

SOC - SCOTLAND'S BIRD CLUB

Highland Bird News

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EDITORIAL

The onset of autumn is always the time for an opportunity for some good bird to turn up in any part of Highland. Already one has been seen, but you had to be very lucky to get on it. It was a **Sandhill Crane**, a first for Highland and only the fourth-ever in the UK. This bird had caused hundreds of twitchers to head for South Ronaldsay a week before, but on Tuesday, 29th September it took off from Orkney and was traced over the Pentland Firth, over Wick, Helmsdale, Brora and then seen over Kildary, before flying inland and disappearing!

It could be anywhere now, but what chance the stubble fields of the Black Isle? Cranes were becoming a theme, this time 3 **Common Cranes**, which were seen for 4 days, but not reported until they had gone from their favoured location, Hilton of Cadboll.

So a good start to autumn migration in Highland, but the autumn has hardly begun, so why not get out there and find some good birds of your own?

I'd like to thank the person who, some time ago, gave me the photo cutting of a branch meeting at the now-defunct Loch Ness House Hotel. I have, however, forgotten who gave it to me and when they said the meeting took place! Any ideas?

ATLASSING The BTO atlas surveying will restart for its third winter period on 1 November, so be sure to get that notebook out and record what you see and where, as all roving records can add important information to our knowledge of Highland birds. Better still, sign up for a TTV [timed tetrad visit]. There are still lots of places that need to be atlassed. Contact Bob Swann or Hugh Insley to get "signed up".

FAIR ISLE Your contributions from sponsoring my New Year birdwatch are being put to good use as a visit to the Fair Isle Bird Observatory website will confirm. The shell of the new building is in place and work is proceeding apace on the interior to turn it into a phenomenal place to stay and find the rarest birds in Britain and also to monitor some of the most important seabird populations in Europe. Log on to www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk.

Thanks to all our contributors this month, notably Dave, Jenny and Keith.

Al McNee

SOC Highland Weekend at Rubha Reidh, 24-26 April 2009

Overview

The long weekend was a great success, blessed by an abundance of birds, unexpectedly good weather and comfortable accommodation in a great location. We all benefited greatly from the leadership and organisation of Anne Sime and Al McNee during the different stages of the trip.

The party, by necessity, was distributed over a number of vehicles, with different start times on Friday, so this report is a personal view, hopefully pulling in much of the rest of the group's experiences. With a lot of my attention on driving and photography I have leaned heavily on Kathy's and Carol's lists of birds. Needless to say any omissions are my fault entirely!

Friday 24th April.

The route from Inverness took us past the **Ospreys** on the pylons near Torrigorrie. What price health and safety ringing those birds! Both adult Ospreys were seen, (a diversion on Sunday afternoon allowed others to share the sight). A brief stop by Loch Luichart gave us **Black-throated Divers, Mute Swan, Teal, Greenshank, Tufted Duck, Wigeon** and **Mallards** together with **Raven** and **Meadow Pipits**.

At Achnasheen, Sinclair's party joined the majority of the early starters and we enjoyed the resident **Redwings**, together with **Collared Dove, Great Tit, Chaffinch, Willow Warbler, Starling, House Sparrow, Blackbird, Siskin, Swallows, Coal Tit, Skylark, Snipe** and **Buzzard**.

A diversion to Loch Clare gave **Common Sandpiper, Tufted Duck** and **Red-throated Diver**. A lunch stop at the Ben Eighe Visitor Centre (**Robin, Blue Tit**) was followed by a visit to the hide at the Loch Maree Hotel and Slattadale where there we saw **4 Red-breasted Mergansers, Swallows, Sand Martin** and **Grey Wagtail**.

The journey continued through Gairloch (a skein of **Pink-footed Geese, Herring Gull, Black Guillemot, Guillemot, Cormorant, Great Black-backed Gull, Razorbill, Shag, Oystercatcher, Eider, Greylag Geese, Gannet, Great Northern Diver**) to the lighthouse at Rubha Reidh (**Rock Pipit, Cormorant, Oystercatchers, Red-throated Diver**), and a first encounter with Edward, the lone male **Wheatear**.

Saturday 25th April

From the vicinity of the Lighthouse we saw Wheatear, Meadow Pipits, **Hooded Crows Chaffinch, Common Gull, Buzzard, Great Skua, Gannet, Fulmar, Black Guillemot, Kittiwake, Arctic Skua, Stonechat, Shag** and **Puffin**.

Motoring down towards Gairloch, passing by Big Sand, there were Greylag Geese, **Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Cormorant, Shag, Tystie, Oystercatcher, Great Northern and Black-Throated Divers, Red-breasted Merganser** and **Sand Martin**. **Goldfinches** were seen at Gairloch. Driving towards Red Point through Badachro gave **Grey Heron, Tufted Ducks, Curlew, Stonechat** and more Meadow Pipits.



No sooner were we parked at Red Point than a **Merlin** was spotted, which later gave us a close up demonstration of its agility – memorable. Overhead a flock of **Golden Plover** put on a great display of formation flying, as if not to be out shone by the Merlin. Grey Wagtails, Skylarks, Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Greenshank, **Lesser Black-backed Gull**, Mergansers, **Dunnock** and on the way back **Collared Dove**, Blue Tit, Greenshank, Common Sandpiper, Willow Warbler and the song of a **Tree Pipit** all added to a first rate excursion.

Sunday 26th April

Before leaving the lighthouse, some fortunates saw **Minke Whale** and **Dolphin**. The rest of us were delighted with the Cormorants, Shags, Gannet and the antics of a bold Meadow Pipit and a **Snow Bunting** determined to distract attention from the group photograph.

A search of Melvaig failed to reveal the rumoured Long-eared Owl, but nearby we had Greenfinch, Meadow Pipit, Hooded Crow and (seen and heard) **Grasshopper Warbler**. The drive through Gairloch gave a large flock of Golden Plover in a field and also **Linnets**.



The riverside at Poolewe gave us Swallows, **Song Thrush**, Herring Gulls, Dipper, **Siskin**, Common Sandpiper, **Pied Wagtail**, Greenfinch and Black-headed Gull. Coffee at Inverewe gave an opportunity to see Greenshank, Curlew and a Great Northern Diver making a meal of a fish.

We then set out for lunch at the very poignant memorial at Rubha nan Sasan by way of Mid Town and the beach at Firemore. This was enlivened by a close encounter with a motorised red-faced *Homo sapiens*, enraged by the sight of telescopes blocking access to his roost in

the car park. More enjoyable were the Eiders, Mergansers and many Great Northern Divers near Mid Town and the **Whimbrel**, **Shelduck** and Lesser Black-backed Gulls at Firemore.

The drive onward to Gruinard Bay took us past the Isle of Ewe where we saw Buzzard but no White-tailed Sea Eagles. Stopping above Gruinard Bay we heard what was for most of us the first **Cuckoo** of the year, but despite its proximity it remained unseen. Once again Sea Eagle was elusive (overheard “seen half hour earlier” – typical!) but Black Throated Divers were seen in flight, Great Northern Divers at sea and a **Peregrine** flew past.

The final stop was near Dundonnell with both Red-throated and Great Northern Divers, with the weekend rounded off in fine fashion by a flight of c60 Pink-footed Geese and a magnificent **Golden Eagle** circling overhead.

Many thanks for a memorable trip, brilliantly organised and led.

Dave Bonniiface



The Way We Were!

[circa 1987???)



Wild birds was the subject on the minds of members of the Highland branch of the Scottish Ornithologists Club when they held their first meeting of the season at the Loch Ness House Hotel, Inverness, at the weekend

DAWN CHORUS – BRAHAN ESTATE, SUNDAY 10TH MAY 2007

I hadn't willingly made an attempt to get up at 3.30am in a very long time – like quite a few others, I'd guess – but this was the dawn chorus outing, so needs must.

Just before 4.30pm at the car park on Brahan Estate, we assembled, a first 15, as it were. Our leader and recently ex-Chairman, Simon, was all ears for the early birds and as he had predicted, the first sounds were from a boisterous and musical **Song Thrush**. **Robins** then joined in, **Woodpigeon** cooed to make it a threesome and then a very shrill and demanding **Pheasant** made it four. As we set off, **Goldcrests** confirmed their presence in a much more restrained way. It was getting properly light, but the sun was not yet up and, as we made our way through the policies, it was clear that **Chaffinches** were going to figure prominently and often. The pace was gentle as we made our way down the avenue of trees, with a first **Blackcap** bringing further musical tones to the proceedings, but he was not easy to see. **Willow Warblers** were very scarce and it took some time to register them and before we did get that long, sweet descending song, we had arrived at the trout pond/loch. The pair of **Mute Swans** was as vocally entertaining as their name suggests, but the cob was not happy with our presence and followed us warily round the loch, at one point flying rather than swimming and crashing noisily as if in warning of dire consequences if we didn't hop it. As we left the swans in peace, **Lesser Redpolls** called in flight, but were not easily seen.



It was a cool morning with a little light rain and this combination may have kept the birdsong down to a lower level than normal, but there were still species to be added including **Mallard**,

Cormorant, Siskin and Goldfinch. We made our way down to the river Conon, the sun now out and the atmosphere was now much more like a normal May morning, with a hint of warmth. At the river bank we had more Blackcaps, a pair of **Common Sandpipers** piped away, **Sand Martins** and **Swallows** hunted low over the water and a **Red-breasted Merganser** flew silently by. It was a beautiful spot, made also interesting by crossing a very rickety, swaying bridge. Everyone had excellent views of a pair of **Treecreepers**, apparently visiting their nest site which lay concealed behind the peeling bark of a big oak. By now we were getting our ears adjusted to the tits, **Coal, Blue and Great.** After examining a mink trap, we headed back to our cars for a spot of refreshment, before heading slightly further west to Easter Moy.

At our new location, a sensibly-sized car park allowed all eight vehicles to be parked. We were again right beside the river Conon and at another rickety bridge which we crossed just as carefully as the first. Unfortunately, there was a minor flood on the other side of the bridge – on



what was Moy island – and this prevented us from going any further and exploring what looked to be a fascinating area, but not before we had heard and seen briefly a **Sedge Warbler.** We now showed care with bridge-crossing for a fourth and last time. The sun was well and truly out and it was really quite warm. Although we strolled along one side of the Conon, it was really the other side that held the interest

and we had a superb hour-plus of Spring birding as we gazed across the clean water of the Conon and scrutinised the scrubby, gorse-filled other side. Almost immediately, Lynda said, “Anyone want to see a male **Whinchat?**”. Sure enough, there was one of the best behaved summer migrants possible, sitting on the first of several bushes and singing almost constantly. It was joined by another, more distant bird. Two Whinchats in one small area is a novelty these days. Very quickly, we had another set of new birds. **Grasshopper Warbler** was heard a lot, but typically unseen. Thankfully, the same did not have to be said for the **Yellowhammers** and **Reed Buntings** which showed well. A sudden appearance of a **Swift**, virtually at water level, was very unexpected. A final flurry of birds included calling **Ravens** which were located at a nest on the cliff by the main road to Garve, then **Tree Pipit** was located singing from the top of a distant tree. At this time, Simon had to leave us, with domestic duties beckoning. It had been an excellent morning’s birding, with a fine range of summer migrants and other songsters, in an excellent area and in good weather. We had also learned a lot about the Brahan Estate, the Mackenzie clan, tree carvings and trout fishing, loch and river. Many thanks, Simon, for a first-rate outing, for the many tips on bird calls and for arranging such good weather.

Al McNee

Outing to Tarbat Ness – Sunday 13th September 2009

A fine, settled autumn morning saw eight keen birders leave Inverness for Tarbat Ness. The bird list grew quickly with all the usual suspects! **Swallow, Jackdaw, Grey Heron, Lapwing, Carrion Crow and Rook**. We soon added **Common, Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls** and our first big flock of the day was 209 **Pink-footed Geese** flying close by the roadside.

Our journey continued alongside fields filled with bales of golden harvest. A fine sight! We were soon adding **Wood Pigeon, House Sparrow, Meadow Pipit, Hooded Crow** and obliging **Yellowhammers** sitting on telephone wires. Close views of a flock of **Goldfinches** was a colourful treat.

On we travelled towards the coast, weather ahead looking misty. Hundreds of **Linnets** were flocking on wires high above fields. The odd **Pheasant** lurked here and there. At Bindal farm a mixed flock of at least 209 Linnets and **Greenfinches, Starlings** were now on the list! Lots and lots of them on the wires, too. (They must be mega birds somewhere in the world surely!). A **Collared Dove** was followed by lots of **Pied Wagtails** (more Starlings) and a **Black-headed Gull** to add to the gull list! A Feral Pigeon was spotted, but I'm not allowed to add it to the list.

Thankfully, the mist cleared as we arrived at Tarbat Ness lighthouse. An expected **Wheatear** welcomed us from the fence. A **Robin** and **Chaffinch** were also spotted and three smart Yellowhammers sat on the telephone wires.

At the point, the day was clear and not cold! We met up with five more birders – one, a certain Bob Swann - and two happy, friendly dogs. The birds obliged. **Bonxies, Fulmar, Kittiwake, Guillemot, Oystercatcher, Razorbill, Arctic Skua**, dramatic **Gannets** and **Shags**. A **Purple Sandpiper** flew discreetly to the rocks just ahead on the shoreline, then another, then they were joined by a **Little Stint** and we were treated to a rather spectacular aerial display.

We tracked two very distant **Pomarine Skuas** passing beneath the impressive Dunrobin Castle. The list continued. A **Curlew**, a **Sandwich Tern**, two **Rock Pipits** and another closer Sandwich Tern, a **Redshank**, a couple of **Turnstone** and our first **Blackbird** completed our birds by the lighthouse.

Off we headed to the “plantation”. Not much there. (*Thinking about lunch*). Down to the shore. More Grey Herons and Redshank. Two **Snipe** lifted at the hidden “little pool”. Looking out to sea we had more Redshank, a juvenile **Cormorant**, a Wheatear and hundreds and hundreds of birds moving in the far, far distance. Mmm! Now we were heading back to the cars, (*thinking more about lunch!*) the air still and warm now, we heard/saw our familiar **Skylark** and between 27 and 28 Goldfinches. A **Dunnock** greeted us back in the car park. Finally, we had a most pleasant lunchtime sea watching from the cliff top beside the car park, but no new birds for the day.

Next stop was Portmahomack harbour where we counted 15 or 20 **Common Scoters**. Onwards, nearing Inver, we saw a large mixed flock containing 209 Linnets, Goldfinches and Yellowhammers. At “the car park”, (apart from 11 beached boats) we had a **Bar-tailed Godwit**, more Redshank and Oystercatchers, 2 **Wigeon** and 2 **Greenshanks**.

Our final stop was at Nigg Bay. The tide was very low but nevertheless the list continued. **Red-breasted Mergansers, Knots, Goosanders, Lapwing** and 5 **Mute Swans** could be seen as well as larger groups of **Dunlin** which were flying in the distance. Lots of **Golden Plover** too with

the odd black belly showing summer plumage still! **Shelduck** made an appearance and a flock of between 40 and 72 Wigeon. Exactly 32 **Greylag Geese** were spotted between two platforms far, far away. And even further far, far away was a single **Osprey**! Then another, then another! Ring numbers were a wee bit blurry!

Thus, at 4.56pm, we concluded a fine day's birding. Good birds. Good company. Good weather. (**Lunch could have been earlier!**) Bird of the day for us? The Little Stint. Altogether, at least 61 bird species. (*Also - 3 combines and 17 tractors.*)

Jenny McNeer

A HIGHLAND FIRST!

Hundreds of twitchers descended on Applecross in July when this River Warbler was discovered. It stayed for over 2 weeks and showed incredibly well, usually in the open in the middle of a Sycamore tree, quite untypical of a species that is usually heard but not seen well on its rare appearances in the UK. A tremendous find by Roger Maskew of Worcestershire, an annual visitor to Applecross and a regular contributor to the Highland Bird Report.



A[nother] HIGHLAND FIRST!

This time only seen by one or two lucky souls who followed this Sandhill Crane down from Orkney on Tuesday, 29th September over Kildary.

[I know – it's a shocking picture!]



Local birding – The Black Isle. Thursday 17th September

Five keen birders left Inverness Retail Park on a chilly morning for a tour of The Black Isle. First stop was Avoch Bay to check out reported Brent Geese, but without success. The few birds present included a small flock of **Wigeon**. As it was nearing high tide, we quickly moved on to Udale Bay. Linda immediately found two female **Pintails** before we started to look through the large flocks of waders and waterfowl. Many **Oystercatchers**, **Curlews**, **Bar-tailed Godwits**, **Redshanks** and **Knots** were settling at their high tide roost, along with a few **Dunlin**. Waterfowl included **Shelduck**, Wigeon, **Teal**, **Mallard** and a small flock of **Canada Geese**. Standing on the shore were at least fifteen **Grey Herons**.

The day was becoming warmer as we drove round to Newhall Point. Along the lane there was a large flock of passerines with many **Linnets** and **Goldfinches** as well as smaller numbers of **Chaffinches**, **Greenfinches** and **Yellowhammers**. There was very little on the sea at Newhall so we moved on towards Cromarty, stopping just after Jemimaville to look for sea-ducks. Scattered amongst more than 100 **Scaup** were several **Eiders**, **Red-breasted Mergansers** and fifteen **Slavonian Grebes**. Looking across to North Sutor from Cromarty produced only a few gulls, **Cormorants** and distant **Shags**.

We decided to move on to Chanonry Point. A brief stop above Rosemarkie gave us 2 **Buzzards**, 2 **Red Kites** and a very brief **Peregrine**. There was one **Wheatear** on the golf course approaching Chanonry and the morning finished with eight **Turnstones** on the shingle at the Point. A total of 50 species were seen.

Keith Barnes



Ragged Robin on Muck – did anyone do a trip report?