

Time: Tuesday 11 April 2023, at 7.30pm

Place: Culloden Library, Inverness

Present: 19 members of SOC Highland Branch

**1**

**Opening of the meeting**

Alister Clunas, Chairperson of the Highland Branch, welcomed all to the 2023 AGM.

**2**

**Apologies:**

There were apologies from David Galloway, Myra Deas, Douglas Young, Janet Brodie, Mike Macpherson, Stuart Crutchfield, John Poyner and Carol James.

**3**

**Minutes of 2022 AGM**

Adopted: **Proposer:** Alex Joss **Seconder:** Kathy Bonniface

**4**

**Matters Arising:**

Item 4 – bird boxes at Inverness Retail Park were not installed due to a change in management.

**5**

**Chairperson's Report:** Alister Clunas

We continue with zoom meetings but it was a pleasure to welcome everyone back to a face to face meeting when Ruth Briggs, SOC President gave a talk in March.

My thanks go to the committee especially Mary Galloway who is a very efficient Secretary to the Highland Branch; Carol Miller who has swapped roles from Chairperson to Treasurer and Minutes Secretary; Alex Joss, Highland Bird Report Editor; Pete Gordon, Highland Branch Website Manager and Branch Representative on SOC Council; John Poyner, Highland Recorder; Jon Clarke, Bob McMillan, Colin Leslie and Gavin Woodbridge.

It is with sadness that we record that two Highland SOC members passed away during the year.

Margaret Deans was in her nineties and had been a regular attender of indoor meetings and outdoor trips usually with her brother George Gibson. She went on many trips to the islands in the 1990s with Sinclair Dunnet.

This year also saw the loss of Lynda Graham. Lynda had been a long standing committee member and had been a very efficient Treasurer for 11 years. She was an excellent birder and led numerous outings, including many of the Thursday morning ones. She was the friendly face of Highland SOC greeting members and non-members, as Treasurer, at indoor meetings.

It was fitting that Alex Joss, as editor, put a picture of her feeding Coal Tits at Abernethy in the 2021 Highland Bird Report. She is greatly missed. A tree has been planted at Loch Ruthven for Lynda as a dedicated RSPB volunteer.

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Our thanks go to Bob McMillan, Colin Leslie, Tony Laidler and Gavin Woodbridge who are leaving the committee. Our especial thanks go to Bob McMillan who has served on the committee for a number of years.

**6****Secretary's Report: Mary Galloway**

A full programme of 18 outings was organised. Many thanks to all the leaders who spared their time and their knowledge. Only one was cancelled – on 11 Dec due to wintry conditions. A joint outing with Caithness took place at Golspie on 11 February to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of our two branches. Most outings, with photos, can be seen on the Blogs page of the Highland Birds website [www.highlandbirds.scot/blog](http://www.highlandbirds.scot/blog)

Participants numbered 4 to 45 with car sharing re-established. Four outings – two in April and two in May are yet to come. Most of Highland areas have been covered on our outings ranging from the West – Small Isles and Applecross; north and north west– Golspie, Dornoch and Lochinver areas; the east – Moray Coast; south – Cairngorm and Insh Marshes, area south of Inverness and local Inverness and the Black Isle.

There were five Highland branch talks organised from September through February with Caithness and Orkney branches joining us on zoom. They were Hywel Maggs – return of breeding cranes to Scotland; Nina O'Hanlon – Seabirds and Plastics; and Alison MacLennan – common scoters. March and April were our first face to face meetings since March 2020 (Covid). In March our new President, Ruth Briggs, was our speaker and after our April AGM Alister Clunas will talk about ringing in Estonia. Due to technical issues, Mary's video about Chanonry was postponed. SOC HQ provided seven monthly talks via Zoom throughout the winter season which were very well supported and appreciated by SOC-wide members.

An afternoon visit was made to Highview Care Home, Inverness to talk to some residents who were interested in birds.

Membership at March stands at 285 individuals, five less than last year.

A new programme of talks and outings is currently being put together for the next season. When finalized the programme will be on the SOC and Highland Birds website. SOC HQ will continue providing monthly zoom talks next season, and two face to face speakers, with Highland providing 4 speakers (three face to face and one zoom in February).

Alister thanked Mary for her report.

**7****Treasurer's Report: Carol Miller**

A copy of the audited, signed accounts was circulated.

Carol outlined the income and expenditure, highlighting the purchase of a new laptop and website payments. The bank balance (10.03.23) is £3314.49

There were no questions arising. The Accounts were agreed accurate.

**Proposer:** Pete Gordon      **Seconded:** Alex Joss

The Chairperson thanked Carol for her report and also John Carruthers for auditing the accounts this year and for agreeing to continue as auditor in 2023/2024.

## **8**

### **Highland Bird Report:** Alex Joss

As in the previous two years, we managed to publish the 2021 report on-line on our website within a year of the last records being submitted, ie. in December 2022. Subsequently 70 printed copies were purchased from our usual printers, Print2Demand, and delivered with a few weeks delay caused by the postal strikes. Because printing and postal costs had escalated over the last year and the 2021 issue is about 30 pages longer than the 2020 one, we are only just able to continue selling copies at £10 per hand-delivered copy, but have to add a postage & packaging charge of £2.50 to posted copies. Despite this, sales have been brisk, so that Carol, I and SOC HQ have only about six copies left to sell. It is quite possible that we may have to order another 10 copies to cover requests that may continue to trickle in over the year via the various websites that advertise for us. The unit printing costs will be higher for these, but I think it is good public relations to keep the prices the same, even if it means a small underwriting cost to the Branch. After the year is over, if we have run out of copies, we should just inform the potential buyers that the issue is sold out.

The preparation of the 2022 Report is well underway, with at least two of our species accounts authors having completed their first drafts, and the other regular authors, including myself, are progressing satisfactorily. However, there has been a delay in finding volunteers to replace two of the regular authors who have retired. I would like to record our sincere thanks to the retirees, Jonathan Clarke, author of the Waders section, and Colin Leslie, author of the Game to Grebes section, for their excellent contributions to the quality of the reports in recent years. Happily, I can now report that, by spreading the workload a little, we have just recently recruited four new volunteers to replace them, and we welcome Dave Barnett, as author of half of the Waders section, and Sue Sykes, as a returning author for the Game to Grebes section. We also welcome David Patterson as author of part of the Wildfowl section and Fiona Reid as author of a short section on Fulmar to Gannet, which will allow David Stone to take on the other half of the Waders section.

This year I have not arranged an (Zoom) annual meeting of the Report Committee as in previous years, but instead will discuss potential /suggested changes to format, content and personnel via group email and come to a consensus on how to proceed.

Finally, having thanked the retiring and newly recruited authors, I think we should express our gratitude to the long-serving authors for continuing, some over many years, to input their expertise to this labour of love, namely Pete Gordon (assistant editor), Bob McMillan, David Galloway, Keith Barnes, Brian Etheridge, Bob Swann, Andy Williams, Al McNee, David Bain, Sean Morris, Hugh Insley and David Stone. I also thank John Poyner for his input on all aspects of the reports, as Highland Recorder, as well as Carol Miller and Alister Clunas for the financial aspects on behalf of the Branch.

The Chairperson thanked Alex, and all his bird report contributors, for the production of Highland Birds 2021.

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**Highland Recorder's Report:** John Poyner**A copy of John's report had been previously circulated.**

Here is the report

BTO Birdtrack continues to be the main repository for Highland records and recent major improvements in the App have been met with a lot of positive feedback from users and certainly seen an up-take in usage. I've also been able to download ebird data and make use of some recent software to convert this into a more user friendly format making it easier to run through.

Colin Leslie took over as regional reviewer for ebird and working with Colin has helped ensure we are not missing any significant records entered. I am also currently taking part in a series of webinars run by Mark Lewis for Scottish recorders to examine and discuss data flow issues, problems with the use of Birdtrack/Ebird and so hopefully this may lead to further improvements.

Birdtrack records were actually down last year by 12% from 184884 records in 2021 to 162286 in 2022. I suspect there may be a "Covid" factor here, the 2021 tally probably inflated due to the surge of "staycation" visitors into Highland that year. However 162 thousand records is still an impressive total and a remarkable effort made as ever by Alex and the species compilers to go through these and produce the HBR in a timely fashion. There is still of course the issue with lack of balanced coverage in Highland, many areas still poorly recorded and under-watched. Social Media plays an ever important role here and I've had invaluable help from various admins of local Facebook groups such as the North Sutherland Wildlife Group and Gairloch and Loch Ewe Wildlife Sightings to follow up records posted from generally local "non-birders". It's still very much a work in progress to try and improve recording from these areas with few birders and coverage, so joining in on these local social media networks has become an important networking and communication tool for gathering records.

By far the biggest task of the year was the RBBP submission which was completed and submitted to Mark Eaton last November. With Ptarmigan numbers a growing concern and now added to the red list, I feel we urgently need to increase the focus on this species. Anecdotal evidence suggests they are doing well in some areas and not others but we need to get a much better picture of this. A bird where records are gained more from casual observers than birders, it would be good to mount a publicity campaign amongst various mountaineering/walking groups explaining how they can submit records and the need for accurate grid refs/numbers/broods. Any help and suggestions from our more experienced hillwalking members on going forward with this would be much appreciated.

Although we still lose some submissions of rares, generally, submitting of descriptions was good, with regular local rarity finders continuing to provide the committees with plenty of work as well visiting birders sending in descriptions. Where there is no submission, good photographic evidence posted online has been used to submit "per recorder". Issues at BBRC (now rectified) have left quite a backlog with no WIP published since last June. I expect an update soon, but there still may be some delay with these decisions.

Finally, I am also indebted to the team running the website for collating records from numerous sources which acts as a vital resource for myself to refer to. This is done on a remarkably organised rota basis and their hard work in keeping the sightings page updated is superb. So thanks to Mike

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Crutch, Steve Broyd, Pete Gordon, Sam & Debbie Borthwick for their sterling efforts throughout the year. And of course last but not least, the hard work done throughout the year by HRC in assessing submissions. It's been a pleasure working with Al McNee as chair since I started as recorder and looking forward to moving on with Stu Crutchfield.

Species Focus It's difficult to know if we can accurately compare 2021 with 2022, as clearly there may have been an excess of visitors to the region in 2021, with a 12% drop in submissions overall for 2022. We had 84 records including breeding data for Red-breasted Merganser and 39 for Crested Tit compared to 101 and 53 respectively in 2021. That is a slight decline from 2021, however on balance I think we have still seen an increase in effort overall especially from local/Scottish birders who are more aware of the campaign. We are however still well above the amount of breeding data submitted for these species before the Species Focus which is very positive news.

The Chairperson thanked John for his report.

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### **Highland Records Committee Report: Stuart Crutchfield**

#### **Stuart's report had been previously circulated.**

Here is the report

The Highland Records Committee (HRC) operates on an annual basis and this summary for the AGM focuses mainly on the period 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2022.

In 2022, 88 records were forwarded by the Recorder, John Poyner, for assessment. These records were for 32 species and sub-species deemed rare in Highland terms. The species most assessed were Scandinavian Rock Pipit, White-Billed Diver and Green Winged Teal . Overall, 76 records were accepted and 12 found to be not proven.

During 2022, the HRC was chaired by Al McNee, ably assisted by 6 others: Simon Eaves, Kate Clarke, Stu Crutchfield, Dean Macaskill, Marcus Conway and Steve Broyd. This was the second year that the committee had appointed a reserve member whose role is to assess any records that were submitted by a current HRC member and Steve fulfilled that role and had a number of significant records to assess. The appointment of a reserve member is made for two reasons: to remove the recorder completely from all aspects of record assessment; also, it was hoped that a reserve member would be interested enough in the work involved to take up a full membership of the committee whenever someone decides to step down or is unable to assess any particular batch. Happily, Steve has done this.

Al McNee stepped down as chair, and from the committee, after sterling and valued work over several years, and I volunteered to replace him as chair. The committee asked Steve Broyd to join the committee as a full member and George Gay as the reserve member and both agreed to do so. Their expertise in general birding identification and knowledge of Highland rarity issues is greatly welcomed.

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HRC has again worked harmoniously and effectively throughout 2022 and I would like to express my thanks, once again, to all HRC members and to our recorder for their careful and valuable contributions and support.

There were no questions.

The Chairperson gave thanks to Stu for his report, and to all HRC members.

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### **Highland Birds Website:** Pete Gordon

Pete began with a rundown of Highland Birds website

[www.highlandbirds.scot](http://www.highlandbirds.scot)

**Sightings Page** updated daily by Mike Crutch, Steve Broyd, Debbie and Sam Borthwick

Thanks to Colin Leslie who has stood down from this role.

**Blogs** – of all Outings. Other contributions on bird-related topics welcomed, so please submit.

**Recording** – what to do with your bird records. Highland Bird List. Rarities assessment.

**Highland Bird Reports** – online and availability of hard copies

**Events** – information on Outings and Talks.

**Where to Go** – needs another look for currency and new sites

**Views** – from 1/4/2022 to 17/3/2023 62299 visits and 107,188 page views.

This website was created by Peter Stronach in January 2016 for the SOC Highland Branch. It was made to provide SOC Members, local and visiting birders with free information on the latest bird news in the recording area and information on where to go birding. Its aim is to encourage participation amongst the whole birding community in recording birds within the Highland area and encouraging the next generation to do the same.

As with all voluntarily run projects it needs your support to be a success, so please help us in any way you can! Pete appealed for computer literate members to assist him in updating the website.

There were no questions arising.

The Chairperson thanked Pete, and the sightings submitters, Mike Crutch, Sam and Debbie Borthwick and Steve Broyd for the smooth operation of Highland Birds.

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### **Highland SOC Council Representative's Report:** – Pete Gordon

**Pete's report was circulated previously.**

### **Office Bearers**

Ruth Briggs appointed as President at 2022 AGM, Chris Wernham to be co-opted as VP (Birding & Science) this summer to replace Prof Jerry Wilson, to be proposed at 2023 AGM.

Lesley Creamer is VP (Management), David Lindgren (Hon Secretary), Richard Kerr (Hon Treasurer)

**Membership**

As at 13/3/2023 there were 2935 Subscriptions representing 3500 members  
Compares to 30/3/2022 there were 2942 subscriptions and 3532 members.  
Year to date 258 new subscriptions, 282 cancelled – increase in cancellations (cost of living?)  
Medium-term trend is slow increase in membership.

**Finance**

A Budget was produced for the first time. So far it is a good fit with reality. The projected loss is less than anticipated, helped by a substantial legacy.  
Independent Examiner met with Council to discuss finances. Concluded that operating losses can be met in medium term from reserves. Matter under regular review by Council.  
Brewin Dolphin – also met with Council to explain financial advice. Risk 6 of 1-10 scale, income plus capital growth long-term aim.  
Legacies – important source of Club income, can't be predicted. Appeal focused on projects and young birders – March Scottish Birds.

**Strategy**

Fellowship scheme launched to replace Honorary Memberships. Criteria/standards  
Joint working with staff, office-bearers and other Council members  
Risk Management Register

**Birding & Science**

Knowledge gaps - paper to follow in Scottish Birds. Discussion on how there are to be addressed  
ESAS course run at profit. Goosewatch events too.  
Recorder group meeting online being planned – in-person event not held.  
Scottish Bird Camp – to continue in 2023  
SOC Youth Connect- online group  
Scottish Birds – print and online.  
Birdtrack questionnaire 217 responses

**Conferences and Activities**

Annual conference at Pitlochry – good in-person attendance after 2 blank years but less than expected attended virtual conference. Successful, young birders integration. Raptors theme to coincide with 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary Scottish Raptor Monitoring Scheme  
One day conference – high attendance, Stirling  
Next annual conference - Bird Sounds theme  
Branches Weekend - to strengthen links and get ideas

**Staff**

Salary increase, bench-marking next increase.

The Chairperson thanked Pete for his report. There were no questions arising. Alex Joss welcomed the addition of Chris Wernham to the post of Vice President.

**13****Retiring Committee members**

The Chairperson announced that Bob MacMillan, Colin Leslie and Gavin Woodbridge have resigned from the committee. Special thanks go to Bob MacMillan as he has been a long serving member of the committee. Gavin Woodbridge has moved jobs and left the area. Our thanks go to all of them.

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**Election of Office Bearers and Committee members**

Fiona Reid has agreed to join the committee

**Proposer** : Alex Joss                      **Seconder** : Sue Seright

Stu Crutchfield has agreed to join the committee

**Proposer** : Alex Joss                      **Seconder** : Mary Galloway

The Chairperson indicated that if any other branch members had an interest in helping the committee, please come forward.

**15**

**Highland SOC Species Focus 2022**

The Chairperson referred to The Recorder's report outlining our species focus in 2022 (please see above)

Alex Joss indicated that he hopes to alert local hillwalking clubs to The Recorder's request for more data on Ptarmigan distribution and breeding. This was welcomed.

In 2023 our species focus will include Crested tit, Red-breasted Merganser, Jay, Spotted Flycatcher, Whinchat and Ptarmigan.

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**AOB:** There were no matters arising.

**17**

**Thanks and close of meeting**

The Chairperson thanked everyone for their continued support this year. It is only through the hard work of Highland Group members that the branch can continue its activities. As there was no other business, Alister closed the AGM and thanked everyone for attending.

The meeting closed at 8.05pm.