

The Scottish Ornithologists' Club

Scotland's Bird Club

Highland Bird News No 117

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Editorial

With March well through and the clocks due to go forward one hour this coming weekend, now is the time to be out and about listening and looking for migrants. A Chiffchaff in song perhaps or an early Osprey, the first Sand Martins or a Wheatear; who knows? The Oystercatchers and Curlews are on their way inland and here in Inverness, the volume of birdsong has noticeably increased; Chaffinches, Wrens, Dunnocks and some Blackbirds, to name but a few, are singing their heads off.

This issue includes accounts of a number of field trips, all of which were much enjoyed by those who came along. Despite on occasion, some inclement weather, all the trips produced a good range of species and who knows, with more participants, what else might be seen? The Committee arranges the field trips for you, the members and we would like to hear your views on the places we visit - most of which tend to be well known favourites - but also suggestions of new venues. Highland Region is huge, with a diverse range of habitats and it would be good to take a look at new ground.

The Thursday morning outings have proved popular for a small, regular group. On more than one occasion, the morning has stretched well into the afternoon. We recognise that this can prove difficult if the decision is taken late in the morning, especially when car sharing is involved. Again we would like to hear your views on this: should we stick to mornings only, or change to all-day or just agree to have flexibility, responding to opportunities as they arise?

Some members have made a day trip to the grounds of Scone Palace on the outskirts of Perth, in the hope of finding Hawfinch. These are usually but not always successful. March is when people have gone so the trip is weather dependent. Does anyone know of a location hereabouts where Hawfinch can be seen and which would obviate the need for a long car journey?

You will recall David Jardine's talk in the last session on the Isle of Lismore. David is moving later this month to live and work in Argyll and has kindly offered to lead a day trip to Lismore. The Committee has discussed this and is minded to accept David's offer but feels that, given the distance involved, it would be more worthwhile to make a weekend of it and explore some of mainland Argyll too. September has been suggested: what do you think?

The next Committee meeting is when we arrange the field trips for the 2012-13 session, so please speak to any Committee member soon and let them have your views!

David Bain, Newsletter Editor

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OUTING TO THE LOCH OF STRATHBEG ON SATURDAY, OCTOBER 8th 2011

Nine of us met at 8am in the car park of the Retail Park in Inverness. It had dawned a dry, dull day. However the sun came out later, highlighting birds at the Loch of Strathbeg. Apart from a few spits of rain on the way, the rain kept off until teatime.

We split into three cars. David Bain the leader, driven by David Reid with Freydis and Jill, then Ann driving Linda, Janet and Mike, and Alec drove himself. It had been arranged that we meet another couple from Peebles at the venue.

Beyond Nairn, we saw **Whoopers** in the fields and spotted a **Sparrowhawk** chasing a passerine. There were skeins of geese flying high throughout the journey. We bowled along, and were soon approaching the reserve, where each Autumn, thousands of geese congregate after flying from their breeding grounds in Iceland and Greenland. It is said to be the first place that they land on their journey.

The 'wink, wink' call of the **Pinkfeet** could be heard as we climbed out of the cars. The first hide was the visitor centre, where a welcome hot drink and a good view of the loch awaited us.

The geese were on the back fields; Pinkfeet, **Greylags**, and some **Barnacles**. Whoopers, including 3 juveniles along with some **Mute Swans** were on the pool. The keener eyes soon spied a **Spotted Redshank** in winter plumage on passage with its interesting feeding habit of wading deeply and swimming with a sweeping bill action. Other waders included **Curlew**, **Redshank**, **Greenshank**, **Dunlin**, **Snipe** and many **Lapwing**.

On my short walk through flat fields to the Tower hide, a huge flock of geese flew up with that wonderful ethereal sound, leaving me spellbound. 20 volunteers from Aberdeen University's conservation society were busy planting trees. The sun came out here and brought out the colour of the **Golden Plovers'** plumage. There were many in amongst the lapwings. We had good views of **Teal**, **Gadwall**, **Pochard**, **Tufted**, **Wigeon** and found two **Pintail** at the back.

Back at the visitor centre, a **Peregrine** had obligingly perched on a fence post in front of the viewing area. Mr Dunbar, the first warden (retired) talked about starting the reserve in 1973 with the RSPB. There were then about 3,000 geese wintering then. Now up to 70,000 can be present at one time. He said a lot of work and management has been done to improve the surrounds and that there used to be a lot of shooting. He had found prehistoric remains near the loch and suggested that the people were transient.

An area outside with trees and a willow arch provided very good views of **Tree Sparrow** on nut hangers. **Tits** – **Blue**, **Coal** and **Great**, and **Goldfinches**, **Greenfinches**, **Chaffies**, **Linnets**, **Yellowhammer** and **Reed Bunting** were seen.

We all drove to the next two hides on the south side of the loch through a disused airfield past a grain silo. There were seaplanes operating from the loch in the war. The approach to the fen hide involved a lovely boardwalk through willow trees. There were singing posts where buttons pressed gave birdsong, useful as a teaching aid with a quiz. From the hide a few wild ponies could be seen at the back of the loch on the fields. These were Polish in origin and graze away the rushes that might otherwise invade the loch. There were good views of duck here.

Some of the pink feet have been fitted with collars with a unique 3 letter code. This is coordinated by the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust and local ringing groups in order to study the movements of individual birds.

Some interesting Pink Foot facts:

The oldest recorded age is 38.

The average lifespan is around 10.

They mate for life.

They breed after the age of three.

Families remain together through the winter.

The juveniles do not have a white line on their flanks.

We then moved on – some went up to Rattray Head and then we looked at the loch opposite St Mary's, a ruined church built in 1220. It was a storm in 1720 that finished both the church and blocked with sand the sea access to the loch, which became the largest Scottish lagoon.

We saw a large group of **Cormorants** roosting on a spit. Afterwards we motored down to the River Ythan and had a look at the waders there, including **Grey Plover**, **Bar-tailed Godwit** and **Oystercatchers**. However by then it had started to rain so after a fabulous day we decided to repair to a local hostelry for a very convivial evening meal.

Species seen:

Little Grebe, Grey Heron, Mute Swan, Whooper Swan, Pink Footed Geese, Barnacle Geese, Greylag, Cormorant, Gannet, Mallard, Teal, Eider, Long-tailed Duck, Wigeon, Red-breasted Merganser, Gadwall, Shoveler, Goldeneye, Pochard, Pintail, Tufted Duck, Buzzard, Kestrel, Sparrowhawk, Peregrine, Curlew, Lapwing, Redshank, Spotted Redshank, Greenshank, Golden Plover, Dunlin, Snipe, Grey Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit, Oystercatcher, Herring Gull, Common Gull, Black-headed Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Wood Pigeon, Collared Dove, Feral Pigeon, Skylark, Moorhen, Coot, Dunnock, Starling, Robin, Blackbird, Magpie, House Sparrow, Tree Sparrow, Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Chaffinch, Linnet, Blue Tit, Coal Tit, Great Tit, Yellowhammer, Reed Bunting, Rook, Hoodie, Carrion Crow, Jackdaw, Magpie. 67 species.

Jill Smith

Outing to Loch Fleet – 6 November 2011

It was a lovely morning as a group of ten members and one visitor gathered at the layby on the A9 just north of the Black Isle. While standing around waiting for the last arrivals, **Mallard** were dabbling in the edge of the Cromarty Firth, **Blue Tit** and **Great Tit** were flitting about in the bushes, a **Robin** was singing from one of the trees and a **Blackbird** flew low along the edge of the layby. All the time, skeins of **Greylag Geese** were flying overhead, honking loudly as they headed south.

We climbed into as few cars as possible and headed off up the A9. Numerous **Rooks** were foraging in the stubble fields, with a few **Carrion Crows** amongst them. Several **Hooded Crows** were perched on straw bales and a **Buzzard** soared overhead as we travelled in a convoy between Alness and Invergordon. A small flock of **Woodpigeon** flew alongside the cars and a **Heron** flapped lazily away from the road. The occupants of one car saw a **Jay** cross the road (on the wing!) near the turning to Tain. Not far away, **Jackdaws** were gathering around some old buildings.

We stopped to scan the inner Dornoch Firth. A single **Pintail** was floating close to a small group of **Wigeon**. Some **Teal** were gathered near the shore at Ferry Point, while a small gang of **Black-headed Gulls** rested on the water just off the point. A single **Black-backed Gull** flew overhead. Three or four **Herring Gulls** were preening on rocks close to a **Shag** standing with outstretched wings, catching the sun and breeze were seen from the other side of the road.

Our next stop was at The Mound where **Teal**, **Wigeon** and a **Heron** were the immediate sightings. However, **Goldeneye** were soon spotted floating close by. A **Curlew** or two were wading in the shallows and three **Greenshank** were feeding at the waters edge with some **Hoodies** searching the grass behind them. A small flock of **Redshank** flew in while a pair of **Little Grebe** worked their way up the east side of the loch. **Redwing**

were heard calling as they flew over and a **Blackbird** called from the trees on the far side. A group of **Common Gulls** were paddling about mid-loch as a flock of **Woodpigeon** flew over them.

A large raptor was spotted soaring over the skyline to the far north-west. After much debate it was agreed to be a **Golden Eagle**. While the discussion was going on, a flock of geese landed on the loch in front of us. One of the **Greylags** had a numbered neck collar and this was noted. Close study of the geese revealed several **Pinkfeet** among them. As we prepared to leave, a **Coal Tit** flew by.

Further up the road we had a comfort stop at Golspie. While standing in the car park, **House Sparrows** were twittering in the bushes of the garden next door and a **Collared Dove** surveyed the area from high up in one of the trees.

Lunch was enjoyed in sunshine at Little Ferry overlooking the stretch of water between Loch Fleet and the sea. A **Cormorant** flew upstream while **Oystercatchers** strutted on the foreshore. A **Greater Spotted Woodpecker** was attacking a telegraph pole by the road. Far out to sea, both adult and juvenile **Gannets** passed by. In the water in front of us, a **Slavonian Grebe** was followed by a **Red-breasted Merganser** on their way inland.

As we walked round to the pier, several **Chaffinch** were disputing ownership of the peanut feeder outside one of the houses. A **Curlew** was feeding on the foreshore as a **Little Grebe** was diving in the shallows. A **Goldeneye** swam past a couple of motionless **Hérons** who also ignored the **Redshank** that landed nearby.

We drove round to the south side of Loch Fleet adding **Lapwing** and **Shelduck** to our list but could see nothing else. As we drove towards Dornoch, our final stop of the day, several **Pheasant** were feeding in the fields by the road.

The sun was getting low in the sky and the temperature was dropping as we looked out to sea from the car park. A small raft of **Eider** was bobbing about with several **Long-tailed Duck** in attendance. A **Red-throated Diver** threaded its way through a scattered group of **Common Scoter**. These were checked one by one and eventually, in spite of the swell, several **Velvet Scoter** were identified.

While we were starting to pack up, three or four **Pied Wagtails** flew along the beach and a few **Linnets** were having a last feed in the grass behind the beach.

Our final bird of the day was a **Wren** that popped in and out of the bramble bush right beside us. A great ending to an excellent day with 49 species observed. Thank you, Simon!

Carol James

Morning outing to Duffus, Burghead and Roseisle

Thursday Nov 17th 2011

A select group of enthusiasts set off in the direction of Duffus, inland from Hopeman, in the hopes of spotting geese, perhaps even **Bean geese**, on the extensive stubble fields near Duffus castle. But no, the huge fields had mostly been very recently ploughed up or were actually being ploughed as we watched! A wild goose chase??

However, the hedgerows afforded views of **Tree Sparrows**, **Great and Blue Tits**, **Fieldfares**, **Magpie**, **Wood Pigeon** and a **Peregrine**. Finches were very much in evidence and a few **Pinkfeet** and **Lapwing** were spotted across the fields.

The sky was somewhat overcast but began to lighten as we made our way to Burghead. Lots of wader activity at the shoreline with **Oystercatcher**, dainty **Turnstone** and **Redshank** systematically probing through the seaweed among the rocks. From the point a good variety of sea birds were seen, including **Eider**, **Common Scoter**, **Long-tailed Duck**, four types of gull, juvenile **Gannets** and some wonderfully acrobatic **Knots**. A **Purple Sandpiper** was spotted and away on a promontory both **Cormorant** and **Shag** were preening.

Onwards to Roseisle for the highlight of the day, no, of the week, even of the month or year! Several **Little Auks** bobbing on the waves: “now you see me, now you don’t”. Really clear through the scopes, with **Common** and **Velvet Scoter**, **Slavonian Grebe** and a **Black-throated Diver**. Most unfair for the novice that the Black-throated Diver has a beautiful white neck with no black visible whatsoever! And another highlight produced for good measure, a charming busy little **Crested Tit** viewed from really close by and not at all fazed by its audience. What a treat! Thank you Lynda for a morning full of interest and two firsts for me. (Total: 48+)

Freydis Campbell

**SOC – Highland Branch Excursion along the Moray Firth coast from Inverness to Lossiemouth,
Thursday 19th January 2012**

After my move to Beaulieu from thirty years of self imposed exile in Assynt, Sutherland I was looking forward to my first Highland Branch outing. I met up with ten hardy souls (the weather wasn’t great – a cold biting wind, occasional showers) including the outing leader Lynda Graham at the Inverness Retail Park. There was a bit of eco friendly car sharing to sort out before we headed east along the A96.

The main topic of conversation was the large flocks of geese that have been seen around the Inverness area recently. On the way, a number of well known sites were to be checked for flocks of Pink-footed or Greylag Geese which may have Bean, White-fronted or even Barnacles amongst them.

We turned off the A96 for our first stop at the Nairn water front. Species seen included **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Long-tailed Duck**, **Goldeneye**, **Red-throated Diver**, **Curlew**, **Turnstone** and **Snow Bunting**. First left out of Nairn took us onto a back road skirting the Culbin Forest. Along the way we saw **Mistle Thrush**, **Fieldfare** and **Yellowhammers** in amongst a flock of Finches (**Chaffinch & Greenfinch**). Back onto the A96 at the River Findhorn and a left off the Forres bypass towards Kinloss. At one point we stopped in a wooded area and saw a Brown Hare watching us for a while before it disappeared into the undergrowth. Finally, along a stretch of road past Duffus we saw a large flock of Geese on the ground, the flock growing by the minute as more arrived. At distance nothing of note was seen amongst these **Pink-footed Geese**. Four **Buzzards** were circling over a wooded hill near-by.

The next stop was a car park overlooking the mouth of the River Lossie. Large numbers of Ducks, especially **Wigeon** and good numbers of Waders notably a flock of **Dunlin** were seen. There was a single **Godwit**. Was it a Black-tailed or was it a Bar-tailed? In the end it was marked down as **Bar-tailed**. Next port of call was Burghead where a large raft of **Eiders** were seen in the harbour. As we drove onto the pier there were good views of a first winter **Glaucous Gull** on a lamp standard. On the way back we stopped off at Roseisle in the hope that we might see Crested Tit. No joy with that but a **Velvet Scoter** was seen from the beach.

By the time we got back to Inverness the species count was 65. All in all a good day out which I fair enjoyed. Many thanks to Lynda for leading the outing.

Doug Mainland

LOCH SPYNIE TRIP, 22 JANUARY 2012

Thank goodness this trip was on the Sunday, not the day before as we were spared the driving rain all day, though it was blustery and far from warm. It was also good to see a very healthy twelve as the total of participants. Surprisingly, for a plan devised by yours truly, it was stuck to and we visited Roseisle, Burghead, Lossiemouth and Garmouth, before reaching the hide at Loch Spynie, having scanned every likely goose field along the way.

After gaining our full complement at Tesco Elgin, we made straight for the picnic car park at Roseisle where Alex immediately picked up on calling **Crested Tits**. They were moving about high in the conifers with

Goldcrests and **Coal Tits**, but no one seemed to get a good view of them. We walked down to the bay where the sudden force of the wind took us by surprise. It was quite choppy, making searching for sea ducks quite tricky, but good views were obtained by most for **Common** and **Velvet Scoters**, **Northern Eiders**, **Red-breasted Mergansers** and particularly for the numerous **Long-tailed Ducks**.

We now drove to Burghead, picking up sightings of **Magpies** on our way. Alex had advised that a first-winter **Glaucous Gull** would be perched on a streetlamp at the harbour. Aye, right was the general view of that prediction, but lo and behold, there it was – on a streetlamp! There were many more Eiders, **Rock Pipit** and the more usual gulls, but the latter were joined briefly by an adult winter [not first-winter, as I called it at the time] **Iceland Gull**, but this flew through to the maltings and was not seen again. One interposing **Shag** gave us a little lesson in ID as it sat with **Cormorants** on the sea wall. Round to the north side of the town and we managed to get on to our one diver of the trip – a **Red-throated**. Dick Hewitt arrived at this point to update us on the nearby geese, essentially to let us know they had hopped it and confirming the dearth of divers hereabouts. **Goldeneye**, **Redshanks** and **Pied Wagtail** were among the additions at this time.

Heavy hints told us it was lunch-time and we spent this at Lossiemouth Estuary. The high tide had begun to recede and so it was an apt time to watch, particularly, waders and these included **Bar-tailed Godwits**, **Sanderlings** and lots of **Dunlin**, with the wildfowl dominated by **Wigeon** and a scattering of **Teal**.

We now followed a mazy route that took us to Garmouth and Kingston adding a flock of **Mistle Thrushes** and distant views of both **Greylag** and **Pink-footed Geese**, but all of the more exotic goose species were absent. Our list was creeping up towards the half century as we headed to our final destination of Spynie.

Having seen no finch flocks, the single **Siskin** and **Chaffinch** at the car park were more than usually well appreciated. Ensnared in the hide, we had high hopes of adding quite a few new birds for the trip. The loch, however, was comparatively bare of birds, but **Mute** and **Whooper Swans**, **Tufted Ducks** and a **Blue Tit** were added before our final species was clinched by Ann when she excitedly called “**Scaup**” for a bird which had mysteriously appeared from nowhere, right in front of the hide.

On a quiet birding day we had climbed to a total of 56 species. Thanks to Frank and Liz Johnstone, Rebecca and Christy James, David and Kathy Bonniface, Margaret Colles, Ann Sime, Alex Joss, Carol James and Jenny for their company and coming out on a cold day.

Alastair McNee

INDOOR MEETINGS & FIELD TRIPS 2011 – 2012

All **Indoor Meetings** are held, unless stated otherwise, at Culloden Library, Inverness, at 7:30pm on the given dates. For further information, please contact Kathy Bonniface, Branch Secretary, on 01808 511740.

For **Field Trips**, please meet at Inverness Retail Park, near Burger King unless stated otherwise. Weekend outings are full day, Thursday outings are morning only – which can take in lunch and thus finish around 2pm if the birding is good! The destination for the latter will be local and will be decided at the last minute, to take account of recent reports. For further information, please contact Kathy Bonniface on 01808 511740 or the Leader.

Indoor Meetings:

2012

17 April - Branch AGM followed with a talk by Pete Mayhew (RSPB) on ‘Bird Reserves in the Highlands – the next 20 years’.

Field Trips:

2012

Thursday 22 March -	Local Outing
Saturday 21 April -	Strathspey (Leader Keith Duncan, 01479 810477)
Thursday 26 April -	Local Outing
Saturday 12 May -	Dawn Chorus. <u>5am start</u> . (Leader, Simon Cohen, 01349 830365)
May 18 – 21 -	“Uig & beyond”. This will be a weekend trip to the Uists/Western Isles, by car as opposed to being specifically led.

Useful Contacts

Branch Secretary:	Kathy Bonniface	(kathybonniface@aol.com) Tel: 01808 511740
Newsletter Editor:	David Bain	(bainrock@btinternet.com)
Local Recorder:	Hugh Insley	(hugh.insley@btinternet.com)

THURSDAY FORAYS

Since the 2007/08 session the club has been running these mid-week, half-day field trips as well as the full-day ones at the weekend, and they have proved to be quite popular and successful. Destination details are not printed in the programme as this is often decided at the last minute, depending on weather forecasts and the reports found on Birdguides or from our local recorder of anything unusual in the area. The half-day can also restrict the distances we travel, but for something unusual I'm sure we could forget to look at our watches, although we vociferously deny being twitchers!

In September we visited a variety of spots on the Black Isle, heading towards Udale Bay and Newhall Point. The winter flocks of wigeon had started to arrive, plus large numbers of bar-tailed godwits, lapwing and knot. Sitting on a rock was a small group of sandwich terns, all tagged or flagged in some way, and there was considerable discussion as to the letters on the leg-rings, the information of which was sent in to the relevant authorities. The last swallow of the season for me was seen as well as the first redwing of the winter. Large rafts of scaup, common eider and several Slavonian grebes also gave good views in the sunlight.

October saw us heading east via Milton of Culloden, Ardersier and Nairn to Burghead and Roseisle. No luck with the king eider which had been present a few days before, but plenty of waders, and the delightful long-tailed ducks, scoters, common eiders and Brent geese.

On each outing we had a total of 50+ species – not a bad count for just a morning – but the aim is not just to see the largest number of birds, but to find and watch and enjoy. The pleasure, I think, comes from birding with like-minded people, learning identification skills, enjoying the splendid sights and taking delight in the unexpected find. If you feel you would enjoy these field trips, then you would be most welcome to join us.

Lynda Graham

REPORT ON MEETING WITH JANE CLEAVER.

Jane is a new member of the Waterston House team, with a remit to raise awareness of SOC, especially for potential young members. In order to do this she is meeting with each branch to learn more about each one.

Alex and I had an encouraging and productive meeting with her, and learnt about some of her ideas, and ways in which she could help us:

- She is looking to revamp the SOC website, with the possibility of new members being able to sign up electronically, which would save on paperwork.
- She is preparing a package of information to give to new members, which could include a page prepared by the relevant branch.
- She could possibly take on the role of welcoming new members by phone.
- She would very much like to help us by representing the branch, and manning a stall, at major events, e.g. an Inverness festival. To this end she is preparing a set of display materials to use. (We both felt that if she were prepared to do this, some of our members might be prepared to join her for an hour or so).
- She is also looking into the idea of roving speakers to go occasionally to regions remote from the main branch centres.

We raised the issue of SOC joining Twitter, and gave all our reservations, or dislike of the idea. She assured us that she too could see some of the disadvantages, and that as a branch we would not be obliged to do anything we did not like, e.g. bird locations etc. People in other branches have expressed differing opinions on this issue, and it is still very much under discussion.

In total, this was a very positive meeting, and our impression was that her appointment could be a useful one to all.

Kathy Bonniface

Wildlife Management in Scotland

SNH wishes to carry out some research to help the organisation gain a better understanding of wildlife management issues in Scotland. If you go to the website <http://www.whyresearch.org/SNHwildlife> you can take part in the survey.

Allt Duine Wind Farm

At the last Committee meeting, the Branch's position with regard to a Public Enquiry on this wind farm was discussed at length. It was decided not to send a letter of objection, for several reasons: we are not a conservation campaigning organisation, but a club; we do not have the expertise or research facilities to find all the facts in the case relating to birds; to intervene on behalf of one campaigning organisation would be to open the way for many other requests for similar interventions.

It was agreed to mention the issue at the next Branch meeting and give the appropriate email address, but to advise individual members who object that they should send letters of objection as individuals, not as representatives of the Branch or SOC.

Dates for your Diary - Indoor Meetings in Session 2012 – 2013

These will be: 2012. 4 September; 2 October; 6 November and 4 December.

2013. 8 January; 5 February; 5 March; 16 April.