

SOC - SCOTLAND'S BIRD CLUB

Highland Bird News

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## EDITORIAL

As I write this, the first flickers of snow have reached downtown Inverness. Not before time, says a certain ski-loving companion. Two premature birding "Christmas" presents recently arrived on the Black Isle in the forms of a Red-rumped Swallow at Udale Bay and a Grey Phalarope at Chanonry Point. These birds apparently constitute firsts, respectively, for the whole Highland recording area and for Easter Ross. You had to be quick off the mark to see them and some of us were not!

Thanks to everyone who has supported this newsletter in 2009 with articles and pictures. I look forward to receiving more contributions next year.

However you celebrate the upcoming festive season, may it be an enjoyable time for all SOC Highland members and friends and may your birdwatching in 2010 be rich in all manner of sights and sounds.

*Al McNee*

## Island of Muck Trip - Sunday, 21<sup>st</sup> June, 2009

Twelve members left Inverness Retail Park on this beautiful Midsummer's Day morning to travel to Arisaig where another six joined the group. Our boat, MV Shearwater, departed for Eigg at 11.00 a.m. En-route the following birds were spotted:-

**Mallard, Grey Heron, 2 Greylag Geese with 3 goslings, Oystercatcher, Great Black-Backed Gull, Hooded Crow, Shag, Eider, Guillemot, Gannets, Cormorant, Artic Tern, Manx Shearwater, Razorbill, Storm Petrel, Kittiwake, Lesser Black-Backed Gull, and Herring Gull.**

Arriving on Eigg at approximately 12 noon, we had 30 minutes to do as we wished. Some of us spent the time having a look in the local craft shop, reading various notices about the island's history whilst others went for a short walk. During this time, the following species were added to our list:-

**Curlew, Starling, Willow Warbler, Swallow, Black Guillemot, Twite, Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Coal Tit, Great Tit and Puffin.**

Boarding the vessel again, bound for the island of Muck, there was great excitement. Several children from Eigg, together with their parents joined us for the journey. They were going to Port Mor for the film premier



**Common Seals** with pups were seen, the pups were especially appealing. Our skipper, Ronnie Dyer who has nearly 30 years experience in these waters and a well-deserved reputation for finding whales, did not let us down today. Four **Minke Whales** were observed, two coming very close to the vessel. What a thrill these sightings gave everyone on board, cameras were

of Aqua Bubble, an eco film which had been produced by the children of Muck. As, with our journey to Eigg, the sea was calm which helped in our search for dolphins and whales. Several



clicking away. Due to the time spent circling the Minke Whales, our time on Muck was slightly curtailed. However, nobody was complaining and we had long enough to enjoy our lunch whilst continuing with our birdwatching. Some people visited the local tearoom whilst others walked to the beautiful beach area of Gallanach. Whilst on Muck, these birds were added to our day's list:-

**Skylark, Lapwing, Pheasant, Chaffinch, Song Thrush, Snipe, Wren, Meadow Pipit, Rock Doves, Pied Wagtail, Great Skua, Shelduck with 5 ducklings, Robin, Buzzard, House Sparrow, Blackbird, Ringed Plover, Common Sandpiper, Fulmar and Collared Dove.**



Before we knew it, it was time to make our way back to MV Shearwater for the return journey to Arisaig then Inverness. It was unanimously agreed that we had all enjoyed a marvellous day and our grateful thanks was relayed to Ann for her organisation. One question was asked, where are we going next year? Several reservations have already been booked even although the destination is not known! A very sincere thank you must also go to those who provided the transport and undertook the driving.

*Maureen MacDonal*

**[Apologies for the late appearance of this  
report - my fault! - Ed]**

**LOCH OF STRATHBEG and**  
**MONTROSE BASIN**

**3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> OCTOBER 2009**

The three cars carrying nine SOC members first met at Cullen sea front. Telescopes were soon set up and the bay was scanned. Numerous **Gannets** were diving into the sea, the adults out at sea and this year's young near the shore. Holding tight onto the telescopes in the blustery west wind a few **Redshanks, Turnstones, Eiders**, several species of **Gulls, Cormorants** and **Shags** were seen. Also two **Rock Pipits** were pottering around on the shore. Several more species were added on the journey to Strathbeg including **Magpies**, a rarity in the Inverness area.

Strathbeg, our next port of call, was excellent, despite the winds, now gale force. As we approached the reserve there were several **Swallows** flying about and large numbers of geese in the fields, mainly **Pink-footed**, but several **Barnacles** were spotted among them. In the reception centre we had no problems with the wind so lunch was started. This was disturbed by superb views of Ralph, a young **Sea Eagle**. Food forgotten we watched him in flight, then perched on a gatepost before retreating to the grass behind the gate giving us tantalising views of him as a crow pestered him. Then someone spotted a ring-tailed **Hen Harrier** quartering the rough vegetation behind one of the pools. It came nearer and eventually we had memorable views as it flew just in front of the reception centre, so close we were looking down on it. Waterfowl seen here included **Whooper Swans, Mallard, Tufted Duck, Goldeneye, Wigeon** and **Shoveler** with the ever-present Pink-footed Geese, plus one **Greylag. Tree Sparrows** were on a feeder seen from the impressive willow tunnel, which made an excellent hide for viewing them.

We then went to two of the hides, battling our way through the wind. This was one of the occasions when the sun shone and the plumage of the numerous **Pochards** was in pristine condition and enjoyed by all. A **Great Crested Grebe** was resting at the far side of the water, sheltered from the wind, head under a wing. Two young **Cormorants** were far from sheltered as they struggled to land on a small island in front of the hide.

We then travelled to the nearby coast and added **Guillemots** and **Kittiwakes** to our count, followed by a brief visit to Rattray Head with **Jackdaws** and **Rooks** in evidence but few small birds due to the wind.

After a night in the White Horse in Balmedie, Sunday dawned as forecast, unbelievably blue sky most of the day with the wind much reduced.

Our first stop for birding was the Montrose Basin. Here we viewed from several places with the best light from the visitor centre. We added to the wader list with two **Greenshanks, Knot** and **Bar-tailed Godwits**, and ducks seen were a few **Scaup** and more Pochard. The tide here was well out and birds mostly distant so we took a break and went to Bridge of Dun to see if we could find any small birds. There were several species with one **Song Thrush, House Sparrows, Robins, Chaffinch** and **Kingfishers** all present in the area. The two Kingfishers were seen by the two male species present in the group, but this record was unconfirmed by the females! Then back to the Montrose Basin. Now the tide was much further up. A second summer

migrant seen here was a late **Osprey** perched on a pile of stones but the local man who pointed it out failed to convince us that the **Grey Heron** stood behind it was a crane. The Osprey was a good distance away but turned round to show its pale breast before flying off.

We then motored a short distance south to Lunan Bay. The contrast with Saturday's weather was obvious as we sat having lunch contemplating putting sun lotion on. We had good views of both **Velvet** and **Common Scoters** plus at least ten **Red-throated Divers**. There was a third summer migrant with several **House Martins** hawking the sky for insects. At first we thought we had a species new to science but it was only the **Greenfinches** feeding on the *rosa rugosa* hips and not Red-billed Greenfinches.

On the way back to the hotel we stopped at St. Cyrus followed by Nigg Bay and lighthouse. There were more Red-throated Divers at St. Cyrus but not a lot else. The light on the sea at Nigg Bay was fantastic as we watched four **Ringed Plovers** on the beach, and Gannets feeding both close in and distant. As we stood near the lighthouse numerous parties of Kittiwakes flew past going north, and a distant **Bonxie** was seen chasing a gull. The last call of the day was Blackdog but the light was going and the hoped-for Surf Scoter couldn't be seen among the Common and Velvet Scoters and the large flock of Eiders.

Monday dawned cold but sunny and we had another fantastic day. First stop was a return to Blackdog where an immature **Stonechat** was spotted, with **Meadow Pipits** and **Skylarks** present in good numbers on the sand dunes and fields, but no sign of the desired scoter so we dipped out on that one.

Our next destination was the Ythan Estuary. The light was as good as it gets and we had a fabulous morning. A good selection of waders was present with more Bar-tailed Godwits and one **Black-tailed**, a small group of **Sanderling** and plenty of Redshanks. It was easy to see where the alternative name for **Lapwings** originated. These 'Green Plovers' had iridescent feathers on their backs shimmering in the sun. The Eider Ducks flying upriver were joining others near the bridge and the male birds were spectacular, their cream plumage showing hints of pink underparts and green heads. From the bridge we had more spectacles from the waders. Lots more Lapwings were joined by hundreds of **Golden Plovers** flying in, twisting and turning in unison as they landed, showing off alternate gold upper parts and pale underparts before raining down to join the others. Even from a distance the gold line of plovers could be seen with the naked eye as the water came up. The tide brought **Dunlins** nearer and good views were obtained of a **Little Stint** in their midst. A flock of about a hundred finches flying about were eventually identified as **Linnets** and later Ann managed to find one **Twite** in with them.

There were several more short stops at small lochs, including Loch Meikle where large numbers on Pink-feet flew off. After much discussion we decided the bird in the distance was not a Ruddy Duck after all. Pity.

The final stop of the day was a return visit to Loch of Strathbeg where we marvelled at the antics of the Pink-feet in the air, calling, scanning everyone in the hope of seeing the Snow Goose that we missed before, but no luck.

Despite missing out on a few birds we all have many great memories of what we did see, many enhanced by the fantastic light on various waders, ducks and geese. A brilliant weekend was had by all with the excellent total of 96 species. Many thanks to Ann for her organisation and all the participants for making it all so enjoyable.

*Jean Denison*

## Brora - Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> October

The October outing to Brora started from Evanton car park where the Inverness contingent met our leader Simon – somewhat to his surprise as a selection of rarities had been reported from Loch of Strathbeg and he thought some members might have given in to temptation. We put thoughts of Glossy Ibis, Snow Goose and White-rumped Sandpiper to one side as we started our list with **Robin, Blackbird, House Sparrow, Starling and Jackdaw** before setting off for The Mound. En route, **Curlew, Buzzard and Sparrowhawk** were added to the list. On arrival at The Mound we found the tide well out, but there were still plenty birds to see. **Mallard and Teal** were on the inner stretch of water and **Coal Tit, Dunnock and Redwing** were heard while 8-9 **Greylag** flew over. There were 9 **Rock Doves** sitting on a rock at the mouth of the river and on scanning Loch Fleet we picked out **Shelduck, Wigeon, Oystercatcher, Black-headed and Common Gulls** – and a large group of geese silhouetted against the mudflats. As a blue morph Snow Goose had been reported in the area a week before we had to check these geese out. A misunderstanding arose which meant that 2 cars went to the south side of Loch Fleet while the third went to Littleferry. However this did mean that the geese were very thoroughly observed. They turned out to be mainly Greylag with some **Pink-footed** and a **Barnacle** but no Snow Goose. A good selection of waders was seen – **Redshank, Greenshank, Knot, Turnstone, Ringed Plover, Black and Bar-tailed Godwit. Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls, Cormorant, Eider, Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser and Little Grebe** were also noted. Simon heard a **Skylark** while the Littleferry group picked up **Chaffinch and Pied Wagtail** and heard **Linnet and Red-legged Partridge**.

The group reunited in Golspie before heading for Brora where chimney pots were studied intently to see if the Glaucous Gull had returned for another year – not yet was the result. Lunch was then taken by the shore while we continued adding to our tally of species. There was not much activity on the sea but we picked up **Gannet, Shag, Kittiwake, Guillemot and Razorbill**. Both **Meadow and Rock Pipits** were on the shore and there was a small selection of waders. We wandered south, above the shore, for a while as the tide continued to come in. We saw a **Buzzard** being mobbed by gulls, found a few **Dunlin** on the beach and Simon thought he saw 3 Purple Sandpipers flying past but was hindered in his identification by the sun. **Lapwing** and **Linnet** were seen and at least 39 Ringed Plover.

It was then decided to visit Dornoch in the hope that there would be ducks in the bay. We went via Loch Fleet where the tide was by now very high and we saw a Greenshank flying past and a solitary **Whooper Swan** on the water. Dornoch proved disappointing both bird and weather-wise but Simon passed the time trying to sell the SOC to a local birder. As we had obviously had the best of the day, it was decided to head for home with one more stop – at Alness Bay to add **Shoveler** as the last bird on the list. Despite my distrust of round numbers, I have to report the total of species for the day was 60. Thank you, Simon, for an excellent day's birding.

*Ann Sime*

[PS: The Glossy Ibis (the easiest tick ever?) and Snow Goose were still at Strathbeg the next day so it was a good weekend's birding.]

## Wild Goose Hunt – Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> November

The bright and clear light of a fine autumn day greeted thirteen intrepid birders as they assembled for the goose hunt. Soon underway to Alturlie Point, the list began with some well known suspects! **House Sparrow**, **Woodpigeons** [and feral ones], **Carrion** and **Hooded Crows**, **Herring**, **Black-headed** and **Common Gulls**. And a **Robin**!

The delicate morning fragrance of the sewage works welcomed us and we quickly added **Rook**, two **Linnets**, **Wigeon**, **Oystercatcher**, **Grey Heron**, **Jackdaw**, **Curlew** and **Lapwing**. The snow capped mountain range of Ben Wyvis made up for the aroma. A fine and welcome sight! We were being closely watched from behind by an inquisitive **Buzzard**, perched on a post. Obviously, it had no sense of smell!

Stunning sunlit views of a male **Pintail** (with two females) were enjoyed by all. **Cormorant**, **Goldeneye**, **Great Black-backed Gull**, **Mallard** and a **Pied Wagtail**, (called a quickstart in Danish) were all there, as were two distant **Slavonian Grebes**, **Scaup**, **Redshank** and a **Dunnock**!

The scenic route to Ardersier added **Wren**, **Pheasant** and we viewed half a dozen **Reed Bunting** on some roadside bushes.

Parking by the waterside in Ardersier, we had our first view of a huge flock of geese far, far away. One **Mute Swan** and two **Whoopers** were closer and a single **Red-breasted Merganser** and a flock of **Long-tailed Ducks** were also soon in the scopes.

The list continued in the sunshine. **Guillemot**, one **Red-throated Diver**, **Starling**, **Greenfinch** and **Mistle Thrush**. Our first **Blackbird** of the day was quickly followed by a flock of approximately 500 **Fieldfares** in a roadside field. (Some of their breasts were very reddish.) There was at least one **Redwing** amongst the flock. **Yellowhammers**, **Goldfinches** and **Chaffinches** danced among the trees close by. Two Roe Deer were running along the edge of the fields, coats shining in the sunlight.

Our next brief stop beside a scrubby area produced 20–30 Yellowhammers and a few more Reed Buntings. Great views of a handsome **Stonechat** on a gate led us to **Skylarks** over ploughed fields. Colourful little **Goldfinches** were there too. A second large flock of geese came in view as we headed for Loch Flemington. There, a **Coot**, a **Great Tit** and very friendly Mallard welcomed us. Postman Pat was on his rounds so we moved on to a better viewpoint and passed lots of feral pigeons on wires!



We now enjoyed the scenic drive to Strathnairn. Our first **Red Kite** made an appearance en route. Lunch, just after noon, was enjoyed by the shore of Loch Duntelchaig. Visit Scotland would have been proud of the outlook! A few closer geese this time. Greylags. Then a **Dipper** and several **Tufted Ducks** for the list! Here also a beautiful, late Red Admiral butterfly paused obligingly to give us good views.

The “hunt” continued, adding a **Kestrel** at Holm Mains on the way, heading along the Beaully Firth, Kirkhill and on to Tarradale Geese and 4 Whooper Swans were **Blue Tit!**

Before leaving Tarradale we had a latest Swarovski 25x50 lens. Very be on some birding wish lists?] more Chaffinches and another Fieldfares. Nearing Redcastle, we cheeky, inquisitive Red Squirrel the wall beside the cars.



where 55 Pink-footed waiting for us with a

trial view through the impressive! [Could it More Greenfinches, large flock of were entertained by a which bounced along

Our next stop was Redcastle. A group of approximately 209 Greylags were standing near the shore. A second group of approximately 50 Teal and Wigeon were mixed up just behind. The list continued. More than ten Bar-tailed Godwits, two canoeists, three Oystercatchers and four **Greenshanks**, in that order!

In the distance, swirling flocks of could not be we were stuck species. From the Charleston, groups the gathering as well as a little and Linnet. Here and split up, but farmer’s daughter (mixed species) grey Massey condition. What a



far, far away were 2070 geese, but they certainly identified, so with just 2 goose car park just west of of Lapwings flew off in shades of early evening flock of 16 mixed **Twite** we said our goodbyes not before one happy clocked four tractors plus a stunning, old and Ferguson, in excellent fine way to end the trip!

*Jenny McNeel*

*[Pics by Janet MacPherson]*