

The Scottish Ornithologists' Club

Scotland's Bird Club

Highland Bird News No 118

August 2012



Forthcoming Events

The SOC Highland Branch Committee has planned a weekend field trip to The Isle of Lismore on 22/23 September. Full details are given on page 5 of this HBN. Please note that members wishing to participate are asked to notify Kathy Bonniface as soon as possible and certainly by the time of the first indoor meeting on 4 September...

To mark the RSPB Highland Local Group's 25th Anniversary, an illustrated presentation by Laurie Campbell, renowned Scottish wildlife photographer is being held in Culloden Academy Community Complex, Keppoch Road, Culloden, Inverness IV2 7JZ on 27th September 2012 at 7:30pm. Tickets £7.00 including refreshments (£3.50 for under 16's) are available from RSPB North of Scotland Regional Office - Tel: 01463 715000 or email: nsro@rspb.org.uk

The SOC Annual Conference 2012 is being held at Carrbridge on the weekend of 26/28 October. For more information, see page 6 of this HBN.

SOC Highland Branch is hosting a mini-conference on Skye, on 17 November. More information also on page 6 of this HBN.

The SOC Highland Branch Committee is proposing a weekend birding in Fife for late May 2013. A boat trip to the Isle of May will, weather permitting, be included. Travel will be by mini-bus and so numbers will be limited to 16. More information is given on page 5 of this issue. To allow planning to progress, the Committee is asking for indication of interest by 31 August 2012.

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A field trip to Strath Dearn and Strath Nairn with Alex Joss on 18 March 2012

Nine members met up near the site of the former Little Chef just off the A9 at Tomatin. As greetings were exchanged, a **Robin** was heard singing and then seen. **House Sparrows**, **Blue Tits** and **Coal Tits** were flitting in the trees while a **Greenfinch** perched on the top of one. A **Mistle Thrush** was prospecting for worms in the field and a **Chaffinch** flew past. A small group of **Common Gulls** flew overhead, calling and a single **Black-headed Gull** was spotted amongst them.

Before going west up the Findhorn valley, we drove a short way north up the A9 and then turned east towards Ruthven. Two **Dippers** were spotted flying up and down the Funtack burn and a pair of **Mallard** were swimming just downstream of the bridge. As we drove on, several **Wood Pigeon** flew round. A cock **Pheasant** strutted across a field to join two females while two **Red-legged Partridges** hurried into cover. We stopped to look down on the junction of the burn with the Findhorn where several **Greylag Geese** were feeding on the grassy bank or paddling up river. A magnificent **Red Kite** put on a spectacular flying display for us over the hill slope to the north. His beautiful plumage gleamed in the sunshine as he twisted and turned. None of us saw any tags on his wings. There were **Curlew** feeding in the field across the river and a pair of **Goosander** spied far downstream. A noisy group of Jackdaws flew by while a **Sparrowhawk** circled overhead.

Returning to Tomatin, **Oystercatchers** and **Lapwing** were feeding in a field near the A9. As we drove slowly up the strath, a **Blackbird** flew across the road in front of the first car. We stopped near the bridge at Garbole for a scan of the surrounding trees and fields but nothing new was seen. Further up the strath, a **Pied Wagtail** strutted up and down along the verge. A pair of **Peregrine Falcons** was flying high in the sky above Dalmigavie as a **Kestrel** hung in the wind and a **Golden Eagle** sailed majestically by.

At the end of the road we left the cars and took a short walk along the straight mile hoping to hear or see some summer migrants. None were seen or heard, however a second pair of **Peregrines** sat on rocks high up to the north of the track. They were preening and surveying the hillside below. A **Buzzard** soared by on the cold wind as we sat in bright sunshine eating our lunch. A **Fieldfare** was spotted foraging among the tufted vegetation.

After lunch we drove back down the strath to Garbole and then over the top road to Farr. On the way, a handsome **Red Grouse** held his ground close to the road as we drove by. He was the only bird seen along the road in spite of stopping to scan the hillsides.

Driving west along Strathnairn we stopped to look at the Lochan beside the Steading Hotel. Several **Teal** were sheltering near the far side, a Goldeneye moved slowly towards the bank while a fast-paddling Little Grebe moved rapidly away. A few hundred yards beyond the hotel, a number of **Wigeon** were dozing beside or dabbling in a pond in the field. Many more **Pied Wagtails** imitated waders on the far side of the pond. In the distance a few **Golden Plover** showed off their black bellies. A **Carrion Crow** flew over with a large crust of bread grasped firmly in his black beak.

We stopped at Loch Ruthven and walked along a muddy track to the hide. **Little Grebes** were calling to each other as we watched a family of **Whooper Swans** on the far side of the loch. A **Red-throated Diver** was floating on the choppy water well to the west. We reached the hide and were rewarded with the sight of a single **Slavonian Grebe** in the middle of the loch and then a pair swimming by close to us. They were looking very smart although not yet in full breeding plumage.

We left Loch Ruthven behind and stopped twice on the way to Loch Duntelchaig, once to watch a handsome **Crossbill** show off in the top of a spruce tree and secondly to scan a dry stane dyke for Wheatear, of which there were none.

Our final stop of the day was at the south-east end of Loch Ashie where a **Black-throated Diver** was seen well up the loch. Behind us, a **Bullfinch** was resting near the top of a tree and a **Goldcrest** flitted from branch to branch. As we left, a **Song Thrush** was heard singing. As we drove east towards the A9, a flock of **Starlings** was perched on electricity wires.

It was an excellent day with 46 species recorded by me. The highlights for me were the fantastic views of the Red Kite and two pairs of Peregrine at Coignafearn as I have only ever seen one before.

Thank you, Alex, for a great day out!

Carol James

North Uist Trip - June 2012

Nine of us met at the ferry terminal in Uig, Skye. We had left Tomatin in snow in the early morning but now the sun had come out and we had had a lovely run over. On the crossing we saw **Gannets, Puffins, a Bonxie, Guillemots, Razorbills, Shearwaters, Fulmars, Kittiwake, Common Gulls, Cormorant** and a diver of some kind flying over. From Lochmaddy we headed north to look for the Snowy Owl. En route we saw the inevitable **Starling** first, also **Mute Swan, Oystercatcher, Buzzard, Lesser Black-backed gulls, Lapwing, Raven, Greylag Geese** and **House Sparrow**. We arrived at Greietobht and had a wee wander, but by now the wind had got up, and we set off west looking for a sheltered picnic spot. Alas, not to be found and we settled for our lunch overlooking Loch Hosta. **Redshank, Rock Dove, Greenfinch, Siskin, Mallard, and Curlew** all made it on to our growing list. On the loch, **Tufted Duck** and **Mute Swans** were present and lots of **Swallows** were flying low over the water, feeding on the newly hatched flies. After lunch, we made our way to the RSPB reserve at Balranald where Kathy had arranged to meet Jamie Boyle, the warden. He told us all about the reserve, how they don't own it, the crofters do, but they advise on how to use the land and when to plant etc. There seems to be a good relationship between the locals and the RSPB. We then walked round the reserve, following the path across the machair to the beach, then round the headland and back to the centre. It was lovely to be there, smell the sea, see all the wonderful flowers, superb scenery with white sand and turquoise seas. We heard the **Corncrake**, had **Skylarks** displaying above our heads, **Shovelers** with young near the centre, **Snipe** drumming, and a **Heron** flew past. At the beach, where a lot of seaweed had been swept up to high water line, there was a flock of **Sanderling, Dunlin, Ringed Plover** and **Turnstone**, feeding on the shore, then flying here and there, all turning together, landing for a short time then off again. **Rock Pipits** looked for food on the rocks and a pair of **Pied Wagtails** was flitting among the sand dunes. A **Purple Sandpiper** was spotted by two of the group. We walked along the rocky shore and added **Arctic Tern** which was nesting in the saltmarsh and several **Arctic Skuas** flew past on their way north. The wind was in the wrong direction for a big passage of skuas, unfortunately. It was a lovely walk with thrift, daisies, scurvy grass and marsh marigolds adding to the colour. We also saw bloody cranesbill, birds foot trefoil, cuckoo flower, violets, cotton grass and meadow sweet leaves. It was so clear that we could see St Kilda and Boreray and the Monach Islands from the headland. After trying to see the elusive Corncrake and the Corn Bunting – another success story- we set off south to our hotel on Benbecula, the Isle of Benbecula House Hotel, where we were made very welcome. We were joined by our other two in the party after dinner.

The next day, after an abortive look for the Red-necked Phalarope, we went on to Stinky Bay, so called because of the large amount of seaweed accumulating on the shore! A delightful family of **Shelduck** was swimming along the waters edge and a beautiful **Great Northern Diver** was out in the bay, looking magnificent with the sun shining on him. A pair of **Whimbrel** was on the rocks at the edge of the sea and two **Mergansers** floated on the waves. There were the same waders as before but lovely to watch. A **Peregrine** put them all up, but they soon came back to feed on the shore. There were one or two other people there, two of whom turned out to be Ian and Jill Andrews. I always seem to meet someone I know on these islands trips! We went back to Griminis to look for the **Red-necked Phalarope** but only Carol and I saw them. We then went to a different habitat, a moorland track up Ruabhal Hill. Several **Hen Harriers**, both male and female, were seen, distant and close. A **Wren** was calling along the side of a loch and a pair of **Red-breasted Mergansers** swam past. A man was cutting peat on the far hill. **Stonechat** was also added to the list. We then went to the shop in Benbecula – it sells everything! - drove over the causeway to N Uist and found a pleasant picnic spot. We stopped near Langlass Cairn at a small area of woodland where we saw **Goldcrest, Chaffinch** and **Blue Tits**. A **Kestrel** was hovering in the wind, lovely to watch. - its head is absolutely still as it hunts, looking for any slight movement that will give the prey away. We wanted to have another look for the owl, so we didn't climb up to the cairn but it is well worth going up. (We did the last time we were here – in the pouring rain!) Past Lochmaddy we had a beautiful sighting of a **Short-eared Owl** as it crossed in front of our car. We saw at least three, sitting on fence posts or slowly quartering the ground. They are really superb to watch. On to the co-op where the Snowy Owl was seen, but alas no luck today either. We came back over the committee road, the highest in the island and drove back to our hotel.

The next day before we headed south to S Uist, we had another try at finding the **Red-necked Phalarope**. Everyone saw them this time! What a lovely wee dainty bird. At the causeway, the tide was out and we saw **Bar-tailed Godwits**, as well as the usual waders. A **Cuckoo** was sitting on a wire, then was mobbed by a pair of **Meadow Pipits**, so it flew off! We parked at Loch Druidibeg and walked along the road, beside the loch to an old forest at the end. **Willow Warbler, Whinchats, Great Tits** were all seen, but the tick of the day was a **Golden Eagle** which slowly made its way across the hillside. It was magnificent! **Ravens** and a **Buzzard** were also using the thermals and the wind. The Buzzard seems to just hang in the sky. A **Common Sandpiper** called his evocative call as he flitted along the shore and we made friends with some very hairy ponies, one of whom

adopted us for a short time. Then after a very pleasant picnic we carried on south to Loch Eynort and took the road on the north side. This ended at an amazing garden with a path going along side the loch. The owners have planted shrubs and flowers, built bridges, placed seats of stone or chunks of wood, excavated a pond and planted a lovely wood. The path then goes out onto the moor. A **Robin** sang and posed for us at the car park. Along the path there were bluebells, primroses, honeysuckle and red campion. Out in the loch, a pair of **Red-throated Divers** was calling and a couple of **Tysties** were fishing. A **Heron** had made a nest in the wood and the young bird was making such a racket, we retreated! A **Shag** was drying his wings. Back in the cars and onwards south, **Golden Plover** were spotted in a field – what beautiful plumage. We made a diversion to South Glendale, where **Greenfinches**, **Collared Doves** and a **Song Thrush** were seen. While the rest of us walked down the road, one group sat in their car and was rewarded with good views of a **Whitethroat**! On across the causeway to Eriskay for a quick visit. The ferry from Barra came in and **Gannets** were diving in the bay. Then it was back to our hotel with several more **Short-eared Owls** spotted.

The next morning it was another look for the elusive owl but alas no luck again. Some photographers had disturbed him but I'm sure he is back there again. The ferry crossing was very pleasant but no new birds were seen. It was a lovely trip and great to be back on the west coast islands. There is something magical about them. We saw a total of 85 species of birds and 33 flowers that I identified! Thank you to Kathy for arranging it all.

Janet Crummy

Black-throated Divers – some personal observations

I spent the second week of June with a group of friends, trout fishing in Sutherland. We stayed in a lodge, set on the north shore of the main fishing loch, the two set amongst some of Scotland's finest mountains. The loch is home, in the breeding season, to a pair of **Black-throated Divers** as well as **Oystercatcher**, **Dunlin**, **Common Sandpiper**, **Ring Plover** and **Greenshank**. An **Osprey** showed up most days, often more than once.

It is, however, of the Divers that I write. When I arrived on 11 June, the two adults were escorting a single chick which I judged to be about 14 days old. While both parents spent a lot of time with the chick, often only one was present and at times, the chick was 'parked' and left alone.

Weed growth in the loch was well on, with strands of vegetation in the surface film. Viewed from the lodge, I could see small, clear areas surrounded by weed and it was to one of these, about 15 metres from the water's edge that an adult and the chick repaired at dusk. The wind, which swung between north north-west and north north-east all week, was never very strong, but generally sufficient to ripple the loch surface. The parking area amongst the weed remain unruffled, presumably meaning the birds did not have to keep paddling to maintain station? The other adult would appear out on the loch, eventually making a series of submerged runs and quietly surfacing beside the other two. Even at midnight, there was still sufficient light to see the birds. They were still there at 7:30am daily but by 8 am had moved further out, the adults diving for fish to feed the chick.

Other Black-throats visited the loch each day, for perhaps an hour or so. On two days, the chick was parked amongst the weed while both adults joined the visiting birds, 3 visitors being the maximum number seen during my week. There was some display, mostly head swaying, communal diving and a lot of calling. Then, when the visitors departed, one or both adults returned to the chick, generally taking it out to deeper water where it was fed.

One evening, an adult and the chick had parked amongst the weed, as usual. About 10:30pm, the adult stirred and paddled directly for the shore, with the chick following a short way behind. The adult ran aground short of the water line, but pushed itself out of the water onto the coarse sand, giving another three pushes up the beach. Here, it laboriously turned round and returned to the water where it rejoined the chick, immediately rolling over and vigorously preening its breast feathers for a minute or so. Both birds then moved back to the 'parking area', where they settled for the night.

There was a pair of **Common Gulls** about the loch daily, plus up to three **Black-headed Gulls**. At no time did I see any of the gulls taking any interest in the chick. However, the adult divers did stay close to their chick when the **Osprey** was over the loch.

David Bain

Field Trip to the Isle of Lismore

As those of you who were at the Branch Meeting when David Jardine gave a talk on the Isle of Lismore may recall, David offered to lead a field trip to the Isle. David's offer was accepted in principle and the Branch Committee has since taken this forward. The weekend of 22/23 September is now confirmed for the trip.

Travel will be by car, to (i) Oban for those who wish to take a car to the Isle or (ii) to Port Appin, to cross on the passenger-only ferry.

Which option is chosen will determine where the accommodation is required ie. (i) on the Isle or (ii) on the mainland.

Crossing times will determine travel times. If staying for only one night, then an early start to catch a late morning ferry, with an afternoon tour of Lismore, late dinner and birdwatching most of the following day in the area before travelling back to Inverness in the early evening. Alternatively, a two night stay would allow us to travel down at a more leisurely rate on the Friday afternoon, book into accommodation and get an earlier ferry, if there is one and have longer on Lismore, before completing the trip as on the first option.

The car ferry trip from Oban takes 50 minutes. Sailing times on:

Friday: 0600/0900/1400/1715
Saturday: 0800/1100/1415
Return to Oban:
Saturday: 0900/1200/1515/1800
Sunday: 1200/1600

The passenger only ferry crossing from Port Appin takes 10 minutes: Sailing times are:

Mon – Sat: 0800/0900/1000/1100/1200
Return:
Saturday: 1615/1715/1835
Sunday: 1115/1215/1415/1515/1615/1715

There is no hotel on the Isle but there are a few Guest houses which may have vacancies.

To complete the planning for the trip, the Committee needs to know who is interested in going. Please respond by email if possible, otherwise telephone or write to the Branch Secretary, Kathy Boniface, whose address and contact details are given elsewhere in this Newsletter.

If interested, please provide the following information as soon as possible and not later than the Branch Meeting on 4 September:

Name
Address
Telephone
Email
Preferred number of nights: 1 or 2, or either.
Car: (1) take to island or (2) leave on mainland

Proposed weekend Field Trip to Fife, taking in the Isle of May

This trip is proposed for late May 2013.

The date and schedule remain to be confirmed. Sinclair Dunnnett will lead. The trip will be by minibus. The maximum number will be 16.

Two options to consider:

- 1 travel down Friday, Isle of May on Saturday, birding in Fife on Sunday, home Monday, birding en route.
- 2 travel down Friday, Isle of May on Saturday, birding in Fife and travel home on Sunday.

To complete the planning for the trip, the Committee needs to know who is interested in going. Please respond by email if possible, otherwise telephone or write to the Branch Secretary, Kathy Boniface, whose address and contact details are given elsewhere in this Newsletter.

Please provide the following information:

Name

Address

Telephone

Email

Preferred number of nights: 2 or 3, or either.

SOC Annual Conference 2012

In case you missed the notice in the June 2012 issue of *Scottish Birds*, your attention is drawn to the Club's Annual Conference, which is to be held in Carrbridge over the weekend of Friday 26 to Sunday 28 October 2012. Carrbridge is only a 30 minute run down the A9 from Inverness. If you have never attended the annual conference before, why not try this one? Go as a day delegate and sample what is on offer! The theme of the Conference is 'Celtic Connections'. Full programme details and a booking form are attached separately to the email with which this HBN was issued.

A mini-conference, hosted by SOC Highland Branch, to be held on Skye on 17 November 2012

In response to a suggestion from members in Skye and Lochalsh, a mini-Conference focussing on the most iconic Hebridean birds, the problems facing our conservation management decisions past and present, hosted by SOC Highland Branch, is to be held at Sabal Mor Ostaig (the Gaelic College), Sleat, Skye on Saturday 17 November 2012, from 10am to 4:30pm. At the time of going to press, further details were still to be confirmed. Full details, which will be included in the September issue of *Scottish Birds*, will also be issued electronically to all members of Highland Branch.

It is hoped that this event will prove attractive to the wider membership of Highland Branch, who remain committed to the Club despite living far from Inverness where the branch meetings are held. Why not make a weekend of it? Stay over on Skye for a couple of nights and enjoy the birding? Remember the influx of Grey Phalaropes off Skye's north coast – birds visible from onshore - in late October 2008? White Gulls are likely and maybe even a Sabine's. The HBR is worth perusing, especially the issue covering 2008. Put the date in your diary now!

Indoor Meetings and Field Trips

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

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

2012

4 September	Keith Duncan – The Great-spotted Woodpecker
2 October	Chris Rose – Artist for Albatrosses: a five week expedition to South Georgia.
6 November	Rory Crawford – Scotland's seabirds: a mystery wrapped in contradiction
4 December	Al McNee – Christmas in Uganda

2013

8 January	Kenny Kortland – wildlife management on a National Forest estate
5 February	Jeremy Brock – Spanish Steppes: birds of the Laguna de Gallocanta
5 March	Edmund Fellowes – some bird photography adventures in Dumfries-shire
16 April	Branch AGM + Bozena Summers – birds of Poland, Hungary, Estonia and Norway

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

2012

- Thurs Sept 13th Local Birding
- Sept 22nd-23rd Lismore Weekend (for details see elsewhere in this HBN, contact Kathy Bonniface 01808 511740)
- Sun Oct 7th Inverness Eastwards (Graeme Prest 01463 791575)
- Thurs Oct 18th Local birding
- Nov 17th-18th Skye Weekend (Bob McMillan 01471 866305)
- Thurs Nov 22nd Local Birding
- Sat Dec 8th Easter Ross (David Galloway 01381 621126)
- Thurs Dec 13th Local Birding

2013

- Sun Jan 13th Within Inverness (Al McNee 01463 220493)
- Thurs Jan 24th Local Birding
- Sat Feb 9th Tarradale - Strathpeffer Area (Alex Joss 01463 221661)
- Thurs Feb 21st Local Birding
- Sun Mar 10th Loch Eye (Simon Cohen 01349 865531)
- Thurs Mar 21st Local Birding
- Sat April 20th The Gairloch Loop (Graeme Prest 01463 791575)
- Thurs April 25th Local Birding
- Sun May 5th Speyside Migrant Hunt (Keith Duncan 01479 821124)
- Late May Weekend Bus Trip to Isle of May (See p5 above for more information)

Useful contacts:

Kathy Bonniface, Branch Secretary	Tel: 01808 511740
Hugh Insley, Local Recorder	Tel: 01463 230652
David Bain, Newsletter Editor	Tel: 01463 772539

SOC Highland Branch Committee Members: 2012-2013.

Alex Joss, Chairman; Kathy Bonniface, Secretary; Lynda Graham, Treasurer; David Bain, Newsletter Editor & Representative to Council; Hugh Insley, Local Recorder; Simon Cohen, David Galloway, Alistair McNee and Graham Prest, Members.

Newsletter distribution

The Committee prefers to issue the HBN by email, but recognises that not all members have access to a computer. A paper copy can be posted out to members without email. There will be a charge to cover printing and postage. Please let the Branch Secretary or Editor know if you wish to take up this option.