



MORAY BIRD CLUB

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Welcome

Where did summer go? But at least we had some lovely weather. I hope you were able to get out and about and enjoy some uplifting bird experiences.

It seems like no time at all since the last of the Pink-footed Geese were heading off to Iceland – and now they are back. But of course, they return to an uncertain future, running the risk of contracting avian flu when they gather in tightly packed flocks to graze and roost. David Law's article brings us up to date with news of bird flu and other avian disease that we may encounter.

Before the geese arrived back, our Swifts had departed south after a brief stay of little more than three months. Let's hope the sterling work undertaken by Cally Smith and her group pays off and we hear more Swifts dashing round our streets in years to come.

The benefits of patch watching (returning frequently to the same site over weeks and years) are amply demonstrated by Richard Somers Cocks and David Law as they describe aspects of the bird life close to their homes in Findhorn and Buckie.

As with so many aspects of life, the last two years have been a challenge for our club. Zoom has been invaluable in enabling us to run a programme of talks over each winter – thanks to Frank Ritchie for handling the technology so efficiently. But the face-to-face social aspect of Moray Bird Club has of course been missing – and it's important. So we are now resuming our normal practice of getting together on the second Thursday of each month to hear a talk, and chat to others over a cup of tea/coffee and a biscuit. I do hope you will feel able to join us in our new venue in Elgin Library on 13th October.

And finally, I would like to extend the Club's thanks to David Law for his term of office in the Chair. Among other things, his efficient chairing of our Zoom meetings in the face of the uncertainties of that technology has been excellent – thank you David.

Martin Cook

Chair

Covid

Our meetings resume as winter approaches so there is the possibility of Covid cases increasing. We have changed our venue to provide a well-ventilated area. We will have hand sanitiser available and ask you not to attend if you are testing positive for Covid or feeling ill .



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.

Cover photo © R Somers Cocks

www.the-soc.org.uk



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The Huntly & District Swift Group.....5 years on Cally Smith

I am grateful for the opportunity to write something for the Moray Bird Club newsletter so on this occasion I decided instead of writing about the habits of the remarkable Common Swift I would instead give readers an insight in to the work of the Huntly & District Swift Group and an update on some of the projects we have completed or have in progress to date. I started the Swift group back in March 2017 and since then I have worked it seems 24/7 to raise the profile of the Common Swift around the North East of Scotland. We are primarily a Swift group but also offer information, advice and mitigation guidance for Swallows and House Martins as they are very much a confusion species and are reliant on our urban environment in a similar way to Swift.

As a small group of volunteers we attend local events with our fundraising stall where we offer Swift, Swallow and martin items for sale plus plenty of chat and information! Several of our members give talks to local groups and we love to attend schools with a specific power point presentation and fun bird related activities. The pupils enthuse about our Aviators and go on to create fantastic projects and collages about our Aviators!

Additionally if the school building is suitable we will suggest they could install external Swift nestboxes, a call system and webcam - a marvellous way of involving the children in a very worthwhile educational environmental project. In 2019 we installed external Swift nest boxes at The Gordon Schools, Huntly, 8 boxes in total connected to a call system and now after three years our patience has paid off and we have four boxes successfully occupied with Swift pairs roosting and/or breeding. We have yet to receive permission for the webcam but that would complete our project and allow live streaming of nest box activity.

There are over 100 Swift groups around the UK working tirelessly to protect and care for our recently Red Listed Common Swift. We are one of only three swift groups in Scotland. Some will concentrate on rehabilitation of grounded Swift, some on awareness raising and some mitigation, some a bit of everything! We do a bit of everything but we are blessed in this area to have excellent rehabilitators in The New Arc Wildlife Rescue Centre near Ellon. They provide the care our weary travellers need and have an excellent release record. I provide a 'Swift Taxi' service to co-ordinate the transport of grounded/injured Swifts, Swallows and martins to the New Arc's care using my list of local volunteers who offer their time to collect and transport the rescued birds.



© R Booth

Most of my day to day work consists of nest site mitigation. It has taken some years to get the Local Authority on side. I am still only scratching the surface at Moray and Aberdeen City but I like to think I have a good relationship with the environmental planners at Aberdeenshire Council. I may receive calls from them regarding upcoming new builds and refurb, as our Swift nesting records may have flagged up on their system, so I will put forward suggestions, on a voluntary basis, as to how to mitigate against losses of existing Swift nest sites or provide further nesting opportunities by incorporating Swift bricks in to new builds. Protecting existing nesting sites is by far the most important step for Swift conservation as some of these Swift colonies may have been in existence for many years and to lose generations of Swift with a demolition or an unsympathetic repair can cause the entire colony to collapse. At this point I must highlight the importance of recording known nest sites to [NESBReC](#) so they flag up against planning applications. It is of no use keeping this information to yourself!

Here are just some of the projects we have either completed or have in progress, and there is an opportunity to replicate many of these in a town near you!

- ◆ The Loco Works Foundry regeneration, Inverurie – bespoke integrated nesting chambers. Work stalled for several years but the current Swift colony is being retained.
- ◆ Cruickshanks listed building regeneration, Huntly – mitigation measures put in place for the 2022 nesting Swifts. Replacement of existing sites and further provision in the finished build.
- ◆ Swift Bricks in to Tesco, Huntly new build development
- ◆ 12 Swift Bricks to be installed to former council depot new build development, Huntly
- ◆ 12 bespoke nesting chambers and call system behind the louvres of Holy Trinity Church, Keith
- ◆ 4 bespoke nesting chambers (8 to follow) and call system behind the louvres of Monymusk Church
- ◆ 20 bespoke nesting chambers and call system behind the louvres at the Fochabers Museum
- ◆ Advising on various NTS refurbishments
- ◆ Advising on numerous smaller projects throughout the region
- ◆ Working alongside Knock Distillery to encourage more provision for their existing colony
- ◆ Working alongside Parkmore Distillery. 14 external boxes made on distillery volunteer day, installed with call system in 2022. Advising how to retain existing colony sites for the future
- ◆ Survey at Macallan Distillery – advised.
- ◆ Advising at Glen Garioch Distillery Swift colony
- ◆ Advising on the Inverurie Town Hall Swift colony as part of the regeneration proposals.
- ◆ The Town House, Kintore – mitigation of active nesting sites and provision of more
- ◆ Running our annual nest box scheme to encourage communities to install on homes and businesses

Cruickshanks Building, Huntly



Nest boxes for Fochabers Museum



So you can see there are many ways to help Swifts within the urban environment they so desperately depend upon. Recording active nest sites is extremely important – we need

more help to survey. Keeping an eye on those sites to ensure they are not under threat. Look for opportunities to provide such as public buildings, churches etc. Let us know if you spot an opportunity, we can advise. Also, remember to garden for pollinators to provide the food these insectivorous birds require to stay healthy and raise their young. Sadly, many rescue Swifts found are severely underweight due to the increasing difficulties endured on migration and the global decline of insects.

Please support us by sharing our work with others. Why not sign up to our quarterly 'Saving the Aviators' newsletters which we email out to you, full of articles on the three Aviators plus of course Sand Martins too! Please get in touch if you would like more information on the work we do to protect Swifts, Swallows and House Martins.



Monymusk Church

© C Smith

Contact



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 [/savetheaviators](https://www.facebook.com/savetheaviators)



© P Bartholomew



Wildlife of the East Moray Coast

David Law

In Moray, most birders stick to well-known sites to the west of the River Spey, like Findhorn Bay and the Lossie Estuary. The coast to the east of the Spey is well worth a visit too, not just for its birds, but for other coastal wildlife.

Coastal birds

Dunlin



© D Law



Redshank

© David Law

If you are travelling from the Elgin direction the best place to start a visit is probably Portgordon Harbour. Over the years this small harbour has silted up and the muddy sand supports lots of worms and crustaceans which attract feeding waders. Numbers of waders like Redshank, Dunlin and Ringed Plovers are lower than at Findhorn Bay, but because the harbour is small and the birds are used to human activity, it's easy to get good views and photographs. Occasionally something rarer is seen in the harbour – a Wood Sandpiper was seen there in August this year for example. When the tide is high, the local Redshank usually roost on the harbour wall and are joined by Turnstone that have been foraging along nearby stretches of rocky shore. In the summer the coast near Portgordon Harbour is a great place to see female Eiders with

their broods of ducklings. The females nest out of sight in less disturbed areas of vegetation near the shore and somehow manage to get their broods safely across the road to the water. Despite being an ideal size for a large gull's snack, a good number of these young seem to survive to reach adult size by autumn.



Away from the harbour, most of the shore between Portgordon and Portknockie is rocky; feeding waders are widely dispersed and can be quite difficult to see at low tide. The easiest way to see these waders is to have a look at high tide roosts and these are some of the best places to see Purple Sandpipers in the autumn and winter. Two of their favourite roosts are on the rocks at the Yardie, just east of Buckpool Harbour and on the Three Kings sea stacks at Cullen.

The coast from Findochty to just east of Portknockie is the best place to see breeding seabirds in Moray. Although the colonies are much smaller than at places like Troup Head, they still give good views of nesting Kittiwakes, Shags and Herring Gulls. Bow Fiddle Rock and the cliffs just to the east are the best place to see most of these birds. Numbers of Razorbills and Guillemots are increasing at this site, although they don't seem to produce many chicks. Breeding Black Guillemots are scattered along the coast from Findochty to Portknockie – they nest out of sight in rock crevices or even harbour walls. The adults are easy to see on the water as they forage close to the cliffs where they search for Butterfish and other small prey. Most of the seabirds leave the cliffs in winter to spend months at sea, but Shags can be seen on the cliffs and harbour walls all year round. As their plumage isn't fully waterproof they have to spend some time every day ashore to dry their feathers. Shags are part of a long-term colour ringing study at various nesting colonies elsewhere in Scotland, so it is worth checking their legs and making a note of the ring colour and lettering. Any sightings can be emailed to shags@ceh.ac.uk

In spring Great Northern Divers are often seen off the coast, mainly from Buckie eastwards, sometimes in full breeding plumage, and most years they are joined by small numbers of White-billed Divers. Rather easier to see are Ravens which are present throughout the year along this coast. Corn Buntings, which are declining across the UK, are still present in reasonable numbers on farmland along the east Moray coast, so its worth listening for their jangling song in summer.



Other coastal wildlife

The east Moray Coast is also a great place to see other wildlife. Between Strathlene (just east of Buckie) and Portknockie the coastal grassland and heath supports a wide range of very attractive wildflowers. One of the first to flower is the Meadow Saxifrage. Its pure white flowers appear in April on short stems and are one of the signs that spring has really arrived on the coast. Later in the spring,

Thrift



© David Law

Thrift, Sea Campion and Bird’s-foot Trefoil put on an eye-catching display. Where the ground is disturbed, Kidney Vetch often colonises and on sunny days in June is worth searching for

one of our rarer and least conspicuous butterflies – the Small Blue. Common Blue butterfly and Six-spot Burnet moth caterpillars both feed on Bird’s-foot Trefoil. This plant produces cyanide in its leaves - the Burnet moth caterpillars accumulate this poison in their bodies, giving the adults protection against predators which learn to avoid their red and black warning

Small Blue



© David Law

Dark Green Fritillary



© David Law

colours. Dark Green Fritillary and Meadow Brown butterflies are also fairly common along this stretch of coast.

The east Moray coast is also a great place to see sea mammals. Bottlenose Dolphins are the best known of these and Harbour Porpoises and Minke Whales are also fairly regularly seen. Other cetaceans also occasionally turn up – a Humpback Whale

was seen for several days this summer and a Fin Whale was seen off Cullen last summer. This stretch of coast is also home to good numbers of seals. The shingle beach and rocks to the east of Portgordon Harbour are used as a haulout by Grey and Harbour Seals all through the year with numbers peaking at up to three hundred in late summer. Most of these are Grey Seals. They tend to congregate in the centre of the haulout, often howling loudly if one

seal gets a bit too close to another. The smaller Harbour Seals tend to keep their distance around the edges of the haulout. The seals are surprisingly tolerant of humans, but can be disturbed if people or dogs approach too closely, so are best watched from the coastal path rather than the beach itself.

There is only space in this article to cover a small part of the bird and other wildlife interest of this spectacular stretch of coast. More information on the birding sites can be found on the SOC's excellent Where to Watch Birds in Scotland app. All of the sites mentioned in this article are easily accessed from the Portgordon to Portknockie Road and there is a footpath running along the whole length of the coast.

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Forthcoming Events

Meetings

Thursday 13th October 2022,
 Martin Cook
*30 years on -
 the new Birds of Moray & Nairn*

Thursday 10th November 2022,
 Mark Johnston
Glenlivet

Thursday 8th December 2022,
 Roy Dennis
*Restoring the Wild - reintroducing birds and
 mammals at home and abroad*

All meetings will be held at 7.30 pm in the
 Gallery, Elgin Library, Cooper Park, Elgin,

Outings

October 16th – Findhorn Bay

November 13th – Cloddach

December 10th – Lossiemouth

These outing dates may be subject to
 change. More details of the outings will
 be provided nearer the time.



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.

A DAY OUT ON FINDHORN BEACH

Richard Somers Cocks



© Richard Somers Cocks

Sandwich Terns are a common sight and sound along our coast in the summer months. They arrive on our shores in April and after a spell in May and June when they gather on their breeding colonies, they can be seen in good numbers through till September. On Findhorn beach at low tide in late summer groups of 700 or more can sometimes be seen. The recent record I have was 1460 on 26 Aug 2021. There is a history of ringing terns, often on the breeding colonies, and when large groups are gathered on the beach there are sometimes 20 or more colour ringed birds. The rings usually consist of a single colour ring which is marked with 3 alphanumeric with the first letter indicating the country or region where it was ringed. This is the tale of one day out on Findhorn beach.

Low tide was mid morning on 19 August this year and when I went out I managed to pick up a group of 55 resting together on the sands at the mouth of the bay. Initially, I was a little disappointed that there were so few. Only 2 days earlier I had seen a group of 240 and identified 11 different colour rings. However, I moved a bit closer and managed to pick up 4 colour ringed birds: Green ELS, Yellow UPB, White E28 and White M9C. I realised straight away that this was a bit unusual as all four of these birds were from different ringing projects and I was fairly sure that I had seen some of them before. So I went home and investigated where they had all come from.

Green ELS

This was a bird from Forvie National Nature Reserve on the Ythan estuary, and I had also seen it a couple of days earlier. Grampian Ringing Group use the letter E followed by 2 letters on their ringing projects and birds from this breeding colony account for around 80% of my sightings. The history I have on this bird was quite interesting:

Green ELS

11 Jun 2015	Ringed as a chick at Forvie NNR
Nov 2016	Mile 4 Saltworks, Swakopmund, NAMIBIA
10 Aug 2017	Coquet Island, Northumberland
18 Sep 2017	Le Portel, Pas-de-Calais, FRANCE
28 Jun 2018	Forvie NNR
11 Aug 2018	Findhorn Beach
2-7 May 2019	Scolt Head, Norfolk
19-20 Sep 2020	Findhorn Beach
17-19 Aug 2022	Findhorn Beach



Green ELS

© **Richard Somers Cocks**

Like many terns this bird had quite likely spent 18 months in Namibia as a young bird before coming back to Europe. Many also go on to overwinter in South Africa. Its return to Forvie in June 2018 probably indicates where it might have been breeding, and it is common for birds to return to the colony where they were born to breed themselves.

Yellow UPB

The other combination I commonly see is U followed by two letters, and this is used for ringing birds in the colonies on Coquet and Farne Islands off the north east coast of England. There was also a varied history for this bird:

Yellow UPB

14 Jun 2015	Ringed as a chick on Coquet Island, Northumberland
29 Aug 2015	Peterhead Bay
29 Aug 2016	La Tapa Saltpan, El Puerto de Santa Maria, Cádiz, SPAIN
Jun 2019	Coquet Island
12 Sep 2019	Findhorn Beach
Jun 2020	Coquet Island - breeding
Jun 2021	Coquet Island
Jun 2022	Coquet Island
19 Aug 2022	Findhorn Beach

**Yellow UPB**

© Richard Somers Cocks

This bird is clearly faithful to the breeding site at Coquet Island and it has also been picked up several times from the north east of Scotland after breeding. The sighting from Spain in August 2016 was interesting in that the bird would only have been a year old, so possibly it had been overwintering there or maybe it had made a partial migration back to Europe from southern Africa that year.

White E28**White E28**

© Richard Somers Cocks

This was another Scottish bird but not from the Grampian team. I had seen similar ringed birds in the past and recognised it as probably one of the Clyde Ringing Group birds. The history confirmed that this was the case:

White E28

10 Jun 2017	Ringed as a chick at Hunterston, Clyde Port, Ayrshire
10 Jul 2017	Fairlie, Ayrshire
6 Sep 2019	Barrassie Beach, Troon, Ayrshire
14-18 Mar 2019	Mile 4 Saltworks, Swakopmund, NAMIBIA
Jul-Aug 2020	Coquet Island with chick
7 Sep 2020	Llanfairfechan, Wales
8 Aug 2021	River Clwyd, Kinnel Bay, Wales
10 & 24 Aug 2021	Ainsdaile Beach, Lancashire
Jun 2022	Coquet Island
2 & 9 Aug 2022	Port Seton, Lothian
19 Aug 2022	Findhorn Beach

This bird had been seen moving around the west coast as a juvenile before disappearing for a couple of years. It is quite likely that it had been in Namibia for much of that time. The next appearance was at Coquet Island, which obviously was not its natal colony.

Nevertheless, birds do occasionally switch colonies. In this case the original colony at Hunterston has been devastated by mink in recent years and this may have forced surviving terns to relocate. E28 still has the instinct to visit the west coast and it is known that terns will frequently fly overland from coast to coast often at night.

White M9C

I remembered seeing this bird a few years ago and worked out at the time that it had been ringed by the Spanish, probably on migration heading south the previous year. I had assumed that it might have been an east coast UK bird. However, the more recent history since that initial sighting proved that wasn't the case:

White M9C

30 Oct 2019	Ringed at P.Nac. de Donas, Huelva, SPAIN
2 Nov 2019	Playa de Matalascañas, Huelva, SPAIN
21 Sep 2020	Findhorn Beach
8-9 Jul 2021	Polder de Sébastopol, Barbâtre, Ile de Noirmoutier, Vendée, FRANCE
16 Apr - 1 Jun 2022	In breeding colony at Barbâtre, Vendée, FRANCE
19 Aug 2022	Findhorn Beach

Given these sightings it is now apparent that this bird breeds on the west coast of France. Most terns move away from their colonies post-breeding often heading north. But quite why this bird should choose to fly almost 1300 kms to the north of Scotland is a bit of a mystery. It would be interesting to find out where it overwinters, but like many other tern it may be facing a 12,000 km migration to southern Africa. It illustrates the point that these birds fly huge distances over their lifetimes.

**White M9C****© Richard Somers Cocks**

My thanks to the Grampian and Clyde Ringing Groups, the Natural History Society of Northumbria as well as the Oficina de Anillamiento in Spain for the information on these Sandwich Terns. The histories of just these four birds seen on that day in August provide a great insight in the movements of the species as a whole.

Overall, this season has seen far fewer Sandwich Terns on our shores than we have seen in some recent years. Last year was exceptional but it was also apparent that there were excellent food supplies for them offshore. This year avian influenza has been a real problem, and the tern colonies on Coquet Island have been devastated. A similar story is emerging from the Netherlands. Unfortunately, it is still present in the Moray area and David Law discusses the issues with avian influenza in more detail elsewhere in this newsletter.

As the terns start to depart in September the geese will be arriving, often in spectacular numbers by early October. Moray Bird Club are planning to run an outing to Findhorn Bay on 16 October to watch the dawn departure from the overnight roost. More details to follow. It should be a good day out.



Bird Flu Update

David Law

Gannet



© David Law

Everyone will have seen the upsetting media coverage over the spring and summer months about the outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) or bird flu that has affected seabird colonies around Scotland. Gannets have been particularly badly hit and, along with smaller numbers of other seabirds, have been washing up on beaches in Moray. Many of these have probably come from our nearest major seabird colony at Troup Head. Populations of several species of seabirds are already struggling due to threats including climate change and overfishing, so the additional

impact of bird flu could have serious long-term consequences for several species such as Great Skua or Bonxie. In Moray we have smaller populations of breeding seabirds on some cliffs such as on and around the Bow Fiddle Rock and at Covesea. Fortunately, bird flu doesn't seem to have had a significant impact on these colonies with Shags, Kittiwakes and Herring Gulls apparently having quite productive seasons and successfully fledging good numbers of young.

Although the breeding season is over for this year, the threat from bird flu hasn't gone

Great Skua



© David Law

away. Wildfowl and wading birds are susceptible to the disease. In the autumn and winter these species roost and feed together often in large dense flocks, so the disease is easily spread from bird to bird. Findhorn Bay is our most important wintering site for geese and waders with tens of thousands of Icelandic Pink-footed Geese gathering to roost there over the next few weeks along with large flocks of waders such as Dunlin and Redshank. As Findhorn Bay is well watched by local birders any casualties there are likely to be noticed quickly, but it is important that we keep an

Pink-footed Geese



© Richard Somers Cocks

eye out for possible victims of bird flu at other sites. In summary here is what you should do if you find:

- ◆ one or more dead bird of prey or owl
- ◆ 3 or more dead gulls or wild waterfowl (swans, geese and ducks)
- ◆ 5 or more dead birds of any species

Report the dead birds to Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) using

this number: 03459 335577. If possible, provide a grid reference or use What3Words so the location can be pinpointed. And remember not to touch any dead or dying birds.

More advice on how to report dead birds and how getting involved in bird surveys is important to monitoring the health of our bird populations can be found in this update from SOC [Avian flu - what can we do?](#)

You can also find more updates on bird flu on the NatureScot and RSPB websites

[Avian influenza \(bird flu\) | NatureScot](#)

[Avian Influenza Updates - The RSPB](#)

Another way of helping wild birds during the winter is to make sure we don't cause disturbance to feeding or roosting birds, particularly along the coast. It can often be tempting to get a little closer for a better view or a more eye-catching photo, but disturbing birds, particularly during short winter days, can reduce their ability to feed and cause them to burn up valuable energy. Even when the birds don't fly off, disturbance can cause stress and reduce fitness which could make them more susceptible to disease. Disturbance distances vary between species and whether birds at a particular site are used to human activity, but we should always try to stay far enough away from feeding or roosting flocks so that the birds don't react to our presence.

Unfortunately, bird flu isn't the only disease that affects our wild birds. Garden birds are occasionally affected by outbreaks of finch trichomonosis which can spread at feeders and bird baths. This disease is caused by a strain of the single-celled protozoan parasite



Trichomonas gallinae. Trichomonosis affects birds' throats, making it difficult for them to feed or drink, they often appear tamer than usual and may have puffed up feathers. Greenfinches and Chaffinches are particularly prone to this disease and it can cause multiple casualties in one garden. One suspected outbreak was noticed among Chaffinches in August this year in east Moray. On a national scale this disease is thought to be the main cause of large declines in Greenfinch and Chaffinch populations. As a result of this, Greenfinches are now on the "red list" of

endangered bird species in the UK. A recent article is available which provides more detail of the effects of trichomonosis on these two species [Habitat-use influences severe disease-mediated population declines in two of the most common garden bird species in Great Britain | Scientific Reports \(nature.com\)](#)

The best way of preventing this disease in garden birds is to regularly clean feeding stations and bird baths and to move these around your garden to prevent droppings and waste food building up in one spot. If you do see any birds which appear to have this disease you should stop feeding for at least two weeks and disinfect all feeders and baths. More information on garden bird health can be found on the RSPB website [Keep your garden birds healthy | The RSPB](#) By taking a little time and care we make sure that the birds we enjoy seeing in our gardens are kept safe.

