



NEWSLETTER
ISSUE 1
OCTOBER
2020

MORAY BIRD CLUB

Welcome

Welcome to the first newsletter of the Moray and Nairn Bird Club. Our lives have all changed over the past few months, and I know that many of us have found contact with nature more important than ever before. The articles in the newsletter will hopefully inspire you to carry on enjoying our birds and other wildlife over the autumn and winter months, whether it is the spectacle of thousands of geese at Findhorn Bay or watching Fieldfares gorging on berries in your garden. The winter nights are also a good time to make plans for the spring and summer of 2021. You could think about something like Al Young's cycling Chiffchaff survey or discovering the huge array of moths in your garden, like Alison and Frank Ritchie. We'd also love to hear about your wildlife experiences over the past few months so please do send us contributions for the next newsletter.

Enjoy and, of course, stay safe.

David Law

Chair



{ Forthcoming Events }

On November 15 we are planning to hold a virtual bird club meeting when Martin Cook and Richard Somers Cocks will each give a talk. We will provide more details nearer the time.

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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.

THE FIELDFARE

Martin Cook

The abundance of berries in the countryside this autumn is a bonanza for our fruit-eating birds. In particular, members of the thrush family will be gorging themselves on the Rowans and elderberries.

During October and November our resident Blackbirds are joined by hordes of continental Blackbirds, Redwings and Fieldfares.

The most obvious thrushes to visit us in winter are the Fieldfares of which up to a million cross the North Sea to arrive in eastern Britain. A Fieldfare is about the same size as a Blackbird but has a brown back and wings, grey head and rump, and a dark tail. Its white underparts are heavily spotted and it has a rusty tinge to its breast and throat. They can be easily recognised as they fly overhead by their loud chattering 'chack-chack-chack' calls. They are usually seen in flocks, typically stripping a Rowan of its berries or on the ground, seeking worms in grassy fields. In snowy weather, small numbers often appear in

Fieldfares occasionally breed in Scotland. Up to five pairs did so annually during the 1970s.

hopes that they might colonise in greater numbers. But this failed to happen and very few breeding attempts now take place. In north-east Scotland, they have nested on 12 occasions, of which four have been in Moray – at Inchroy (Glen Avon) in 1972, at Blackhills in 1978, in Glen Fiddich in 1988 and near Cabrach in 2002.

Fieldfares to breed in loose colonies of up to 50 pairs. These colonial birds cooperate in defence of the colony against predators such as foxes and crows. They swoop low over their target, veering off at the last moment and showering the unfortunate victim with a stream of droppings. If the predator is a bird, its plumage may become matted with droppings to the extent that it is grounded and may even be killed.

Fieldfares occasionally breed in Scotland. Up to five pairs did so annually during the 1970s, giving rise to

During severe winter weather in Scotland we might expect Fieldfares from the north of Norway to be hardier and to fare better than our resident Blackbirds, but this appears not to be the case. A study at Drumnadrochit in the late 1970s showed that in a prolonged cold spell, when the ground is frozen, the Blackbirds put on weight while Fieldfares lost weight and many died. It may be that Fieldfares are dependant on berries in such conditions and these become quickly exhausted whereas Blackbirds can make use of a wider range of foods, particularly those offered in gardens.

In any winter, the depletion of wild berry supplies almost certainly accounts for the southward movement of fieldfares out of Moray during the course of the winter. Often only small numbers remain after Christmas.



country and suburban gardens, particularly where windfall apples are available.

Fieldfares have a huge breeding range, from central France east across Europe and much of northern Asia. They are all migratory and most flocks that overwinter in Britain breed in Scandinavia. Those in northern and eastern Scotland have mostly come from Norway, whereas birds from Sweden and Finland tend to overwinter in south-eastern Britain.

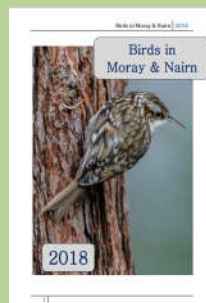
In Norway they breed in various types of open woodland and even in scrubby vegetation above the tree line. Although some breeding pairs are solitary, it is common for

BIRDS IN MORAY & NAIRN

2018 is now published and can be found under 'Bird Reports' – '2011 onwards', in:

birdsinsmorayandnairn.org/

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



BTO Surveys During LockDown

W Melvin Morrison

There are several regular surveys organised by the BTO the main ones being the Breeding Birds Survey and the Waterways BBS. Both involve two visits about a month apart.

Lockdown came just before the early visits and most volunteer surveyors could not get out to do the visits. There were two exceptions; both people who could do the surveys as part of their work. The lockdown was lifted in time for some of the second (late) surveys to be done so out of 43 BBS squares, 28 should have been covered but actually only 2 had both visits and another 4 had a late visit. One late WBBS was done. Many thanks to those who managed to do the visits.

Of our 4 known heronries, one was visited and counted (16 nests) but Martin Cook found a new one near Nether Dallachy – actually an old one which had moved a bit and had been ‘lost’. It had at least 13 occupied nests but most birds had left the colony before we counted it.



No Woodcock surveys were done.

It remains to be seen what the situation will be for 2021. More details in my BTO newsletter early next year.



Wildfowl ID virtual training



Improve your identification of winter wildfowl and other waterbirds in this two-part online course.

The training will consist of two weekly online modules, complemented by supported self-study exercises which will be provided after each session. The training will be run by BTO staff members who are experienced birdwatchers and surveyors.

SESSION 1: Identifying dabbling ducks, swans and common grebes

Tuesday 27 October, 10:00–11:30am

SESSION 2: Identifying diving ducks, sawbills and grey geese

Tuesday 3 November, 10:00–11:30am

This course complements two other courses that will run during autumn 2020: a two-session course on wader identification and a one-session course on survey skills for the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS). There is a charge for all these courses and details of those courses can be found on the bto.org training courses page.

Keep an eye on the BTO website for more training courses.



GEESE ON FINDHORN BAY

Richard Somers Cocks

Findhorn Bay is well known for wildfowl at this time of year and in particular for the numbers of migrating geese. This year is no exception and we have seen thousands of birds arriving on the Bay over the last few weeks.



Pink-footed Geese

The vast majority are Pink-footed Geese migrating here from their summer breeding grounds in Iceland. They start arriving in mid-September and reach a peak by mid-October. At the moment there are 25-30,000 although this time last year there were 50,000+. Many will continue their migration to their overwintering grounds further south, but between 5-15,000 will remain on the Bay. Most will then depart back to their breeding grounds by the end of April. Findhorn Bay is used as an overnight roost and every morning they depart just after daybreak to feed on fields in the local area before returning back to the roost later in the day.



Greylag Geese

Greylag Geese have been on the Bay for a few months. In mid-July birds breeding in inland areas like Lochindorb move down to the Bay. This year there were counts of around 1100 in mid-August. At the moment their numbers have dropped off a bit as some have moved away, but their numbers will increase again in a few weeks' time as more birds arrive from Iceland and we can

expect to see 1000+ by mid-November.. The Greylags are usually seen in the SW corner by the channels of the Findhorn as it flows into the Bay, although a few individuals will sometimes be seen mixed in with the Pink-footed Geese out in the centre.



Barnacle Geese

Barnacle Geese that arrive in Moray are usually just transiting through our area. Many of the birds that we see have come from Svalbard, a group of islands in northern Norway, and are en-route to the Solway Firth and other areas on the west coast. Some years we see very few, but recently we have had over 400 on Findhorn Bay. Many will move on quite quickly, but we can expect to see a few mixed in with the Pink-footed Geese in the weeks to come.



From left, Dark-bellied Brent Goose, Pale-bellied Brent Goose & Grey-bellied Brant.

Brent Geese

The Moray Firth is at a crossroads for migrating Brent Geese. The subspecies that we normally see are Pale-bellied Brent Geese coming in from breeding grounds in eastern Canada, NE Greenland and Svalbard. Dark-bellied Brents come in from the Arctic coast of central Siberia and normally over-winter further south, but a few can occasionally be seen here. Another form very occasionally seen is Grey-bellied Brant which breed further west along the Arctic coast of north America. A Grey-bellied was recently seen at Findhorn. Most of the Brent Geese over the winter tend to gather in the Nairn area but recently they have

been spotted at several coastal sites in Moray including Findhorn Bay.



Canada Geese

Around 10 Canada Geese are also present on Findhorn Bay at the moment. Although their ancestors would have originated in north America these birds are from UK established flocks.



Snow Goose

A Snow Goose has also recently arrived on the Bay. It looks as though it is the same individual that has been seen in recent years. Snow Geese breed in Arctic Canada and can either be a pale “white morph” or a dark “blue morph”. The bird on Findhorn Bay is an intermediate form with a mixture of both morphs - pale head and neck, dark body and pale underneath. The white head usually stands out well when it is mixed in with the Pink-footed Geese.

The best time of day to see (and hear) all these geese is at dawn as they wake up and over the next hour or so as they depart the Bay. If you struggle to get out of bed on a cold winter’s morning, then watching them come back mid to late afternoon is also a great spectacle.



NOVEMBER NEWSLETTER



We are hoping to produce other newsletters while the Covid-19 restrictions are in place. We would like to encourage our members to contribute to the newsletter.

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:

Alison Ritchie

moraysecretary@the-soc.org.uk

AVAILABLE TO DOWNLOAD:

Where to Watch Birds in Scotland, SOC's free mobile app.

Where to Watch Birds in Scotland, the Club's free mobile app for Apple and Android devices, now has over 560 sites. The app launched in April 2019 and just a year later has been downloaded by more than 10,000 users. It won 'Product of the Year' in Birdwatch and BirdGuides' 2019 Birders' Choice Awards.



CORONA CHIFFCHAFFS

Alastair Young

Like everybody I ended up home-working and facing restricted travel as the lockdown set in. As I sat in my garden at the end of March, I heard the early Chiffchaffs singing and decided if I couldn't go far, I would find something to look at locally. The obvious choice for me was to see how many Chiffchaffs were breeding in the local woods. With a need for exercise as well I decided to check the woods in and around Inchberry where I live within cycling distance of my house in the evening which kept me within 5 miles of home. There is a lot of woodland in that area so to make it manageable I



concentrated on the small blocks scattered within the farmland around me and easy sections at the edge of bigger woods. Chiffchaffs are easy to identify and sing often so it was a good choice to survey and I could do several visits to each woodland and ensure all pairs were located. So what did I get? Well, I surveyed 314.1 hectares in 14 pieces of woodland, mainly Scots Pine plantations but a few Broadleaved woodlands as well. I found a total of 61 singing birds with an average breeding density of 19.42 prs per square Kilometre. Birds preferred Broadleaved woodland but were happy with well thinned Scots pines as long as there was a good undergrowth. And as an added bonus I found three singing Corn Buntings in the farmland between woods, saw lots of hares, Roe deer and foxes and lost 4kg in weight.

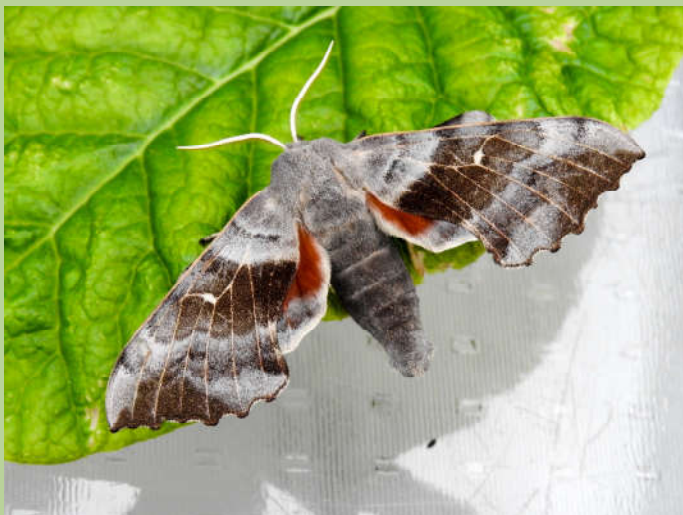
WOOD	AREA (HA)	SINGING BIRDS	DENSITY (Territories/km ²)	HABITAT
GUSHET NEUK	4.71	1	21.23	Conifer (sp)
DARNET HILLOCKS	9.14	1	10.94	Conifer (sp)
ST MARYS	13	2	15.38	Conifer (sp)
ROSEHILL	13.1	2	15.27	Conifer (sp)
INCHBERRY HALL	4.73	3	63.42	Mixed
GARBETHILLS	5.12	3	58.59	BL
CARRA BURN	11.1	3	27.03	Mixed
RIVER SPEY ROCKY BURN	13.2	3	22.73	BL
BRUNTLANDS WOOD	14.1	3	21.28	Conifer (sp)
TROCHELHILL	37	4	10.81	Conifer (sp)
BLACKBURN WOOD	35	6	17.14	Conifer (sp)
RED BURN COMPLEX	9.6	7	72.92	BL
RIVER SPEY (HAUGHS ISLAND)	21.3	7	32.86	BL
BALNACOUW WOOD	123	16	13.01	Conifer (sp)
SUMMARY	314.1	61	19.42	



NOT JUST BIRDING

Alison Ritchie

Lockdown gave Frank and I the opportunity to take up a new hobby. We had been considering moth trapping for a while and after a few unsuccessful attempts with a homemade trap we eventually bought one. We had not been aware of any moths in our garden in the evenings so did not know what to expect. Also the thought of getting up at 5.30 am did not appeal to me. Frank said the moths would all be gone by the time I emerged but it turns out the moths were quite docile and some hung around for quite a while. Our first attempt produced about 12 moths. At this point we were not sure how involved we would get. Some moths were more interesting than others. That first morning we had a beautiful Poplar Hawk Moth and a Peppered Moth amongst others. We found them in our moth book fairly easily.



Poplar Hawk Moth

A few days later we found a lovely White Ermine. We had to photograph each one so we could study them in detail later and see clearly the shape, pattern and colour of the moth. Also, not only were we finding moths in the trap but on the surrounding wall and windows. Very quickly it became engrossing. The mornings after setting the moth trap were a bit like being a child at Christmas when you run down the stairs to open a parcel and are full of anticipation about what is inside. The most moths we had in the trap at one time was about 50. It would sometimes take us an hour before we got them all on camera.

But that was the easy bit. There are over 2500 moths in the UK including 1600 micro moths. What we thought was an unusual patterned moth that would be easy to

identify turned out to have about ten similar ones with only the tiniest difference in marking. Martin and Richard were both very helpful in identifying many for us. Martin suggested a moth book to us, 'Concise Guide to the Moths of Great Britain and Ireland', which was an immense help to us with the initial identification of the macro-moths. We use it in conjunction with other guides. Even with the books, we can sometimes spend many hours in a day identifying them and can still get them wrong. Many of the moths have some absolutely wonderful names such as *Merveille du Jour* which we haven't seen yet but there is still a chance we might see one this year.



White Ermine Moth

As the months went on and the mornings grew darker, I no longer had to get up so early. We have identified 73 species so far including a Hummingbird Hawk Moth which we saw in the daylight in the garden. We ignore most of the micro moths and we also ignore some of the macro moths that are very worn. It has been a steep learning curve for us; the plain brown ones are very difficult. Some of the others are also very tricky especially when we were told that the moth pictures in the field guides were more typical of southern moths and not like the ones we have up here which are often darker. However, we are increasing in confidence with our identification of moths and are now searching for moths when we are out walking. At the end of this month we will put the trap away. I have become quite passionate about moth trapping and I am already looking forward to next year when we can start again and hopefully exceed our present total.



HOW THE ROBIN GOT ITS NAME

Frank Ritchie



In the *Shell Bird Book*, James Fisher gives us sixteen species that were known by name by the year 700. For the curious these are Crane, Sea Eagle, Crow, Woodpigeon, Cuckoo, Nightingale, Swallow, Chaffinch, Whimbrel, Kittiwake, Tern, Quail, Raven, Whooper Swan, Gannet and Robin.

Not all the birds on that list would have been known by that particular name at the time. For instance, those of you who do crosswords will know the Sea Eagle or White-tailed Eagle is always an Erne. Some of you may question some of the names on the list, and people have done that in the past. Why, for instance, is there Whimbrel but no Curlew or Whooper Swan but no Mute Swan? As far as I know, although some queried, I do not think anyone showed the list to be wrong.

One name on the list that is of no surprise is that of the Robin. Its distinctive colouring and long history of confiding behaviour in Britain means that it was probably one of the earliest birds to be given a name if not the first.

Originally it would have been called Rudduc or Ruddock possibly meaning little red one. Later this became Redbreast. Although it is probably more orange than red there was apparently not a word for orange when it was first given its name in this country.

Around about the fifteenth century our ancestors started giving birds first names, so we had names such as: Tom Tit (Blue Tit or Great Tit); Jackdaw, Magpie, Jenny Wren and to begin with Robert Redbreast. In some parts of Scotland, it was known as Red Rab. Robert Redbreast later became Robin Redbreast as Robin was a popular diminutive of Robert.

In the case of birds such as Jackdaw and Magpie, the first names, Jack and Mag became incorporated into their common names. Others such as Jenny Wren hung around for a while as separate names. Although I have still heard people referring to Jenny Wren – possibly because of its inclusion in nursery rhymes.

In the case of the Robin its first name or friendly name became its common name possibly because of its close association with humans. Being on first name terms – so to speak!

However, just to confuse things I should add that the Jay-pie (a close relative of the Magpie of course) is now also known only by its first name.

Finally, the Robin's association with Christmas is because of Victorian postmen who, because they had red uniforms or waistcoats, were given the nickname Robins. Victorian postmen were the first to deliver Christmas cards and so the association with Christmas cards and Robins began. The legend of the Robin obtaining its red breast from the blood on Jesus' crown of thorns helped to establish the link. If Victorian postmen had had black uniforms we might now have Christmas cards with lots of Blackbirds on them or even better - Rooks.



Join the SOC Scotland's Bird Club