

The Scottish Ornithologists' Club

Scotland's Bird Club

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Editorial

As the summer draws on, waders such as Curlew, Oystercatcher and Lapwing are drifting away from their inland breeding grounds, heading for the coast. Other species which breed in more northerly latitudes are already heading south – you may hear them calling as they pass over, for example, Whimbrel, or come across them stopping over at places like Udale Bay. What breeding success our local birds enjoyed I don't know but I found both Lapwing and Oystercatcher chicks killed on the A9 at Dalmagarry, adjacent to a field where both species breed. Curlew too were feeding on the verge there though I never saw small chicks. Those who followed Springwatch this year may have seen the film sequence from Aberdeen, when Iolo Williams met up with Alistair Duncan and Brian Pirie, two SOC members who have been monitoring the breeding success of roof-nesting Oystercatchers in the city for many years. Unfortunately this year, many chicks died during the long dry period we enjoyed because worms had gone deep and the ground was so hard that the adults could not find food.

Passerines too are recovering from a busy breeding season, moulting, skulking, but feeding hard as they seek to build up their strength, especially migrants such as Willow Warbler, which will soon face the long flight back to Africa.

Most of the Swifts have gone now though I did see two over Dornoch on the 23rd; the skies are quieter now, no screaming parties hurtling through the air. House Martins appear to have had a good breeding season, with most hereabouts getting at least two broods away. I was interested to see nest building activity resume when the rain came at the end of July, but sadly, the heat between the showers soon dried up any mud sources.

Highland Region enjoyed its share of rare and not so rare migrants this year and you can read more inside this issue, where you will also find articles about the field trip to Kinrara, a holiday in the Uists and details of both Indoor Meetings and Field Trips planned for the 2013 – 14 season.

As always, articles and newsworthy items will be welcomed for inclusion in future issues and can be sent by email to me at bainrock@btinternet.com My thanks as always to all who have contributed material for this edition.

David Bain, Editor

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INDOOR MEETINGS & FIELD TRIPS FOR 2013-2014

2013	September		
	03	Indoor	Dick Hewitt – Tristan da Cunha 50 years after the evacuation
	07	Field trip	Easter Ross – leader to be confirmed
	19	Field trip	Local birding – Leader Lynda Graham
	October		
	01	Indoor	Stan da Prato – Birds in gardens
	05 – 06	Field trip	Strathbeg & N-E Aberdeenshire – leader David Bain (overnight stay)
	17	Field trip	Local birding – Leader Lynda Graham
	November		
	05	Indoor	Chris Rose – Artists for Albatrosses: a five-week expedition to South Georgia
	09	Field trip	Moray Coast – Leader Alex Joss
	21	Field trip	Local birding – Leader Lynda Graham
	December		
	03	Indoor	Desmond Dugan – Boreal birds: close encounter by a forest dweller.
	08	Field trip	Black Isle – Leader to be confirmed
	19	Field trip	Local birding – Leader Lynda Graham
2014	January		
	14	Indoor	Al McNee – A birding trip to Costa Rica
	18	Field trip	Local from Inverness – Leader Al McNee
	30	Field trip	Local birding – Leader Lynda Graham
	February		
	04	Indoor	Mark Hancock – Breeding Common Scoter in Scotland
	09	Field Trip	Burghead area – Leader Peter Gordon
	20	Field trip	Leader Lynda Graham
	March		
	04	Indoor	Rhian Evans – East Scotland Sea Eagles
	08	Field trip	Dornoch – Loch Fleet area – Leader to be confirmed
	20	Field trip	Local birding – Leader Lynda Graham
	April		
	15	Indoor	AGM & Bob McMillan – Hen Harriers on Skye: problems of predation
	20	Field trip	North-west coast – Leader to be confirmed
	May		
	01	Field trip	Local birding – Leader Lynda Graham
	Date tbc	Field trip	Possible long weekend to North Ronaldsay

Meeting Places

Indoor meetings are held at Culloden Library, Keppoch Road, Inverness IV2 7LL starting at 7:30pm

Field trips start from Inverness Retail Park, near Burger King. Meet at 9:00am (9:15am on Thursdays). Thursday outings are usually morning only but may be extended if the birding is good.

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Lynda Graham

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Branch Membership Update for period 26 March to 17 July 2013

The following new members are welcomed:

Jeffrey Buttress, Carrbridge
Bob & Moira Johnson, Burghead
Mr A Loveland & Ms J Main, Elgin
Duncan & Avril McCormick, Dingwall
Rachel Moore, c/o SWT, Isle of Eigg
Malcolm & Doreen Smith, Broadford, Isle of Skye
Derek Spencer, Culkein Drumbeg, Lochinver

Resignation:

Colin Murdoch, Kingussie

SOC HIGHLAND BRANCH OUTING – Kinrara 5th May 2013

A group of 12 assembled at the SNH office at the north end of Aviemore on a dry, blustery morning, fortunately a lot warmer than it had been recently. Our leader, Keith Duncan, outlined the programme and, as parking space was to be limited, we took just 3 cars. The season was very late, the trees were still leafless, with few birds singing.

Parking near Loch Alvie, we set off up the estate road and under the railway bridge, just before the London train went south. We started with a **House Martin** and heard **Willow Warbler**. A **Buzzard** flushed and circled obligingly: it had several wing feathers missing, which it was considered did not appear to be the result of moult. A **Pheasant** walked along the railway and a Yellow Labrador approached, being exercised by the estate manager who was driving a 4 x 4. Keith conversed with the manager and we then proceeded to walk towards the empty pheasant rearing-pens.

A bird perched in a tree was confirmed as a **Tree Pipit**, giving a few snatches of its song and good views. Other snatches of song proved to be **Redstart** and Keith got us tremendous views for several minutes of a head-on male: what a spectacular bird!

Walking around the pens, we headed up the slope at a gentle angle, moving first through open Birch/Juniper woodland and then the same with old Scots Pine and some younger pine regeneration: a most attractive area and, had the season not been so late, no doubt alive with bird song. However, we were not to be disappointed. A **Great Spotted Woodpecker** was heard and at least one bird was watched drumming. Small numbers of **Siskin** and **Redpoll** were heard calling and seen in Birches, one of the former being especially tolerant of our presence. Frequent stops were made to scan and listen, with Redstart and Willow Warbler being the main species heard. Keith regaled us with a list of species that had bred in this type of open woodland, for example Wryneck. Certainly there was no lack of looking on the part of the participants!

At least one **Wren** sang and several red deer were seen disappearing into the distance. We stopped near a large nest in a Scots Pine, probably that of a Buzzard. We then walked along the edge of a field and into Oak woodland of varying density. It was interesting to see Juniper among the Oak. By now the day had dulled, though the wind did not abate.

Keith stopped to show us a distant **Osprey** nest, part way down a large conifer. We could just see the head of the bird. This was followed by some wing flapping and then the bird flushed, giving us fine views as it circled round in the vicinity of the nest tree.

More Redstart song was heard and a **Treecreeper** was seen. Keith found us a sheltered spot in the Oak wood for lunch, with a handy fallen tree for seats. A Red Squirrel performed well for us, apparently eating bark on Birch branches. There was no sign of Wood Warbler, it was not yet warm enough for their return.

The day dulled and we looped round through the open woodland and back onto a track heading up the hill. A Willow Warbler and a **Blue Tit** were seen. Our walk levelled out and then took us back down the slope towards the cars, with more sightings of Redstart. Keith heard a single Crested Tit call, but the bird did not oblige further.

The weather deteriorated into light drizzle as our day drew to a close. We returned to the SNH office and expressed our thanks to Keith. It had been a splendid day in an area new to almost all of us. Keith had produced some fine views of Redstart and other species. With the 2012 trip having been cancelled because of bad weather, perhaps he would lead us again in 2014, with the hope that better weather might show us the full potential of this attractive area?

Roger Tozer

The Birds of Eigg



To those interested in wildlife the name John Chester and the Island of Eigg go hand in hand, although he is perhaps better known to visitors and locals as 'John the Bird'. John is the ultimate "patch watcher" and his knowledge through the seasons on this much-loved hebridean island is unsurpassed. John is the Scottish Wildlife Trust warden on Eigg, the SWT getting involved as a partner in the original island buy-out. John's first annual report was produced in 1986 and over the years they have added to his library of knowledge culminating in this new guide, a fitting tribute to one man's work and dedication, supported by the local community. There have been many ornithological highlights including Bridled Tern in 1993, Golden Oriole in 1994 and Red-breasted Flycatcher in 1997. More recently, Glossy Ibis and Woodlark have been the stars. This well illustrated guide comprises an extremely valuable checklist, with lots of information and many humorous anecdotes. It will be a must for those who enjoy their birding in the west Highlands and will encourage many to visit this wonderful and thriving hebridean gem.

The guide is published by the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust and is available from http://www.isleofeigg.net/the_bird_book.html at a cost of £12 including p&p and all proceeds from the sale will go towards woodland improvement projects.

SKUAS AT CHANONRY POINT

At 0830 on 12 May I was fortunate to see four adult **Pomarine Skuas**, three pale and one dark, gently flight past the lighthouse and into the outer firch. It later transpired that on this day there was a very large movement of over 600 Poms past North Uist.

Early evening on 23 May I heard from Margaret Collier, who lives at the Fortrose end of the golf course, that during the afternoon she had seen, from her bedroom window, 15 **Long-tailed Skuas** fighting over the golf course and out into the outer firch. This, of course, necessitated Mary and I together with Kevin Davis, having a little look round! We waited and watched a fair while and at 1920 five magnificent Long-tails floated, completely unhurriedly, over the Point

and out. Great!

An hour later two pale phase adult Pomarine Skuas, about 100 metres apart and low over the water, passed round the Point and out. This was repeated at 2040 by a further four adult Poms. Fifteen minutes later a line of 21 Long-tails crossed the golf course and were away out to sea. Time for celebration, Long-tailed Skuas are not a usual sighting these days, and certainly not in these numbers.

On the following morning between 0800 and 0900, small numbers of all four skua species were in evidence, at a distance, from the Point but then fairly quickly disappeared. Again, I subsequently learned that over one thousand Long-tails were logged past North Uist on 22 May whilst in the following day over eight hundred Long-tails were noted at the Corran Narrows moving up towards Inverness.

Delighted as I was to have had such good skua viewing there is much to reflect on in relation to these simple sightings. Why, on 23rd, did so many Long-tails head up the Great Glen and, presumably, the east coast? Is the deviation from their favoured west coast route solely related to weather conditions? Do they move only in daylight and settle on water during the hours of darkness? Do they migrate only over water or cut off large corners overland - some experts have noted Long-tails are more likely to land in fields than any other skua? And at what altitude do they travel, should we perhaps spend more time scanning vertically rather than horizontally?

Dave Galloway

A WEEK ON THE UISTS AND BENBECULA: 11TH – 18TH MAY 2013

The drive to Uig on Skye, for the ferry to Lochmaddy, produced two **Whooper Swans** and a **Black-throated Diver**, a nice start to the holiday. The crossing was smooth, with all 4 breeding auks, **Bonxie** and **Arctic Skua**. It was a return to the self-catering house, on the NW corner of South Uist, that I had rented in June 2012. Overlooking Kilaulay Bay, it was only a short distance from Ardivachar, the middle of the three west facing headlands, from which the spring passage of Pomarine and Long-tailed Skuas can be observed.

With the late spring, there were still many waders on passage. They fed busily among the vast heaps of rotting seaweed, washed in by the Atlantic Ocean, before they made the final push north to their breeding grounds. **Dunlin**, **Turnstone**, **Sanderling** and **Ringed Plover** were present, many in colourful breeding plumage. Other waders seen during the week were **Whimbrel**, **Bar-tailed Godwit** and **Golden Plover**.

The first two days were cold, with north-west winds and icy squalls and a fellow birdwatcher showed me the benefit of using the car tailgate as a shelter. The sea was a mass of foaming, white waves. Two days watching did produce 8 **Pomarine Skuas**, a new species for me and one I had especially wanted to see. I shall long remember these bulky birds, with their “thick” tails, battling north into the wind. I discovered later that before, during and after my stay there had been a record passage of Pomarine and Long-tailed Skuas at Aird an Runair and Ardvule, the northern and southern of the 3 headlands. No doubt this will be written up in “Scottish Birds”.

The local birds showed well and included **Twite**, Arctic Skua, Dunlin, **Arctic Tern** and Bonxie. **Rock Doves** are always nice to see, especially when feeding on the machair fields. I saw the **Kumlien’s Gull** that had been in the area for a little while. **Hen Harriers** flew over the beach on several occasions.

A day tour with Steve Duffield, of Western Isles Wildlife, was most enjoyable. It started well, when I picked up the proverbial flying “Barn door”, as the 4 other participants and I waited in the Creagorry Co-op car park on Benbecula. **White-tailed Eagle** featured on several other occasions. Steve took us to see the returning **Snowy Owl**, that sometimes commutes to St Kilda. We also saw **Purple Sandpiper**, **Little Gull** and **Corn Bunting** at the RSPB Balranald reserve, a **Cuckoo** caught in a lobster pot, which we released, two late **Barnacle Geese**, a **Greenshank**, **Short-eared Owl** on the Committee Road, **Little Tern**, Whimbrel and **White Wagtail**.

I visited North Loch Eynort, where the house owner has created a garden, woodland and a small plantation that now contains a heronry, all from what before was open moorland: some achievement. In the right season, this area is frequented by passerine migrants and vagrants, but I was pleased to see a Hebridean **Wren**. Ardvule had a party of **Pale-bellied Brent Geese**. There was a **Great Northern Diver** in breeding plumage in Kilaulay Bay, one of several of these handsome birds that I saw. **Eider**, **Common Scoter** and **Long-tailed Duck** were also present at Ardivachar. The road passing Loch Druidibeag to Loch Sgioport produced both eagles, **Stonechat** and Black-throated Diver.

So, you are thinking, what about Corncrake. Well the late season meant the vegetation had hardly started growing. Thus, I was able to watch a **Corncrake** going about its business for over half an hour. It was rather amusing to see the bird, as it trod stealthily and with great care, right out in the open! I had splendid views of this normally elusive bird, especially when it reacted, neck up and calling, to the calls of another bird.

I was fortunate also, in that the **Red-necked Phalaropes** arrived slightly earlier than in some years and again I had great views from the public road of another obliging bird. A birdwatcher staying nearby told me about a **Raven's** nest on the chimney stack of a ruined building and I saw the two young birds, with the parents in close attendance.

There was only one low point and that involved the two **Dotterel** that I found on the machair, near where I was staying. I discovered later that half a dozen bird photographers had formed an arc and driven the birds towards a fence, in order to get "their" best photo. Several people to whom I spoke were heartily sick of this type of behaviour from bird photographers. It certainly made me think and I doubt I will ever report a colourful, rare bird to a website again.

All in all it was a memorable holiday and it was the passage waders, feeding busily on their way north, that made the greatest impression on me. Indeed, on one day the beach seemed empty, after the previous day's Turnstone, Sanderling and Dunlin had headed north during the night.

I would thoroughly recommend the Western Isles to any birdwatcher. The scenery is spectacular and it is often possible to use the car as a hide. Indeed, I did this each evening, overlooking the beach south of Ardivachar, watching the constant movement of birds on the beach and others flying to and from the machair, never knowing what might appear next. There is also the Hebridean Smokehouse, with its delicious smoked fish and pate. Indeed, with this and the good chance of American vagrants, I am tempted me to return in the autumn. Then, of course, I will have to return next spring for the Long-tailed Skuas!

Roger Tozer

SPRING/SUMMER SIGHTINGS

This item is not necessarily exhaustive but contains records which have been submitted to the Local Recorder. Some of these are subject to consideration by the appropriate Rarities Committee, whose decisions are not yet known.

APRIL

A **Scandinavian Rock Pipit** was reported from Dornoch Point on the 2nd, staying until the next day. A **Common Crane** was seen at Dunachton, near Kinncraig on the 8th and towards the end of the month, on the 22nd, an **Arctic Redpoll** was photographed in a garden at Talmine, Sutherland..

MAY

A drake **Gadwall** stopped over at Tain Links on the 8th. Next day, a **Little Egret** was at Loch Caroy, Skye, a **Whitethroat** was seen on Fortrose golf course, 4 calling **Wood Warblers** were reported from Carr Brae with the first **Whitethroat** of the year seen there, next day. **Pomarine Skuas** appeared on the 12th, when a single was seen off Tarbat Ness and 4 flew past Chanonry Point. A red male **Scarlet Rosefinch** came to feeders in a garden near Feshiebridge on

the 15th, the same day as a **Grasshopper Warbler** was noted at Brahan estate and **Wood Warblers** at Luichart Power Station (3) and Loch Meig (2). Another **Grasshopper Warbler** was 'reeling' at Loch Ruthven on the 16th. A **Wood Sandpiper** graced a pool at South Kessock on the 20th. Two **Pomarine Skuas** flew past Tarbat Ness on the 21st, the same day as 7 **Great-northern Divers** in full breeding plumage were present there. In the west, 2 **Red-necked Phalaropes** stopped off at Broadford Bay on the 23rd, the same day as a blue morph **Fulmar** flew past Tarbat Ness into the Dornoch Firth. Skua movement continued too, with 7 Long-tails flying east, south of Fort George, 5 **Long-tails** and 2 Poms over Chanonry Point and 15+ Long-tails over Fortrose Golf Course (see article on p4 of this issue). As the month drew to a close, a singing **Garden Warbler** was reported from Easter Moy island, a male **Red-backed Shrike** was seen in a garden at Nethybridge and 2 **Little Egrets** were at Isleornsay in Skye. Finally, on the 30th, a brown male **Scarlet Rosefinch** was present on Eigg.

JUNE

Wilkhaven Farm had a pair of **Whimbrel** on the 6th; two days later, 2 **Ring-necked Duck** were reported from Loch Inshore. A female **Pied Flycatcher** showed briefly at Loch Ruthven on the 11th and a male **Collared Flycatcher** was reported from the lighthouse garden at Stoer on the 12th. Next day, a single **Storm Petrel** was seen feeding just offshore at Tarbat Ness; a single **Whimbrel** was at the Ness where the local pair of **Ravens** had successfully fledged 3 young. In the west, on the 16th, 6 **Common Cranes** were reported, heading north over the Sound of Raasay. A **Common Rosefinch** and a **Marsh Warbler** were found at Uig, Skye, the warbler remaining to the next day, when a singing **Icterine Warbler** was found near Fort Augustus. A **Black Kite** was seen at Bernisdale, Skye on the 21st while on the 24th, a first summer **Med Gull** was seen at Loch Fleet, the same day as a **Purple Sandpiper** and 7 **Turnstone** came in off the sea at Tarbat Ness – the start of the autumn wader passage?

JULY

A **Little Egret** was watched on the shore at Shildaig Lodge, Badachro on the 5th. 550 **Manx Shearwater** flew past Chanonry Point on the 20th and on the 23rd, more wader passage was evident with at least 25 **Whimbrel** south past Chanonry Point, the same day as a **Brent Goose** stopped off at Udale Bay.

AUGUST

A juvenile **Wilson's Phalarope** was found in Broadford Bay, Skye on the 16th and was still present on the 20th.

RED-BACKED SHRIKE IN STRATHFARRAR.

On the 10th June this year, while monitoring a pair of Golden Eagles in Glen Strathfarrar, Brian Etheridge, Doug Mainland, Stuart Rae and Adam Ritchie had all stopped to watch a small group of Scottish Crossbills in a mature Scots Pine. SR, who many will know of as an expert on upland birds, noticed an unusual bird perched on the topmost spike of a young Scots Pine about 100m away. BE, AW and SR trained their bins on the bird and enough detail could be seen for them to identify the bird beyond question as a male Red-backed Shrike. SR was of the opinion that it could be breeding in the area as the habitat was suitable. A cursory search was made but no evidence of breeding was found. It is interesting to note that Pete Gordon, Highland Bird Recorder has received a larger than usual number of sightings of Red-backed Shrikes this year.

BIRD RECORDS

For those not using **Birdtrack**, please send your records to Peter Gordon, Local Recorder for Highland, whose contact details are as follows:

Peter Gordon, 2 Craigmere Crescent, Nethy Bridge, Highland PH25 3RA

Tel: 01479 821339 Email: gordon890@btinternet.com