

North-East Scotland Branch Newsletter

Spring 2017



Welcome to your spring newsletter from your local SOC branch.

A local newsletter to all our members with an update of where we are with the current programme of talks, plus a few more articles. 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/local-branches/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

This winter's talks programme

Monday 2nd October – Emma Rawling - Scottish Wildcat Action

Monday 6th November – Mike Daniels - Rewilding in Scotland. Are we ready?

Monday 4th December – tbc

Monday 8th January – Mark Lewis - Birds of Sanday

Monday 5th February – Norman Elkins - The Fife Bird Atlas

Monday 5th March – Owen Selly - Sea Eagles in East Scotland

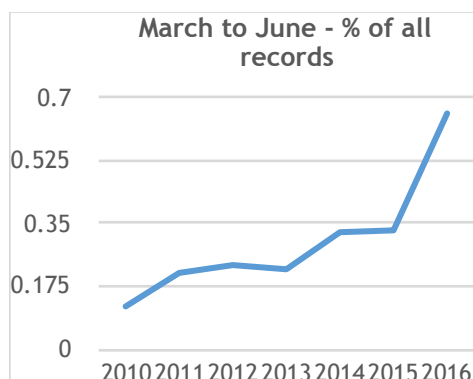
Monday 9th April – Branch AGM, followed by Grampian Ringing Group local projects

The meetings venue is usually The Sportsman's Club, 11 Queen's Rd, Aberdeen, AB15 4YL at 7.30 pm. but we are exploring an occasional alternative venue to give a little variation for our members. So watch out for future announcements please.

To cover the hire of the room a small donation is requested - £2 for members and £3 for non-members.

Chiffchaffs in the North-East

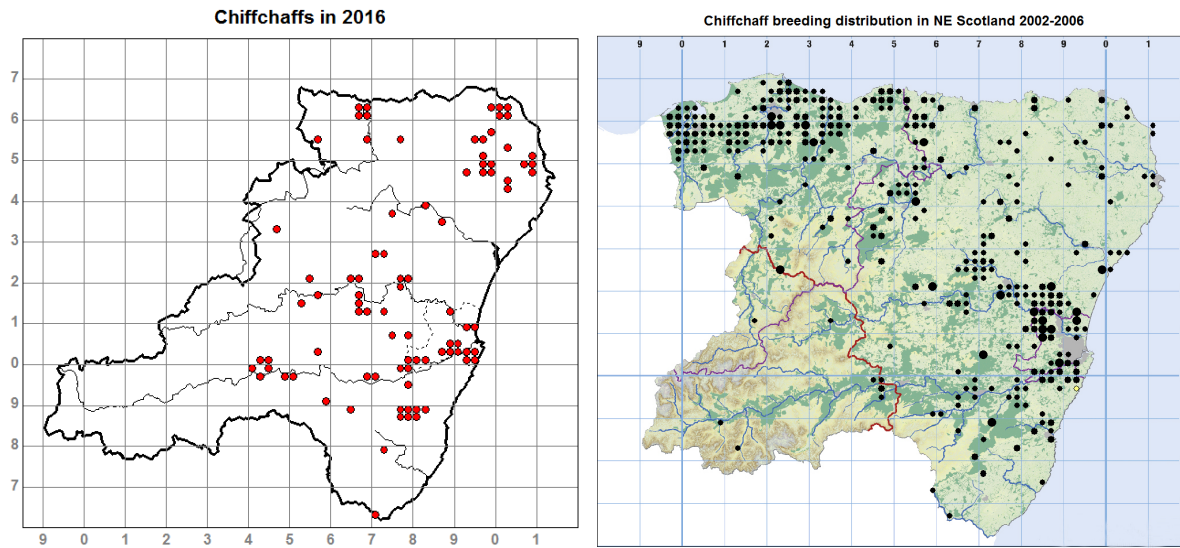
Chiffchaffs have increased throughout the UK over recent decades and especially in Scotland, apparently fuelled by improved overwinter survival. In the first national breeding atlas in 1968-72, there was only a handful of records up here and just a single case of proven breeding. The rate of change in the local atlases between 1981-84 and 2002-06 was a sizeable +189%.



Last year we asked observers to submit all records of singing Chiffchaffs. We received a bumper number of records, although we are aware that not all the data were available at the time of writing.

The number of spring-summer Chiffchaff records expressed as a proportion of all bird records received by the Local Recorder has been creeping up year on year, but in 2016 it doubled.

The map given here is based on records between March and July 2016, with the more obvious coastal migrants excluded.



The Atlas map, which includes Moray (right) is, of course, five years of data, compared with just the Aberdeen/Aberdeenshire 2016 snapshot on the left. Allowing for some big differences in presumed coverage (especially along Donside), Chiffchaffs are continuing to spread and we saw unprecedented local numbers in 2016, including 13 singing birds at Haddo on 7 April, 10 around the Cults reservoir on 11 April and 21 along the old railway line between the Maryculter bridge road and Den of Cults on 17 April.

It is also worth noting that a significant number of records came from deep within large conifer plantations, rather than the more open, mature broadleaf areas more typically occupied up here. This is a species that is clearly doing well.

Thank you to all observers for your records, and Ian Francis for the Atlas map.

Alan Knox & Nick Littlewood

This year please note your Whinchats and Stonechats (and keep recording those singing Chiffchaffs!)

Following the success of our request for records of singing Chiffchaffs last year (see Alan Knox's write-up above) this year we are asking for records of all Whinchats and Stonechats that you see on your travels, whether on territory, breeding or potentially breeding (singing). As a summer migrant Whinchat numbers have apparently increased up here in the last few years and it will be interesting to see just how widespread and common they have become. Stonechats, however, are resident and their numbers are greatly influenced by winter weather - hard winters greatly reduce their survival rates whereas we might expect that increasingly milder winters would enhance their numbers.

Also, since last year's campaign was so successful, we are asking you to keep recording those singing Chiffchaffs, where ever you may encounter them.

Please 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. Grid references will add greatly to the usefulness of the records.

John Wills

Nightjars

Following three years in a row with Nightjars inland in the North-East (as reported in the [last Newsletter](#)), we are still waiting for proof that the species is breeding here again after a 40-year gap. Perhaps it will all happen in 2017! Surveying will be under way again this year including the use of automatic audio recorders in a few locations.

If you hear a Nightjar inland this year, please contact Alan Knox as soon as possible (a.g.knox@abdn.ac.uk) as it may be possible to relocate one of the audio recorders to monitor attendance and behaviour. They save a lot of midge-infested, late-night and early-morning visits, and can record all night long!

Hen Harrier records

At a recent indoor meeting, local member Graham Rebecca highlighted the history and current precarious status of breeding hen harriers in NE Scotland, as found by the North-East Scotland Raptor Study Group and RSPB. There was around 28-30 pairs in the 1990s, but this dropped to 3 pairs in 2010-12, 5 in 2013 and only 1 in 2014 (see paper in *British Birds*: 109, pages 77-95, February 2016 by Graham and colleagues). Graham showed that there had been an improvement in 2015-16 to 9-10 pairs - but breeding success remains poor. Most breeding sites are on 'grouse-moors' with aspects of management (e.g. burning out known breeding areas in autumn) and direct persecution keeping the population low. Evidence for the latter can be seen in a video, just released by the RSPB, of a female harrier being shot at the nest site on the Cabrach estate in 2013. This incident, and another harrier shooting, are referred to in the BB paper (see these web blogs for more information: <https://raptorpersecutionscotland.wordpress.com> & <https://wildlifedetective.wordpress.com>). Graham asked that any members seeing a hen harrier in the breeding season (late March - July) to please report this asap to Graham or Ian Francis at the RSPB office in Aberdeen (01224 624824, or e-mail graham.rebecca@rspb.org.uk) so that the Raptor Study Group can follow up. Graham also encouraged members regularly 'going on the hills' to spend a bit of time watching for harriers from good vantage points with extensive vista. Indeed, this is a tactic that Graham and colleagues use to establish harrier presence, and does not require any special licence or formal access (please note that a Schedule 1 licence, obtainable from SNH, is required if nest visits or encroachment to a known breeding area is planned).

Reporting Rare Breeding Birds in North-East Scotland

As regional Bird Recorder, one of my roles each year is to collate relevant local data for the Rare Breeding Birds Panel (RBBP). This panel oversees collation of such data from all the recording regions in the UK in order to report on the status of some of our rarest birds. The information is of immense interest to conservation organisations as it shows which species might be responding positively to conservation and which might be in most urgent need of help. The data are used for assessing coverage of protection through the Special Protection Area network and may be used to argue for protection of sites from development.

Data are gathered by RBBP for all bird species with sustained breeding populations of fewer than two thousand pairs. Some such species of interest in our area are relatively well monitored year on year. For example, the Common Cranes that have recently started breeding in Aberdeenshire are monitored by RSPB whilst Golden Eagle territories and nests are checked by experienced and licensed raptor workers from Grampian Raptor Study Group. Some other species, though, are far less well-monitored and it is here that birders can make the most contribution.

The Breeding Birds of North East Scotland estimated the Wigeon population in Aberdeenshire and Moray at 25 to 50 pairs and probably comprising 10% of the UK population. Yet each year, I contribute fewer than a handful of records from the region to RBBP. Records needn't be of confirmed breeding to be relevant (though records of broods of duckling are, of course, especially useful). Pairs seen just once in likely breeding habitat can count as "possible breeding" whilst sustained presence of displaying birds combined with furtive behaviour from the female may elevate this to "probable breeding".

Water Rails are similarly under-recorded. Whilst it is difficult to prove breeding, birds on territory in the breeding season are the next best thing. Long-eared Owls are surely more abundant as a breeding species in the region than records suggest whilst Short-eared Owls fluctuate in numbers and are difficult to track without submission of opportunistic encounters by folks out and about in moorland habitats.

So this spring, please do consider making an extra effort to note down records of these species that may relate to breeding birds and please submit these records to me in due course (at end of the year with your other records, or online via BirdTrack, is fine). When doing so, please bear the following points in mind:

- Please supply a grid reference. I need to supply one for each record and if I have to estimate it, then it is likely to be less accurate than one supplied by the recorder.
- If breeding is not proved (i.e. by finding a nest or seeing very recently fledged young, etc.) please note carefully any evidence that might relate to breeding such as that the birds are in suitable breeding habitat and associated behavioural clues.
- If entering records on BirdTrack, there is an option to include a code that relates to the breeding activity noted – please do use this option.
- Note whether a bird is singing. If singing on multiple visits, it might be holding territory.
- Where possible, note the sexes of birds seen - it can be frustrating to receive a record of 2 Wigeon in a likely breeding area in spring and not know if this refers to a possible pair or not.
- Do not cause undue disturbance in recording potential rare breeding birds and remember that visiting the nests of some species is illegal without a license.
- Don't pass on the location of rare breeding birds to others and think carefully before visiting sites that you hear about from others – some of our rare breeding species are at potential risk due to disturbance from birders and photographers.



Water Rails are difficult to prove breeding but this juvenile gave itself up to a camera trap. If you do see young birds, then please do report this, but all records of birds in suitable breeding habitat during spring and summer are most useful. If multiple birds are present, an estimate of the likely number of pairs is really helpful also.

Please do help us to get a better handle on some of our most important breeding birds. For more information about RBBP and a list of species that they consider, view <http://www.rbbp.org.uk/> Otherwise, contact me for any further information or advice.

Nick Littlewood (nesrecorder@yahoo.co.uk)

Mammal Atlas of North-East Scotland and the Cairngorms

Mammals have universal appeal, and many species are easily recognised by naturalists and the wider public alike. Yet our knowledge of their distributions, populations and trends are far less known than is the case for groups such as birds and butterflies. The last (and only) national atlas was published back in 1993 (though another is currently in preparation) and there has been no previous atlas showing specifically the distribution of the mammals of our region. This has recently changed, with the publication, in March, of the *Mammal Atlas of North-East Scotland and the Cairngorms* which is the most comprehensive description to date of the distribution of terrestrial mammals in Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Moray and the Cairngorms National Park.



Drawing on 77,496 records from 1,472 observers and with input from 31 authors and six editors, the atlas presents 43 distribution maps at a tetrad (2 km x 2 km square) resolution. Records are shown for two time periods; 1960 to 1999 and 2000 to 2015. Records were accepted using any method by which a species could be reliably identified so, in addition to live sightings, substantial proportions of records also came from animals found dead (especially as roadkill), camera trapping, use of bat detectors, footprints and, for some species, presence of droppings or faeces. Public appeals for records prompted contributions from people who had never previously submitted a biological record and, in many cases, these made real tangible contributions to our knowledge of species' presence.

Some mammal species are very well-recorded in the region. For example, thanks to appeals for records by Saving Scotland's Red Squirrel and predecessor squirrel conservation programmes, we have 13,473 records of Red Squirrel, whilst Roe Deer and Mole are the most widely recorded species in the atlas area. The atlas period has seen substantial strides forward in our knowledge of the region's bat species and our list of naturally occurring species has increased from three to seven since 1960. Several non-native species have seen marked trends, such as declines in the numbers of Rabbits and, in recent years thanks to control programmes, American Mink. On the other hand, Sika are appearing in the west of the region and Fallow Deer have started to pop up. There are also a few recent records of Wild Boar, which had been extinct for several centuries, although the animals recorded recently are of unknown genetic heritage. Some species in our region present real recording challenges and the atlas demonstrates how much potential there is to improve on our knowledge of the distributions of many of our mice, voles and shrews.

The atlas extends to 184 pages and is full colour throughout. In addition to the main species accounts,



separate chapters summarise recording methods used, the region's mammal habitats, distribution and species richness patterns and mammal conservation. The 14 cetacean species recorded in our seas are covered in a separate chapter whilst a summary is given of the domestic livestock that shape our habitats.

mountain hare on Morven

Throughout the process, we aimed at producing an atlas that was both an authoritative and evidence-based account of our current knowledge of the region's mammal fauna whilst, at the same time, being an attractive and accessible publication that will appeal to a wide range of readers. The book is published by the North East Scotland Biological Records Centre (NESBReC) with funding from Aberdeenshire Council, Cairngorms National Park Authority, Forestry Commission Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Atlas Fund from the North-East Scotland branch of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club. Copies can be obtained for £15 direct from NESBReC (email nesbrec@aberdeenshire.gov.uk for details of how to collect a copy), or for £17.61 including 2nd class UK postage (cheques payable to "NESBReC, Aberdeenshire Council"). They will also, in due course, be available through bookshops and online.

Nick Littlewood

Notable birds of the year, contd. (November 2016 to end April 2017)

Late October ended with the single male **Pied Wheatear** at Donmouth on the afternoon of the 30th. The last of the thirteen **Siberian Accentors** recorded in the UK in 2016 was found at Avoch on the Black Isle (not so far from us), last seen on 7 November. A fourteenth appeared at nearby Invergordon 8-14 February; unringed it was evidently a different bird from the ringed Avoch individual.

Swans, geese & ducks : A single **Bewick's Swan** was at Loch of Strathbeg with Whoopers 10-11 December. Large roosts of wintering Pink-footed Geese, up to 34,000, were noted at Loch of Skene in

October and November, with occasional sightings of one or two Tundra Bean Geese, both European and Greenland White-fronts, and very occasional single Brents. A single Tundra Bean Goose was also seen at Meikle Loch on 1-2 November and four were photographed at St.Combs on 1 January. Tundra Bean Geese also appeared on Cotehill Loch in late January, at Blairdaff, Kemnay in late February, at Rattray Head on 2 March, Slains Pool on 18 March, and last on the Ythan on 8 April. Greenland White-fronts were also noted at Rattray on 12 December and Waulkmill in early January, and Loch of Strathbeg in February and March. The three blue-phase Snow Geese seen at Loch of Skene in October moved to Loch of Strathbeg, seen on 10 November until the 15th, before returning to Skene at the end of the month, and seen regularly until 20 December.

Aberdeen's wandering drake Mandarin 'Mac' kept reappearing and being photographed moving between Johnston Gardens and Walker Dam throughout the season. It was possibly the same bird that appeared briefly on the River Don at Burnherve, Inverurie 24-26 March. A second unringed Mandarin was photographed in Greyhope Bay on 13 April, and yet another at Logie Buchan bridge on the Ythan on 22 April. Single American Wigeons were noted at Loch of Strathbeg from 11 November to 9 December, again on 6 January and 13 February. Another female was recorded at Strathbeg in the last week of April. Another American duck, single Green-winged Teals turned up on the Ythan Estuary on 29 March, Loch of Skene on 8 April and nearby Policy Loch in the Dunecht Estate on 10 April, and finally at Loch of Strathbeg on 30 April. Do they really come from the Americas or are they emanating from somewhere closer these days?

Up to 16 Scaup were recorded through November to early March at Loch of Skene. Single Smew were at Loch of Strathbeg on 22 December and 29 January, at Loch of Skene 13-14 March, and two redheads on the Ythan Estuary 27-31 March and again 6-8 April. An early sighting of 'Elvis', our annual King Eider visitor, occurred off St.Combs on 17 January, but then disappeared again - before appearing again at his familiar springtime haunt on the Ythan Estuary on 27 March. As usual his early behaviour is rather erratic, often disappearing for days on end before settling down into his usual lazy routine into the summer. He duly appeared for only two days in mid April before pulling his disappearing act once again. Where does he go in the interim? The first Garganey at Strathbeg was seen on 30 April, hopefully a breeding bird.

Divers & Grebes :The first White-billed Divers were seen off Portsoy and Sandend from 23 March onward and the now-regular 'flock' (?) should be around into early May. The first boat excursion ventured out from Buckie on 22 April to have a closer look at them.

Two Great Crested Grebes graced Loch of Skene briefly on 9 March, and became more of a regular occurrence on the more usual site of Loch of Strathbeg in April. A single Black-necked Grebe was found on Loch of Skene on 8 April, a rare occurrence these days in the NE.

Shearwaters, Petrels : A single Balearic Shearwater was seen passing Girdle Ness on 7 November.

Herons, Storks & Ibises : A Bittern made its customary winter visit to the Strathbeg reedbeds being first seen on 28 December and again on 1 January, a welcome sighting for the New Year listers.

The first Little Egret sighting of the year was at St.Cyrus on 4 January, and the second at the more familiar location of Strathbeg from mid-February onward. It was joined by a Great White Egret on 27 March, another becoming a regular spring visitor in these parts. The GWE stuck around all throughout April and was joined by a second on 30 April. A Little Egret was also seen on the Ythan Estuary on 19 April.

A single Glossy Ibis there on the 18th-19th. Another Glossy Ibis appeared at Strathbeg on 30 January, being seen intermittently until 1 March, then another dropped in on 26-27 April.

Raptors : The first Osprey of the season was noted at a regular nest site on 2 April and Marsh Harriers were seen regularly at Strathbeg. A sub-adult White-Tailed Eagle was observed flying over Forvie NNR and the Ythan Estuary on 24 April, and a possible Pallid Harrier over Rathen on 29 April.

Cranes & Waders : A pair of Common Cranes were photographed overflying Drumoak heading south on 20 April, while more regular sightings at Loch of Strathbeg were recorded 19-20 April and three on the adjacent ploughed fields 26-30 April. The breeding pair from the last few years was also recorded back at their protected site in early April.

The first migrant waders: Greenshank, Common Sandpiper, Spotted Redshank, Little Ringed Plover, started turning up at coastal sites at the end of April.

Gulls & Terns : White-winged gulls started to appear more frequently from January onward, frequenting the usual harbour hotspots of Fraserburgh, Peterhead and Aberdeen, with occasional sightings to the end of March. A Mediterranean gull was noted at Sandhaven 19-20 January, and was probably sticking around the Phingask shore through the winter months. The occasional Little Gull has been seen too on the coast before a couple started frequenting the tern island in front of the Visitor's Centre at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg at the end of April. Hopefully, last year's breeding pair returned to try again. Let's look forward to a successful report in the autumn newsletter.

A rare **Bonaparte's Gull** turned up at Loch of Strathbeg on 23 April, was seen later the same day following a plough in nearby Crimond, and then turning up again at Strathbeg on 28 and 30 April.

An early Sandwich Tern was seen at Rattray Head on 5 February which might have been the same unidentifiable tern photographed rather distantly at the same location on a late date in October. Possibly a bird overwintering somewhere in UK waters (a few do overwinter in the English Channel)? The regular spring migrants appeared on the nesting colony site on the Ythan in mid April, followed by the occasional Arctic Tern by end of the month.

Owls : An apparent dark-breasted Barn Owl was a road casualty at Hatton, found on 16 March.

Larks : A single Shore Lark appeared at Loch of Strathbeg on 5 February.

Hirundines : There were early Swallows at Rosehearty on 6 March and Fraserburgh on 11 March. Mid-March also saw the first Sand Martin sightings at Inchgarth and Loch Davan. The cold early start to April however seemed to hold up many of the common spring migrants and it was not until late April that the flood gates opened and the regular Wheatears, Blackcaps, Willow Warblers, Redstarts, etc. started flooding in. A couple of White Wagtails were also seen.

Waxwings : In early November a major invasion of Waxwings occurred, with large flocks several hundred strong recorded at Forres, Elgin, Inverurie, and Aberdeen of course. As the berry trees got stripped, the flocks broke up and dispersed throughout the region, moving inland as far as Banchory, Rhynie and Nethy Bridge, and south to Montrose. Occasional large groups were still being seen in early January, for instance 600 on Lang Stracht on the 1st and small groups were still being recorded around Aberdeen, Cults, Westhill, Mintlaw and Elgin to mid April. Lots of lovely photographs posted on various Facebook and blog sites!

Chats : Black Redstarts were recorded at Cotehill Loch on 16th and at Cairnbulg Harbour on 20th November, and a late bird was hanging around the university campus until 17th December. Into 2017 and single birds were recorded at Buchanhaven on 13 February and Stonehaven on 7 March.

Warblers : A calling Siberian Chiffchaff was seen at the sewage works at Girdle Ness on 2 December, and another probable seen and heard occasionally at Collieston from mid to late December. Remarkably, five Chiffchaffs were trapped on the Nigg Bay site on 18 January, three of which were probable sibes. Another was recorded singing in April at the same site. A more usual occurrence were the first singing migrant Chiffchaffs on location in Kingswells, Perwinnies Moss, and Pitmunie, Monymusk in mid-March, heralding the arrival of spring.

Nuthatches & Shrikes : A **Nuthatch**, only about the fourth occurrence up here in the NE, was photographed on a peanut feeder in Rora, near Peterhead, on 17 April. Sadly it was not seen again.

Great Grey Shrikes were noted at Forest of Birse on 31 December and Park, Drumoak from 18 January, the latter regularly being sighted around that area until 26 March, and on Hill of Fare on 6 February which may have been the same bird wandering a little off site.

Finches : Mealy Redpolls were recorded at Loch of Skene and Brathens, Banchory in December.

Slightly out of our area, a small flock of Hawfinches frequented the Old Spey Bridge, Grantown, in early January. Closer to home, a single was seen near Drumoak on 10 March.

End note: A White Stork caused quite a stir when it turned up at Ythanbank near Ellon 18-19 April, before relocating to Loch of Strathbeg on 20-21 April. Bearing a prominent green ring, it was a rather infamous wanderer relocated from Poland in 2014 as an injured bird, then leaving its rehabilitation sanctuary and wandering the length of England, before turning up here. Whether it's tickable or not is a personal choice.

Good Birding for the summer!

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).

Branch Committee and 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.

Jenny Weston (Chair & Programme Coordinator)	Tel: 01224 749915 Email: jenny.weston@rspb.org.uk
John Wills (Secretary)	Tel: 01467 651296 Email: grampian.secretary@the-soc.org.uk
Paddy Grant (Treasurer)	Tel: 01224 861757 Email: patrick.grant5@btinternet.com
Alan Knox (Council Representative)	Tel: 01224 861185 Email: a.g.knox@abdn.ac.uk
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