

The Scottish Ornithologists' Club
Scotland's Bird Club

Highland Bird News No 120

April 2013



Editorial

The warmth of the sun these past few days has been really welcome, even if simply to make the bitter wind more bearable. I just wonder how the Sand Martins which were seen at Drumullie in Strath Spey on 4 March are faring?

As I write this at the beginning of April, I have still not come across any returning migrants. This despite going to places where I can usually count on an early Chiffchaff, Sand Martins, or an Osprey.

I do however continue to enjoy Bramblings at my feeder, with up to seven at times. The cock birds are well on with their moult and yesterday I had one resplendent in full breeding dress; what a splendidly beautiful bird! Yellowhammers have visited too, the cocks still in varying stages of moult but looking superb in the bright sunlight.

The Pinkfeet have been passing over the house each morning, coming from the direction of the fields up the Essich road, heading east perhaps for Gollanfield. Their clamour seems to have an urgency about it; maybe these bright, clear mornings have got them thinking about the flight north?

I have been informed that a flock of Waxwings numbering some 75 birds continues to feed in gardens at Westhill, Inverness, coming to apples.

And finally, a reminder:

The last indoor meeting of this session is on Tuesday 16 April, at 7:30pm in Culloden Library, our usual meeting place. The Branch AGM comes first and will be kept as brief as possible. Following on, Bozena Summers will give a talk on the birds of Poland, Hungary, Estonia and Norway.

I wish you good birding through the Spring and Summer, in hopefully more agreeable weather. Who knows what might turn up this year? If you have a story to tell, why not consider writing a short article for the next HBN?

David Bain, Editor

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Inverness and East - Sunday 13 January 2013

Two days of scouting ahead for this trip had produced very little of interest to the west and south of Inverness [not helped by pea-soup conditions] and so we thought it might be best to stay close to Inverness but head east slowly and take in a few sites that were well known and one that wasn't and not to go far, given the iffy weather forecast.

There were only 3 names on the list, but it was a healthy group of nine of us that pulled away from beside Burger King to make the short hop to Milton of Culloden. It was probably best to get the more significant coastal locations out of the way before high tide at 1.30pm as our outing had unfortunately coincided with the WeBS count. Who knows the reaction of a dedicated WeBSer if interrupted counting Knot at the wrong moment. "1357, 1358, 1359". "Hi, don't mind us, but anything about?" "1, 2, 3, 4" No such issues, but the birds were mostly quite distant as we scooped up a few of the expected species. **Scaup**, **Pintail**, and **Shelduck**, plus 50+ **Goldfinches** were all seen well, but the **Bar-tailed Godwits** and **Slavonian Grebe** were a different matter altogether. The hoped-for Grey Wagtail – now, there's a scarce species these days – was absent. Best, perhaps, was the trio of Otters which swam west towards the Kessock Bridge, right in the middle of the firth and all seeming to be having fun chasing each other's tails.

When we left for Alturlie we had seen over 30 species, but had paid for it by being well-chilled and the car heaters were much appreciated. This spot was quiet but we did add a sizable flock of **Lapwing**. We now meandered along the minor road at Castle Stuart, past Wester Dalziel farm and heading towards its Easter neighbour. Hundreds of **Pink-feet** didn't carry any other geese with them and a **Sparrowhawk** caused mayhem at Wester D but, just before rejoining the B9039, we pulled in at a farm manure pile with much good hedge and bush cover to enjoy excellent views of finches, principally **Linnets**, and over 30 **Tree Sparrows**. More time had passed than intended and a comfort stop at Inverness Airport was taken, everyone ensuring that we were back on the road before the free 20-minute parking period ended! We pulled into the Connage cheese farm to try and see a Corn Bunting on the wires, but alas none and little else, so next to Ardersier where exactly the same could be said and it was very cold and we were hungry. Lunch was taken in the middle stretch of the village looking across a wintry and bird-less firth. Heaters were at full blast!

The next location was a site tick for most of us. This was the east end of the rifle range beyond Fort George, a 2km straight, flat path to the bay to the west of the old Barmac yard. It is potentially a very good area at any time of the year, and we got a good few species here including **Yellowhammers** at the start and **Whooper Swans**, **Sanderling** and **Long-tailed Duck** at the end, but it was spoilt by a really snell wind and our first real rain. Still, by now we were on the leader-defined minimum of 50 species.

The day was concluded by a drive round some likely goose fields, popping in at Loch Flemington where we encounter 2 relaxed WeBS counters who put us on to **Moorhen** and the **Whoopers** were plentiful and very close. Tomhommie is really at the very edge of Highland recording territory and it was there that we turned off and headed back. Our last two species were **Little Grebe** and **Buzzard** and these made the total a fairly respectable, especially given the mixed weather, 56. Many thanks to Anthony, David and Kathy, Alex, Margaret, Carol and David for their company.

Alastair and Jenny McNee

The Strathpeffer and Dingwall area – Saturday 9 February

Eight members set off to explore the Strathpeffer and Dingwall area on Saturday 9 February, led by Alex Joss. The first birding stop was Udale Bay where Alex immediately spotted the **American Wigeon** just offshore from the RSPB hide. Whilst getting out of the cars we unfortunately scared the birds, but it was found again in amongst the many **Wigeon**. Other birds seen here included **Pintail**, **Dunlin**, **Knot** and **Black-tailed Godwit**, but it was lovely to hear and see singing **Skylarks**.

A chance meeting with Mark Finn was followed up with a visit to his garden at Gordon's Mill where good views were had of **Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Siskin** and **Brambling** on his bird feeders. At Newhall Point, some had a distant sighting of a **Slavonian Grebe**.

A short walk on the South shore of the Cromarty Firth at Urquhart provided a good outlook but no new species.

Next was our lunch stop at the RSPB hide at Tollie which coincided with feeding time and lovely views of 3 **Red Kites** occasionally swooping in to try to pick up some lunch. The best views, however, were of an opportunistic **Buzzard** which attempted to eat the lot by feeding on the ground.

Fed and watered, we moved next to Loch Kinellan and the smaller loch just outside Strathpeffer and good views of **Goldeneye, Mute Swan, Little Grebe** and **Long-tailed Tit**.

We ended the day at Dingwall. A search for interesting gulls was rewarded with good views of the **Ring-billed Gull** at the play park in Dingwall. A total of 64 species.

Carol Miller

Not the Black Isle but east of Inverness – Thursday 21 February

Ten hardy souls arrived at the Pizza Hut on a beautiful but extremely frosty morning and after a quick discussion decided to go east and not to the Black Isle, which turned out to be a good choice.

The first stop was the Alturlie/Longman bay which provided **Ring Plover, Redshank** and **Slavonian Grebes** followed by a beautiful line of **Long-tailed Ducks** and a small group of **Scaup**, all shining in the morning sun. We then discovered a small loch behind Alturlie Point which had some **Coot** and **Tufted Duck**; a large feeding flock of **Pinkfeet** was on the field behind the loch. Then, on the way to Gollanfield, a **Merlin** was spotted. When viewing from the road by the cemetery, the beautiful panorama gave us a family of **Whoopers** and a flock of **Lapwing** but no matter how hard we tried, we could find no Golden Plover. The odd **Goldfinch, Bullfinch** and brilliant **Yellowhammer** also appeared. Loch Flemington was next which gave us some **Waterhen** and then to our surprise two Roe deer appeared, disturbed by our arrival. As the day was now so beautiful with not a cloud in the sky, we all decided to head for Eagle Alley via Daviot and where within 50 metres of the road was a flock of **Brambling/Chaffinch** which turned out to be, for most of us, the largest number seen together. In a group of feeding **Pinkfeet/Greylag**, Lynda spotted a neck-ringed goose which ducked down and avoided identification. Strath Dearn however proved very quiet with the only excitement being a **Buzzard** which always seems far bigger in these surroundings however to my surprise, a **Dipper** was spotted flying down river avoiding the ice en route. The icing on the cake was to follow when Carol spotted, on the Garbole/Farr road, an **Eagle** which was hunting over the moorland, flushing **Grouse** as it flew, a fitting end to a special day. Total of 49 species for the day. Thanks to all.

Jim Fulton

East of Inverness again - Thursday 21 March

Bird watching is sheer joy. And in March sunshine by the blue waters of the Inverness Firth where 'the waves they were piddlin' an' small'* it was heaven indeed. The mud flats at Milton of Culloden were frenetic with activity: the tide was ebbing. **Redshank** ran back and forth across the mud; **Curlews** were confirmed not to be whimbrels when they took off and called with iconic wistfulness – thinking ahead, perhaps, to upland moors where breeding territories will very soon be established. Off-shore were flotillas of mostly male **Golden-eyes**, and as I finally sighted my telescope on these smart birds I saw them stretching their necks and throwing their bills up to the sky – and I wondered how many will stay on in Scotland to breed?

Our convoy of perhaps seven cars snaked on to West Beach at Nairn. Usurping golfers' parking, the cars provided perfect 'hides' from which to watch a new – for me, species. Not the big **Greylags** or smarter **Pink-foot** geese ('wink wink') which we'd passed in their hundreds in the coastal fields north of the A 96, but small and neat **Brent Geese**, of which a straggling band of about fifty were contentedly grazing the weed covered rocks in the shallows. Somehow it was special to see them eating feed there where they'll have grazed since time immemorial: rather than being reliant on farmers' tolerance of their theft of crops. These were geese overwintering from eastern High Arctic Canada, of the race *B. b. brota*; we didn't see the darker bellied race which breeds on the Russian tundra. Many wore conspicuous rings: where and when had they been ringed? 51 were counted, as they swam together in a tight bunch: disturbed, but not alarmed by a dog walker.

Dodging the wavelets was a group of about ten **Purple sandpipers**: another first for me. I remember their shortish yellow legs with matching bill base, and very delicately patterned grey plumage. A lively bunch seemingly dabbing at the rocks with quite stout bills: the book tells me they were searching for crustaceans and molluscs.

We drove slowly on along back roads past King's Steps and finally to Findhorn Bay. A short stop for 'finches' turned up **Reed Buntings**, **Yellowhammers**, **Linnets** and possibly – said Lynda, redpolls: 'I think I heard them'. And all the while **Skylarks**, high and unseen, poured forth their glorious song.

The wind at Findhorn was bitter, but three of us fairer sex found shelter in the sun 'behind' the hide to eat our lunch watched from above by a hovering **Kestrel**. I took a lift home, leaving the others to add to the day's sightings, the target was 100 species, as they headed on towards places like Burghead and Lossiemouth. I was happy to sit back and think about my new favourites, the Brent. A wonderful day: thank you.

- From 'Albert an' the Lion' by Stanley Holloway

Jane Tyrer

Recent Sightings

Black-necked Grebe in Loch Sunart – 3 January

Ring-billed Gull back in Dingwall – 25 January

American Wigeon at Udale Bay – 25 January

White-tailed Sea Eagle – an adult bird drifted eastwards downwind over Inverness on 4 February.

Richard's Pipit on Dornoch beach – 5 February

Snowy Owl in Moray – 18 February

Sand Martin (2) at Drumullie, Strath Spey on 4 March

White-tailed Sea Eagle – a huge dark bird seen over the Hill of Fortrose on 30 March, mobbed by 2 Buzzards.

On 2 April at 1720 a juvenile Sea Eagle flew off south from the Rosemarkie cliffs and disappeared beyond Fort George.

Indoor Meetings & Field Trips

Members wishing to attend meetings and/or field trips should note that if Scotland or the Highlands are experiencing severe weather, anyone travelling a distance is advised to telephone the Branch Secretary or another Committee member to ascertain if the meeting/trip is going ahead.

Indoor Meetings are held in Culloden Library, Keppoch Road, Inverness IV2 7LL starting at 7:30pm. The syllabus for the remainder of this session is as follows:

- Tues 16 April Branch AGM + Bozena Summers speaking on the birds of Poland, Hungary, Estonia and Norway.

Field Trips: contact Kathy Bonniface (01808 511740) or the leader. Meet at 9.00am (9.15 am on Thursdays) at Inverness Retail Park, near Burger King, unless otherwise stated. Weekend outings are full day, Thursdays are usually morning only.

- Sat 20 April The Gairloch Loop (Graeme Prest 01463 791575)
- Thurs 25 April Local Birding
- Sun 5 May Speyside Migrant Hunt (Keith Duncan 01479 821124)
- Fri 10th – Mon 13th May Weekend Trip to Isle of May and Fife. The plans for this weekend have changed somewhat since it was originally announced in September 2011. Travel is now by private car, sharing as much as possible. Hotel accommodation has been booked and a private boat chartered.

However, with the change from mini-bus to private car, the option for more people to go is open. The chartered boat can only take 12 passengers, so any over that number would have to book and travel on the normal service boat. Similarly with the hotel, it is basically fully booked but there are other hotels and B & Bs in Anstruther. The booked hotel is providing dinner, bed & breakfast and it is believed could accommodate additional non-resident guests for dinner.

The trip to the Isle of May is only part of the weekend. Fife has a lot to offer, especially at this time of year. It should be a good weekend. Anyone interested in joining the trip is advised to discuss this further with Kathy Bonniface, telephone number as above.

Useful Contacts

Kathy Bonniface, Branch Secretary	Tel: 01808 511740	Email: kathybonniface@aol.com
David Bain, Newsletter Editor	Tel: 01463 772539	Email: bainrock@btinternet.com

New Local Recorder

Peter Gordon took over as Local Recorder from Hugh Insley in March 2013. For those not using BirdTrack, please send all records to Peter, whose contact details are as follows:

Peter Gordon,
2 Craigmore Crescent,
Nethy Bridge,
Highland
PH25 3RA.
Tel: 01479 821339
Email: gordon890@btinternet.com

Websites and Blogs about birds and birding in Highland

Addition to the list included in HBN 119:

The Anti-Social Birder – a blog about birding and wildlife experiences around Easter Ross, the Black Isle and further afield by Sam Brown, based in Dingwall: <http://the-anti-social-birder.blogspot.co.uk>

2010 Highland Bird Report

The Report was received from the printer at the beginning of December 2012. Copies can be had from Lynda Graham, 9 Burn Brae Terrace, Inverness IV2 5HD (ljgraham50@btinternet.com), price £8.00 or £10.00 inc. postage. Cheques should be made payable to 'Scottish Ornithologists' Club HBR.?

Birding the north-west – a perspective from an incoming southerner!

In October 2011 my wife Brenda and I moved from Suffolk to Ullapool. I had taken early retirement that summer from the public sector at the time of the austerity cuts, our three children are grown up and independent and since none of them were necessarily settled we decided to move 'up north'.

From a birding perspective I was keen to try something new. In Suffolk where I had spent the last 20 years there are lots of good birds and there are lots of active birders - almost anywhere you go there will be other birders and the chances are someone will have been there before you so most of the time you know what you are going to see before you get there.

So how have I found birding the north-west Highlands? I think a simple summary statement would be that "it's hard work!" Let me explain.

There are fewer birds up here, both in terms of numbers and species. We are further north, and although the landscape is spectacular, vast areas of upland habitat are 'inhospitable' and support few species of birds. There is extremely limited broadleaved woodland, or even conifer woodland, and farmland (arable or improved grassland) along the north-west coast so whole suites of associated birds are largely absent. Similarly there are few nutrient rich wetlands but a multitude of nutrient poor upland lochs, which support the core populations of both species of diver but are generally poor in birds. The west coast has an extensive system of sea lochs but these have only small areas of mud at their head, mainly because the rivers and streams tend to be shorter and carry lower sediment loads, and consequently support few estuarine-type birds; indeed half a dozen redshanks or dunlins is a good count for here! I remain surprised that the coast does not have big flocks of sea ducks and again a couple of common scoter or a dozen eider is notable, but in contrast great northern divers are numerous in winter in most of the sea lochs and bays. So generally there are fewer birds up here than in Suffolk, or indeed than in the east around the Moray Firth basin.

There are also few recognised birding sites. There are no real "hot-spots". There are few bird reserves and very limited infrastructure – hides and visitor facilities are virtually non-existent. This probably reflects both the landscape – there are genuinely no real hot-spots' and the 'special' upland species are widely scattered - and the distance from major centres of population.

The other reason that makes birding challenging (but exciting) is that there are vast areas, much of which is difficult to access, and very few active birders. I am lucky in having moved to Ullapool in that there is a like-minded birder in the village (Andy) to share time in the field and exchange sightings; although I was looking to escape the crowds I do enjoy the camaraderie of birding friends. However, apart from Andy, I rarely see anyone else out with binoculars, except for the occasional visiting birding group in the summer. So, in this huge area, maybe good birds do turn up and are never seen by anyone; possibly many rarities go undiscovered. This

scarcity of birders has some benefits. We can visit an area and there's a very good chance that no other birder has been there recently so if anything is around we'll find it (unfortunately most of the time there isn't anything good!) and we don't get 'gripped off' – there's very few other people out birding so it's unlikely that anyone else is going to see good birds on 'our' patch.

Part of my rationale for moving to this area was that it was so under-watched and surely I would be able to find my own good birds. The Birds of Scotland, when discussing rarities, says that “on the mainland there is a definite east-west split with 70% of the non-passerines and 84% of the passerines being observed in recording areas that border the east coast. In fact of the 331 Scottish records of rare passerines, no more than nine have been seen in the western half of mainland Scotland.” This scarcity of rare birds is obvious to anyone who subscribes to the Rare Bird Alert (or similar) service – on most days at any time of year the distribution map of scarce and rare species shows records concentrated in the south with a huge 'black hole' in north-west Scotland. Is this a true reflection of the distribution of the birds, or just a reflection of birdwatcher activity? At the moment I tend to favour the former but hope for the latter!

Rarities in the north of Scotland generally seem to attract far fewer admirers, this presumably being a combination of the fewer local observers and the distance from the major centres of population which means that few birders will make the journey up here for a scarce bird unless it's an absolute 'mega'. Half a dozen people is a good twitch crowd up here. And often you are on your own. Compare this with experiences in birding hotspots like East Anglia when all you have to do is turn up and ask someone where the bird is and it will be pointed out. Here you need persistence and greater id skills because you have to put in the effort and find birds yourself, even previously reported birds. I have to confess it means I have paid far more attention to the (few) rarities I've seen up here, had better views of several without the associated crowd pressure and I think enjoyed them more.

As can be ascertained from the above personal comments about birding, I am definitely a “lister” – the possibility of adding a new bird to a list is a major incentive for me to go out birding. Since moving up here I have kept a Loch Broom parish list and more recently decided to build my Scottish list. My Loch Broom parish list now stands at over 130, not too bad considering all my whinging about the lack of birds! I have quickly developed different expectations of my birding up here – Andy and I were recently extremely pleased with a couple of velvet scoter at Ardmair and a kingfisher on Loch Broom, good local birds but not exactly rarities. Although we do try and 'escape' occasionally and visit the bird-rich east or twitch something further afield, Andy and I put in significant hours of local patch trudging – one day it will pay off with that mega which will have all you eastern based birders rushing over to the west coast; I live in hope.

Richard Rafe