

North-East Scotland Branch Newsletter

June 2016



Welcome to your summer newsletter from your local SOC branch.

We thought it was time to issue another local newsletter to all our members with an update of where we are with the next programme of talks, starting in October, plus a few more articles. While we don't anticipate this being a regular occurrence, please do contact me if you have anything you would like to include in a future edition, or with any other comments. Other ways to keep up to date with branch news are through our page on the SOC website (<http://www.the-soc.org.uk/whats-on/local-branches-2/grampian/>) and by email. If you'd like to receive email updates about branch news and events, it would be great to have your email address. If you think that we might not have your correct (or preferred) address, please send an email to me at grampian.secretary@the-soc.org.uk.

John Wills, Branch Secretary

Next winter's talks programme

Here are the initial details that have been arranged for your entertainment.

Monday 3rd October – Iain Malzer – The factors affecting the status of the Bearded Reedling in the Tay Reedbeds

Monday 7th November – Nick Littlewood – NE Scotland Mammal Atlas

Monday 5th December – Catriona Reid – Muir of Dinnet

Monday 9th January – Martin Cook – 100 years of Moray birding

Monday 6th February – Stuart Benn – 50 years a Slav – the changing fortunes of Slavonian grebes in Scotland and beyond

Monday 6th March – Hywel Maggs & Allan Perkins – Cranes and corn buntings in the North East

Monday 3rd April – Branch AGM, followed by Graham Rebecca – Hen harriers in NE Scotland

Meetings are held at The Sportsman's Club, 11 Queen's Rd, Aberdeen, AB15 4YL at 7.30 pm. To cover the hire of the room a small donation is requested – £2 for members and £3 for non-members.

Review of last winter's talks

Every year we aim to have a wide range of talks over the winter which hopefully our branch members find entertaining and informative. This past winter was no different and despite several changes to the published programme due unforeseen circumstances we had another well attended series of talks. We are fortunate in Aberdeen to have so many individuals studying and interested in birds in both amateur and professional capacities, and who are willing to come and speak to their local SOC branch! We started the winter with an introduction to Orkney from committee member Eric Meek. Will Miles then provided an overview of the very complicated analysis of the massive Fair Isle migration datasets which was fascinating. Des Thompson spoke on the life of Derek Ratcliffe and Grampian Ringing Group opened the new year with updates on their current projects. Forvie warden Daryl Short gave a fantastic insight in the life of a Forvie birder. Ian and Jenny from the local RSPB Scotland office spoke about some of the work RSPB International do which they had worked on during their sabbaticals on Egyptian Vultures and Turtle Doves. The season was rounded off at the April AGM by Emma Sheehy on pine marten and red squirrel conservation. We also took the opportunity to hold raffles at the December and March meetings, and thanks to first the generosity of several members' donations and secondly the willingness of attendees at each meeting, we raised £162.88 for branch coffers.

Another varied and enjoyable winter season and we look forward to the coming autumn and the first talk in October. If you have any suggestions or requests for talks please feel free to contact the one of the committee. Thank you again to our all of our speakers of the last 12 months.

Jenny Weston, Branch Chair

Branch Excursion to Moray

On 8 May, ten of us, a mix of branch members and non-members, travelled up to Moray for a conducted tour around several sites. The day started very misty and the omens did not look good for a good day out. However, as forecast, it cleared and by the end of the day we were basking in unending sunshine and temperatures as high as 23°C. We met up with Moray Recorder Martin Cook at Tugnet, Spey Bay, who then showed us round a variety of sites for a good cross-section of typical Moray birds. Stars of the day were a drake Garganey at Spey Bay, as well as many singing sedge warblers, a female peregrine on the nest, plus black guillemots and ravens at Tronach Head, Portknockie, a singing corn bunting on wires near Portgordon, a successful search for crested tit in Lossie Forest, singing blackcaps at Loch Spynie, and almost calling out a water rail at the same site. Total for the day was 85. The walk around Loch Spynie was further enhanced by a beautiful display of dancing orange-tip butterflies, and a further four species of butterfly were also noted during the day.



The excursion gave us a better appreciation of what the Moray coast has to offer (thanks to Martin) and we will surely venture up that way again.

Your branch committee is always willing to organise an excursion so if interested in a particular trip contact myself or any one of the branch committee. We'll listen!

John Wills

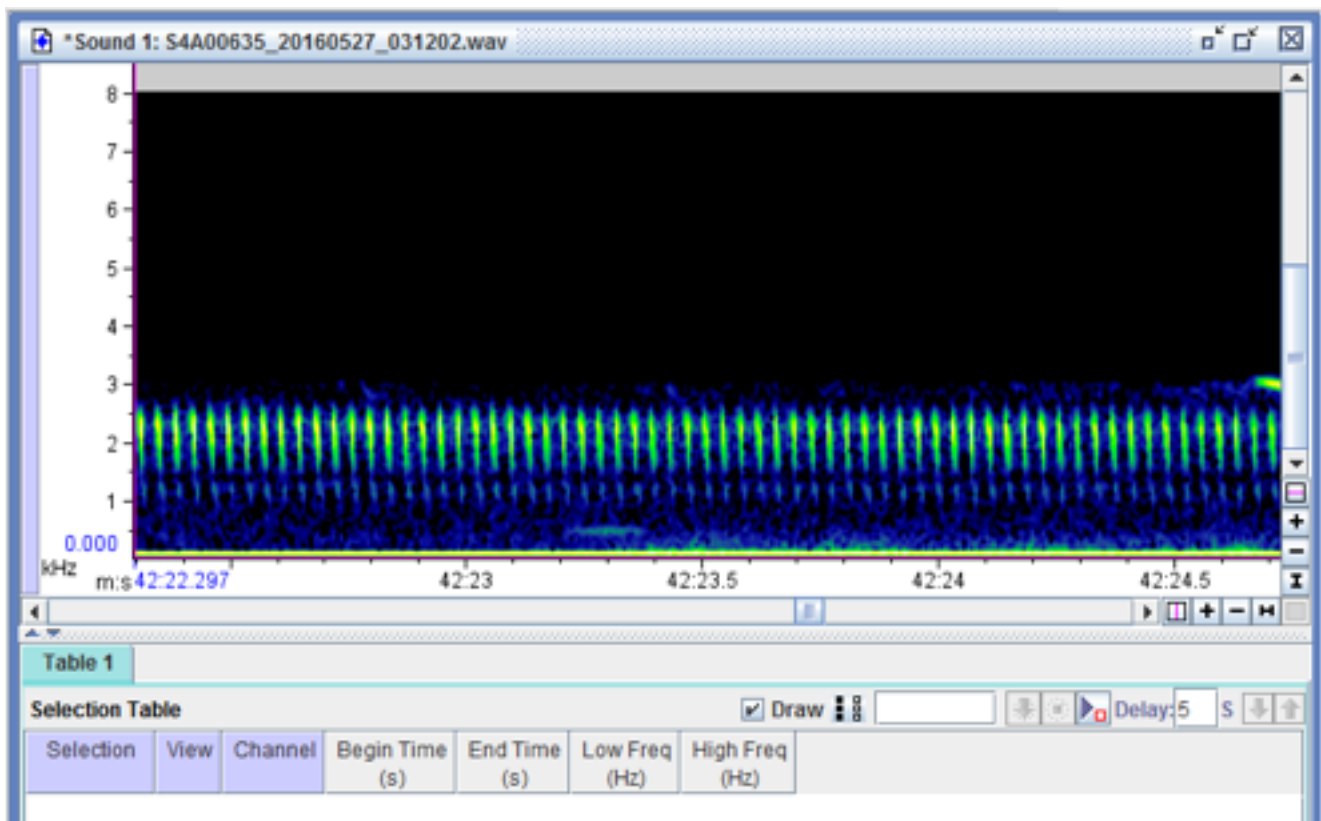
Nightjars in the North-East

A hundred years ago Nightjars were common and widespread in the NE but numbers collapsed and they were last recorded nesting here in 1944 and 1979. Following the recent discovery that they are nesting again in Angus (see *Scottish Birds* volume 34 pages 44-46, 2014) a group of local birders has been looking more intensively across Aberdeenshire since 2014. An amazing ten or 11 birds were found in 2014, and another two in the horrible early summer of 2015. At the time of writing there has already been one bird for three nights in the last week of May 2016 and we're hoping for more when things get under way in early June. Best time to listen for them is just after sunset and prior to 30 minutes before sunrise (if you are that keen).

This year we have deployed three automatic audio recorders at likely spots in the forests and these are recording continuously from dusk to dawn. Fortunately we also have software which will scan the recordings for us and look for Nightjar song or calls and it can sift through a week's recordings in about 20 minutes and flag up anything that looks interesting. One of the recorders found our Nightjar in May. We wouldn't have known about it otherwise, and we can also determine its singing pattern from the recordings and possibly whether it is mated. We're obviously hoping there's more to come! If you come across a Nightjar this year, we'd be keen to hear about it as soon as possible as we may be able to move one of the recorders to monitor the activity of your bird (mail: a.g.knox@abdn.ac.uk).



The audio recorders were purchased with generous grants from The North-East Scotland Atlas Fund, the SOC Research fund and the North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership. Thank you!



Sonogram of a short part of the Nightjar song, May 2016, as captured by the automatic recorder.

Alan Knox

Please note your Chiffchaffs!

This is a reminder that we are asking that you make a note of all the breeding or potentially breeding (singing) Chiffchaffs you come across this year and submit these either to BirdTrack (<https://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack/bird-recording>) or include them along with your annual returns to Nick Littlewood as our Local Recorder. You do not need to tell Nick about these as and when you find them - just include them with all your other records for 2016 when you send them in next December or January. Chiffchaff numbers have increased greatly up here in the last few years and it will be interesting to see just how widespread and common they have become. Grid references will add greatly to the usefulness of the records.

Alan Knox

Passing on news about rare breeding birds and causing disturbance

As you are all aware, the breeding season is in full swing, and this is a period of some vulnerability for all birds. As such, could those who find rare birds in suitable breeding habitat please give serious consideration as to whether the news should be made public.

Egg collectors may frequent birders' websites and email lists to garner information and some breeding birds are vulnerable to disturbance simply from birders or photographers visiting their nesting area. You may think that there is no harm from your own short visit but consider the cumulative impact of several people all visiting the site. There have been cases in the past of birders and photographers causing nest failures so please, don't let this happen here in the North-east. The law is strict when it comes to deliberate disturbance.

The same general request goes to passing on information by other means, such as in conversation to other birders that you may encounter. As a rule of thumb, don't pass on information on rare breeding birds and if you are aware of others talking openly about locations, please politely ask them not to.

Thanks, and enjoy the spring birding.

Andy Webb

Notable birds of the year (so far)

It hasn't been a really notable year for scarce and rare birds in the region this year– so far. It started off alright with an American Wigeon at Loch of Strathbeg on 1 January, followed by further singletons at Corby Loch in February and on the small pool behind Wallace's Caravans near Mintlaw in March.

On 3 January there was a remarkable passage of Little Auks returning north in extremely blowy weather after large numbers had been displaced into the North Sea by winter storms. The passage continued for the next few days, involving hundreds of birds. A few even turned up inland, the furthest from the coast being one at Loch of Skene on the 5th.

Single Red-necked Grebes turned up at Girdle Ness, the Ythan Estuary and Loch of Strathbeg in early January, plus further records at the latter site in February and March. One or two Bitterns frequented Loch of Strathbeg from late January, usually seen from the Fen Hide – an annual occurrence now it seems. When will they stop over to breed? A group of four blue phase Snow Geese, an adult and three juveniles, roosted on Loch of Skene regularly from 11 January into March, often being found foraging with Pink-feet on nearby fields. A single Bean Goose was also seen on Loch of Skene on the 30th.

The first big 'star' of the year, and potentially a first for the region, was a 1W Thayer's Gull found by Chris Gibbins at Donmouth on 19 January which stuck around for the next few days. Seen and photographed in various light conditions it was the subject of some debate as to whether it was the full 'species' (only recognized as a full species by some authorities, but not the BOURC – yet!) or possibly an intergrade. The jury's out on that one until the BB Rarities Committee rules sometime in the future.

Many local birders would have been down to Johnston Gardens in the west end of Aberdeen to see the drake Mandarin and Kingfisher that had been hanging out there from January onward. The Mandarin has been a regular winter visitor to this small ornamental pond since at least 2011 and has been the subject of many a photograph. It turns out that this duck is now sporting a brand new ring (no, he's not engaged!), fitted when visiting Norway in April 2015. Last seen at the nearby Walker Dam on 14 April, he turned up again just a few days later back near Oslo. Seems the same individual has been flying regularly back and forth between Aberdeen and Norway for 5 or 6 years. Read the full story from Harry Scott's two blog posts of 24 March and 21 April on <http://grampianringing.blogspot.co.uk/>.

A Great Grey Shrike was found on Knock Saul near Alford on 4 February, and another hung around Forvie NNR from 11 to 14 April, and one more on Crimond Airfield on 15 April.

Three Bewick's Swans, an adult and two 2W juveniles, were at Strathbeg on 18 February, and a juvenile White-tailed Eagle was briefly seen there on 29 February.

A single Common Crane was noted flying over Maryculter on 10 March. More accessible sightings of one or two birds on the ground occurred at Strathbeg in April and May, on the Ythan Estuary late April, and two on Slains Pool on 12 May.

The *Gemini Explorer* sailed out of Buckie several times between March and May looking for the now-annual gathering of White-billed Divers off the north Aberdeenshire coast between Sandend and Portsoy. About ten were seen in April and further sightings from onshore were also recorded in April.

The first really rare bird of the year was a first year Caspian Gull found at Drums by Chris Gibbins late on 2 April. It didn't stick around for the twitchers however and was later found down at Dunbar on the 5th.

'Elvis' the King Eider dutifully turned up again on the Ythan Estuary on 18 April but sightings since have been sporadic to say the least. Where does he go in the meantime?

Waxwing sightings have been very rare the second half of winter, the only record the author is aware of being a single bird at Braemar on 3 April.

A Great White Egret appeared on Loch of Strathbeg on 5 April, before another (or maybe the same bird returning?) appeared on Cotehill Loch on 1 May. It regularly moved between Cotehill and Sand Lochs on Forvie NNR before relocating to Strathbeg on 15–18 May.

Two Shorelarks turned up at Girdle Ness on 14 April but didn't stick around either. Better were two Avocets on the Ythan from 23 to 30 April.

It all went fairly quiet for a while with just a regular trickle of summer migrants coming in from early April, enhanced by a couple of Black Redstarts in the allotments at Girdle Ness. May however saw things picking up nicely, first with a brief Hoopoe around Forvie on the 3rd, and then a Lesser Yellowlegs on the Ythan 7th and 8th. Several Red-backed Shrikes have been seen, and two Yellow Wagtails – a blue-headed at Girdle Ness 9–10th and a rarer grey-headed at Loch of Strathbeg on the 17th. A single Roseate Tern was spotted in the Ythan ternery on the 15th, and on the same day a Spotted Crake was seen intermittently in the marsh at Nigg Bay.

A Glossy Ibis was located at Loch of Strathbeg on 16 May, possibly one of those knocking around Montrose Basin a few days before, taking up a regular evening residence but disappearing off somewhere presumably into local fields during the day. One appeared briefly at Slains Pool on 20th before presumably

relocating to Strathbeg in the evening to join the first, and one was by the Tufted Duck Hotel in St.Combs at midday on 25th.

The next big 'star' was a single Pacific Golden Plover on Slains Pool on 21 May (check out the nice photos on the Collieston Birding blog www.colliestonbirding.blogspot.co.uk). Unfortunately it departed very early the next morning successfully avoiding being seen by the author!

That takes us to the end of May and so to summer and beyond – what do they hold for us? Good Birding!

John Wills

The Atlas Fund – a reminder

As a result of the publication of our local atlas, "The Breeding Birds of North–East Scotland" in 2011, we have a sum of money that is currently held on account. While we're not looking to spend it in a hurry (some, for instance, may be used to support a future atlas), the editors (Ian Francis and Martin Cook) along with the North–East Scotland Branch Committee have decided that money can be made available to support birds and ornithology in the region. For the purposes of the fund, this region comprises of Moray, Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City, in accordance with the published atlas. In order to ensure transparent distribution of any of the money, the following rules have been drawn up:

- Applicants must be able to demonstrate that their project will benefit ornithology in North–east Scotland (including Moray).
- Grants are available only for amateur projects.
- Applicants are expected to be existing members of, or to join, the SOC.
- Where applicable, it is expected that recipients will disseminate the results of their project to local birdwatchers. This may be by a talk to the local SOC branch(es) or through publication in the North–east Scotland or Moray Bird Reports, or Scottish Birds.
- Any publications relating to the project results should state that a contribution towards costs was received from The North–East Scotland Atlas Fund.
- The fund is administered by the North–East Scotland SOC Committee or by an alternative committee or subcommittee that they entrust with this role. Awards are entirely at the discretion of the awarding body.
- Applicants must state whether or not they have applied for, or intend to apply for or have received, grant aid from other sources.
- Where appropriate, applicants are expected to have applied for an SOC Research Grant and to be aware of other funding sources.
- The grant must be used for the purpose stated in the application unless otherwise approved in writing by the awarding body. The grant must be returned to the awarding body if it is not used by the recipient as agreed by the awarding body.

Applications may be made at any time by writing to the Secretary of the North–East Scotland SOC Branch (grampian.secretary@the-soc.org.uk).

The George Waterston Library at Waterston House, SOC Headquarters

SOC members can borrow books!

Club members can borrow up to two books at a time for a maximum of two months, subject to availability and borrowing terms and conditions (see <http://www.the-soc.org.uk/borrowing-books/>). Smaller books can be posted (p&p charges apply) or passed on to members via conferences/meetings/events, so distance from Waterston House should not be a hurdle to borrowing. There is also the facility for Headquarters to scan and email, or photocopy and post pages to you (p&p charges apply), subject to copyright conditions.

For more information and to view an up–to–date library catalogue, please visit the Club's website <http://www.the-soc.org.uk/our-headquarters/the-library> .

With an outlook over Aberlady bay, the library offers a calm and tranquil environment to sit and read. It is open to all–researchers, birdwatchers of all levels, artists and historians, seven days a week during HQ's normal opening hours. There is also an area specifically tailored to young visitors with comfy seating, activity sheets and children's books on offer.

Contact details

Details for the current North–East Scotland Branch Committee are given below.

We welcome nominations or suggestions for new members of the committee at any time.

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