



MORAY BIRD CLUB

SCOTTISH BIRDWATCHERS' CONFERENCE  
ELGIN 19th MARCH 2022



See  
Page 9

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**In This  
Issue**

Birding at Lossiemouth -----	2	Conference -----	9
The Nuthatch -----	7	News-----	10
Quiz -----	8	Quiz Answers -----	10

## BIRDING AT LOSSIEMOUTH

### HENRY FARQUHAR



*Iceland Gull*

© Henry Farquhar

Lossiemouth, five miles north of Elgin on the Moray coast (Ordnance Survey ref NJ235705), is home to a population of approximately 8,000, a small town given the moniker "Jewel of Moray".

Once the leading Whitefish port in Scotland, the harbour area, previously a hive of bustle and activity, has now reinvented itself as a peaceable marina for pleasure craft, with a few creel fishermen left to exploit the marine resources.

Lossiemouth is also home to a large RAF base to the west of the town, the flying conditions among the best in Britain. The base benefits the economy of Moray and beyond enormously. Currently undergoing expansion, it looks set to be an important part of the U.K.'s defences for years to come. A tolerance of decibel levels is at times required. Birds are attracted to the open expanses, but as an air strike could prove catastrophic, a high level of bird control is in place at the base.

Lossiemouth enjoys a favourable climate, never too wet or too hot for too long, heavy snows seemingly a thing of the past, although at times there can be storms which kick up the sea tremendously. For birdwatchers, warm clothing is only needed for about ten months of the year (give or take two months).

The principal birdwatching sites are the estuary, the sea from the harbour, the beaches east and west, and farmlands and woodlands to the south of the town. Within the town, behind the river-facing dwellings, down Quarry Road, is a stretch of sycamore, gorse and ivy which can attract migrants on occasions, as can the scrub areas near the coastal stretch from the harbour to the west beach. Cliffs two miles west of the town hold nesting seabirds.

Nearby is Spynie Loch on the Pitgaveny Estate (NJ235665), once an open sea inlet which silted up and underwent much land reclamation. What remains now is an area of water and extensive

reedbed, with adjacent coniferous and mixed woodlands, of great interest for nesting birds and wildfowl. It is internationally recognised with the designation SPA<sup>1</sup>, SSSI<sup>2</sup>, and is a Ramsar<sup>3</sup> site (no. 569), and is currently being run as an RSPB reserve. There is a feeding station in the car park area, which attracts small birds and squirrels, much used to hone photographic skills.

Seawatching can be rewarding at all times of the year; more common birds such as Kittiwake, Gannet, Guillemot, Razorbill, Cormorant, Shag, Eider, Common Gull, Black-headed Gull, Herring Gull and black-backed gulls will be supplemented by rarer but regular divers, skuas, terns, waders, white-winged gulls, shearwaters, auks and ducks.



The pig farm at Balormie on the Drainie Road immediately south of the air base is also worth a look; it has had Avocet, Ruff, Little Stint, Mediterranean, Iceland and Glaucous Gull in the recent past, and large flocks of Lapwing can be seen there.



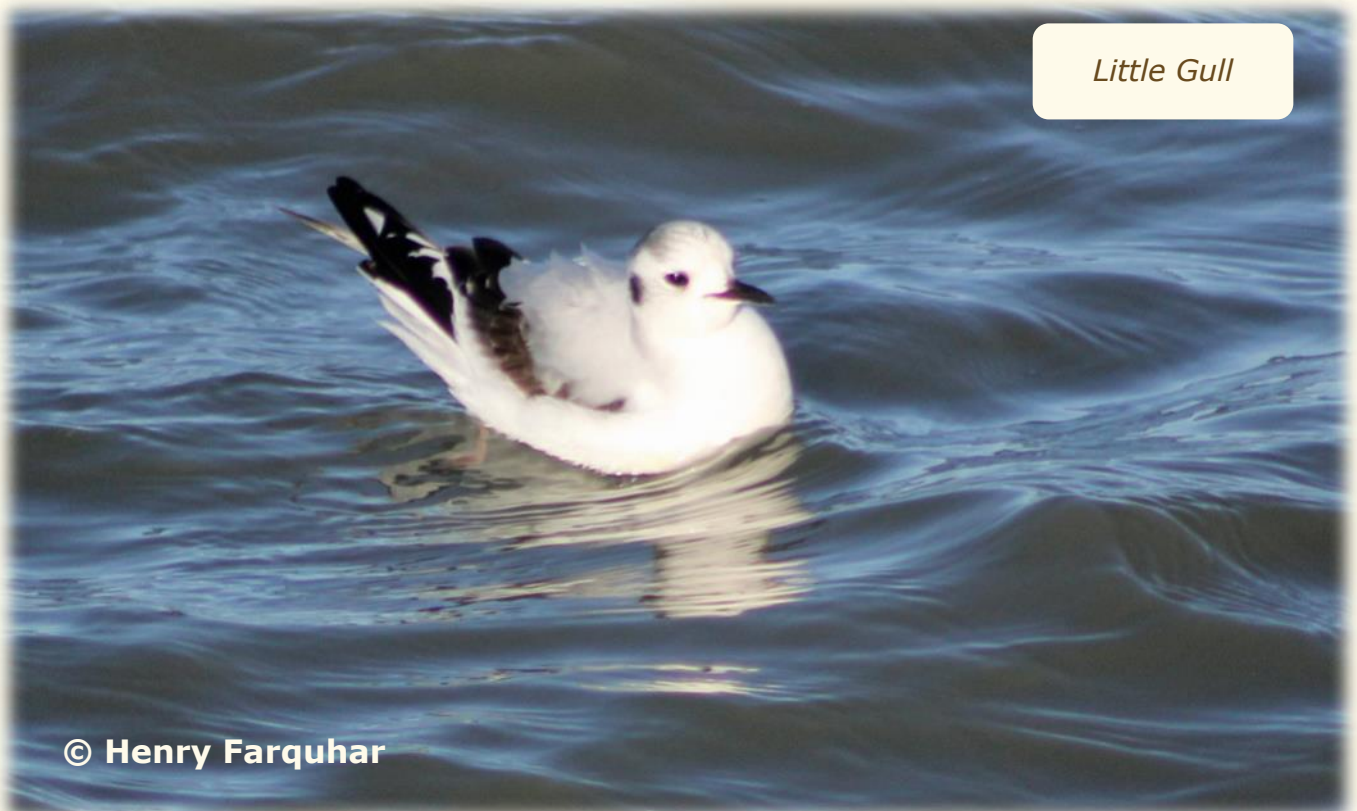
Apart from fine walking, the beaches east and west usually have waders somewhere along their stretches. Sanderling, Dunlin, Turnstone, Purple Sandpiper, Knot, Ringed Plover, Oystercatcher and Curlew can be encountered whilst out for a stroll. Little Terns have a precarious foothold along the east beach, and there was a Lesser Sand Plover seen six years ago.

It is watching at the Lossie estuary that birders will find the most rewarding – or annoying. Great views can be had of many birds, but the area is prone to human and dog disturbance, moreso now



© Henry Farquhar

that watersports has taken off in such a big way in the locality.



© Henry Farquhar

The estuary can at times hold many gulls – Herring, Great Black-backed, Lesser Black-backed, Common, Black-headed, with the occasional Little, Mediterranean, Iceland and Glaucous, and on rarer occasions, Sabine's and Bonaparte's.

Wader numbers have been going steadily down over the years; most numerous are Oystercatcher

*Sabine's Gull*

© Henry Farquhar

and Curlew. What were once common such as Ringed Plover, Dunlin, Redshank do occur, but not in the numbers they were, even as little as five years ago. Rarer waders (for Lossiemouth) such as Grey and Golden Plover, Greenshank, Ruff, Common- Curlew- and Green Sandpiper, Bar- and Black-tailed Godwit, and Whimbrel can be seen more or less on an annual basis, but they don't tend to hang around for too long. A Long-billed Dowitcher was seen at the estuary in the not too distant past.

*Golden Plover**Grey Plover*

© Henry Farquhar

In the winter there are Teal, Wigeon, Mallard, Goldeneye, Goosander and Merganser, Little and Slavonian Grebe, Heron and, more recently, Little Egret. Kingfisher are scarce but seen most years.

Geese, such as Greylag and Pink-footed usually arrive in September; look out for Barnacle, White-fronted, Bean and Snow Goose amongst feeding flocks out in the fields. Smaller numbers of Canada and Brent Goose appear earlier, most usually at the estuary.

Pipits, Linnet, finches, Snow Bunting, Reed Bunting, Stonechat, wagtails and Wheatear all occur, as

do Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Buzzard and Peregrine, and from April to September, Osprey can be observed fishing at very close range.

The gorse between the caravan park and the woods can be a good place for early summer migrants such as Whitethroat and Willow Warbler. Upriver, the woods hold Crested Tit. Jays are moving into the area, as are Magpies, with numbers steadily increasing.

What with sea, estuary, beach, forest, field and scrub, for the birder, Lossiemouth can hold an interest at all times of the year.



*Little Egret*

© Henry Farquhar

1: Special Protection Area, 2: Site of Special Scientific Interest, 3: A Ramsar Site is a wetland of international



### **[Birdsinmorayandnairn.org](http://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.

## **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.



# THE COMING OF THE NUTHATCH

## MARTIN COOK

We often hear about the pressures facing our wildlife and the declines that are taking place. These effects can be evident in our bird life, especially in the case of farmland birds and seabirds. But while we should be concerned, both nationally and closer to home, the story in Moray & Nairn is by no means entirely gloomy.

Consider, for example, the range of bird species which breed in Moray & Nairn. In total, 162 species have definitely bred here, another four have probably done so and the possibility exists for a further four. Of these, 11 have bred for the first time since 2000. Five of them have established themselves as annual breeders – Greylag Goose, Razorbill, Mandarin Duck, Black-throated Diver and Guillemot. The other six have bred on up to three occasions but have yet to establish a permanent population; these are Gadwall, Marsh Harrier, Hobby, Red-backed Shrike, Bluethroat and Hawfinch.

There is of course no reason why the list should stop increasing, and the speculative choice of further additions depends in large measure on the effects of climate change. If, as forecast, our summers become warmer and drier than more southerly, even Mediterranean, species might colonise and in the reasonably short term we might see Little Egret, Mediterranean Gull, Black Redstart or Yellow Wagtail for the first time, and perhaps the return of Nightjar and Green Woodpecker. Over the longer term, species such as Firecrest and Cetti's Warbler, with expanding populations in southern England, might reach us.



© Norman Mackenzie

A more immediate candidate for colonisation of our area must surely be the Nuthatch. A Nuthatch behaves like a small woodpecker and has a distinctive appearance with a large neck-less head and long pointed bill. It is easy to recognise, being blue-grey above and buff-coloured below, with a long black stripe through the eye.

Nuthatches climb jerkily around the branches of trees and frequently climb vertically down tree trunks, headfirst - something that our familiar Treecreeper never does. Although primarily woodland birds, they are regular visitors to gardens and bird feeders which leads to them being noticed when they appear in a new area. Even non-birders recognise them as 'something different'.

In the early 1970s, Nuthatches were widespread in England as far north as Yorkshire. By 1990, they had colonised the Lake District and as far up the east side of England as the Scottish border. They first bred in Scotland near Kelso and at the Hirsell in 1989 and expanded their range rapidly during the 1990s. By 2010, they had spread through most of southern Scotland up to Edinburgh and have subsequently established a strong population in Perthshire.

The rate of spread is even more remarkable as, in their traditional range south of the border, Nuthatches are normally extremely sedentary. Ringing recoveries of adults usually show movements of less than 1 km, although 2-3 km is more usual for juveniles.

In recent years, Nuthatches have spread into Highland and North-east Scotland in small numbers and both areas have had their first breeding records. In 2020, a pair bred just north-west of Inverness and another pair in Dinnet Oakwood.

In Moray & Nairn, our first Nuthatch was seen in a garden in Mosstodloch in January 2003. There were no further reports until 2020 when one was in Tomintoul on 19 April, and another was attracted to a garden feeding station at Cragganmore on 13 May. In 2021, a Nuthatch visited garden bird feeders at Darnaway on 20 April and 13 May. It appears that we can expect more records and hopefully a breeding population will become established. So do keep an eye on your garden feeders, which have attracted three quarters of all Moray & Nairn Nuthatch records to date.

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## QUIZ

- 1. What bird is only found in the UK?**
- 2. Which bird species is known for laying their second clutch of eggs before the first clutch have even fledged?**
- 3. The Peregrine Falcon is recognised as the fastest bird when it is stooping or diving but what is recognised as the fastest flying duck?**
- 4. What is the maximum age determined from ringing of a Common Gull?**  
**A. 20 years 9 months B. 27 years 10 months C. 33 years 11 months**
- 5. Which of these spring migrants generally arrives the latest?**  
**A. Whitethroat B. Redstart C. Spotted Flycatcher**

*Answers on back page*



## SPRING CONFERENCE

### MELVIN MORRISON



At last, our long awaited Birdwatchers' Spring Conference looks as if it will go ahead on **19<sup>th</sup> March** in Elgin Town Hall.

It was originally arranged for 2020 but had to be cancelled at short notice because of the developing Covid pandemic. Most people are now triple vaccinated and Covid numbers are slowly falling so the meeting has been rearranged for this March.

Elgin Town Hall is very spacious with a total capacity of over 500 but numbers will be capped at a maximum of 150 so there will be lots of 'social distancing'. There is also good ventilation which is probably the most important preventative measure. We will ask attendees to take a lateral flow test before coming and to wear masks when not seated. Precautions are therefore excellent.

The programme is themed around 'Northern Seas and Coasts' so it will be about the birds of the Moray Firth up to the Northern Isles. The scene will be set by talks on the marine environment and its birds followed by more specific presentations on Curlews, Greenshanks and Wood Sandpipers. Our own Martin Cook will talk about Spey Bay and Roy Dennis will reminisce about his time on Fair Isle and the seabird work there. Continuing the theme, Liz Humphreys will tell us about the movements of Arctic Skuas and finally Nina O'Hanlon will update us on the very topical subject of seabirds and plastics.

The plan is to provide tea and coffee but not lunch since arranging a caterer at such short notice presents difficulties and the lunch queue can be a bit crowded. Delegates will be asked to take their own packed lunch or visit one of the nearby shops or cafes. The cost is being kept low –£26 for adults and £22 for students & young birders under 30, just enough to hopefully cover the cost of hiring the hall, providing tea and paying our speakers' expenses. We will be running a raffle which will be in aid of club funds and planning is ongoing to have a number of exhibitors with stands. Above all, it will be good to have a real live meeting at last. We might be looking for a few volunteers to help on the day but again, that remains to be seen.

SOC HQ is dealing with bookings. Everybody who had originally expressed an interest in attending should have had an e-mail by now and bookings can be made on the SOC website:

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



## NEWS

### *Bird Club Meetings*

We plan to resume face-to-face meetings on October 13th. The speaker for this meeting has still to be confirmed. On November 10th, Mark Johnston, Head Ranger of Crown Estate Scotland, will give a talk on the Birds and Wildlife of Glenlivet. Roy Dennis will give a talk on Rewilding on the 8th December

### *Spring Migrants*

It won't be long now before our spring migrants start to appear. For the arrival dates of migrants in the Moray and Nairn area you can check Martin's website [Birdsinmorayandnairn.org](http://Birdsinmorayandnairn.org) and if you are interested in other parts of Scotland you can look at the SOC's page, [www.the-soc.org.uk/bird-recording/spring-migrants](http://www.the-soc.org.uk/bird-recording/spring-migrants). This is a service provided by Birdline Scotland and is very interesting.

### *Podcasts*

If you haven't already started listening to nature podcasts, here are some that may interest you.

**Nature News from RSPB Scotland** is presented by Stephen Magee and Kate Kirkwood and has the latest news on wildlife, policy and what's going on on RSPB Scotland's reserves.

**The Casual Birder Podcast** is hosted by Suzy Buttress and although Suzy is based in the south of England she covers subjects that are of interest to all birders and has stories from around the UK and other places.

**Tweet of the Day** is the long running programme from the BBC. Each programme lasts about five minutes and usually focusses on one bird. Although sometimes the programmes will compare birdsong eg Chiffchaff/Willow Warbler. There are over 100 episodes available on BBC Sounds.

**UK Wildlife** is as the name suggests not just about birds. In fact very few of the episodes have birds as their main focus but if you are interested in other aspects of wildlife it is well worth a listen.

**The Bearded Tit's Podcast** is, despite its name, another podcast not just about birds. It is presented by wildlife cameraman Jack Perks and the podcast describes itself as being for nature nuts!

### Quiz Answers

1. **The Scottish Crossbill (*Loxia scotica*) is not only the UK's only endemic species of bird, but also the UK's only unique vertebrate.**
2. **Goldcrest**
3. **Red-breasted Merganser**
4. **27 years 10 months 22 days (set in 2013)**
5. **Spotted Flycatcher**