

The Scottish Ornithologists' Club
Scotland's Bird Club

Highland Bird News No 122

March 2014



Editorial

I must apologise for the long gap since the issue of HBN 121. Time stands still for no-one! Anyway, this bumper edition will, I hope, be of interest and as always, contributions for inclusion in a future issue will be welcomed and can be sent by email to me at bainrock@btinternet.com

Spring is not far off now, officially at any rate. We have fared much better than most of the UK over these last few months, but perhaps we had better not count our chickens, yet?

The American Coot found at Loch Flemington on 4 January is still present and surely must have been seen by most local birders. A female Lesser Scaup at Allanfean was a little more difficult to see at times and hasn't featured in BirdGuides reports for a while now. 4 Avocets were at Udale Bay on 31 January. A Little Egret was seen near Inverness Airport on 2 February and an adult Little Gull was at Whiteness Head on the 4th. There is a Tundra Bean Goose with Pinkfeet on the Black Isle, last seen at Glenurquhart Farm between Rosemarkie & Cromarty on 3 March.

Spring migrants are on their way, with reports of Osprey, Swallow, Sand Martin, Wheatear and Black Redstart in England.

How many of you witnessed the spectacular display of the Aurora Borealis on the evening of Thursday 27 February? The evening was still and the sky completely clear. I had gone out to look at the stars; Jupiter was directly over the house, its four moons clearly visible through binoculars. It was about 8:20pm when I first became aware of the Aurora and even allowing for the illumination from Inverness itself, the display was distinctly visible, the flicker and changing colours all making a wonderful sight.

On the Club front, something to celebrate. Membership has passed 3000 for the first time in the Club's 78 year history. Thanks are due in no small measure to Jane Cleaver, who has done much to achieve this success.

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 CURRENT SESSION

2014

March

04	Indoor	Rhian Evans – East Scotland Sea Eagles
08	Field trip	Dornoch – Loch Fleet area – Leader Simon Cohen
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 Graeme Prest

May

01	Field trip	Local birding – Leader TBC
16 - 19	Field trip	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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Branch Membership Update for period from 17 July 2013

The following new members are welcomed:

Ms M C Bale, Alness

Mr K Davis, Cromarty

Mrs I Glover, Inverness

Mr J Henderson, Aviemore

Dr Jon Mercer, Fort William

Mr & Mrs J Manson, Muir of Ord

Ms J Tyrer, Farr

Resignations:

Mr S Bentall, Broadford

Ms H Chance, Rosemarkie

Mr S Green, Carrbridge

Mrs M Mackay, Inverness

Mr C Mitchell, Kingussie

Mr A Muir, Fort William

Mr J Poyner, Nethybridge

Prof W McBryde, Inverness

Miss K Nellist, Glen Brittle

Ms F Newcombe, Forres

Ms F Strachan, Croy

Thursday Trips

Thursday outings are on the programme as half-day trips with the option to stay out longer depending on weather, the birds that are around and peoples' preferences. Needless to say, many of these trips have lasted the full day and it's dark by the time we get home.

November's field trip took us onto the Black Isle and, being creatures of habit, we visited the usual sites. We had a visitor join us, an excellent birder used to doing wader watches on the Thames estuary, and it was amusing to see him at Chanonry not knowing whether to concentrate on the fly-past of long-tailed ducks with his bins, study the plumage of the winter great northern diver in his scope, or use the long-lensed camera to photograph the dolphins which were displaying well, almost within touching distance. He was also delighted at Udale with the American wigeon which was a lifer for him, and also a lifer for some of our own regulars. Another highlight was the large raptor which gave very brief views as it flew over the hide; most likely the goshawk that Mark had seen several times quartering over the salt-marsh.

December saw us venture east along the Moray coast and it was definitely a case of '3 Little Maids from the SOC', braving atrocious weather. First stop was at Allanfearn where the lesser scaup was giving excellent views, then on to Ardersier, but no sign of the Iceland gull which had been there the previous day, and on to Nairn for the Brent geese. In between snow showers the light was excellent, giving quite dramatic views. Towards Findhorn we had 4 species of thrushes all in the same patch, a huge flock of swirling golden plover and about a hundred striking-looking pintail in the bay. Burghead east bay gave us common and velvet scoter, eider, long-tailed duck, and divers but not the elusive king eider unfortunately. The strong gales and an extremely high tide meant that the harbour was awash but many ducks were sheltering there giving great views. On both these trips we recorded over fifty different species.

In January we went east again hoping for the king eider that had been seen in Nairn, and also in Hopeman. Arriving in the car park we were met with what must be the birder's most dreaded comment...'You should have been here 10 minutes ago!' We had missed little auk and, as if that wasn't enough, we also missed grey phalarope! We spent the day at a variety of sites along the coast ending up at Loch Spynie, having clocked up a total of 63 species with some stunning sights. But no king eider. One day!

Lynda Graham

Mongolia June 2013

My trip to Mongolia was organised by a small specialist company "Speyside Wildlife" and I was part of a group of 10 clients who met at Heathrow airport. We were joined by the UK guide. The evening flight to Seoul took 10 hours and we were made comfortable by the charming staff of Korean Airlines. We had a wait of several hours before we could board the plane for a 3hour flight to Ulaanbaatar (UB) the capital of Mongolia. Waiting to meet us were 2 further guides and our 4 Mongolian drivers and, in no time, ourselves and luggage were transferred to 4x4 vehicles and we were on our way to Terelz National Park east of UB where we stayed in a hotel for 2 nights.

We awoke to sunshine and found ourselves surrounded by attractive Siberian Taiga Forest. Siberia is essentially made up of treeless tundra and taiga forest, which extends in an enormous swathe across northern Eurasia virtually unbroken. Mongolia has a comparatively small area of the boreal woodland and so our first taste of wildlife favoured species more typical of Siberia such as the Siberian rubythroat and Taiga flycatcher. The next day and a half was spent amongst rolling hillsides cloaked in trees, flower-strewn meadows and very distinctive rock formations over which soared magnificent birds of prey. Many birds, unlike humans, range across Eurasia unhampered by political boundaries and so I recognised booted eagle, black vulture and bearded vulture from previous European trips. The bearded vulture or lammergeier is known as the bone breaker as it drops bones in order to gain access to nutritious (!) bone marrow. We enjoyed a picnic lunch admiring carpets of pink birdseye

primrose as well as cream and purple pasque flowers. Amongst the bushes were many colourful pine bunting, often singing from the tops of the shrubs sounding very like our yellowhammer, a related species.

We then moved onto our next destination, Gun Galut Nature Reserve, where we stayed 2 nights. Here we were in steppe country, which forms a large part of Northern Mongolia as well as Russia. Indeed it was this enormous area of flat grassland that enabled Genghis Khan and his terrifying hordes to sweep across Eurasia as far as present day Poland. We were to meet Genghis, not in the flesh, but in the form of an impressive steel statue of the man on horseback. It was built by a Mongolian tourist company to attract in tourists who come to visit the statue, museum and restaurant. From a distance the visitors looked like ants running round the feet of the horse, so enormous was the construction. During our stay in Gun Galut NR we visited 4 shallow lakes; important sources of water not only for wildlife but also for the domestic stock belonging to the traditional herdsman namely horses, goats, sheep and camels. We were treated to the sight of many elegant Demoiselle cranes and the rarer white-naped crane. There were many waders and plovers, some familiar such as avocet and lapwing and others exciting rarities such as Asian dowitcher and grey-headed lapwing.

Our next destination was Hustai National Park to the west of UB where we stayed 3 nights in a tourist Ger camp and experienced sleeping in traditional yurts. The large circular tents would normally accommodate an entire nomadic family and are designed for easy dismantling to facilitate moving on to fresh grazing pastures. The yurts in a tourist camp combine tradition with western style comforts and I really enjoyed the experience. We were surrounded by rolling hills and grassy sand dunes where early morning birding was an added bonus. I was becoming more familiar with birds adapted to a dry, scrub environment such as Asian short-toed lark, Mongolian lark, Daurian shrike and Daurian partridge.

A day was spent around alkaline lakes and salt marshes full of birds including rarities such as snow goose and relict gull. Another day was spent amongst grassy hills where we searched unsuccessfully for wolf. We were rewarded with a wonderful family group of Przewalski horse right beside the road. This species has been reintroduced as it is an endangered native animal to the steppes of Central Asia and was last seen in Mongolia in 1966. It is related to *Equus ferus*, the wild horse and it was great to see a number of foal indicating a promising future for a delightful creature.

Our colourful, capable drivers left us for the long drive to the Gobi desert. Meanwhile a coach was organised to transfer us to UB airport where we did some birding before we flew to Dalanzadgad, the capital of the Gobi region and stayed overnight in a comfortable hotel. It was great to meet up with the drivers and our vehicles which were plastered with sandy mud as there had been some rain making the drive more arduous and challenging. Near the airport, we encountered the Oriental Plover, reminiscent of a very colourful version of our dotterel.

Dalanzadgad like UB are products of the Soviet era and hence very ugly. My understanding is that they were built to support the mining from which the Russians mostly benefitted. Mongolia is mineral rich and, since the introduction of democracy, appears to have more control over these resources. We had an early start for a long drive into the Gobi Desert and a 2 night stay at another tourist Ger camp. However, we stopped off at Yolyn Am, a spectacular narrow, rocky gorge where, in some places the sun hardly penetrated and there was still snow underfoot. It was a very dramatic walk of about 2 miles into the gorge where they were plenty of birds. I found that it was the mammals that were the stars here. There was a small group of Ibex on a slope high above us and, as we walked, the immediate slopes seemed full of scuttling picas, mid-day jirds and long-tailed ground squirrel; all unbelievably small and cute.

We were very late arriving at the camp but it was a delight to wake up in the morning to a stony desert stretching towards immensely high golden sand dunes against a backdrop of the Altai mountain range. The sand dunes are known as the Khongorin Els and, as contradictory as it would appear, support an area of low growing trees known as Saxaul Forrest. This was a good place to search for small birds especially the Saxaul sparrow and to enjoy some shade as it was now much hotter than further north. There was a shallow river

where at least a hundred Pallas's sandgrouse came down to drink in the cool of the early morning. The experience was quite magical as the desert scene glowed under a rising sun and the birds flew in and called to one another before settling by the river. We had a feast of desert loving birds while we were at Khongorin Els and in the evening went round the edge of the camp with torches looking for jumping jerboas (Mongolian Five-toed Jerboa and Northern Three-toed Jerboa). Again, very cute mammals, caught in the torchlight but unconcerned and tame.

I was very sad to leave such a remote and exciting place but we had another adventure awaiting us when we reached Dalanzadgad airport for our morning flight back to UB. Due to uncharacteristic rain and wind at UB the flight was postponed with only a possibility of flying in the evening. After much discussion, it was decided that we would go back with the drivers who preferred company rather than driving empty vehicles. The experience felt like we were in an episode of "Top Gear" driving across enormous spaces with minimal evidence of tracks and of course no SatNav or maps. We stayed overnight in a hotel in Mandal Gobi rather than UB and the next day we had plenty of time to reach UB for our evening flight back to Seoul. There was time for a few more megaticks (birding speak for rarities). Our 3 guides had been excellent for their enthusiasm and skills in finding birds and mammals. In a country like Mongolia which is still not used to many tourists, organisational skills were provided by Balazs and Uugan. Balazs is Hungarian and his company is ideally situated for Natural History trips in Central and Eastern European countries but has recently branched out to Mongolia. Uugan is a lecturer at Mongolia University and does research work on birds. He worked in the background smoothing over difficulties both large and small relating to accommodation and travel. Shortly after we returned to the UK, Mongolia had an election and I certainly hope the future is bright for a country with lots of potential.

Hilary Rolton

Pelagic out of Gairloch, 10 September

On the morning of 10 September, ten intrepid Highland birders (plus a welcome 'hanger-on' from Edinburgh) met on Gairloch pier for a pelagic on the M V Kerry operated by Hebridean Whale Cruises. Unfortunately Nick Davies who was to skipper the boat, with a wealth of knowledge of the seabirds and wildlife of the Minch, had been called away on a personal matter and we had a stand-in skipper not used to the ways of birders and birding, but who at least got us there and back safely!

As we paid up (just £36 each – not bad for a full day out on the waves) and milled about in anticipation we were greeted with the news that the toilet on board was out of order – but there was a bucket! Needless to say everyone visited the facilities on the pier and drinks were left firmly in rucksacks until we were safely back in view of the harbour at the end of the trip.

Once aboard, tough conditions in the Minch, poor light, mist, rain and lumpy seas, all combined to make this a rather challenging trip. Numbers of seabirds were rather disappointing too, with no notable passage. We headed out to the Burma Bank, an area where the seafloor of the Minch rises sharply, producing upwelling currents, nutrients, and in theory lots of birds. In the absence of Nick, handling the chum was done by some of the stalwart participants, donning rubber gloves and creating a 'slick' of fish oil, chopped up mackerel, dog biscuits and bread. The latter are supposed to attract in gulls, whose feeding frenzy attracts other seabirds; the oil and fish smell should bring in petrels and shearwaters. The first birds to arrive were great black-backed gulls, fulmars, gannets and bonxies (great skuas), then a few kittiwakes and several storm petrels. Unfortunately none of the hoped for, more unusual, seabirds came in.

Despite the challenges we managed the following species list:- herring gull, great black-backed gull, common gull, kittiwake, gannet, cormorant, shag, common tern (1), guillemot, razorbill, black guillemot, puffin, great skua (c20), arctic skua (1), red-throated diver (3), fulmar, storm petrel (c12), manx shearwater (c5) and sooty shearwater (1). A Leach's petrel was seen by some but unfortunately didn't hang around.

Cetacean sightings included harbour porpoise, unidentified dolphin sp. and two very nice white-beaked dolphins

- a good record for the area and not an easy species to see in this part of the world.

Despite the conditions and lack of birds it was an enjoyable day out and even after 7 hours at sea it was great to hear people still chatting and laughing; the craic was good. It was good to meet up and re-affirm some old birding friendships and also a great opportunity to make some new ones.

We may make this an annual event; and hopefully next year's will produce some of the scarcer seabirds – a 'mega' or two wouldn't go amiss – great shearwater, Fea's petrel dream on.

Richard Rafe

LOCH of STRATHBEG – SOC Weekend Trip 5th - 6th October 2013

The weather forecast for the weekend was good when 17 of us set off from Inverness in 7 cars, at 8.00am prompt. Our car had a brief stop en route, just after Nairn, to confirm that the skeins of geese flying over were Pinkfeet. The travel instructions from David Bain were excellent and everyone arrived safely at the Loch of Strathbeg. The bushes near the car park held several Tree Sparrows and we spent a short while admiring these smart birds before moving on. The light was superb, and from the viewing area in the centre we made a good start. The Pink-footed Geese in the far fields were numerous, with a recent count of 22,000. These were carefully scanned and several Barnacle Geese were spotted but, after serious discussion, it was decided that the distant pale goose was a partially leucistic Pink-foot, as it did not have the heavier bill of Bean Goose that we had been hoping for. Also, as it was sitting down, most inconsiderate of it, we couldn't see the leg colour.

Several times a large flock of over 200 Lapwing was seen flying over the geese, along with a much smaller flock of Golden Plover. Ever hopeful for a raptor, the sky was scanned to see what had put them up, but no luck.

The pools in front of us were very productive, with a good range of waders and ducks. Lynda spotted 3 Ruff behind the geese. [I just wish my eyesight was as good as hers.] Several godwit turned out to be Black-tailed and not Bar-tailed as first thought. A lot of wing-flapping, showing the large white wingbar, was the proof. As the waders were in transition plumage this can cause confusion. Some still had plenty of summer plumage, while others were in full winter plumage, as well as anything in between. Mallard, Teal, Shoveler and Wigeon were some of the duck species seen. A group of 7 Konik ponies [a Polish species] were grazing behind the pools, doing their bit for conservation.

Next we walked to the Tower Hide through the grass and corn fields with several hedges. All very good for small birds. Seven Skylarks flew over and a good-sized flock [50+] of Goldfinches was feeding on the corn heads and weed seeds along with a few more Tree Sparrows and 3 Reed Buntings, all constantly flying up into the cover of the nearby hedge. A Buzzard was perched on a concrete building and there were plenty of corvids flying about. We had more good views of the geese, ducks and waders from the hide as well as seeing 1 Swallow.

Next stop was Rattray Head where thoughts turned to lunch! After breakfasting at 6.00am we were glad of this as by now it was almost 2.00pm. Someone was heard to say they had already eaten tomorrow's sandwiches! After lunch birding became a game of patience, with our group splitting up and going different ways round the garden of the former lighthousekeepers house, everyone staring at gorse bushes and vegetation. We all managed to see the Firecrest present, a superb bright little bird, making the accompanying Goldcrest look drab and dull. Other birds around were Robins, Blackbirds, Song Thrush, Stonechats and Willow Warblers. Ann was lucky enough to see the Bluethroat, while Frank saw the Lesser Whitethroat. Some walked down to the lighthouse and saw Red-throated Divers, Gannets and Shags as well as lots of Eider Duck on the sea. As the light was starting to fade we set off back down the track, deciding the flock of small birds on the fields were Linnets.

Last stop for the day was Crimond airfield, at the Bay and Fen hides. A Kestrel hovered over the airfield, ever hopeful, while the pools had good numbers of wildfowl on them. Lots of Wigeon were present as well as a number of Tufted Duck and a dozen or so Whooper Swans. A very smart male Pintail was seen in with the Wigeon, while behind them were Pink-footed geese flying in constantly, calling and settling on the water to roost for the night. Air traffic control were obviously in charge, as 2 skeins of geese thought to be on a collision

course were actually at different heights. Several Herons punctuated the vegetation and water. All this against a fantastic sunset. As it got dusk and then dark we travelled south to the White Horse Inn at Balmedie, our stopover for the night. They fed us well, with breakfast next morning setting us up well for another good day's birding.

Sunday and more good weather, we spent most of the day around various sites on the River Ythan. First Newburgh golf course with detailed searches of the bushes. In a small area of burnt gorse [the blackened stems like a modern sculpture] 3 Yellowhammers showed up well. Robins and Wrens were the only other birds seen here. Down on the riverside plenty of waders were on the mud and damp shingle. There were Curlews, Turnstones, Redshanks and dunlin. Among a flock of Knot, 1 still had most of its rusty red breast still intact, and another wader flapped its wings showing black axillaries, thus proving it was Grey Plover. Both Common and Atlantic grey seals were basking, shuffling and 'singing' on the far side of the river. The focus of our attention turned to the hundreds of Eider Ducks, but after walking to the estuary and scanning all the males we could not find the King Eider that had recently been seen. We spent some time near the Mussel House and further up the estuary. Waders were numerous with lots of Dunlins and Redshanks. We had good views of a Greenshank which was feeding, flying and calling its distinctive 'chew, chew, chew' call when in flight. More Common Eiders were scanned but no luck.

Then over the bridge to the Forvie NNR car park where some saw a Little Egret fly off and disappear up the river, not to be seen again. Still, we had more species here with Goosander and Shelduck added to our duck count. Also more Greenshanks on the far side of the river. Then away from the Ythan and visits to Meikle Loch with a Peregrine standing in a field at the far side of the loch. A brief look at Cotehill Loch gave us 4 Little Grebes and a few Mallard. Then on to the coast where we saw several Arctic Skuas, 1 Great Skua, a few Guillemots flying fast over the water, and a Red-throated Diver close in. A Rock Pipit was present. We slowly motored up to Cruden Bay before most of us headed off for Inverness, with some calling at Peterhead, where 2 more species, Sandwich Tern and Kittiwake, were added to the list.

We all had an enjoyable and successful weekend with very many thanks to David Bain for doing all the organisation. We finished up with a total of 98 species including 14 ducks and 15 waders.

Jean & Tony Denison

SOC Field Trip: 17 October 2013

The day started grey and dry with some blue sky. Our leader Lynda took us to the Black Isle with stops at Munloch Bay and Udale Bay. We were treated to large numbers of Greylag and Pink-footed geese close to the hide at Udale Bay. There were also plenty of ducks including Wigeon, Mallard and Teal on the grass and small inlets. Further out, there were Scaup, Eider, Long-tailed duck and Merganser. More interest was added with sightings of Red-throated Diver and Slavonian Grebe. The tide was well in but we could still spot roosting Oystercatcher, Redshank, Lapwing, Knot, Godwit, Dunlin and Curlew, mostly asleep with their heads tucked in.

We continued to Newhall Point to search amongst the bushes and scrub and were rewarded with large numbers of Fieldfare as well as Skylark, Meadow Pipit, Dunnock, Robin, Wren, Redwing, Mistle Thrush, Reed Bunting and Yellowhammer.

Our final stop was at Tollie in time to see the Red Kites swoop down to catch the food put out for them. It was raining by then and so we were afforded shelter for some lunch while we watched the Kites and a Woodpecker. This was a suitable moment to finish a good day of birding.

Hilary Rolton

OUTING TO THE EAST COAST – 9TH NOVEMBER 2012

The main cohort of what was to prove an impressively high eighteen members assembled at our beloved Retail Park on time and with some relief that the weather was dry and sunny, if a little cold. Our Chairman, Alex Joss, was also our leader and gave us a briefing in the car park of the plans for the day and the tasked few practised

their “Roger”, “Over” and Out” with the CB radios. En route to our first stop at Nairn harbour where most of the rest of the party were waiting, all of Common Buzzard, Robin, Starling, Carrion Crow and Mallard were already bagged and, with the tide a good bit out, there we were able to add a group of Knot, Oystercatcher, Curlew, Wigeon, Herring Gull, Pink-footed Goose [just a couple close], Gannet, Red-breasted Merganser, Shag, Long-tailed Duck, Cormorant, Yellowhammer and Bar-tailed Godwit. One of the last-mentioned was very close by the pier and showed its considerable patience and dexterity in extracting a Lugworm from its sandy lair.

AJ then had us drive along the coastal road to Broome of Moy, a new location for quite a few of us. Some thrushes were identified on the way, including Fieldfare, Mistle Thrush and Redwing, none in the big numbers that have been present this autumn. Our time here was brief but we managed to nudge our list up with more species that included Blue Tit and Chaffinch. Claiming Rock Dove was a step too far for some

Netherton was the next birding stop [not counting Forres for comfort and dodgy parking]. We parked by the road and then headed across a form of saltmarsh/field to a raised mound close to the edge of Findhorn Bay. Unfortunately, as those who visit Findhorn Bay well know, even standing right by the bay can still mean that most birds are tiny dots and this was the case. Intense scrutiny, with scope lenses at maximum warp, allowed the dots to turn into Shelduck, Dunlin, Meadow Pipit, Skylark, Grey Heron and Golden Plover, but a lot was left unidentified.

Some unsubtle hints about cold wind and starvation may have nudged Mr Joss into mentioning that lunch would be enjoyed at our next stop, Burghead. Patient birders showed appropriate decorum by delaying consumption of their Spam and Marmite rolls until good views of Common Eiders [sadly no King], Common Scoters and Red-throated Divers were had. Waders failed to include Sanderling, but most got the Purple Sandpiper and all of us the Turnstones. We now stepped on the gas a bit after an unproductive visit to the harbour [another Purp, though]. Along the coast again until we got to Lossiemouth East beach where our last group member finally joined up with us [no name, no pack drill]. At least four new birds for the list – a very distant Pied Wagtail and Stonechat, closer Teal and very dramatic and lengthy view of a hunting Peregrine which put up most of the assembled avian cast. All this in a glorious late afternoon light. However that reminded us that we had better step on it to get a decent amount of time at our last site, Loch Spynie. Despite SOC Highland having history here with people being lost repeatedly in the Spynie Triangle, we all managed to arrive at and squeeze into the hide, Jays showing well overhead on the way down the track. Coot, Tufted Duck, Goldeneye and Moorhen were on the loch, but not much more. However, the first folk down had taken their place on the right side of the hide where Charlie Gervaise at Lossiemouth had advised us a Water Rail could regularly be seen coming to a feed tray. Not at first it didn't, but after ten minutes it proceeded forth from the sedgy edge to show quite stunningly well for about fifteen minutes. This was a new bird for some and an excellent way to end the trip on 70 species. Thanks for the good organisation and leadership, Alex.

“Roger, over and out.”

Al McNee

SOC Outing – December 8th leader John Carruthers

The party assembled in the Retail Park, Inverness as usual. Five car loads drove to North Kessock Hall. The weather was not at its best during the day. The wind was whipping up a swell on the water and whistling round the trees inland. Intermittent drizzle made viewing difficult at times. In spite of that the day started well. Curlew and Redshank were probing the seaweed along the shoreline as a Greater Black-backed Gull watched them. A Heron was standing like a statue, staring into the waters edge while a couple of Oystercatchers strutted about. A Carrion Crow flew in to see if there was anything edible along the seaweed fronds. Out on the water, a Shag was diving for fish while Wigeon and Mallard dabbled in the shallows.

In the gardens on the other side of the road, several Blackbirds were attracted by the large numbers of berries on the bushes. A Robin was singing in the undergrowth but was not visible. Several Jackdaws swaggered about on the grass before flying onto one of the roofs. Black-headed and Herring Gulls floated overhead.

A final look at the water revealed a female Goldeneye playing hide and seek among the waves with a small group of Shelduck. A Cormorant flew up the firth as we were preparing to move on in the cars.

We parked for a short time by the Lifeboat Station under the Kessock Bridge. At least 20 Goldeneye were congregating to the east. Wren and Chaffinch were calling and heard moving about in the bushes but were remaining hidden.

As we drove back along the shore front, a Merganser was bobbing up and down in solitary state.

The convoy stopped a number of times along the road to Redcastle. We watched a Red Kite searching for carrion in one field while a Pheasant stalked through the grass. A large flock of Chaffinches was scanned for Brambling as they flew from bushes to trees to the ground and back again, but none were seen. A Buzzard was circling over another field while a few Woodpigeon patrolled the woodland edge. A small skein of Pink-footed Geese headed out over the firth while Wigeon and Teal swam slowly upstream. The occupants of the car were lucky enough to spot a Yellowhammer in the hedge but it had flown by the time the others drove past. We spent some time scanning the mudflats at Redcastle but nothing new was found. The gardens of the houses, however, had Blue Tit and House Sparrow foraging for food.

Three cars drove directly to the hide above Munloch Bay while the fourth returned to North Kessock to retrieve a lunch inadvertently left behind. The occupants added Dunnock and Starling to the day's list while those at Munloch searched the extensive mudflats. Initially, Wigeon, Shelduck and Oystercatcher were all that were visible then five Mute Swans swam out from behind a headland. Even after the fourth car rejoined the group, nothing else was seen in the bay and the fields and hedgerows inland were devoid of new species.

Driving along the road towards Avoch, a large gaggle of Greylag Geese was seen feeding in one of the fields. We turned off the main road towards Corrachie and then stopped at a junction just east of Drum. One group had excellent views of a pair of Yellowhammers and more than 25 Curlew while a second group was watching Pied Wagtails, a Fieldfare and a Hooded Crow by some farm buildings. There was another large flock of Chaffinches flitting between the hedge, some trees and the ground but once again, no Brambling were seen amongst them. A much larger skein of Pink-footed Geese flew overhead, calling.

As we drove down the slope into the outskirts of Avoch our attention was drawn to the rafts anchored offshore that are used by nesting Terns.

We stopped by the harbour, hoping to make use of the facilities but they were shut for the winter. We took the opportunity to look around and saw a Robin in one garden while a Greenfinch flew between gardens. We had much better views of a Merganser that was diving for food in the much calmer water near the shore.

We found that the facilities in Rosemarkie were open. Those standing in the car park had excellent views of a group of Rooks fussing about in the rookery at top of the tall beech trees beside the burn.

Lunch was eaten at Chanonry Point, everyone opting to remain in the cars because of the wind. However, birds could still be seen. A group of seven Long-tailed Ducks were swimming back and forth close to the shore. The occupants of one car could also see small flocks of Ring Plover and Dunlin patrolling a stretch of beach. After eating, everyone was out of the cars and eager to see what else was about. Three Turnstones were spotted along the strand line and a fin was seen not too far offshore. A number of Dolphins entertained us for awhile and several inquisitive seals watched us closely.

We took a walk along the north-east shore of the point and found a number of beached jellyfish but no new bird species. As we returned to the cars, several Eider were swimming near the point.

We drove across the Black Isle to the hide at Udale Bay for the last stop of the day as the light was starting to fade and make bird identification more difficult. We did see some Lapwing standing in the grass and one lucky member of the party saw the American Wigeon fly west and disappear. Try as we might, it was not seen again.

As the light was making viewing increasingly difficult, the group split up. Although only 45 species had been identified, it was agreed to be an excellent day out and John Carruthers was warmly thanked for leading the group.

Carol James

What future for our Common Scoters?

For our February SOC evening, Mark Hancock from the RSPB gave us a most informative talk about Scotland's declining population of the scarce breeding **Common Scoter**. We were told of research to find causes for the decline, and the whole was supported by easily interpreted graphics. The number and range of questions from the audience afterwards, showed how the presentation had held our attention.

As a volunteer warden at Loch Ruthven, I met a visiting New Zealand birdwatcher who had come to see our **Slavonian Grebes**. I explained that the Scottish breeding population had declined to around 30 pairs, and that much research and effort was being made to discover the reason for this decline, and to hopefully reverse the situation. He then asked about numbers of the birds elsewhere. I had to admit that the Iceland/Scandinavian population was around 5000 birds, and the species was also to be found across the Siberian tundra, in northern and western Canada, and also in the USA. He couldn't really understand what the problem was! In New Zealand there are birds such as the Takahē that is on the verge of extinction, and the iconic Kiwi is also declining in numbers. If NZ loses these birds there are no 'back up' populations elsewhere. They would be well and truly 'Dodo'd! Fortunately, not a situation faced by our Common Scoters, Slavonian Grebes or other 'fringe' species.

If Global Warming progresses as we are led to believe, there will be a northwards movement of many birds that only just 'make' Scotland, being as we are on the very edge of their natural range. Some species could desert us entirely as regular breeding birds. However, luckily we will continue to enjoy these as familiar visitors during the non-breeding seasons.

The complexity of determining optimum conditions regarding habitat and food availability for our Scoters, was highlighted by the presence or otherwise of Trout at Scoter breeding sites. These fish compete with the birds for the available stock of the invertebrate food supply. If Pike are present these will over time reduce the Trout population. However, you may end up with fewer but larger fish, to say nothing of the Pike developing a taste for young Scoters. Large Trout consume more of the available food supply than do small Trout. Tell me, is the presence of Pike at these sites a blessing or otherwise? I'm certainly pleased not to be a research biologist who is attempting to solve this dilemma!

Now, don't get me wrong – I'm as keen as anyone to retain our Common Scoters as breeding birds in Scotland. But, I sometimes wonder if all this effort and expense on these and other 'fringe' species can really be justified - in the light of Global Warming implications? I appreciate that even thinking these thoughts could result in my appearance before the President and Committee of my local SOC Branch – where I might find my very practical and warm official SOC fleece being confiscated before I am shown the door!

Mike Strickland

PS. These fleeces are available from our HQ shop for around £30. And worth every penny of it! But buy a larger size – they do shrink in the wash.

SOC Field Trip on Thursday 20 February 2014

There were only two of us joining Lynda Graham for our Local Birding outing but the adverse weather forecast may have been to blame. We took advantage of going against the traffic flow on the Kessock Bridge and set off to the North. Our first stop was to check on a group of gulls just after the turn-off to Munloch. Sadly, nothing unusual but a big group of Pied Wagtails and several Starlings were active. Then to the Wildfowler's car park at Munloch and although much of the arable land had been ploughed there was a large group of Pink-footed Geese in a far green field. They were very wary and had their "sentries" checking our progress along the track. Wigeon, Heron, Oystercatchers and Shelduck were viewed from a distance and lots of tits, at least two Dunnock and several Yellowhammers flitted in and out of view on our return to the car. We then went through Corrachie and the minor road to Avoch and were amazed at the dearth of anything flying. A quick trip to Chanonry Point produced one answer: the gale was ferocious and no self-respecting bird would have attempted flight! After a brief stop at Rosemarkie to see a few more gulls it was up to Poyntzfield where Lynda had had a great listening experience just a few days ago. Not today! We couldn't even hear ourselves speak let alone hear any birds. But it wasn't all bad. Visibility was good and the sun was out. We went along the track to Newhall Point and had great views of Dunlin, Knot, Godwit, Curlew, Ringed Plover and Oystercatcher right inshore so giving us time to study them at length and, further out were Wigeon and Shelduck. From time to time the waders took off and we had truly wonderful sights of them curling and swirling in the sunshine. The wind abated slightly and there was some shelter to be had round by the Udale Bird Hide so we had our picnic there at about 2 hours before high water. Lots of Teal were sheltering under the banks of the burn and there was a good group of Lapwing on the grassy area but the climax of the morning was when Lynda found a Peregrine on the tideline. We had time to focus him in our telescopes with the sun highlighting his plumage and it was a wonderful sight. Shortly after we decided to call it a day with just a short stop at the layby beyond Jeminaville and a few Red Kites to escort us off the Black Isle.

Janet Macpherson

Tailpiece

And finally, an advert which appeared in a recent issue of Highland Life. Can I ask anyone choosing to stay at Letterfinlay Lodge in September to write an article for this Newsletter, describing their birding experiences? See over!

Loch Fyne's beauty is accentuated in winter.



5 winter wonders

Words: Ben Hendry

Hebridean Huts, Isle of Lewis

Best for... Wild seas and tame alpacas

Glamping's taken to new levels by Hebridean Huts. The eco-friendly cabins are fully insulated from the elements and make for an idyllic winter retreat. And you don't have to venture far from your doorstep to enjoy the nature that the isle is known for.

Spot the seals residing on the bay or the range of birds known to frequent the area, all from the comfort of your own porch. You may be surprised by some of the unexpected creatures nearby; the huts are sited on a working



alpaca farm... The animals, native to South America are happy to pose for photographs! ■ *Black Sheep Croft, 52 North Galson, Isle Of Lewis. Prices from £85 per hut per night. Call 01851 850700 or visit www.hebrideanhuts.co.uk*



Loch Fyne Hotel and Spa, Inverary

Best for... Rest and relaxation

Located on the shores of the loch it takes its name from, this hotel and spa resort is just the place to wash away any winter blues. If the swimming pool, sauna, jacuzzi and steam room aren't enough, the hotel now has a hot tub ready to melt any leftover stress. And if bubbles are your thing, the 'girls' night in' package treats guests to a glass of champers along with accommodation, full use of facilities and a six-course dinner.

Guests are able to personalise their own blend of spa treatments from the expansive selection on offer. You can choose from full aromatherapy body massages, Indian head massages, hot stone massages, Reiki and the many facial options.

■ *Loch Fyne Hotel and Spa, Inverary, Argyll. One night break from £75 per person, 'girls night in' £85 per person. Call 01499 302980 or visit www.crerarhotels.com*



Letterfinlay Lodge Hotel, by Fort William

Best for... Outdoor activities

Adventure awaits at Fort William's Letterfinlay Lodge Hotel. The area boasts a range of activities for the intrepid holidaymaker, including clay pigeon shooting, canyoning and white water rafting. You can even take part in a seasonal spot of skiing or snowboarding.

However, if you'd rather a break to recharge your batteries after a busy

festive season then the cosy lodge, located on the banks of Loch Lochy, is a fantastic way to get away from it all. You can also partake in some bird-watching – flocks of ospreys are known to swoop over the water at dusk.

■ *Prices £99 to £225, with self catering packages from £590-£770 per week. Visit www.letterfinlaylodgehotel.co.uk or call 01397 712 622.*

