted Ducks and 2 **Little Grebes**. Then Sinclair took us to a hitherto unexplored part of the island Claggain Bay which marked the end of the road north from Port Ellen. **Fallow Deer** were seen and a mass of **Fieldfares** and Redwings in trees near Kildalton. A **White Wagtail** was identified by Ann and Lynda flying around over the shingle but there were Pied Wagtails too, just to confuse!



A splinter group led by Janet Crummy set off early on our departure day to try to find the Gyr Falcon which had been recorded and photographed the previous day. Sadly no sign of it and they just had to be content with seeing lots of **Red-legged Partridge**, more Whoopers and plenty **Hares**. Many Gannets and **Kittiwakes** were seen from the ferry on our return to the mainland and we also added **Razorbills** and **Fulmar** to the now very extensive list of well over 100 birds.

Four dry days on Islay was almost a record in itself never mind the birds! The smooth running of this trip, which was enjoyed by all, is not achieved without a great deal of planning and organisation, so a big thank you to Ann Sime for all her hard work and to our drivers Sinclair and Kathy. It was a memorable trip.



All photos by Janet Macpherson

*Janet
Macpherson*