

# The Scottish Ornithologists' Club

Scotland's Bird Club

Highland Bird News No 123

August 2014



The first indoor meeting of the 2014-15 session is on Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> September at 7:30pm in Culloden Library, Keppoch Road, Inverness IV2 7LL. Ben Darvill will give a talk on *Upland Birds: Ecology, conservation and how you can help*.

The first Field Trip is on Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> September to Tarbat Ness. Meet at Inverness Retail Park in the car park by Burger King, for a 9am departure.

Full information on all other meetings is given on page 2 of this HBN.

## Editorial

Another summer is drawing to a close as I write this, with forecasts today for high winds, plunging temperatures, grass frost and snow on the hills. The tail of Hurricane Bertha which hit us over the period 9 – 12 August looks to have taken most of the Swifts away south though there are still plenty of House Martins and Swallows hereabouts. A newly fledged brood of Blackbirds was in my garden at the end of July – a third brood perhaps? So what of this year's breeding season? Comments/feedback will be welcome for the next edition.

The rivers have been low over the period from mid-May to the beginning of August, so low that few if any returning salmon and sea-trout were able to run the systems. Ospreys will have fared well at Findhorn Bay but I did not see an Osprey over the upper Findhorn. However, a pair of Ring Plover in suitable breeding habitat there was a good find and a pair of Common Tern was present nearby.

Once again, the Region has enjoyed its share of less common species of which more inside this issue, along with articles about a trip to Coll and an account of the May-day outing to the Black Isle. Details of Indoor Meetings and Field Trips planned for 2014 – 15 are also included. I do hope you find these of interest.

Articles for inclusion in future issues of Highland Bird News are always welcome, even in long-hand. My thanks as always to all who have contributed material for this edition.

*David Bain, Editor*

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## SOC Highland Branch Programme for 2014-15

### INDOOR MEETINGS

- 2014 Tuesday Sept 2<sup>nd</sup>: Ben Darvill – Upland birds: Ecology, conservation and how you can help.
- Tuesday Oct 7<sup>th</sup>: Sarah Hoy – The effects of Goshawk colonisation on Tawny Owls in Kielder Forest.
- Tuesday Nov 4<sup>th</sup>: Derek McGinn – Western Australia: one of the world’s best kept birding secrets.
- Tuesday Dec 2<sup>nd</sup>: Desmond Dugan – Abernethy National Nature Reserve: who owns this land?
- 2015 Tuesday Jan 13<sup>th</sup>: Al McNee – A birding trip to central Thailand.
- Tuesday Feb 3<sup>rd</sup>: Mark Newall – Seabirds studies on the Isle of May: spreading our wings after 40 years.
- Tuesday Mar 3<sup>rd</sup>: John Calladine – Breeding waders of the Uist machair: land use and predators, past, present and future.
- Tuesday Apr 14<sup>th</sup>: AGM followed by Sinclair Dunnett – What’s in a name? Some thoughts on European bird names.

### FIELD TRIPS

- 2014 Sat Sept 6<sup>th</sup>: Tarbat Ness (Leader TBA)
- Thurs Sept 18<sup>th</sup>. Local Birding (Lynda Graham)
- Fri-Sun 10<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> Oct. South of Aberdeen (Alex Joss). This will involve 2 overnight stays.
- Thurs Oct 23<sup>rd</sup>: Local Birding (Lynda Graham)
- Sat Nov 8<sup>th</sup>: Strath Spey (Peter Gordon)
- Thurs Nov 20<sup>th</sup> : Local Birding (Lynda Graham)
- Sun Dec 7<sup>th</sup>: Black Isle ( David Galloway)
- Thurs Dec 18<sup>th</sup>: Local Birding (Lynda Graham)
- 2015 Sat Jan 17<sup>th</sup> 2015: Inverness East or West (Al McNee)
- Thurs Jan 29<sup>th</sup>: Local Birding (Lynda Graham)
- Sun Feb 8<sup>th</sup>: Burghead Area and Moray Coast ( Simon Cohen)
- Thurs Feb 19<sup>th</sup>: Local birding (Lynda Graham)
- Sat Mar 7<sup>th</sup>: Strathdearn and Strath Nairn (Alex Joss)
- Thurs Mar 19<sup>th</sup>: Local Birding (Lynda Graham)

## MEETING PLACES and CONTACTS

Indoor meetings are held at Culloden Library, Keppoch Road, Culloden, Inverness IV2 7LL at 7:30pm on the stated dates.

Field Trip: the usual meeting place is Inverness Retail Park by Burger King. Full day trips depart at 9am; Thursday morning trips depart at 9:15am. Please contact the trip leader for other meeting place options.

Contacts:

Alex Joss, Branch Chairman: tel. no: 01463 221661 or email: [ejoss99@btinternet.com](mailto:ejoss99@btinternet.com)

Kathy Bonniface, Branch Secretary: tel: 01808 511740 or email: [kathybonniface@aol.com](mailto:kathybonniface@aol.com)

Lynda Graham, Thursday morning field trip leader: tel 01463 791292 or email: [ljgraham50@btinternet.com](mailto:ljgraham50@btinternet.com)

David Bain, HBN Editor: tel: 01463 772539 or email: [bainrock@btinternet.com](mailto:bainrock@btinternet.com)

## NOTICES

### IMPORTANT NOTICE TO MEMBERS

The Club's Annual Report for the year 2013/14 will be issued to all members in mid-September, along with the next volume of *Scottish Birds*.

The Report includes the Notice for the 2014 Annual General Meeting along with details of Council's Proposal to Re-structure the Club.

### Highland Bird Report 2012

The Report is now with the printers and should be available at the October or November meeting.

### SOC Highland Branch

Discussions are ongoing with a view to developing a local website. Watch this space.

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### Some reported Bird Sightings since March 2014

The first reports of Sand Martin and Chiffchaff came from Loch Flemington on 2 April.

A Cuckoo was heard in Culbokie Wood about 4 May, with another at Mullbuie Forest on the 8<sup>th</sup>. 9 Arctic Skuas flew NE over Fortrose Golf Course at 7pm on the 11<sup>th</sup>. The next day, 3 Swifts were over Arabella while from Inverpolly, good numbers of House Martins and Swallows were reported, along with 3 calling Cuckoos. On the 13<sup>th</sup>, a juvenile Sea Eagle passed over Chanonry at 11:30am, heading towards Inverness airport. 2 Sanderling were at Chanonry the same day. Reports from Skye on the 17<sup>th</sup> comprised 2 Tree Sparrows at Broadford, a Little Egret at Kilmaluag River in Trotternish and a Turtle Dove at Aird Bernisdale. Still on Skye, the following day

brought reports of 8 Tree Sparrows in Harrapool, the number seemingly equalling a historical record at Torrin in 1937! 4 birds on Lewis at the same time perhaps suggests an influx? There have only been 2 previous records of this species on Skye in the last 10 years. Towards the end of the month, a male Red-backed Shrike was found at loch Kinellan on the 28<sup>th</sup>. A singing Garden Warbler was at Easter Moy Island the same day.

Fewer records to hand for June, but good ones all the same! An adult summer Citrine Wagtail was at Balnakeil on the 18<sup>th</sup> while next day, also on the north coast, a Great White Egret was on the Kyle of Tongue. Also on the 19<sup>th</sup>, staying till next day, an adult Rose-coloured Starling was seen in Achiltibuie, near the Piping School café.

A singing Grasshopper Warbler was recorded behind the beach at Rosemarkie on 10<sup>th</sup> July, the same day as a Quail was heard calling, north of the Fairy Glen. As one would expect, return wader passage picks up in July as evidenced by a Black-tailed Godwit at Udale Bay and a Whimbrel flying W over Fortrose GC on the 14<sup>th</sup>. Two days later came reports of 22 Black-tailed Godwits passing through Skye and of numbers of Oystercatcher, Greenshank and Dunlin building there, sharing the shore with a few Knot and Sanderling. Back to the mainland and still on the 16<sup>th</sup>, a leucistic, recently fledged Swallow was seen with other Swallows NW of Rosemarkie. A Corncrake was heard calling in Achiltibuie the same day. On the 21<sup>st</sup>, an adult male Red-backed Shrike was found in Strath Kanaird. On the 25<sup>th</sup>, 29 Whimbrel passed over Chanonry Point at 1330 and as the month end approached, another calling Quail was reported from a barley field behind Eathie Mains on the Black Isle.

Few records, at the time of compiling this report, for August, so I include two of my own. A Quail was singing by one of the Black Isle Show parking areas on the 7<sup>th</sup>. On the 13<sup>th</sup>, I listened to a Whimbrel calling over the house at 11pm on a dark, stormy night. You never know what you might hear when putting out the wheelie bin!

*David Bain*

### **A FEW DAYS ON COLL**

6<sup>th</sup> May saw me heading to Oban for the ferry crossing to Coll for a few days birding. Whilst I have visited many of the islands, Coll was a new one for me. A decent crossing provided a very scenic vista all around and whilst the birds showing were the usual seabirds expected, the Common Terns were putting on spectacular displays in search of food. I was keeping a good lookout whilst passing Tobermory for any Sea Eagle as they have nested in that area recently, but no luck I'm afraid.

My plan really was to see Corncrake again which I had previously only seen on Iona. After a slightly uncomfortable night sleeping in the car (I wasn't able to get accommodation on the island for the first night) not surprisingly I eased the discomfort by making an early start on the short road trip to the RSPB site at Totronald...and was there at 5.30am. This site has a good viewing area, a pleasant converted barn /information room with a seat outside overlooking the wardens garden. Within minutes of arrival I was hearing the "crex crex" call both from the garden and the surrounding land but a view proved elusive that day. However the site of 7 Brown Hares feeding in a field was great to see. The rest of the day was spent walking and birding with Shelduck, Eider, R-b Merganser, Hooded Crow, Stonechat, Redshank, drumming Snipe and Buzzard all putting in appearances. There seemed to be big numbers of Wheatear and Skylark about everywhere I went. The following morning saw me back at Totronald and this time I was in luck...views of Corncrake albeit fleetingly and some distant photographs. The rest of the day again was walking and birding with good views of Cuckoo, Sand Martin, Shag, Willow Warbler, Lapwing, Goldfinch and down by Port Na Luing area 5 Snow Geese which was a surprise. I had seen two flying earlier and thought perhaps I had miss ID' them but on talking to the warden was assured. It seems they are resident or at least very regularly there. Later I managed a few decent photos of them feeding in a nearby field.

Feall Bay was next point of call where Gannet, Ringed Plover, Dunlin, Wren and Oystercatcher were added to the usual sea birds.

The 10<sup>th</sup> May saw me heading back to Totronald again early in the morning for what proved the best views of Corncrake in strange circumstances. From the small viewing area I had been hearing two or three males calling but could not see them although they sounded to be only yards away (I haven't gone metric yet). One bird seemed to be behind me and eventually after crawling about I managed to see the bird and get a picture or two. What happened next surprised me. The local farmer and his pal came along on two quads with dogs just past where I had been viewing the bird. A stop for the usual pleasantries was followed by his request that I move my car a bit for safety as they were going to move cattle from one field to another.....right past where the bird was. I moved the car, watched proceedings and decided that would be it for Corncrake viewing. How wrong I was. I set off and the bird was still there !! I lowered the car window, switched the engine off and took my best pictures of the bird about 4 yards away from me. I also managed a bit of video footage and whilst it is not very good, the opportunities with digital cameras are remarkable.

Also recorded that day was a record shot of a male Hen Harrier with prey in its talons which I couldn't really identify but I suspect was probably an Oystercatcher chick of which there were plenty about. Other raptors known on Coll are Merlin and Hobby but I didn't see them.

Hogh Bay produced Greylag, G N Diver, whilst my return to Arinagour bay produced R T Diver, Sedge Warbler, Pied Wagtail, Twite, Heron and Curlew.

Talking with the warden was enlightening and much of his work on the island is helping the Corncrake. He has been planting fast growing species to provide early season cover for the birds, clearly successfully as again I was hearing birds where the planting had taken place. Also I was getting distant views and hearing the calls on other parts of the island not just by the warden's premises. With decent field margins and cover strip planting the birds have good secluded areas but as only the males call I suppose the breeding success is hard to quantify as the number of female birds about must be hard to quantify.

Waiting for the ferry produced only a second ever viewing for me of a Minke Whale which I duly reported to the website for record purposes. I thought this viewing was fairly early in the season but the Cal Mac staff advised that they pick up sightings from late April.

All in all a good break, good birding, great bays and pleasant walking.

*Rob Greenwood*

### **A Fort Augustus Woodland**

We have had a busy time at home so far this year. We did a lot of gardening, mainly vegetables and fruit but some flowers too. Despite all this effort, the garden gets more wild as the years pass. Still the resident creatures mostly benefit from this, the birds included. We do have a large garden as well as a small piece of ancient woodland and half an acre of meadow. The woodland is mainly mature birch and oak trees (some at least 150 years old) with a good variety of plants, fungi etc., at ground level. It is actually a croft and as the trees are classed as a crop, we don't have to do anything to them.

We did have a good year for breeding birds this year and were delighted when one of the dead trees in the woodland was occupied by a pair of Great-spotted Woodpeckers. This is the first time they have bred with us in the 11 years we have been here. The woodpeckers we get feeding on the peanuts through the winter have previously bred across the road in the forestry commission woodland. Luckily a pair still bred there as well as 'our' pair. Because of this we have been inundated with red crowned youngsters. I must admit it costs a fortune in peanuts, but bit is well worth it!

Another species that bred successfully with us for the first time was Swallow. They tried a couple of years ago, but a Pine Marten climbed up a downpipe and took all the one week old youngsters, but this year a more secure situation for the nest had 4 young fledging.

An immature tree Pipit has been seen three times recently in the edge of our woodland, where a pair of adults was holding a territory in the Spring. Although we have a male singing most years, this is only the second time we have had proof of breeding success.

Spotted Flycatchers have been seen spasmodically in the same area as the Tree Pipits, with 1 adult and 1 immature seen together last week one day and again this morning. They have probably bred in our wood as there are lots of suitable places. Once again, Tawny owls bred, with at least 1 fledged young seen in the woodland along with a nearby adult. Both were flushed as we walked round the wood, with the young one landing only a short distance away. It then sat and stared at us, its head moving from side to side as it tried to figure us out. Presumably this was its first sighting of humans! It is probable that they bred in the nearby 'chimney' box slung under an oak tree branch, where 2 young were raised last year.

Every year, from mid-April to the end of June, we get Woodcock roding over our woodland and nearby woods as well. We see them most nights from our bedroom window, which is a great midge-free way to birdwatch! No doubt they breed, and our woodland is suitable, but nests are notoriously difficult to find, so we have no definite proof of breeding in our wood though they probably do so.

Other successful breeders have been Blue and Great Tits, who are the main occupants of our many nestboxes and eating us out of house and home. Although Coal Tits don't use nestboxes, they have also produced lots of youngsters, as well as the Siskins, with more young around than most years. The Siskins are now feeding voraciously on the large numbers of birch seeds, both in the tree tops and on the ground.

We are not only interested in the birds but in the habitat and its occupants as a whole. Our small meadow is improving with time. The small population of Heath Spotted Orchids only spreads very slowly, but last year 2 plants of Greater Butterfly Orchid appeared for the first time with 100% increase this year. Now these have gone over and hopefully producing seed, the meadow is a sea of blue with Devils Bit Scabious. These increase every year and are a magnet for bees and butterflies. Over our 11 years here we have had 18 species of butterfly, the best one being a single Comma in 2004; at the time it was the most northerly record for Scotland. Unfortunately, since the scabious came out this year it has been dull weather and we just await a good, still and sunny day or two for butterflies to appear. We will then be inundated with butterflies, bees and dragonflies.

Unfortunately, the 4 Red Squirrels we had visiting our peanuts last year, seen most days, have only visited us 3 times in 2014 but, not to worry, they will be back, hopefully.

*Jean Denison*

#### **Thursday Morning Birdwatch – May 1<sup>st</sup> 2014.**

It was wonderful to renew acquaintance with the SOC Highland branch Thursday Morning Bird Walk. My first encounter with this warm and friendly group occurred last November when I happened upon their website and the date of one of the Thursday morning outings. A call to organiser Lynda Graham, and the Scottish welcome that followed, became an invaluable introduction to birding in the Highlands - even producing a life tick American Wigeon! So on checking the SOC Highlands events and spotting a Thursday walk during our recent holiday, my wife and I were delighted to be able to meet up and enjoy the company and advice for a second time.

As we gathered at the Retail Park meeting point it seemed I wasn't the only returning visitor. A Swallow flew over us placing itself top of the list for the day, to be closely followed by a more local House Sparrow. With

Spring migration picking up pace and previous days of easterly wind, following discussion, leader David Bain decided our best bet would be to drive out to some of the Black Isle locations.

First stop : Munlochy Bay. The tide was still well out but in a few minutes we had sighted Grey Heron (2), Shelduck, Mallard, Willow Warbler, Chaffinch, Blackbird, Carrion and Hooded Crow and Skylarks.

On the drive to Chanonry Point two Pheasants and a buzzard sized raptor were seen.

Chanonry Point – White/Pied Wagtail, Oystercatcher, Common Gull, Herring Gull, Shag, and 2 distant terns (likely Sandwich). Auk sp. including Razorbill, and Red-breasted Merganser flew around the point. Dolphins were displaying well, breaching twice. Sandwich Tern (2) were observed around the bay.

Next stop was Udale Bay, with red kite seen en route, close to the Fairy Glen.

The sight raised discussion around the recent raptor poisoning in East Ross. Tragically this type of background persecution appeared all too relevant in my holiday raptor sightings on Mull and while circumnavigating the Highlands. Three days on Mull produced 24 eagle sightings (at least 5 different WT sea eagle, and 6 Goldies), Hen Harrier m&f, numerous Buzzard, Sparrowhawk, Peregrine, and a Goshawk; whilst a full 5 day circumnavigation of the Highlands in similar weather, and terrain produced a single goldie (on Skye) and a couple of Kestrel, and a few common Buzzard. Despite it being less than a scientific analysis, I suspect my observations reflect the appreciation of raptors and recognition of their value on Mull alongside the historic persecution of such, as tragically experienced in recent days. Thankfully Ospreys provided a brighter note with 8 sightings of at least 4 pairs of nesting birds and one individual seen over 4 days on the East Highlands. Let's hope that the recent incident at East Ross is the 'one too far' that results in definitive action and an end to the persecution enabling all raptor sp. to flourish as their fish eating brothers.

Udale Bay provided some excitement for my wife and I with the arrival of a skein of Pink-footed Geese (613 total) against the fresh snow-dusted mountains, - a rare but absent (2014) annual visitor to our South Essex area. Curlew (5) arrived on the flood, with 2 drake Goosander, and single drake Scaup (showing some signs of oil). Red-breasted Merganser, Mute Swan (2) were in the creek, with a Common Sandpiper and Redshank and the remnant of the winter Wigeon (13), were alongside more familiar Shelduck, Mallard and Lapwing.

Further east along the coast Eider were seen and a small wader (possible dunlin) had moved on before being identified. A single Long-tailed duck was also seen.

Eyes were peeled as we drove back via farmland field transecting roads, looking for golden plover with the hope of a companion dotterel – life tick for me! But alas, the former were elusive and latter notable by RBA reports of four sat 40 miles from my home in Essex! Birding can sometimes be like that! An attempt to spot the American Coot at Loch Flemington also turned up blank as it allegedly had disappeared for some privacy with a native species! But Little Grebe and Tufted Duck were added to the list as well as a new clutch of c10 mallard ducklings.

It is always a joy to meet like-minded people and non-more-so than the Thursday morning outing birders of the SOC Highlands group. Thanks to David et al for welcoming us again. A big thank you to Lynda who, though unable to attend on this occasion, kept us up to date with what was about, helping us on our way to 127 species despite missing Capercaille!. As if we need an excuse to visit again!

If you're ever on our patch in South Essex/East London – please don't hesitate to get in touch.

*Steve and Elaine Swinney*

## ARMENIA 2014

This tour to Armenia was arranged privately, but all participants were members of the Highland Branch of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club.

A party of six, including our leader, Mark Finn, travelled to Armenia via Kiev, happily without incident.

The vast majority of Armenia's interesting species were recorded during the 9-day tour which resulted in 176 species being observed. A few late migrant waders and terns at Armash fishponds helped the list on the penultimate day. Interesting species seen included a migrant Rustic Bunting near Lake Sevan. In addition to this several Caucasian specialties were located notably Caucasian Grouse, Lammergeier, Levant Sparrowhawk, White-tailed Lapwing, Armenian and Caspian Gulls, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Rock and Persian Nuthatches, Mountain Chiffchaff, Upcher's, Moustached, Paddyfield, Eastern Orphean, Eastern Olivaceous and Menetries Warblers, White-throated Robin, Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin, Finsch's and Persian Wheatears, Radde's and Alpine Accentors and the beautiful Fire-fronted Serin.

We had a most enjoyable, entertaining and informative time, thanks to Mark. Armenia is made up of many and varied habitats, all with wonderful landscapes. We experienced the forests and alpine meadows of the north; the crags and deep gorges further south; the semi desert and bleak mountains along the Iranian border; the marshes along the Turkish border with wonderful views of Mount Ararat just inside Turkey and the high mountain and snow environment on Mount Aragats which, at 4095m. is the highest mountain in Armenia.

We met many friendly people, including one of the families with whom we stayed. Our main language of communication there was French, and a number of happy hours were spent on their terrace over dinner, with delicious local food and copious local drinks. We are also indebted to Hayk for driving us safely around Armenia, to Bagrat for his language skills and to Arthur for his preparation of lunches and general help to the group.

In all, I believe this is a country and an experience we shall never forget.

A full report may be read on Mark Finn's website: [www.birdwatchingbreaks.com/](http://www.birdwatchingbreaks.com/) Look under 'Trip Reports'.

*Kathy Boniface*

## Tailpiece

Readers may recall some time ago, a short note and photographs of a Great Tit, plucking fur from the corpse of a Field Mouse with which to line its nest. Here is another equally interesting account from the same part of the country.

Helen and Stevan Lockhart moved to Clachtoll in Assynt where Helen started hand-dyeing knitting yarn for a living. The dyed hanks were put out in an open ended tent to dry. Helen noticed bits of moss appearing in one of the hanks, which she thought must have blown in. She removed it twice, only to find more moss appearing which she left as it must have been put there on purpose. The mystery was solved when a Wren was seen gathering moss and building a nest in one of her hanks of wool. Helen and Stevan are happy to share their video of this delightful story of the Wrens successfully fledging five wrenlings or wrenlets from the nest. Stevan has posted the video on his blog at:- <http://www.tinslave.co.uk/blog/index.php?post/27/The-Wrens-have-fledged>

Do have a look at this. Some still photographs are shown below.

*Doug Mainland, with kind permission from Helen and Stevan Lockhart.*





