



Welcome

I hope everyone has been able to enjoy the sights and sounds of birds in the recent fine weather. It has been good to see reasonable numbers of Swifts screaming about during the warm evenings. It's always worth enjoying their aerobatics while you can, as by mid-August Swifts will be heading to South Africa for the winter. Another evocative sign of this time of year is the return of some wading birds like Whimbrel and Greenshank to our coasts as they return from their breeding grounds further north. You can keep up to date with the latest bird news at the recent sightings section of the Birds in Moray and Nairn website www.birdsinmorayandnairn.org

In this edition we take a look at some of the less well-known birding sights of Moray. Bob Proctor tells us what hundreds of hours of dedicated sea watching at Lossiemouth has revealed about movements of seabirds and other species offshore. Al Young explains why he has been playing recordings of bird calls along the coast in the wee small hours and how this turned up what might be the oldest known bird in Moray. Melvin Morrison takes a peep by drone inside Heron's nests. Many people will have enjoyed seeing Rose-coloured Starlings earlier this summer – Martin Cook tells us more about these flamboyantly coloured visitors, which I managed to miss – there's always next year!

David Law

Chair

In This Issue

Welcome -----	1	Storm Petrels in Moray ---	11
Sea-watching -----	2	Counting Heronries -----	14
Rose-coloured Starling ----	8	Quiz -----	15
News -----	10	Book Review -----	16



Kittiwake

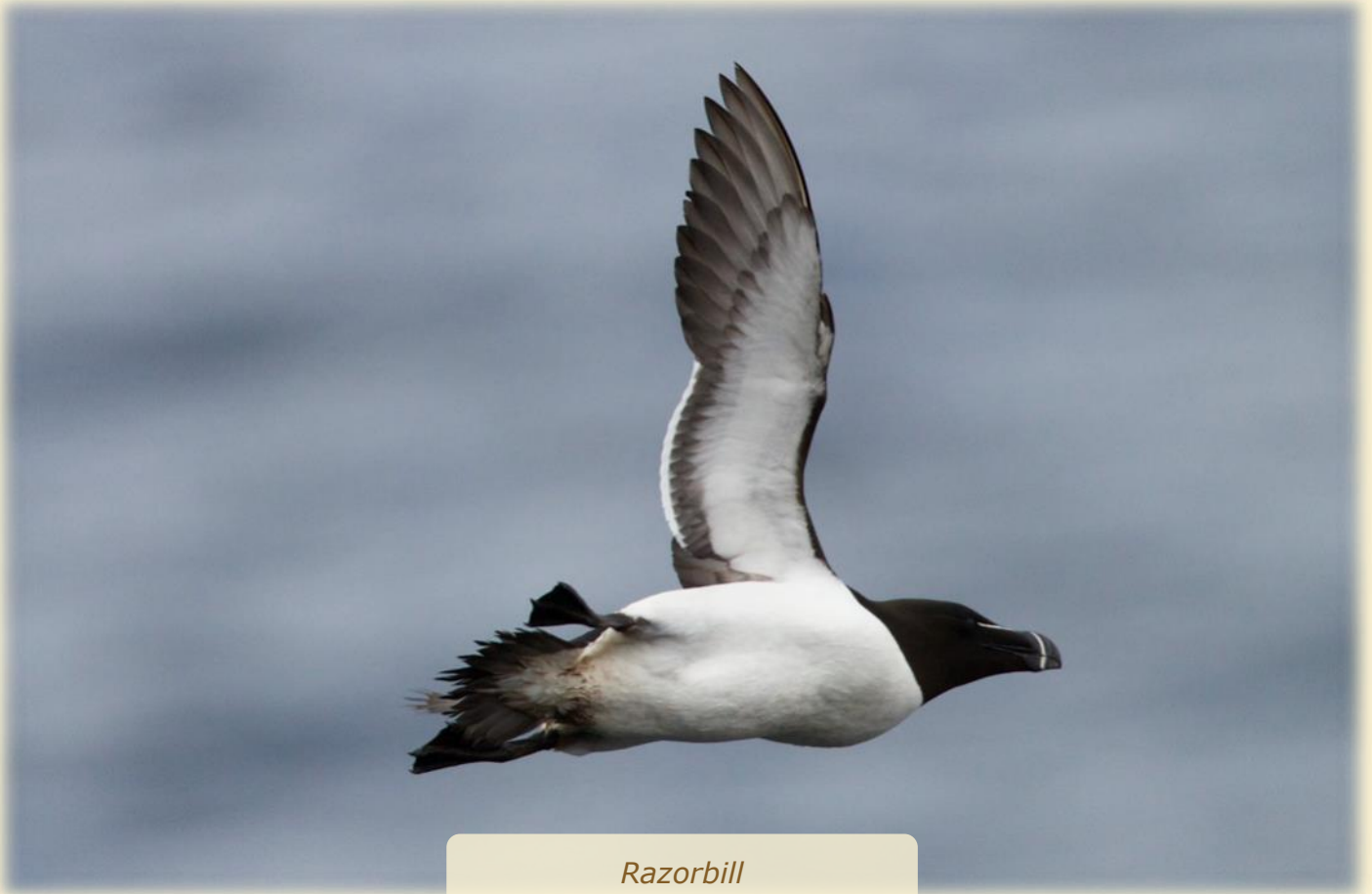
Sea-watching

Bob Proctor

Unfortunately, within Moray & Nairn we don't have any of the massive seabird colonies like Troup Head or Handa that many people will be familiar with, therefore, for certain species such as skuas and shearwaters, the only realistic option to see these locally is to 'sea-watch'. Land-based sea-watching (as opposed to pelagic trips on a boat) is a style of birdwatching whereby an observer will watch the sea primarily to see passing seabirds. The majority of sea-watching is traditionally done during the main migration periods in spring and autumn, and can frequently be in weather conditions involving gale force winds and torrential rain. The hope is that these conditions will force seabirds that are normally well offshore closer to the observer. It is a pastime not liked by everyone due to the inclement weather, frequent fleeting views of the birds, identification struggles between certain species and if it is a quiet day: boredom. However, some of my best sea-watching experiences in recent years have been in mid-summer in little wind and bright sunshine.

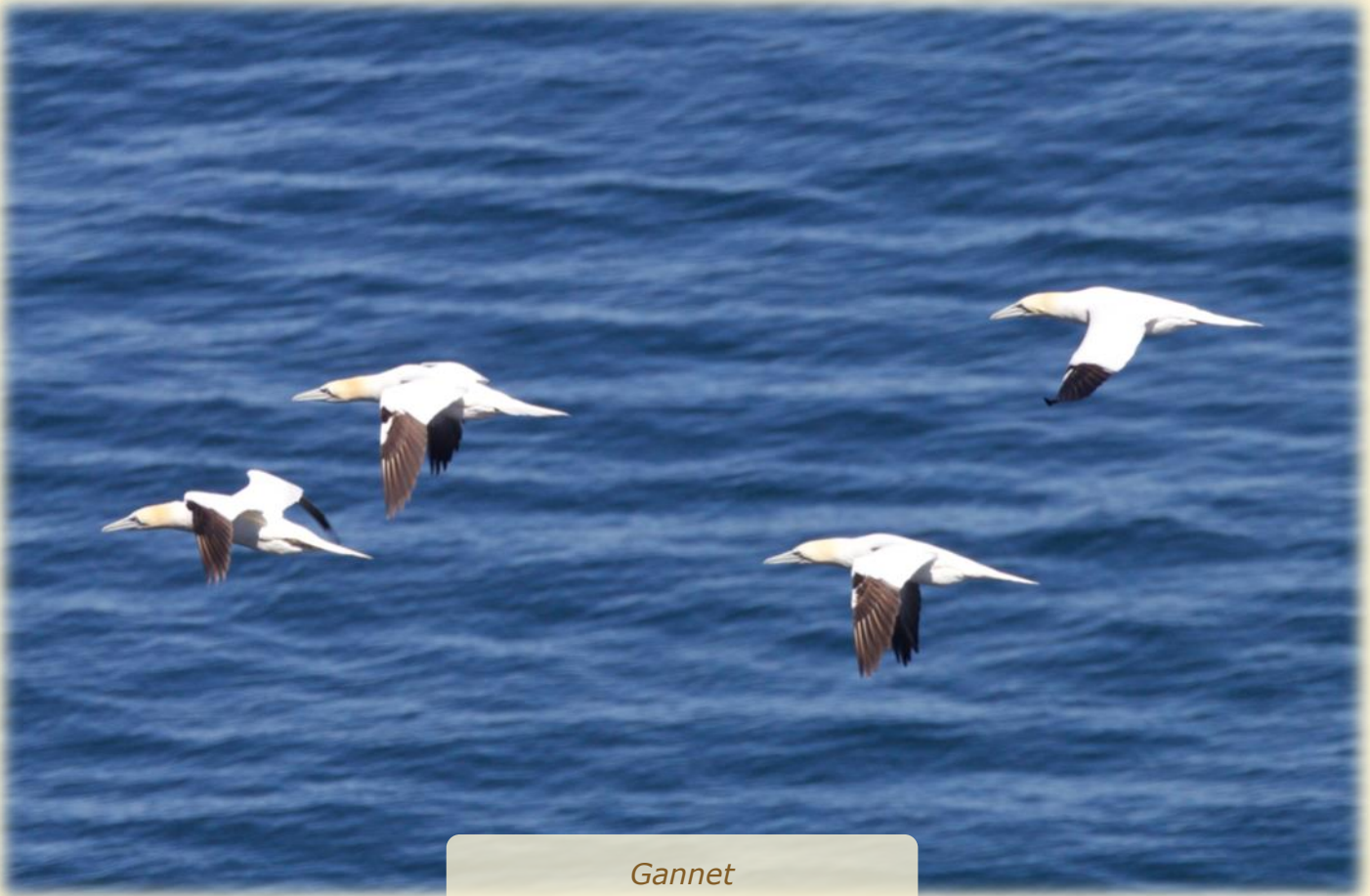
Previously, I undertook periods of sea-watching in the autumn off Lossiemouth, usually in the 'obligatory' gales and rain to look for species that were irregular off Moray, though with the

constant optimism that putting in time and effort may bring the reward of something rarer such as a Sabine's Gull. In 2014 I started to sea-watch on a regular basis throughout the year off Lossiemouth harbour as I was interested in finding out what species passed outwith the traditional migration periods and in what numbers. What I thought would be a single year of observation has turned into eight years so far of observing birds passing Lossiemouth amounting to 937 hours (or 39 days) staring at the sea!



Razorbill

My counts have been divided into 30 minute periods and depending on the time of year and the time of day an observer can potentially see somewhere in the region of 6-8 species – so even if you only have 30 minutes you can see something of interest. Since my regular sea-watching started I have only recorded zero species once and one species twice, while at the other end of the spectrum, I have encountered 12 species 10 times and 13 species three times. Over the eight years of seawatching a total of 97 bird species have been recorded passing Lossiemouth harbour, of these an average of 27 seabird species have been recorded each year. The top three species have been the same in every year and account for 88% of the total number of individual birds seen; they are Kittiwake, Gannet and Razorbill. Also during sea-watches annual spring migration of Meadow Pipits have been observed and movements of Carrion Crows frequently crossing the Moray Firth.



Gannet

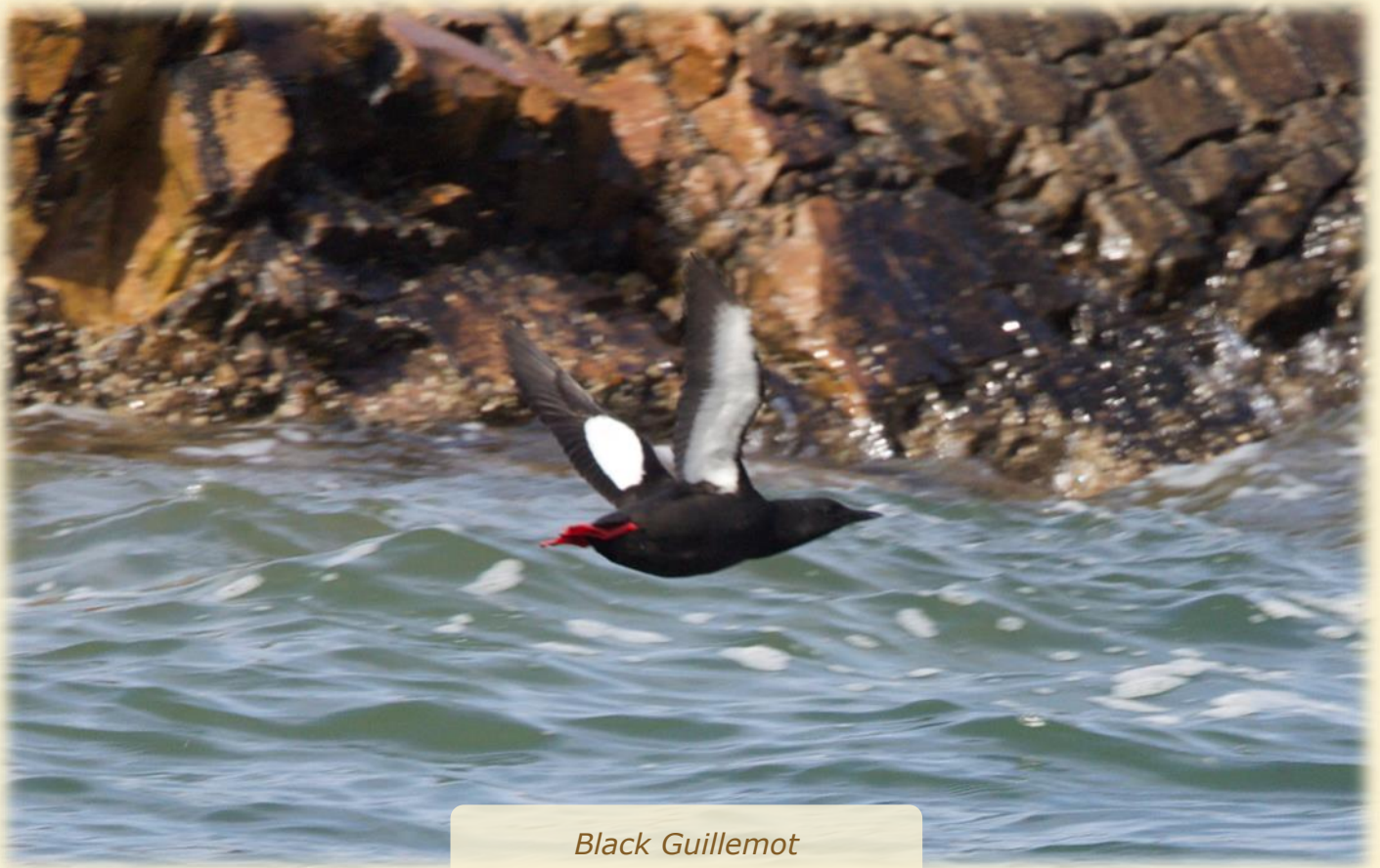
Sea-watching can be frustrating to the novice initially. Depending on sea conditions many species will frequently appear and disappear into the troughs of waves. To improve the experience a telescope is obviously the best optical aid to use as not all species will be close enough to identify with binoculars, however, even if you only have binoculars satisfactory to good views can be

obtained for all the auks, shearwaters, skuas and obviously the larger species such as Gannet and divers. If you do use a telescope it is still worthwhile alternating with a pair of binoculars as some species, such as divers, skuas and Gannet, will frequently fly high and can be easily missed if concentrating on the sea alone.



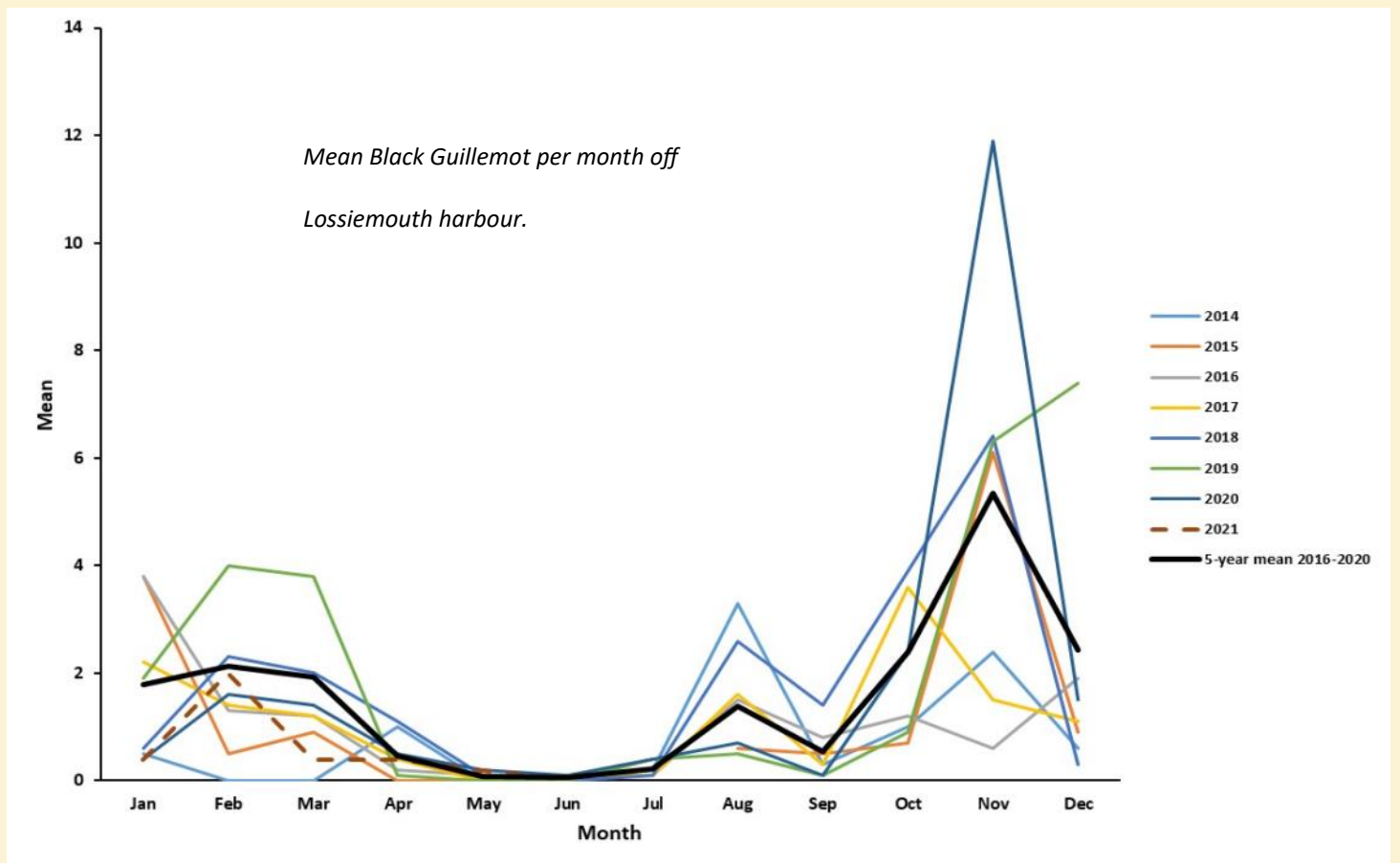
Arctic Skua

One advantage of regular counts from an area is that trends can begin to appear for common to scarce species. The graph below shows that the autumn arrival of Black Guillemots starts in July

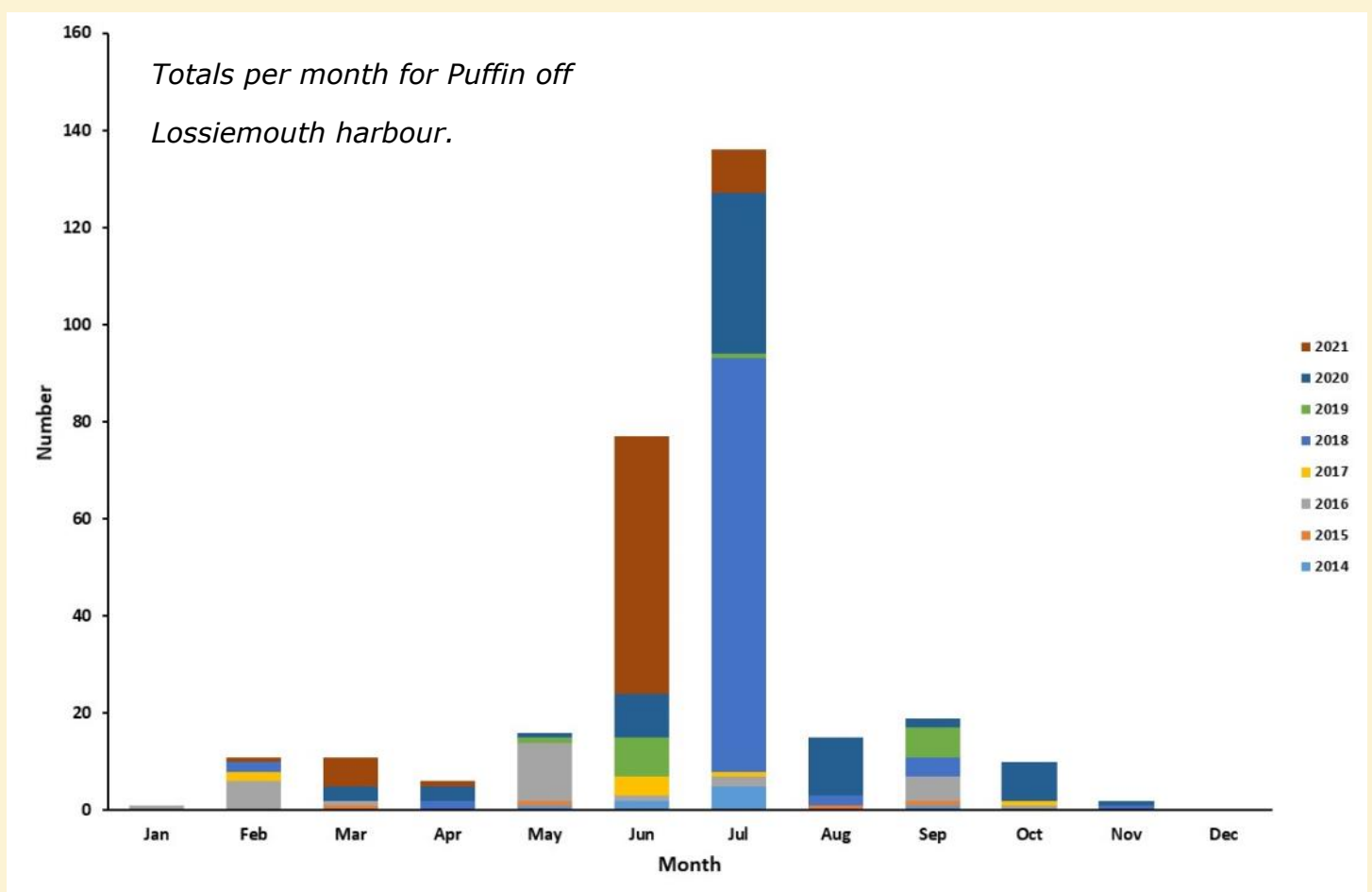


Black Guillemot

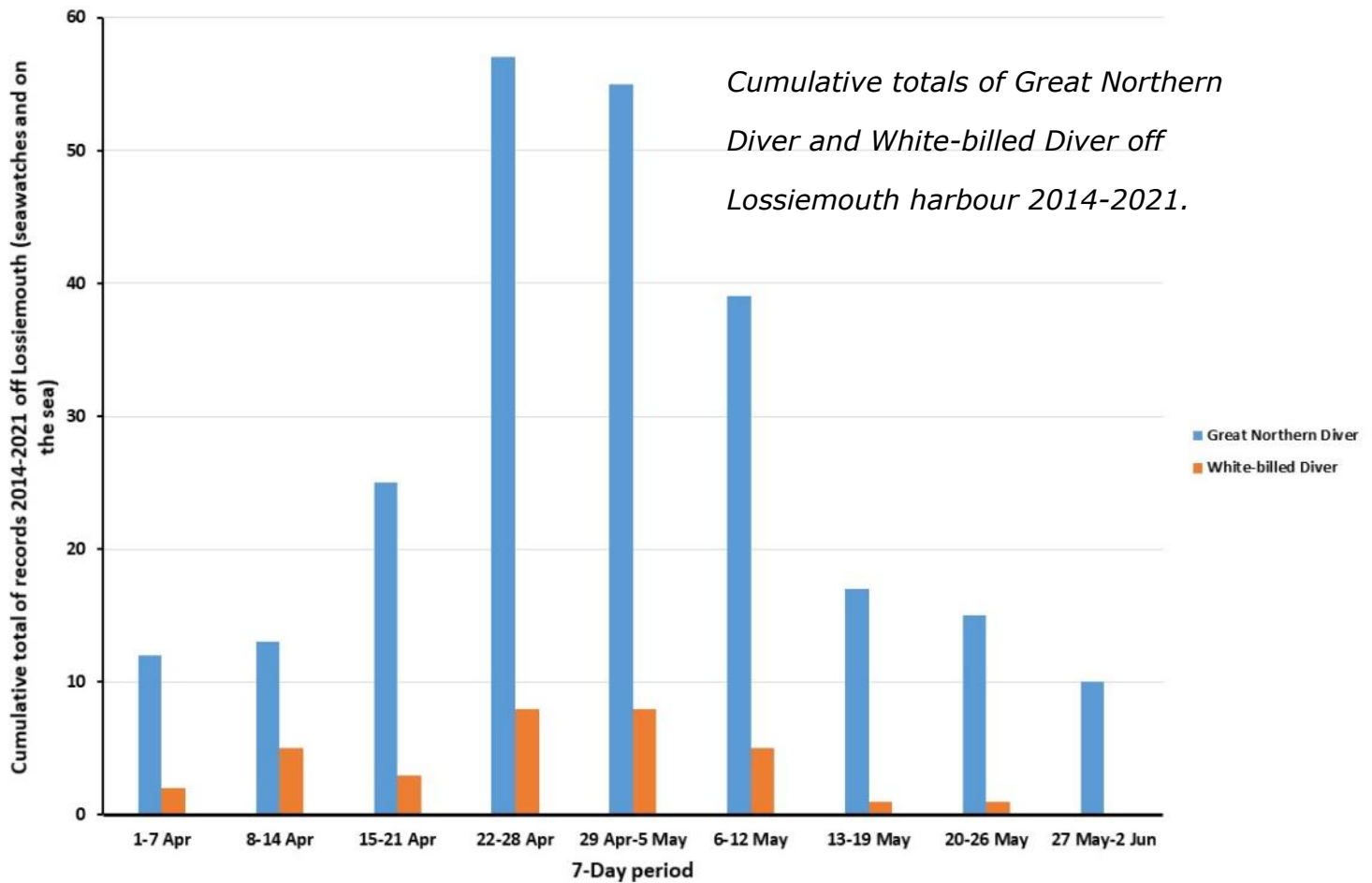
with a late summer peak in August. This early arrival has so far only involved adults in breeding plumage. There is a dip in numbers in September which coincides with the adult flightless moult period. Then the main passage of Black Guillemot occurs in October/November with birds mostly in non-breeding plumage. The largest count in 30 minutes was 73 passing on 21 November 2020.



Sea-watching from sites throughout a year, or more observers undertaking sea-watches, will probably change the status of certain species. Puffin is currently considered as very scarce offshore (i.e. less than 10 in most years). This scarcity is particularly evident if only sea-watching during the traditional migration periods when the majority of monthly sightings have been in single figures. However, June and July have become the main months for seeing Puffins off Lossiemouth. Since 2018 numbers passing the harbour have increased dramatically with annual totals of 96 in 2018, 16 in 2019, 72 in 2020 and 70 to early July 2021. Many of these latter counts have involved individuals very close in-shore and observable using only binoculars.



Rare species are always a thrill when seen. Since 2014, local rarities have included Cory's Shearwater, Balearic Shearwater, Leach's Petrel, Long-tailed Skua, Sabine's Gull and Surf Scoter. One of the frequently encountered rarities off Lossiemouth is White-billed Diver. In late April to mid-May there is an obvious increase in Great Northern Divers offshore and usually in early May 1-3 White-billed Divers can be found.



To summarise; sea-watching can be frustrating, exciting (and occasionally a good test of your boredom threshold) but is also a rewarding way of adding to our local knowledge of a group of species that are off our shores but usually not seen or documented by any other method.



Members' Survey

We are very grateful to all of you who completed our recent survey and pleased that there was a generally positive response. We will consider all of the information you have given and in a future newsletter we will provide a report on the information gathered and how we will make use of that information.





Rose-coloured Starling at Hopeman, 29 June 2014

Rose-coloured Starlings – Best Year Ever In 2021

Martin Cook

When it comes to rare birds in Moray, rather a lot are small and brown and take a bit of tracking down in quiet countryside. Not so the Rose-coloured Starling, it's bright pink and usually turns up in back gardens on a fat ball feeder.

Early in my bird ringing days, while still a teenager, my ringing trainer and I joined a group of wader ringing enthusiasts for a few days' wader ringing on Wisbech sewage farm – and we camped in a derelict house beside the sewage farm. It was about as pleasant as it sounds but the wader catching was good! One of our number, a young woman, had a coffee mug inscribed with the words 'xxxx (I forget her name) saw a Rose-coloured Starling today' – but that was several days previously, and the trail was cold. In the late 1960s, Rose-coloured Starling was a proper rarity, and I was deeply envious.

Wind on the clock 20 years to 13 June 1987 and I got a call from someone telling me that there was a Rose-coloured Starling near Allt-a-Bhainne Distillery, in Glen Rinnes. Off I dashed and there it was, wandering along the roadside, oblivious to the cars hurtling past. But for me it was a dream fulfilled. I still have a poor, sun-bleached photo on my study wall. It stayed around the distillery

until early July – just the second record for Moray, though the first in living memory as the only earlier bird was shot at Loch Spynie in June 1851.

Since 1987 there have been 15 further records, of 16 birds, with an adult at Portknockie on 17-19 October 1998 being the only autumn occurrence. In 1999, I learned that a pink bird had been found in a weakened state in Burghead on 25 June; it was taken into care but died on 28 June. I visited the householder who agreed to exhume the corpse from his back garden – it was a Rose-coloured Starling. In 2000, two birds were seen, in Buckpool on 18 June and in New Elgin on a date in July. Two more were found in 2002, the year of an exceptional influx into Scotland, at Hopeman in July and in Mosstodloch in August. No more were seen until one in Lossiemouth in June-July 2008.

Since then, sightings have become more frequent, with one in 2014, three in 2018, two in 2019 and three in 2020. There have been five this year, all in June, in Cummington/Hopeman, Lossiemouth (2), Findhorn and Buckpool.

Of the 23 records, all but one have arrived in June-August, with 18 in June. Seventeen records have been of birds visiting garden feeding stations, often in the company of Starlings.



Rose-coloured Starlings at Lake Kerkini, Greece

So where do they come from, and why do they come? They breed in large numbers in the steppes and semi-deserts of central Asia and are prone to periodic mass movements in a westerly direction

which lead to records across Europe with a few reaching as far as the UK. The causes of these irruptions are not fully understood but may be linked to changes in the population of the locusts on which the birds feed. Breeding success of the starlings is greatly improved during the 'hopper' phase of the locusts when food for the birds is abundant, and their population builds to abnormal levels.

Following the largest irruptions, a few pairs have stayed to breed in south-east Europe, and a small breeding population is now established there. They have never nested in the UK, and with locusts an unlikely feature of the Moray countryside, a considerable degree of global warming will be required before we have them here.



News

Forthcoming Events

Our next virtual talk will be on Thursday, 21 October at 7.30 pm when John Love will give a talk on the natural history of St Kilda. We will provide you with more details on this talk later, together with details on how to attend.

Planning a holiday in the Highlands this summer?

[Highland SOC](#) are asking for help with their Species Focus this year – a citizen science project for a 'stay at home' summer. If you're birdwatching in the region, the branch would be particularly keen to hear of any sightings of two resident bird species: Red-breasted Merganser and Crested Tit. Both species are on Rare Breeding Birds Panel (RBBP) list and Highland holds important breeding populations, but surprisingly few actual breeding records. Details of the appeal can be found at


<https://www.the-soc.org.uk/files/docs/HighlandSOCSpeciesFocus2021.pdf>

Online Scottish Bird Report

All of you will be aware of our local annual report *Birds in Moray & Nairn* edited by Martin Cook and available on his website www.birdsinmorayandnairn.org but some of you may not know that you can search reports from all over Scotland at :

the-soc.org.uk/about-us/online-scottish-bird-report

You can search by species, region or year and it is very useful if you are planning a trip in Scotland, doing some research or just curious.





Storm Petrel

Storm Petrels in Moray

Alastair Young

Storm Petrels are small seabirds which are seldom seen as they spend most of the daylight hours and most of the year at sea, only coming ashore to breed. They breed in colonies around Scotland, mainly in the northern and western isles with very few on the east coast, with none known near the Moray Firth.

They have however occasionally been seen in Moray with 5 records noted in 'The Birds of Moray and Nairn (Cook 1992)'. That book also noted that 'it was probable that on summer nights there were many more birds in the vicinity of our coasts than the small number of daytime records would suggest'. Ringing in other areas had shown that birds did wander around the coasts in summer, so it seemed an interesting thing to do to see what was coming around here. A few attempts showed that there were birds around and birds were caught at Lossiemouth and Spey Bay. From 2013 I put a little more effort into this and between 2013 and 2020 I managed to catch a total of 558 birds, mainly between Findochty and Portknockie. This clearly shows that there are reasonable numbers coming in on summer nights and wandering around our coastline. I am aware of a few

other ringers also catching these birds locally and they have been located as far in as Burghead. With ringers elsewhere around Britain also catching Storm Petrels, a number of these were already ringed and a number were later caught elsewhere. So what did I find out and where were our birds going to and coming from? There was a total of 61 records of birds either already being ringed or being caught elsewhere so we can get a reasonable picture of how far our birds are moving and it is quite a distance.

Location	Number
Moray Firth	3
East Scotland (north of Moray)	3
Orkney/Shetland	16
North Highland coast	16
Isle of Man	2
Wales	2
North East England	2
East Scotland (Forth and south)	2
East Scotland (north of Forth to Moray)	9
Norway	5
Faroe Islands	1

Not content with staying in Scotland you can see that birds wandered all around the UK coast and indeed east to Norway and north to the Faroe Islands. The larger numbers, as expected, are from the north coast of the Highlands and the Northern Isles where there are several colonies and ringers catching them. There is some bias to where birds are caught and so 9 were from Fair Isle (caught at the observatory) and 10 from Eilean Nan Ron, a colony in the north Highlands. There were however a few interesting records which are worth looking at separately.

The records show that birds can move quickly between areas as seen by a bird ringed on the 21st July 2019 at Portknockie, reaching Fair Isle by the 25th that month. I certainly couldn't walk that fast and I suspect to them, distance means a very different thing.

The oldest bird was ringed at Auskerry, Orkney on the 14th July 1979 and caught at Portknockie on the 30th July 2017 making it 38 years and 16 days from ringing. Not a bad age for a small seabird which was at least a year old when first caught.

Other records of interest show that some birds are caught more than once. A bird from Faraid Head, Highland, ringed in 2016 was caught twice at Portknockie in 2019 and another ringed at Craig Stirling, Aberdeen on the 25th July 2012, was subsequently caught at Cove, Aberdeen in 2013, Portknockie in 2019 and then 5 times at Portknockie in 2020, the last time 8 years and 11 days after it was ringed. That suggests birds are hanging around the east coast and with birds recently found breeding on the Isle of May, tantalisingly, it's a possibility there could be a small colony elsewhere in the east still to be found.

It is clear that these birds move around a good bit and a weekend trip to 'Norway' is probably not unusual for this species.



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.



Join the SOC Scotland's Bird Club

Counting Heronries

Melvin Morrison



Heronries

Heron usually nest in colonies and the Heronries Census is the longest running BTO survey.

It was first organised by Max Nicholson in 1928 whilst he was still an undergraduate at Oxford, with help from H G Witherby who promoted it through the *British Birds* magazine. This, and the subsequent equally successful Great Crested Grebe survey in 1931 led to the founding of the

BTO, so it has a special place in the organisation's heart.

Over the 90 years, this annual survey has shown how Grey Heron numbers fluctuate depending on various factors (especially on winter weather) but that populations can recover from such events. There has been a slow overall increase in Heron numbers over the years.

In Moray & Nairn, we know of 5 heronries – Aberlour, Findhorn Bay, Auldearn, Loch Spynie and Spey Bay. In the past various smaller groups have come and gone and it is certainly possible that we are missing some.

The trouble is counting the nests which are usually high up in trees and often not visible through the canopy. The usual way is to look for



Egg shell and 'whitewash'

broken egg shells under the trees and 'whitewash' where the birds droppings have been squirted out of the nest. This can be difficult since the whitewash can go some distance and some nests can be close together thus creating only one area on the ground for two or more nests.

The colony near Spey Bay was rediscovered last year. This year, looking at the eggshells and whitewash, it seemed that there were 7 sites. I later found another a little distance away, making 8. Then I asked my son to look at it with his drone. (He has a CAA licence and the colony is

outwith the nearby 'no fly' zone of RAF Lossiemouth). Unfortunately for one reason or another we were rather too late in the year and most of the young had fledged but assuming that the whitewashed nests had been used this year, the count seemed to be 9 or maybe even 10. There is one nest with 4 eggs visible which looks as if it has been abandoned early on.

The drone did not bother the birds in the least so next year we shall have a look when the nests are still occupied.



Quiz

How well do you know the scientific names for birds? Can you match the common name of the bird to its scientific name? Answers can be found at the foot of page 18.

Common Name	Scientific Name
1. Blackbird	A. <i>Larus argentatus</i>
2. Blue Tit	B. <i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
3. Herring Gull	C. <i>Ardea cinerea</i>
4. Chaffinch	D. <i>Rissa tridactyla</i>
5. Grey Heron	E. <i>Turdus merula</i>
6. Storm Petrel	F. <i>Morus bassanus</i>
7. Kittiwake	G. <i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>
8. Gannet	H. <i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>

Book Review

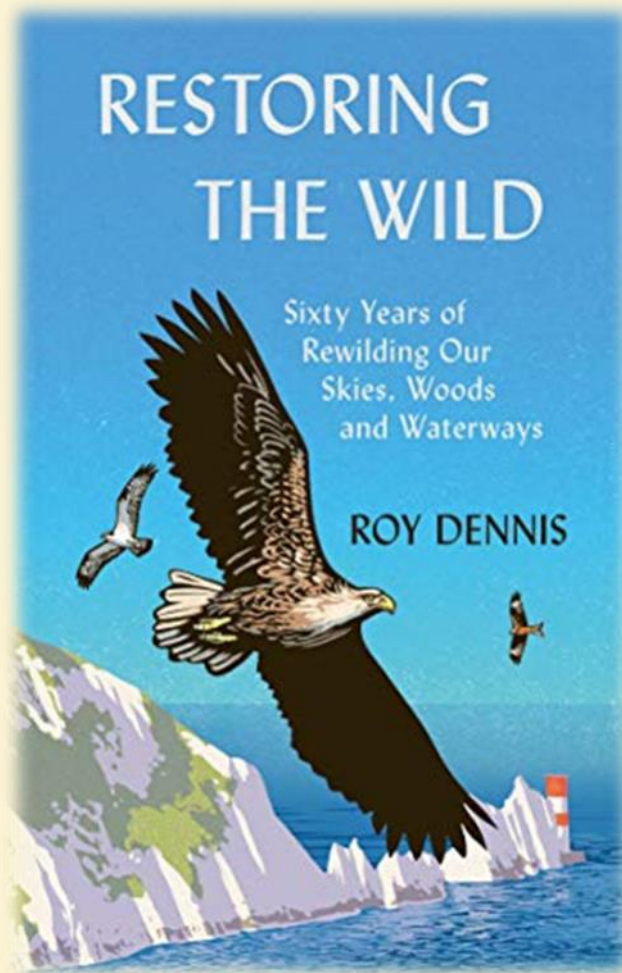
Mike Crutch

Coming hard on the heels of the author's previous book 'Cottongrass Summer' (Saraband, 2020) is this impressive work detailing each of Roy's projects to promote and re-introduce various species of fauna, not just in his resident Scotland but across the UK and Europe with links to far beyond.

In his usual conversational style of writing, the chapters describe individual efforts by Roy, from the humble Goldeneye to the majestic White-tailed Sea Eagle, as he championed moves to place these

birds firmly back on the British 'map'. As reflected throughout the book, he has engaged with a vast range of people that not only worked alongside him but also those in authority - and sometimes opposition. The book demonstrates not only how a project can never be a 'one person band', but also where to strike a balance between conducting research (such as researching species records, even going back to ancient times to prove exactly how myopic living/near-living memory can be) and to the point of where - with all safeguards and considerations in place - just getting on with the job. Candid accounts of highs and lows appear in the text, illustrating the lessons that were learnt and sometimes re-applied to other projects and cross-species.

In a time when the term 'rewilding' appears more and more in our headlines and social media feeds, this book is a timely reminder that such efforts have been going on for over sixty years (in Roy's case), if not longer and therefore are not simply a fashion that should be allowed to wax and wane, only expand from now onwards. Aside from anyone with an interest in the subject, the



Restoring The Wild

By Roy Dennis

William Collins

£18.99

452 pages

species covered and Roy's work in general, Restoring the Wild should be seen as a very readable yet highly detailed manual for those who are or wish to become involved with projects that can improve our environment. Roy's expertise in so many fields of nature means that we are very unlikely to ever see another individual in our midst who can ring an Osprey, translocate squirrels, broadcast on the television and release a Sea Eagle essentially all on the same day (and a lot more besides), but the next generation can use his writings as their guidance for the future.

One of the appendices gives a summary of the individuals involved in the projects covered in each chapter. They, together with his family, effectively have formed Roy's 'army' over the many years of work and this book recognises them for the key parts they have played, and continue to play. At the head of that army we find a 'Field Marshal' for nature (Roy would want the emphasis on 'field', I am sure!) - it's our nature, and without his work as detailed in the book it would be lacking many elements right now, if not forever.

Restoring the Wild by Roy Dennis is available to buy from Roy's website at www.roydennis.org



BIRDS IN MORAY & NAIRN 2018 is now published and can be found under 'Bird Reports' – '2011 onwards', in:

birds_in_moray_and_nairn.org/

The report is only available on that website, from which it may be printed if desired.



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.

Next Newsletter



Welcome

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David Law

Chair

In This Issue	
Welcome	1
Sea watching	2
Rose coloured Starling	8
News	10
Storm Petrels in Moray	11
Counting Heronries	14
Quiz	15
Book Review	18

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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

Picture Credits

Front Page

Dotterel, Robert Ince

Sea-watching (pp 2-7)

All photos Richard Somers Cocks

Rose-coloured Starlings (pp 8-10)

Rose-coloured Starling at Hopeman Gordon Biggs

Rose-coloured Starlings at Lake Kerkin Richard Somers Cocks

Storm Petrels in Moray (pp 11-13)

Storm Petrel Martin Cook

Counting Heronries (pp 14-15)

All photos Chris Morrison

Answers to Quiz on page 15.

1 –E 5–C

2–H 6–G

3–A 7–D

4–B 8–F