



Welcome

After the winter solstice on the 21st of December the days slowly start to lengthen. The change will be noticed by our birds and it won't be long before Ravens repair their nests and start laying their eggs. One of our articles features Moray's Ravens, which might be about to expand their population. We also have an article about one of our most characterful song birds – the Snow Bunting which shares some of the Raven's habitats from the Cairngorms to the coast. If you visit the coast and find a stranded or dead marine mammal, such as a dolphin or seal, it is important to know who to contact for help and advice, so one of our pieces explains what to do. We also have an article on what to do if you find or see a ringed bird – reporting these provides vital information about the movement and health of our wild bird populations. You can also help our birds by taking part in surveys and our final article is full of information about how to get involved.

Merry Christmas and a Very Happy New Year from the Bird Club Committee and we look forward to seeing you at our first virtual meeting of 2022 on the 13th of January.

David Law

Chair

In This Issue

Welcome -----	1	Bird Ringing -----	8
Ravens -----	2	Quiz -----	10
Snow Buntings -----	4	BTO Surveys -----	11
Marine Mammals -----	6	News -----	12

RAVENS: ABOUT TO REPOPULATE MORAY?

MELVIN MORRISON



© Richard Somers Cocks

Ravens are the biggest of the crows, bigger than buzzards, with heavy bills and wedge shaped tails. Rooks' tails can be a little wedge shaped in some views but they are much smaller. The first indication of a Raven's presence is often its loud, hard call – much coarser than Carrion Crows or Rooks.

For many years Ravens mostly nested on cliffs or crags, rarely in trees, so were largely confined to mountainous areas especially the west coast and islands.

Locally they were common in the 18th century but heavily persecuted in the 19th, so even in the late 20th century they were confined to remote parts of Moray and Nairn. However during the 21st century a steady increase in the presence of Ravens over the sheepwalks of south Moray was becoming apparent. During 2002-06 they were found in 34 tetrads (NE Atlas 2) and during 2007-11 they were found in 13 10-km squares in the breeding season and 17 during winter (BTO Atlas 3). They mostly inhabit open country with sheep, at altitudes of 300 -750 m, over which they range widely. Ravens regularly visit the Cairngorms plateau and probable family groups, including fledged juveniles, have been seen there in June in 2014, 2016 and 2019.

In recent years they have taken to nesting in trees much more often (as probably they did before being persecuted) and as a result their range has expanded a lot in England.

Recently breeding has been proved in a small number of sites in M&N including lowland sites and most interestingly including one tree nest – the first for the area. A pair were recently seen and heard for a couple of days in forests around Keith – not just flying over. Perhaps they are about to get the hang of tree nesting again and expand their numbers here.

Please keep an eye out for them and report sightings via birdsinmorayandnairn.org

Further advice on identifying the crow family can be found at [Identifying Corvids - Crow, Chough, Jackdaw, Rook and Raven | BTO - British Trust for Ornithology](#)

Acknowledgements: Martin Cook permitted the use of an extract from his forthcoming book, the second edition of *Birds in Moray and Nairn*



BIRD FLU

Unfortunately bird flu is widespread this winter in farmed and wild birds throughout the UK, with large numbers of Barnacle Geese in particular dying in Dumfries and Galloway. So far there don't seem to have been any confirmed cases in Moray, but it is important that any suspected cases are reported. Here is the advice from the Scottish Government website.

If you find a single dead wild waterfowl (swans, geese or ducks), a single dead bird of prey, or five or more dead wild birds of any other species (including gulls) at the same place at the same time, you should report them to Defra's GB telephone helpline: 03459 33 55 77 (please select option 7). It is advisable that you do not touch these birds. More information on what to do if you find dead wild birds is available on the Scottish Government website: [Avian influenza \(bird flu\): how to spot and report the disease - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](http://www.gov.scot)

SNOW BUNTINGS — AND WHERE TO SEE THEM

MARTIN COOK



Snow Bunting on the Cairngorms in May

© Jenny Cook

One of the highlights of birding at this time of year is the sight of a flock of Snow Buntings flitting along the tideline, or on stubble fields in the snow.

In summer, a few pairs of Snow Buntings breed among the boulder fields of the high tops of the Cairngorms, building nests in cavities among the boulders and often raising two broods. In 2002-06 there were 15-20 pairs of which around half were in Moray. Work in the early 1990s showed that most breeding birds resembled the Icelandic subspecies.

Snow Buntings from the Moray breeding population spend the winter locally, close to the Cairngorms or up to 100 km away. The first winter immigrants are usually seen at the coast between mid-September and mid-October. One on Lossiemouth east beach on 1 September 2017 was most unusual, the earliest otherwise being two at Speymouth on 13 September 1969, but it is generally late October or November before large flocks are seen.

Since the mid-1980s, coastal winter flocks have traditionally been found around Delnies, on Nairn east beach and the Nairn and Culbin Bars, and on Lossiemouth east beach. Typically, they feed among sand dunes or along the tideline. In the 1980s, coastal flocks of up to 400 birds were occasionally seen but numbers have steadily declined and in recent years, flocks at any one site have seldom exceeded 50, although they can be a little more numerous at the Bars.

Although reasonably consistent counting is carried out at the coast, inland sites are not routinely visited in winter. Random reporting suggests the regular presence of small flocks around upland farmland, moorlands and on lower hills. Of 61 flocks reported since the mid-1980s, 43 contained 10-50 birds and 10 flocks held 51-100 birds. Largest flock, by far, was of c.500 in the Cabrach on 31 January 1988. Small flocks also sometimes feed on lowland stubbles with other finches and

buntings, especially in snowy weather. They were apparently far more numerous in the 19th century than they are today. Observers writing at that time reported that in Glenlivet in 1895 there were large flocks on all hills, sometimes in 'astonishing numbers', and there were big flocks in stockyards and fields around Ardclach.

Although flocks regularly inhabit the Lecht ski area (maximum 70 in February 2002) and Ben Rinnes (e.g. 30 on the summit on 20 December 1987), winter records at higher elevations are rarely reported. In recent winters, a flock has been a regular feature of the Cairn Gorm ski carpark, just outside Moray & Nairn. These birds can be quite confiding and if you want to photograph Snow Buntings this is a good place to go.

Ringling at overwintering sites in Scotland has resulted in many recoveries between Scotland and Iceland, suggesting that a high proportion of Snow Buntings in Scotland in winter (and therefore, presumably in Moray & Nairn) are of the Icelandic subspecies. Most winter immigrants have left by the end of March; latest at the coast, in 2013, were 1 at Cullen on 26 May and 2 at Tronach Head on 31 May.



Available to Download

The SOC's free mobile app; *Where to Watch Birds in Scotland* is available for Android and Apple devices. The award winning app has over 560 sites and new sites will continue to be added and existing ones updated as far as possible.



MARINE MAMMAL STRANDINGS

DAVID LAW

Grey Seals



The Moray Firth is famous for its resident population of Bottlenose Dolphins and along the Moray coast we can also see Harbour Porpoises and the occasional whale. Grey and Harbour Seals are common all along the coast and particularly easy to see at their haul outs at Findhorn Beach and Portgordon. Occasionally you might find one of these marine mammals dead or in distress on the shore. So here is a quick guide to what to do.

If the animal is dead

Contact the Scottish Marine Animal Stranding Scheme [SMASS \(strandings.org\)](https://strandings.org)
Phone/text: [07979 245893](tel:07979245893) or Email: reports@strandings.org

When you report a stranding, please try to provide the following information:

- Date found
- Location (grid reference if possible)
- Photographs of the carcass
- Species or description
- Overall length (estimation)
- Condition of the animal
- Your contact details

Animals that are in a relatively fresh condition may be sampled or collected. The SMASS website gives more details of the best way to photograph animals and there is a guide to identifying species. Information on all strandings is valuable, for example it provides vital information on the health of marine mammal populations and on the threats they face.

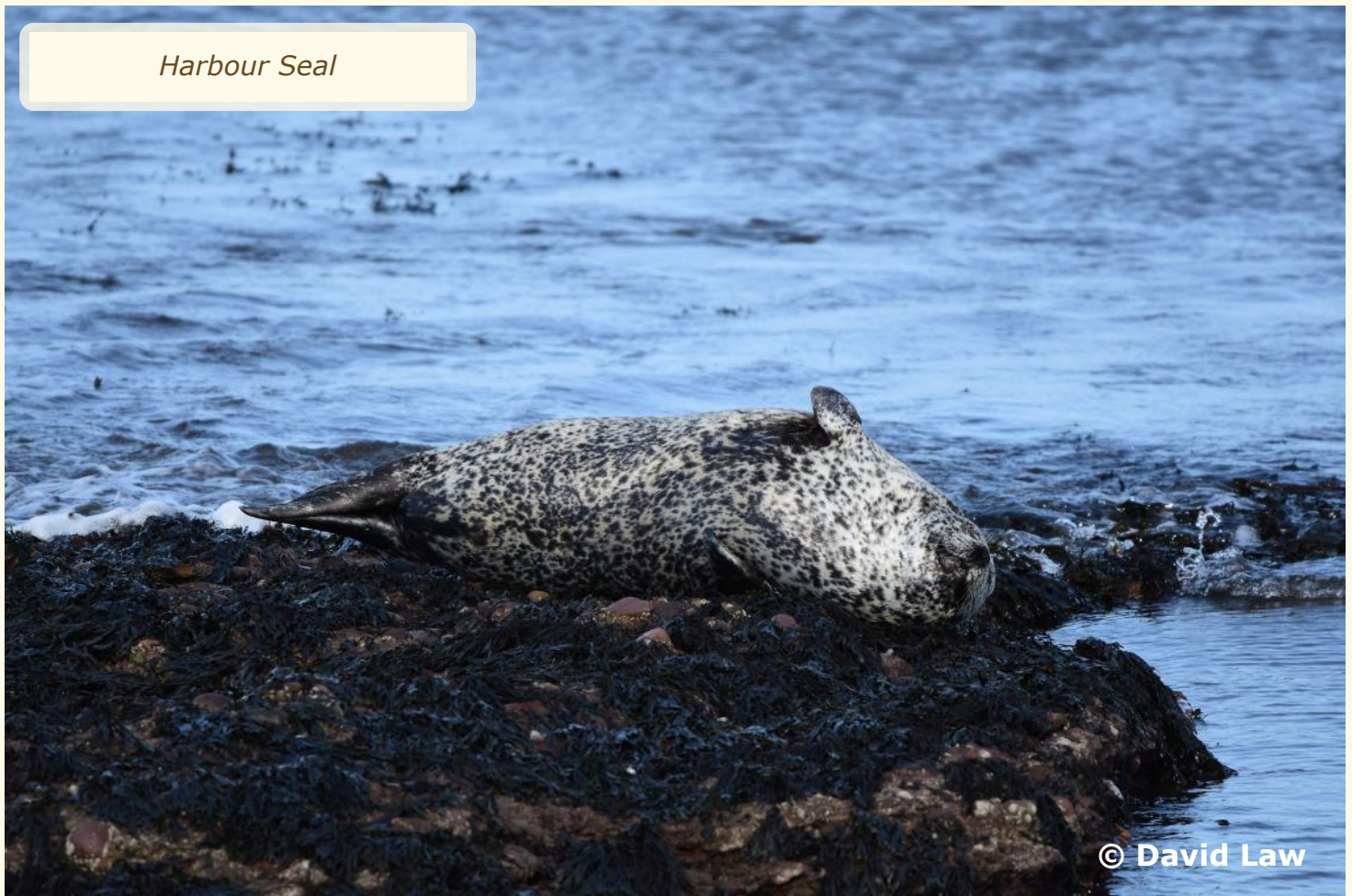
Live whales, dolphins or porpoises

Any whale, dolphin or porpoise found alive on the shore is in trouble and needs urgent help

Immediately call the British Diver's Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) Rescue Hotline **[01825 765546](tel:01825765546)** (24hr)

You will receive further advice over the phone. The BDMLR website also provides a lot of useful advice. [What to do if... - British Divers Marine Life Rescue \(bdmlr.org.uk\)](http://bdmlr.org.uk) Importantly it advises against trying to return the animal to the sea yourself – it is best to wait for their team of experts to arrive.

Live seals



Seals spend a lot of time hauled out on the shore so usually there is no need to take any action – just enjoy watching from far enough away to avoid causing any disturbance. If you think a seal is injured or sick or a seal pup has been abandoned it's important not to go too close or to handle the animal as their bite can cause injuries if they feel threatened. The BDMLR website has advice on what to do and they will also provide advice by phone **01825 765546**

Whether a marine mammal on the shore is in distress or dead it is always worth reporting. Occasionally these reports turn up something particularly surprising. For example last year Bird Club committee member Richard Somers Cocks spotted a stranded whale near Cape Wrath in north west Sutherland. He reported the stranding and it turned out to be the first British record of a True's Beaked Whale. [MC2003 TruesBeakedWhale-1.pdf \(mammal.org.uk\)](#)



BIRD RINGING

ALASTAIR YOUNG



© David Main

It's a Saturday morning and you take a trip to Lossie Estuary. There's a load of gulls on the beach and you notice that one has a colour ring. Your interest is piqued, where is it from, how old is it... how do I find out? Read on and you will find out.

As a bird ringer I put a metal ring on all the unringed birds I catch. That's great but the reality is I am relying on either the bird being found dead, or the bird being caught by another ringer to find out more about it. With only a few thousand ringers in the UK, that means there is a very small chance of my birds getting caught again and in general it's less than one in 100 for most species.

How then do ringers get more information? One way of doing this is to put colour markers on the birds, generally rings, leg flags or wing tags. Each bird generally gets a specific combination which identifies the individual bird and when seen, the combination can tell you where it was ringed without catching the bird. For many species which sit around in flocks this can be a good way to get reports of your birds. It generally works better on larger birds where they can be seen, and a number is often added.

You can see the results of this yourself by simply looking at the ringing section of the Moray and Nairn web site. I had a quick look to see what people had picked up in this area that otherwise would not have been reported from normal rings. Here are a few examples:



© Richard Somers Cocks

Kittiwake yellow MVF was ringed as a nestling at Nidingen, Halland (SWEDEN) on 13 June 2017 and sighted at Nordjylland (DENMARK) on 12 June 2020, at Nidingen on 8 July 2021 and on Findhorn beach (NJ0364) on 9 August 2021, 927 km from the ringing site after 4 years 1 month

Bar-tailed Godwit DA53220 (yellow PEN) was ringed at Makkevika Giske, More & Romsdal (NORWAY) on 7 September 2019 and sighted in Portgordon harbour (NJ3964) on 12 October 2019, 734 km from the ringing site after 1 month 5 days.



© Brian Bates

Snow Bunting SY54730 (white 31) was ringed at Plage de l'hoverport, Calais (FRANCE) on 2 February 2015 and sighted at the Lossie estuary (NJ2470) on 28 March 2015.



© David Main

You can see records come from many species, mainly waders, gulls, and terns but also on some waterbirds, and a few passerines like the Snow Bunting. Just looking at the ringing page again there has been over 50 sightings in 2021 of 9 species. we can see that these have been all over Europe. As a result of those sightings, we now know much more about where the birds we see spend the rest of the year.

by Mark Johnston

Often there have been other sightings and just look at what we know about this Sandwich Tern because of the reports of the colour rings.



© Richard Somers Cocks

Sandwich Tern red UBF (DD76888) was ringed as a nestling on Inner Farne (Northumberland) on 12 July 2013 and sighted at Mile 4 Salt Works, Swakopmund (NAMIBIA) on 26 February 2016, at Coquet Island (Northumberland) on 11 August 2016, at Mile 4 Salt Works, Swakopmund (NAMIBIA) on 8 December 2016, at Coquet Island in April/May 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, on Findhorn beach on 8 August 2020 and 11 August 2021 and at Carnoustie (Angus) on 18 August 2021, after 8 years 1 month.

We all have an inkling that these birds may have come from somewhere else, but it's great to get that confirmed. So, what do you do if you see a marked bird: first thing is to note the species of bird, colour and where the mark is in the bird e.g., leg rings, green over blue on the left leg and metal ring on the right? Don't forget to include where any metal ring is. It may also be a be a leg flag, wing tag or collar. If you can see a number, then read that as well. The British Trust for Ornithology run the UK ringing scheme and if you go to the web site you can report a ringed bird. [Euring Web Recoveries \(bto.org\)](http://www.birdsinmorayandnairn.org/i/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Findhorn-colour-ringed-Sandwich-Terns-in-2013.doc). From there you can look up the relevant colour ringing project and report your bird. You should hopefully get a quick response telling you about your bird. Don't forget to let us know what you find out so we can let others see it on the website. There's also an interesting article by Richard Somers Cocks on colour ringed terns on Findhorn Bay from 2013 which is worth a look. <http://www.birdsinmorayandnairn.org/i/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Findhorn-colour-ringed-Sandwich-Terns-in-2013.doc>

So, what about the gull with the Yellow ring. Well, this is what came back for that one:



© David Main

Iceland Gull Yellow T12H was ringed at Arbroath (Angus) on 19 April 2015 and sighted on the Lossie estuary on 11 July 2015, 137 km from the ringing site after 83 days.

QUIZ

1. **Approximately, how many feathers does a House Sparrow have in winter?**
A) 500 B) 3500 C) 7000
2. **What is the connection between a Wheatear and Water Hemlock?**
3. **Which bird is known in Gaelic as Ceann-dubh ?**
4. **What is the collective noun for a group of owls?**
5. **Which bird is John Clare describing here:**

*(They) 'twit on bush and tree
Scarse bigger then a bumble bee
And in a white thorn's leafy rest
It builds its curious pudding-nest
Wi hole beside as if a mouse
Had built the little barrel house.'*

Answers on back page

BTO SURVEYS

MELVIN MORRISON

This is my annual call for volunteers to undertake some of the surveys organised by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). They are mostly not for beginners (but see Woodcock below) but nor do you need to be a great expert.

The main survey is the Breeding Birds Survey (BBS) which involves walking prearranged transects through a 1 km square and counting all adult birds which you see or hear. The survey is done twice between mid April and the end of June, preferable in the early morning. I have no control over which squares are available – they are randomly selected by a BTO computer so some are easier to survey than others but as the BTO Regional Representative, I manage the allocation of the squares to local volunteers.

In Moray and Nairn (M&N) we have 46 squares of which 25 are allocated to volunteers and in 2021, 19 of these were surveyed – a pretty good number all things considered and only a little below average. Variations from year to year is the important thing so it is important that they are done every year if at all possible.

Meadow Pipit was the most frequently seen bird in 2021 (198 individuals) with Chaffinch coming in second with 157 records.

The waterways BBS is similar but is along rivers. We have 8 stretches of river of which 6 are allocated and all of which were covered in 2021.

To do one of these surveys, you need to be able to identify all the species which you are likely to encounter by sight and also by their calls and songs.

But the Woodcock one is easy – it just involves being at a designated site in or near woods for 15 minutes before and an hour after sunset on three occasions in May and June and counting the Woodcock seen or heard. It is a pleasant way to spend a calm summer evening. We have two available squares – NH9246 and NH9150. You only need to be able to recognise Woodcock flying round their territories – so called 'roding'. Just enter 'roding woodcock' into YouTube and that will be your training!

There are also surveys of heronries, but all known heronries in M&N are presently covered – Aberlour, Spey Bay, Findhorn Bay, Loch Spynie and near Auldearn. However there may be others, even small groups, so if you come across a heronry, please let me know.

If you are interested in taking part in one of these surveys, then more details can be found on the BTO website or by contacting me: wmmorrison@btinternet.com



Birdsinmorayandnairn.org

is a one-stop-shop for everything to do with birds and birding in the region. View latest sightings, forthcoming survey work, bird club news and more.

NEWS

Sunday

Our next virtual talk will be on Thursday, 13 January at 7.30 pm when Mark Lewis, SOC Birding & Science Officer, will give a talk on Birding on Sunday. More details on this talk, together with details on how to attend will shortly be sent out in an email.

Scottish Birdwatchers' Conference 2022

This will be held on 19th March 2022 in Elgin in partnership with BTO Scotland. Because there is still uncertainty about the continuing effects of Covid-19 and its variants, tickets are not available for purchase at the moment, but you can indicate an interest in attending and reserve a place. Two of our committee, Melvin Morrison & Richard Somers Cocks, have put in a great deal of work in helping to organise this conference and it would be good to see their efforts rewarded with a high turnout of local members. Full details on how to reserve a place and details of the programme are available here:

<https://www.the-soc.org.uk/support-us/events/events/scottish-birdwatchers-conference-2022>

© Richard Somers Cocks

NEXT NEWSLETTER

We hope you have enjoyed this newsletter. We would like to encourage our members to contribute to the newsletter and we would also welcome any suggestions for future newsletters and we will try to accommodate them.

If you would like to contribute an article that may be of interest to our members or have any suggestions please contact me on the email address below.

In addition, if you have any comments on the articles in this newsletter or any previous newsletter I would be delighted to hear from you.

Alison Ritchie
moraysecretary@the-soc.org.uk

Quiz Answers

- 1. 3500 (This can drop to below 2000 in July)**
- 2. *Oenanthe oenanthe* is the scientific name for the Wheatear. *Oenanthe crocata* is the scientific name for Water Hemlock. (It is not 'acceptable' according to the rules of taxonomy, for unrelated animals to share a genus name but birds and plants can have the same generic name.)**
- 3. Blackcap**
- 4. A Parliament (There are other less common terms)**
- 5. Long-tailed Tit (John Clare called them Bumbarrels)**