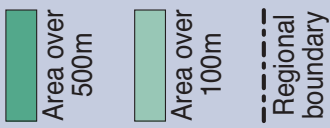
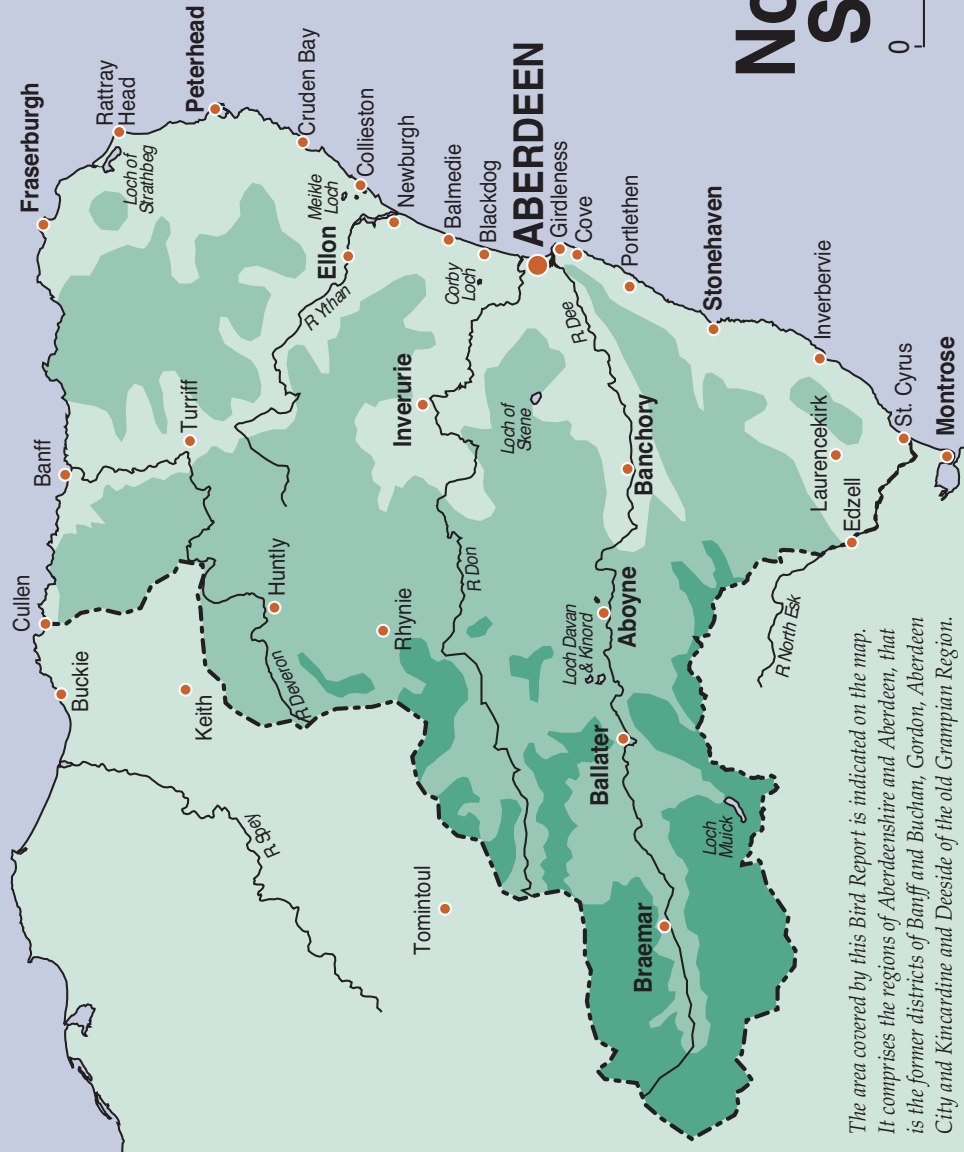
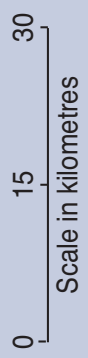


2017 North-East Scotland Bird Report





North-East Scotland



The area covered by this Bird Report is indicated on the map. It comprises the regions of Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen, that is the former districts of Banff and Buchan, Gordon, Aberdeen City and Kincardine and Deeside of the old Grampian Region.

North-East Scotland Bird Report, 2017

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Front cover: Great Grey Shrike, March 2017 © K. Forbes. A wide-ranging bird spent almost 3 months in the Loch of Park area.

Back cover: Pine Martin, Aboyne, July 2017 © H. Scott. This once rare and elusive mammal is extending its range across the region.

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Mammals in North-East Scotland

2017 Systematic List, with Selected Earlier Records

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Introduction

March 2017 saw publication of the first *Mammal Atlas of North-East Scotland and the Cairngorms* (Littlewood *et al.* 2017), with the region's species all mapped at tetrad (2 km × 2 km square) resolution. As well as summarising our information at that stage, the project leading up to the publication generated huge enthusiasm for mammal recording among keen naturalists and those with a more casual interest. Anyone was able to submit records that tangibly added to our knowledge and, by the end of 2015, some 77,496 records had been assembled across the Atlas area.

All distribution atlases become out of date almost before they are published. Gaps that they highlight prompt further recording (or submission of older records that had been lurking in notebooks, on photos or even in memories) whilst, for some species, there are real changes in distribution. With the publication of the Atlas, mammal recording has experienced a, perhaps inevitable, reduction in intensity. However, we are keen to build on the Atlas and to encourage continued mammal recording in the region. We hope that regular updates in the *North-East Scotland Bird Report* will help to achieve this.

For most species, the information presented here specifically refers to the area covered by the *Bird Report* – i.e. the administrative regions of Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire, rather than the wider area covered by the Atlas, which included Moray and the whole of the Cairngorms National Park. However, some data collated as part of recording projects that extend beyond the City and Shire are featured, including cetacean records for the whole of the Moray coast.

The records used are derived from a range of sources and several authors have assisted by providing information on species with which they have a particular conservation, research or recording interest. A substantial portion of records have come via NESBReC (the North East Scotland Biological Records Centre - www.nesbrec.org.uk) and recorders are strongly encouraged to submit records (for the whole of Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and Moray) to NESBReC or to species-specific recording schemes.

Grey Squirrel *Sciurus carolinensis* and Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*

Red Squirrels remain widespread in the region and this is the only squirrel species detected across the majority of Aberdeenshire during 2017. Surveys, conducted by the *Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels* project, show that the proportion of survey sites returning 'Red-only' results more than doubled in 2017 from 15% to 34% since 2015. Meanwhile 'Grey-only' sites halved from 22% to

11%. The results were not surprising, as more reports of Red Squirrel sightings closer and closer to Aberdeen City centre were submitted.

During 2017 Red Squirrels continued to establish in and around Aberdeen City. Healthy Red Squirrel populations were recorded in the woods at Countesswells and Hazlehead and within Seaton Park. Populations in Donside were recorded right up to the edge of Aberdeen City. Those in Deeside were found to be spreading, with animals detected for the first time at Banchory-Devenick and at Robert Gordon University, Garthdee. In 2017 Red Squirrels were also detected during surveys and sighted by the public around the University of Aberdeen for the first time. The spread of Red Squirrels further into the city is a major result of the removal of Greys as part of the SSRS project.

The survey results and public sightings show that work to control Grey Squirrels in the North-East is making a difference. Overall, the 2017 survey showed that Red Squirrel populations across Scotland had stabilised but, in the North-East, populations had significantly increased. These findings would not be possible without dedicated survey volunteers and all the members of the public. Please continue to report squirrel sightings at scottishsquirrels.org.uk.

Water Vole *Arvicola amphibious*

Four records were submitted for 2017. These included burrows and latrines at Glen Muick and Linn of Dee and one seen swimming at Braemar. The most unusual record was of a typically black animal running across the Deeside Way footpath near Drumoak on 30 June (AGK).

Field Vole *Microtus agrestis*

Clearly under-recorded: only 13 records were submitted from 10 tetrads. Six records were of cat casualties, a further one was found dead and two were camera trap records.

Bank Vole *Myodes glareolus*

Just 11 records received (six dead and three camera trap sightings) of this widespread vole, from seven widely-spread tetrads.

Wood Mouse *Apodemus sylvaticus*

A total of 46 records from just 14 tetrads, with none from Deeside above Kincardine O'Neil or in Upper Donside, where it is presumably also common. Many were detected with camera traps.

House Mouse *Mus musculus*

This species seems to be genuinely scarce in the North-East. Despite the number of camera traps (and cats) in operation, only one record was received, an adult brought in by a cat, near Drumoak, on 8 February (NAL). House Mice are not always easy to positively identify – this one was confirmed by examination of its incisors.

Brown Rat *Rattus norvegicus*

There were 31 records from 22, mainly rural, tetrads. Most were camera trap records. There have been no records in recent years from Deeside west of Abergeldie, but it is not clear if this simply reflects recording effort.

Brown Hare *Lepus europaeus*

Twenty-two records from 12 tetrads, with a cluster of sightings around Tarland and Cushnie where the species is common. The furthest inland was seen on the flood plain just west of Braemar (IF). None was reported from Kincardineshire, or in the agricultural areas just inland from Aberdeen.

Mountain Hare *Lepus timidus*

There were just 14 records submitted to NESBReC for 2017, including four of road-kill animals. The only count to exceed single figures was of 20 at Am Mullach, Glen Muick on 11 March (IF). The only reports from outside the Cairngorms National Park were of one dead on the road at Cairn o' Mount on 21 January (IF) and one at Bennachie on 29 April (JC).

There has been considerable and rising concern expressed about trends in Mountain Hare numbers. Quantitative information has been hampered by a lack of standardised survey methodology. Following on from fieldwork in the Cairngorms National Park in 2014 to 2017, a recommendation for a survey methodology was published in 2018 (Newey *et al.* 2018). This was based around 10 study sites, five of which were in Aberdeenshire. Density estimates, based on live trapping methodology, for the Aberdeenshire sites, ranged from 18 to 147 Mountain Hares/km².

Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

Forty-seven records from 26 tetrads, spread across the region, avoiding the higher ground. Rabbits are an important prey item for both mammalian and avian predators, but they are vulnerable to diseases such as Myxomatosis and Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease. Reports of dead or distressed Rabbits would be useful to help document disease outbreaks.

Hedgehog *Erinaceus europaeus*

There were 44 records from 30 tetrads, from Marykirk in the south to Fraserburgh in the north and from Aberdeen to Claybokie, just west of Mar Lodge. Most were in gardens or reported as road-kills. Again, camera traps proved helpful in recording these mainly nocturnal animals, but rural records of live animals are few and far between. There were only two records from north of the Ythan. The first of the year was one killed on the road at Westhill on 3 March (IF), the only record that month. There were two in April. The latest in the year was one road-kill at Kennay on 1 December (TG). Systematic reporting of road-kill Hedgehogs can be a useful way to monitor the distribution of this declining species.

Water Shrew *Neomys fodiens*

Until recently, there have been very few Water Shrew records in the region. The development of a technique for camera trapping small mammals during fieldwork for the *Mammal Atlas* led to the species being recorded in 39 tetrads in Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire, up to the end of 2015. Two further tetrads were added in 2016. In 2017, University of Aberdeen students, Amber Stringer and Katie Horton, used camera traps to survey for Water Shrews at around 60 sites across Aberdeenshire and Moray, and succeeded in finding animals at 13 of these. These included records from seven tetrads in Aberdeenshire and six in Moray. Two further records were submitted, both of animals found dead. Collated records from the atlas period and beyond show Water Shrews to be widely distributed across the region. The precise limits of the species' distribution remain unknown and the number of records is still modest. However, with records from moorland burns, lowland ponds and even nutrient-enriched waterways by the coast, it is now clearer that there is a very wide range of sites in the region in which Water Shrews could at least potentially occur.

Common Shrew *Sorex araneus*

There were 42 records from 27 tetrads, generally spread across central and eastern Aberdeenshire. Few were from Buchan and Kincardineshire, and none were from the upper reaches of the main glens apart from one seen alive in Glen Lui on 2 August (AGK). Recorded every month except January and May. Amber Stringer's use of camera traps at Durris and around the Loch of Skene area, Corby Loch and Haddo racked up an impressive 581 images of this species.

Pygmy Shrew *Sorex minutus*

For a species that has been recorded from the coast to the Cairngorm plateau, the Pygmy Shrew can be very elusive. Just six records were received, from four tetrads. Five of the records were from camera traps, and one from a Barn Owl pellet collected at Pitfichie (EB).

Daubenton's Bat *Myotis daubentonii*

Three records were received directly by NESBReC, from Fetteresso on 14 June (AGK), Aboyne on 25 June (AL) and Peterculter on 5 August (SW). In addition, two counts were made at Milton of Crathes, where standardised counts have been conducted annually since 2009 (see below).

Bat Conservation Trust National Bat Monitoring Programme Waterway survey – River Dee, Milton of Crathes 2002-2017:

Date of survey	Daubenton's bat passes	Possible Daubenton's bat passes*
15/08/2002	121	0
30/08/2002	35	0
07/08/2009	2	138
25/08/2009	4	113
13/08/2010	91	0
20/08/2010	62	0
13/08/2011	82	40
23/08/2011	145	13
10/08/2012	93	1
07/08/2013	83	21
27/08/2013	205	0
06/08/2014	173	6
19/08/2014	96	9
17/08/2015	152	0
05/08/2016	96	6
24/08/2016	129	5
12/08/2017	101	3
23/08/2017	120	5

*Possible bat passes are where the behaviour of the bat cannot be seen to aid separation from other *Myotis* bat species

Natterer's Bat *Myotis nattereri*

Static bat detectors and DNA analysis of bat droppings are assisting in the detection of Natterer's Bats. New records of the species in 2017 came from Crathie, Finzean, Kingswells, St Cyrus and Luthermuir. A roost of 25 Natterer's Bats, presumed to be a maternity roost, was found in Durriss.

Nathusius' Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus nathusii*

Nathusius' Pipistrelle echolocation calls were recorded at two waterbodies where previously not recorded: Culterty Ponds, Newburgh (September) and Haddo Loch (May and September). Nathusius' Pipistrelle were also recorded at Meikle Loch, Sand Loch (Forvie), Loch of Strathbeg, Loch of Skene, Inchgarth Reservoir and Loirston Loch in the month of July. Nathusius' occasionally turn up on oil rigs and are known to migrate to the UK in autumn, leaving again in the following spring. However, these records indicate that there is a resident population of the species, but no roosts have been identified to date. Surveys, as part of the Bat Conservation Trust's *National Nathusius' Pipistrelle Survey*, were carried out at three sites with a view to ringing any Nathusius' Pipistrelles caught. Whilst they were recorded foraging during two of the surveys, none was caught or ringed.

Common Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus pipistrellus*

Sixteen records of this widespread species were submitted to NESBReC, mostly of single-figures of bats. A larger count was of 70+ at Strathdon on 1 May (AF, SF).

Soprano Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus pygmaeus*

Fourteen records were submitted to NESBReC. By far the highest number was an estimate of 1,000+ present at Aboyne on 5 June (AF, SF).

Brown Long-eared Bat *Plecotus auritus*

Very few bat hibernation sites have been identified in Aberdeenshire for any species of bat. In January 2017, solitary Brown Long-eared Bats were found roosting at Boyne Castle, Portsoy and at Gight Castle, Methlick.

Bat Conservation Trust Surveys

Volunteers carry out a number of surveys under the umbrella of the *Bat Conservation Trust National Bat Monitoring Programme*. Some of the pipistrelle roost counts have been running since 1996. Data from a hibernation count are shown below:

Bat Conservation Trust National Bat Monitoring Programme bat hibernaculum count – Drum Castle 2012 – 2017:

Date of survey	Pipistrelle species	Brown long-eared bat
21/01/2012	5	1
13/02/2012	9	0
14/01/2013	3	1
07/02/2013	4	1
27/01/2014	0	0
12/02/2014	0	0
14/01/2015	6	0
09/02/2015	7	0
12/01/2016	5	0
15/02/2016	5	0
28/01/2017	4	0
17/02/2017	4	0

Scottish Wildcat *Felis silvestris*

Scottish Wildcats continue to be one of the most challenging of mammal species to record and verify in the North-East, due to their extreme rarity and identification difficulties surrounding hybridisation. The recommended methodology of Pelage Scoring for distinguishing wildcats from hybrids and feral cats (Kitchener *et al.* 2005) remains the best tool, although genetic analysis is also now available for use on hair and blood samples, if these are obtainable.

The rise in the use of camera traps has led to a welcome increase in public sightings sent to *Scottish Wildcat Action*, and via *IRecord* and *Mammal Web* apps, and our ability to clarify and verify these. Many other records come from road-kill cats, which are collected where possible for research.

The worrying national downward population trend for Scottish Wildcats seems to be borne out by North-East Scotland data in 2017. Only a tiny handful of wildcats was recorded in Aberdeenshire, but a relatively large number of hybrids and numerous feral cats were reported. The only formal survey work undertaken (by *Scottish Wildcat Action Project* in Strathbogie, winter 2016-17 and 2017-18) revealed fewer than 10 verified wildcats, but three or four times as many hybrids.

Scottish Wildcats were found in small remnant population groups in large forested areas with farmland adjacent, such as at Clashindarroch Forest, but occasional outliers were also recorded elsewhere in the North-East. Many hybrid sightings were confirmed from across Aberdeenshire and eastern Moray, including in areas around Peterhead, Fraserburgh, Stonehaven, Cornhill, Fordyce, Turriff, Fyvie, Alford and Inverurie. This shows how widespread hybridisation is and confirms it as one of the biggest threats to wildcats. However, all such sightings are still valuable to wildcat conservationists, as they provide clues as to where isolated wildcats may be clinging on.

Many areas of potential wildcat habitat, such as in Deeside and Donside, remain poorly surveyed and data deficient, so new records from these areas are particularly welcome.

Fox *Vulpes vulpes*

Even with 57 records from 25 tetrads, the Fox is grossly under-recorded, with no records from some places where they are common, such as the area around the Loch of Strathbeg where it must be seen almost daily. Most of the reports came from the outskirts of Aberdeen, where it frequents gardens and even begs at doors.

Grey Seal *Halichoerus grypus*

Just seven records were submitted directly to NESBReC; three from the Stonehaven area and four from St Cyrus. By far the most significant site for Grey Seals in the region is the mouth of the Ythan Estuary. During the Mammal Atlas period, there were no confirmed pupping records in the region. However, in January 2016, immediately after recording for the Atlas concluded, breeding was confirmed at the Ythan. In 2017, at least one pup was born at the mouth of the river, and was seen with a fresh umbilical cord on 17 December (RM). Several (up to 15) other young pups were noted that month. These may have been born there but, as Grey Seals can take to the sea and travel some distance when still very young, the possibility of them coming from elsewhere cannot be eliminated.

No counts were submitted from the Ythan haul-out in 2017, but a record from the latter part of 2016, on 9 August, confirms the continued rise in numbers there. On that date, 1,973 animals were counted during an aerial survey by the Sea Mammal Research Unit, jointly funded by Scottish Natural Heritage. This is a new record count for the region.

Harp Seal *Pagophilus groenlandicus*

A record has come to light since publication of the *Mammal Atlas* of an animal found by Bob Davis, on 20 January 1994, at Forvie NNR. It was in a weak state and was taken into care, before being released on 3 March that year at Balmedie. Hall (2008) listed 12 records of Harp Seal for the UK between 1886 and 1994. These included one in 1994, described simply as “E Scotland, taken into rescue centre”. This is presumed to refer to the above record. Dunn *et al.* (2012) added three further British records up to 2008.

Harp Seals occur widely in Arctic regions. They are highly migratory with large numbers at times occurring along the Norwegian coast. Nonetheless, the species remains a very exciting find on our coasts. The *Mammal Atlas* listed three records published by Sim (1903). However, as none of these have subsequently been listed in collated accounts of vagrant seals in the UK, it must be assumed that they were either overlooked or regarded as being inadequately documented.

Common Seal *Phoca vitulina*

Just eight records were submitted to NESBReC for 2017. All were of between one and four animals and six of the records came from the Donmouth area. One was just south of Girdle Ness. The only record further afield was of one at St Cyrus on 8 August (GW).

Otter *Lutra lutra*

Almost all 38 records from 25 tetrads were from the middle and lower stretches of the Rivers Dee, Don and Ythan. There were no sightings from the higher parts of the river catchments, though one was identified from footprints in the snow at 520 m on Cairndoor Hill, above Gairnshiel, on 28 April (GM). Increasingly, Otters are being reported from the mouths of the Dee and the Don, where they are often seen in daylight. No reports were received from the Loch of Strathbeg, where the species is frequently seen.

Pine Marten *Martes martes*

Excluding reports based solely on faeces, there were 49 records, from 31 tetrads. Most were from within the now well-established range, especially in wooded areas in central parts of the region. An outlier was one see at The Burn, just on the Aberdeenshire side of the border close to Edzell, on 5 July (MSG).

Pine Marten monitoring also continues in the region and elsewhere in Scotland for research conducted by the University of Aberdeen, into interactions between Pine Martens and squirrels. However, records from this were not available at the time of compiling this account.

Badger *Meles meles*

One of the better-recorded species in the North-East, with 84 records received from 55 tetrads. Seen in every month of the year, though there was just one record in April. There were few records

from Buchan or Kincardineshire and no records anywhere in Aberdeenshire west of Dinnet or Mossat, where the Atlas suggests that this species is indeed sparsely distributed.

Stoat *Mustela erminea*

The seven records received from seven tetrads rather under-represents the distribution of this species. The records were widely spread, from the Linn of Dee, which appears to be as far as they go up Deeside, on 8 August (BC), to Nigg Bay on 2 October (IT).

Weasel *Mustela nivalis*

Of the 16 records from 15 tetrads, eight were from camera traps, two had been killed by cats, and two were seen crossing the road. Most were reported in a broad arc running from Crathes north and east to Balmedie.

American Mink *Neovison vison*

Only two records of this introduced species were received. One was caught on a camera trap set for small mammals at Milton of Crathes on 17 June (AS) and one was at Roseheartly on 1 October (SG). It is not clear if this represents a scarcity of the species or simply a low level of active recording and reporting.

Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus*

One of the better-recorded mammals, with 183 records from 74 tetrads. This widely-distributed species was reported frequently along Donside and from the outskirts of Aberdeen, where the species is becoming more common and can cause problems in suburban gardens. Presumably a reflection of its greater affinity with lowland over upland areas, none was reported in Deeside west of Ballater although they do occur there.

Red Deer *Cervus elaphus*

The 29 records from 21 tetrads were mostly from the usual areas in Upper Deeside and Upper Donside. Four occupied tetrads in Fetteresso Forest may indicate better reporting or represent a continuing spread eastward. No reports were received from Buchan.

Cetaceans

A number of cetacean records were received by the *Sea Watch Foundation* and NESBReC during 2017 and these highlight the variety of animals that visit our coastline. The records are by no means complete as other bodies also make observations and collect data, but these are not represented below. The most regularly observed species are usually very much under reported, such as the Harbour Porpoise and the Bottlenose Dolphin (which is now so regular that it is rarely reported from Torry Battery). By contrast, the more unusual species, such as Humpback Whales, tend to be heavily recorded due to their larger size or behaviour. However, these may in fact relate to just one or two individuals. Most of the records come in from one or two well-watched locations and weather and time of year can contribute to reporting biases.

Twenty-nine species of cetacean have been reported from UK waters, of which 14 have been recorded in the region at one stage or another. In 2017, the North-East had nine of these species, which is a fairly typical year. The table below gives a month-by-month summary of what was reported in our area, showing the number of animals with number of records.

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	TOT
Bottlenose Dolphin	78 (8)	5 (1)	53 (8)	50 (7)	226 (20)	276 (21)	221 (27)	250 (22)	97 (13)	149 (16)	24 (4)	23 (3)	1452 (150)
Harbour Porpoise	4 (2)	14 (3)	46 (8)	9 (4)	15 (10)	25 (13)	36 (25)	102 (26)	155 (19)	16 (6)	2 (2)	1 (1)	425 (119)
Humpback Whale	9 (5)				1 (1)	1 (1)	-	34 (33)	4 (4)			1 (1)	50 (45)
Killer Whale					? (1)	5 (1)	-					5 (1)	10+ (3)
Long-finned Pilot Whale							15 (1)						15 (1)
Minke Whale	3 (3)			5 (4)	8 (6)	79 (64)	38 (30)	11 (11)	5 (5)	1 (1)	1 (1)		151 (125)
Short-beaked Common Dolphin						2 (1)	60 (1)						6 (2)
Sperm Whale						9 (1)	-						9 (1)
White-beaked Dolphin							37 (1)						37 (1)
Unidentified cetacean					4 (3)		1 (1)						5 (4)
Unidentified dolphin						1 (1)	6 (1)						7 (2)

Minke Whale *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*

Minke Whale records in the region ran from spring to autumn, other than a couple of outliers where singles or the same animal were reported three times between 7 and 8 January around the Hopeman area and a single was off Covesea on 22 November. Most sightings were of one or two individuals, with three off Covesea on 19 May and off Burghead on 13 June. Four animals were also observed feeding off Covesea on 13 June and a further three were well offshore from Covesea on 26 June.

Humpback Whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*

Since the 1990s, Humpback Whale sightings have increased markedly such that they are becoming annual visitors, usually in two peak periods in summer and winter. The animals are quite often long-staying individuals, hanging around for a couple of months depending on food availability, and 2017 was no exception. Up to two animals were regularly reported from the Moray Firth between 7 and 9 January. A single animal was subsequently reported on two occasions off Burghead, on 25 May and 4 June, before a run of 27 reports of a single animal feeding (often extremely close inshore) in the St Cyrus area between 5 August and 9 September. The final record of the year came on 15 December from Inverallochy.

Sperm Whale *Physeter macrocephalus*

Sperm Whales are rare visitors to our region and more often than not make the headlines due to strandings, of which we have had several over the years. Happily, the nine observed off Burghead on 5 June proceeded to travel east then head north out into the Moray Firth.

Short-beaked Common Dolphin *Delphinus delphis*

Short-beaked Common Dolphins are sporadically reported in the region. There were two records received during 2017. The first was of two animals off Covesea on 13 June and, the following month, 60+ were observed off Findochty, heading east into Cullen Bay.

Long-finned Pilot Whale *Globicephala melas*

There have been up to a dozen sightings of Pilot Whales in the region historically, in no particular seasonal period. A single record of 15 off Portsoy on 29 July represents the only 2017 report. The animals appeared to be milling around some two miles or so offshore and were observed for around half an hour.

White-beaked Dolphin *Lagenorhynchus albirostris*

White-beaked Dolphins are fairly widespread offshore and come inshore as regular summer visitors, mainly along our east coast. They rarely venture into the Moray Firth and, in recent times,

numbers seem to have tailed off for unknown reasons. A group of 37 very active animals, approximately one mile out from Donmouth on 4 July, was, unusually, the only report in 2017.

Killer Whale *Orcinus orca*

Killer Whales are seen annually, usually in small numbers and generally between May and July. During 2017, only one official record of Killer Whale sightings came in, although there were also a couple of anecdotal reports. A group of five (one calf) was observed off Cummingston on 9 June, with a male seen to repeatedly lob tail and tail slap the surface, presumably stunning fish before the rest of the pod piled in, in what appeared to be a feeding frenzy. In recent years, Killer Whales seem to be increasingly observed in our region, especially around the Peterhead area during the months of May and June. Second-hand reports included a group off Rattray Head on 25 May and five off Torry Battery on 14 December.

Common Bottlenose Dolphin *Tursiops truncatus*

A population of around 200 animals inhabits the coastal waters along the east coast of Scotland and they can be observed year-round with peak numbers during the summer months. Bottlenose Dolphins were recorded in all months of the year in 2017 and despite being the most commonly recorded species with the greatest numbers, they are still vastly under-recorded. The sightings broadly have a bias to the Aberdeen area in winter/spring and the Moray Firth and South Aberdeenshire/ Tayside during the summer/ autumn. Group sizes tend to range from 2 to 30 animals. Notable winter records include 20 animals off Fowlsheugh on 12 January, 11 off Burghead on 18 March, of which four were calves, and 22 off Burghead on 31 March. Spring records and numbers increased, with 20-30 fairly regularly recorded from a number of areas, including 30 off Burghead on 25 May. The trend for this amount of activity continued through the summer, with a maximum of 31 (including five juveniles and five calves) in Burghead Bay on 14 June. Numbers of reports and group sizes tailed off during the autumn, but notable records of 28 off Findhorn and 25 off Burghead on 28 September and 12 October represent the largest groups recorded. A record of 15 at Aberdeen Harbour on Christmas Day no doubt added to the observer's festive period.

Harbour Porpoise *Phocoena phocoena*

Harbour Porpoise is one of the commonest and most widely distributed cetaceans in the region. Like the Common Bottlenose Dolphin, they are recorded year-round in the North-East, with the greatest abundance between July and October. During 2017, most records were of one to four individuals, but occasionally with the right conditions, larger agglomerations can occur during the summer months. An exceptional 30 off Covesea on 26 March were recorded feeding, well spread between two and six kilometres offshore. Other notable records include 21 on 30 August feeding in proximity to a feeding Minke Whale, 23 on 7 September and 25 on 17 September, all off Burghead. During November and December, two single, dead strandings were noted along Aberdeen Beach, both individuals heavily scarred and marked, probably as a result of attacks by Bottlenose Dolphins.

Authors

Kevin Hepworth (cetaceans), Gwen Maggs (squirrels), Emma Rawling (Scottish Wildcat) and Aileen Salway (bats). The remainder of the species accounts were written by Alan Knox and Nick Littlewood.

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Observers

The following observers either sent records directly to NESBReC or to organisations that have shared 2017 records with NESBReC. Further observers may have contributed records directly to other projects that have gone into compiling these species accounts, and we are grateful to all.

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Bat trapping, Cults, September 2017 © Alan Knox



Daubenton's Bat, Cults, September 2017 © Nick Picozzi



Common Frog, Ellon, August 2017 © Andrew Leonard



Harp Seal, Forvie, January 1994 © Bob Davis



Grey Seal, Ythan, December 2017 © Ron Macdonald

Amphibians and Reptiles in North-East Scotland

2017 Systematic List, with Selected Earlier Records

Compiled and edited by Trevor Rose

This is the first annual report on the reptiles and amphibians of North-East Scotland. All of our terrestrial species are very under-recorded and we urge observers to submit records to NESBReC, either on a spreadsheet (email to nesbrec@aberdeenshire.gov.uk) or via the online form (www.nesbrec.org.uk/recording-services/online-form which includes an interactive map to help you find grid-references). Maps showing the distribution of the various species listed below can be found on the NESBReC website. Further details about all these species (and more) can be read in *The Amphibians and Reptiles of Scotland*, by Chris McNerny and Pete Minting (2016), which can be downloaded *free of charge* from www.glasgownaturalhistory.org.uk/books.html.

Common Frog *Rana temporaria*

Very common throughout the county from the coast to 700 m. Less frequent at higher altitudes although reaching the arctic-alpine zone in places. Probably present in every 1 km square, breeding in most, but still under-recorded, with NESBReC and Record Pool (www.recordpool.org.uk) combined showing approximately 35% of 1 km squares populated. For 2017, 47 new records were received, bringing the total to 782. The earliest was one found while clearing vegetation at the side of Kingswells Pond on 14 February (JB, JH) and another was on Scotstown Moor the following day (JH, LM). The first spawn reported was at Kincorth Hill on 1 March (SW). The last Frog seen was one at Scotstown Moor on 21 October (DM *et al.*).

Common Toad *Bufo bufo*

Locally common but, anecdotally, populations declining. Present in many habitats from coast (including fresh water-fed rock pools), across suburban and rural lowlands to glens up to 600 m. Frequent road casualties particularly in spring. Previous records total 306 though many are historic. In 2017, only 15 records were received, from 11 March (30 in Glen Muick, IF) to 10 October (nr Ruthven, AL). The only sizeable count was of ‘hundreds’ at the Fairly Loch in Glen Tanar on 2 April (EC).

Palmate Newt *Lissotriton helveticus*

The only tailed amphibian currently verified in Aberdeenshire and common across the region, can be found in lowlands and glens to 450 m. Palmate Newts are common throughout Scotland due to their tolerance of slightly acidic pH and preference for montane habitats. Often inconspicuous and poorly recorded, probably much more frequent than the 155 previous records from NESBReC and Record Pool suggest. Most mesotrophic pools in wetland habitat will be used by Palmates; presence can easily be established by using a kitchen colander to trawl marginal vegetation, as one

would for dragonfly nymphs. Twenty records in 2017 from 20 April (NJ20) to one seen at Bennachie on 6 December (CP). Most reports were in single figures, but 150 were found in a daylight partial count of a pool in Fetteresso on 8 May (AGK).

[Smooth Newt *Lissotriton vulgaris*

No records for this species in Aberdeenshire. Following a recent review by Dr Alan Knox, none of the records held by NESBReC or Record Pool were able to be verified and several were clearly misidentified as Palmate Newts. Despite its alternative name 'Common Newt', this species is uncommon in Scotland, normally only found in neutral pH water catchment areas.]

[Great Crested Newt *Triturus cristatus*

No verified records for this species currently in Aberdeenshire, and no records on file with NESBReC or Record Pool (nearest verified records are in Moray). Similarly, to the Smooth Newt, this species is very uncommon in Scotland, preferring neutral pH and habitats with long history.]

Adder *Vipera berus*

Often found where Common Lizards and Slow-worms are present as they are the primary prey. They favour unspoilt glens, moorland and low mountains to 550-600 m, and are totally absent from the lowlands due to farming and loss of suitable and extensive habitat. The records held by NESBReC show Adders to be common in Deeside west of the Dinnet crossroads, and in upper Donside, and more thinly distributed along moorland and hills to the south of the Dee as far east as the Slug Road. There is an isolated record from the side of the River Dee opposite Crathes dating to 1991. There are no records in Aberdeenshire to the north of the Dee, east of the road between Dinnet and Strathdon. The only record in the north of the county was near Glass in 1970. None has been reported from the Hill of Fare or the hills around Bennachie. Despite this, the glens and around the lochs of the North-East offer some of the best Adder populations to be found, especially at Dinnet and Glen Muick.

In 2017, 18 records were added, bringing the total for Aberdeenshire to 271. At Dinnet, the first Adders were seen on 15 February, the first shedding their skins on 7 April, and mating from 14 April; the last seen was on 25 October (CR). One local population here contains about 15-23 individuals within about 200 metres.

Slow-worm *Anguis fragilis*

For Aberdeenshire, there were only 59 records, many of them old, with just three added in 2017. Very under-recorded and often unseen as they live a highly subterranean lifestyle (in topsoil and leaf litter), although they can easily be detected by placing refugia discretely in suitable habitat (deep, variable and extensive vegetation). They generally require undisturbed habitat with long history. They have been found generally in the valleys in Deeside west of the Dinnet crossroads, and eastwards to the south of the river as far as Banchory (once, historically, near Inchmarlo on the north side), with a small population at Gight (no recent records). There are no records from Donside or the glens between the Dee and the Don. They have been most often reported in the

Forest of Birse, Glen Tanar and between Dinnet and Ballater. The only records in 2017 were at the Burn o' Vat on 7 and 10 April and 5 October (CR).

Common Lizard *Zootoca vivipara*

Very inconspicuous and under-recorded, but can be locally numerous. Some coastal records in Aberdeenshire (e.g. St Cyrus, Newburgh), but generally absent from arable lowlands, restricted to undisturbed heath, scrub and glens, up to 650 m, possibly higher. There are 464 records currently for Aberdeenshire, 31 of which were received in 2017 from 3 March to 23 September (AL), from sites including Milton of Garlogie, Castle Fraser, Elrick Hill, the north side of the Don Estuary, Haddo and Moss of Cruden. It is pleasing to see that the species is still persisting in some lowland localities, but these fragmented populations are probably vulnerable and require continuous monitoring.

Leatherback Turtle *Dermodochelys coriacea*

This species is a regular visitor to UK shores though more commonly recorded on the west coast, where it specifically hunts Cnidaria (jellyfish). The last recorded sighting in Aberdeenshire was a stranding on 8 January 2016 at St Cyrus. There are earlier records in 1975, 1996 and 2000.

[Loggerhead Turtle *Caretta caretta*

Has occurred in the North-east, with two historic records, both in 1861.

There was also an unidentified turtle at sea off Cove on 1 November 1955.]

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