

# North-East Scotland Branch Newsletter Spring 2024



Welcome to the first newsletter of 2024.  
We start with some forward information about next winter's talks programme followed by a few more articles and useful branch notices.

## Next winter's talks programme

Next winter's talks programme has now been finalised and includes a good mix of subjects:

**Monday 7 October** – Andrew Painting (NTS, Mar Lodge): The past, present and future of Crested Tits in Deeside: searching for an enigma in the pinewoods

**Monday 4 November** – Louise Bacon (BTO & BBRC): BBRC, past, present and YOU?

**Monday 2 December** – Julie Black (JNCC): Net zero and space for nature: offshore wind farms, seabirds and climate change.

**Tuesday 14 January 2025** – Alan Knox: Out of the dark: breeding Nightjars in NE Scotland (joint meeting with local RSPB Members Group)

**Monday 3 February** – Douglas Barr (FIBOT): Fair Island Bird Observatory: Past, present and future

**Monday 3 March** – Nick Littlewood: Twenty years bodging around Blackdog

**Monday 7 April** – Branch AGM, followed by Neil Calbrade (BTO): Monitoring migratory geese and swans in the UK

Also Head Office will again present monthly **online** talks, September 2024 to April 2025, open to all SOC members. Dates and details will be advised in due course.

In conjunction with the talks programme, two outdoor events will be trialled. The first will be a birdsong event at Dinnet in early May followed by a wader event later in spring-early summer.

*John Wills, Branch Secretary*

## Crested Tits in Deeside

Why are there no Crested Tits in Deeside? That this delightful pinewood specialist is not part of the region's avifauna is one of the longstanding mysteries of Scottish birding. Despite hundreds of square kilometres of apparently suitable, well connected Scots pine-dominated woodland, in the last fifty years or so there have been just a couple dozen verified records of Crested Tits in Deeside. Is it simply down to the species' limited dispersal capabilities, coupled with historic loss of habitat a few centuries ago? Climate? A lack of deadwood to breed in? Something else entirely?

Later this year (outside the breeding season), birders across Deeside will be looking a little closer into this question, completing habitat surveys across Deeside, and keeping a weather ear open for this chatty little critter in apparently suitable habitat.

For now, we are after records of Crested Tits across Deeside that may have been missed – be they old or recent, heard, seen, substantiated or otherwise. Have you recorded Crested Tits in places away from its known haunts in Strathspey and Moray? If so, we'd like to know about it!

If you do have any records, please send them in to: [nescotlandrecorder@the-soc.org.uk](mailto:nescotlandrecorder@the-soc.org.uk). If you've any more questions about Crested Tits in Deeside, please send me a message at [a.painting@gmail.com](mailto:a.painting@gmail.com). Remember, Crested Tits are Schedule 1 listed birds.

If you'd like to hear more about Crested Tits, I'll be doing a talk for the SOC on October 7<sup>th</sup> entitled: 'The past, present and future of Crested Tits in Deeside: searching for an enigma in the pinewoods.' It would be great to see you there!

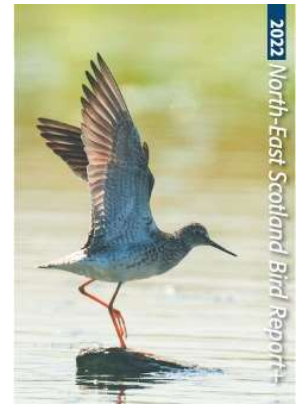
*Andrew Painting*

## North-East Scotland Bird Report

The 2022 NES Bird Report has been produced following the transfer of the administration and finances to the branch. Future NES Bird Reports will be published in the SOC's name.

The latest edition of the NESBR+ includes not just a summary of the bird records of the 263 species seen in the region, but a summary of all the mammal, amphibian, and reptile records for that year, plus an update of butterfly records and, for the first time, dragonflies and damselflies.

The report is fully illustrated with colour photographs for the main groups listed above. It includes a summary of the ringing studies performed in the region, and articles of birding interest for the region. Despite increases in size and postage, we have managed to keep the price at £10.00 + £2.50 p&p., and can be ordered from Mark Sullivan at [geolbird@gmail.com](mailto:geolbird@gmail.com).



*Mark Sullivan, Editor*

Data collection for the 2023 report has now been completed, with an increase to approximately 148,000 records, and the spreadsheet has been transferred to the report editor Mark Sullivan for distribution to the species accounts authors. This will be the 50th edition of the Report.

As before, you can submit records throughout the year rather than wait until the end of the year. The optimum method, which reduces risk of introducing errors via handling multiple files, is to submit via BTO BirdTrack <https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/birdtrack> or the recently upgraded (and very easy to use) BirdTrack mobile app and I am very grateful to all those who have adopted this system in recent years. I can also take a limited number of records on excel spreadsheets, but please ensure that these are formatted with one record per row, and separate columns for species, quantity, location, grid reference, first date, last date, observer name and comments (if any). eBird records can also be accepted and these are now easily integrated into the records database; eBird records now account for almost a third of the records.

Please submit your records to either BirdTrack <https://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack/bird-recording> or eBird, or include them along with your annual returns to the Local Recorder [nescotlandrecorder@the-soc.org.uk](mailto:nescotlandrecorder@the-soc.org.uk).

### **A brief reminder to all birdwatchers about news of rare breeding birds and causing Disturbance**

As you are all aware, the breeding season is now in full swing and this is a period of vulnerability for all birds. As such, could those who find rare birds in suitable breeding habitat please give serious consideration as to whether the news should be made public.

Details of sightings of rare breeding birds can be sent in confidence to the Local Recorder [nescotlandrecorder@the-soc.org.uk](mailto:nescotlandrecorder@the-soc.org.uk) who will send them to the Rare Birds Breeding Panel.

*Ian Broadbent, Local Recorder for North-east Scotland*

### **BTO News April 2024**

As I write this I'm looking forward to hearing my first Willow Warbler of the year, and if I'm lucky seeing the first Ospreys arriving, a sure sign that Spring is definitely here, despite the grey chilly weather this week. It also means that survey season is upon us, and there is much that local birders can do to help.

#### New BTO Regional Organisers

There are now new Regional Organisers for Aberdeenshire and Angus. Thanks to David Gregory for taking on the Aberdeenshire area, and to Ron Lawie for covering Angus. Their help is much appreciated. **Contact details for all the local BTO representatives are at the end of this newsletter.**

### Breeding Bird Survey 30 Year Anniversary - BBS

On April 4<sup>th</sup> 1994, BTO volunteers embarked on a brand new survey. The first bird recorded was a Skylark in the Vale of Belvoir, Leicestershire. 30 years on, nearly 8 million bird, 320,000 mammal, and 200,000 butterfly records have been generated. BBS data contribute to several outputs, ranging from official government statistics that have a direct influence on national conservation policy, to ground breaking research. The survey provides robust population trends of nearly 120 of the UK's breeding bird species.

Coverage of the randomly selected 1km squares is key to maintaining and improving this valuable dataset. Many thanks to those of you reading this who already do BBS squares, but if you do not and are interested in taking part, there are always vacant squares in the Aberdeenshire and Angus areas. Please contact your BTO Rep if you are interesting in finding out more. Information about taking part in the survey can be found here: <https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/breeding-bird-survey>

### Waterways Breeding Bird Survey - WBBS

The WBBS uses transect methods akin to those of the BBS but with minor adaptations to a linear habitat. WBBS results supplement BBS with additional data on the birds and mammals specifically in waterside habitats. It is especially valuable for monitoring the trends of specialist animals of linear waters, such as Goosander, Common Sandpiper, Kingfisher and Dipper. More information about this survey can be found here: <https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/waterways-breeding-bird-survey>

### Heronries Census

Many herons are already sitting on eggs, and chicks will be hatching soon. If you come across or know of any heronries, please don't assume that they are known about or are being monitored, take note of the location and please get in touch with your Regional Organiser, and let them know. You can find more information here: <https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/heronries-census>

### BirdTrack

Submitting your records through BirdTrack in spring allows real time tracking of the arrival and movement of migratory species. It is easy to use, and provides, amongst other things, important information on how the behaviour of migratory species is adapting to our rapidly changing climate. You can use BirdTrack to record your sightings, keep your records secure, send records automatically to the Local Recorder and help improve our bird knowledge. Using the BirdTrack App on your Smartphone is simple, quick and current. See details at the BirdTrack site <https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/birdtrack>

Please also note that you can submit records of other species on BirdTrack; mammals, amphibians, butterflies, dragonflies, orchids, and reptiles.

### Nesting Neighbours

If you are not already aware of this project, it is an activity suited to someone who enjoys getting to know their neighbourhood patch in more detail. Taking part helps improve understanding of Britain's breeding birds. Nesting Neighbours participants follow the progress of individual bird nests through the spring and summer. You can send your records to the BTO database, contributing vital information to the understanding of birds' breeding success. More information here - <https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/nesting-neighbours>

### BTO eNews

If you don't receive it already, you can sign up to the BTO eNewsletters – full of useful and up to date info on the work of the BTO: surveys, online training courses which are highly recommended, and much more.

BTO enews: <https://www.bto.org/community/news/e-newsletter>

Science enews <https://www.bto.org/our-science/enews>

### BTO Regional Organisers:

Kincardine & Deeside - Claire Marsden: [fbears@me.com](mailto:fbears@me.com)

Aberdeenshire – David Gregory: [davidwgregory@icloud.com](mailto:davidwgregory@icloud.com)

Angus – Ron Lawie: [ron.lawie@aol.com](mailto:ron.lawie@aol.com)

WeBS Coordinators – Patrick Cook and Lynne McKenzie: [webs.aberdeenshire@gmail.com](mailto:webs.aberdeenshire@gmail.com)

## Where to Watch Birds in Scotland – the SOC free mobile app

We hope everyone has by now downloaded the SOC's free mobile app

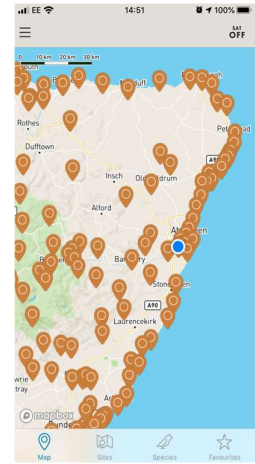
**Where to Watch Birds in Scotland** and is finding it useful! It's got details of lots of birding sites in the NE (indeed, all over Scotland), how to get there and what to expect, as well as other helpful information for beginners and experts alike.

**You can help make it even better!**

One of the app features is a list of recent records at each site extracted from BirdTrack. The more everyone uses BirdTrack, the better this feature becomes! If you use BirdTrack in the field, you should see some of your records appear on the app just a short time later (the actual time varies). We'll be fine-tuning this feature as we learn more about how it is being used.

Please submit your sightings via the BirdTrack app or web site and help make the **Where to Watch Birds** app even better!

Finally, we welcome any revisions, amendments, additional information for those sites already contained in the app, also any new additions to the app - with suggestions as to who should write it up!



Alan Knox

## Notable birds of 2023 and Winter 2023/2024

This article reminds us of some of the notable birds that occurred in the region over autumn and winter. The first returning Cranes of 2023 flew over Milltimber on 8 March, and the first returning Osprey was seen on the early date of 9 March. The Ross's Gull, first reported 4 March, stuck around Kinnaird Head and Cairnbulg until 19 April. May saw notable arrivals of a **Black-winged Stilt** in the vicinity of Meikle Loch, the region's first **Dark-eyed Junco** for four days at Rattray Head, and a very brief unringed drake **Baikal Teal** at Macduff, although this has been deemed as a Category E escape by BBRC. A drake King Eider present at the Ythan from early May to early July was a new individual – different to the previous bird known locally as "Elvis". A Subalpine Warbler sp. was photographed at Sandhaven. Continuing the theme of American visitors and firsts for NES, a **White-crowned Sparrow** stayed for just one day at Girdle Ness allotments in June. A Sabine's Gull went past Kinnaird Head in early June and another was seen off Girdle Ness in July, while a Yellow-legged Gull visited St.Cyrus. A Caspian Tern was seen at Girdle Ness at the end of July. A pair of Marsh Warblers were found feeding young at an undisclosed site in the region in late July, the first confirmed breeding record for NES.

There was a notable skua and shearwater passage along the NE coast in mid-August, with a possible **Brown Booby** seen off Stonehaven. A Lesser Yellowlegs was seen at Loch of Strathbeg. Another skua and shearwater passage occurred in mid-September.

October saw the start of a Waxwing invasion with reports from several locations. A Semipalmated Sandpiper was reported at Longhaven and three Cattle Egrets were seen at Meikle Loch, with presumably one of these birds also seen at Strathbeg. At the end of the month the region's third **Red-flanked Bluetail** turned up in an Aberdeen cemetery, staying for several days and bringing joy to many observers. The returning adult Yellow-legged Gull made infrequent visits to Inchgarth from early October to early December. November saw another first for the region with an **Eastern Yellow Wagtail** at Rattray Head, confirmed by DNA analysis. Two swift sp. were reported briefly over Fraserburgh on 9 November. A drake American Wigeon was at Strathbeg in November and December, and the returning female Red-crested Pochard was seen there again in late December after last being reported at Strathbeg in August. It was an excellent winter for Short-eared Owls and several were present at King's Links, Aberdeen; a Glossy Ibis flew over some of the owl photographers there on 28 November. A Firecrest frequenting the small water treatment plant (sewage works to you and me) at Drumoak enjoyed a long stay from end November until end February 2024. Several Bewick's Swans were seen in the region in February, as well as a remarkable flock, up to fifty strong, of Hawfinches in the Fetternear woods, Kemnay.

The first returning Cranes of 2024 were recorded at Strathbeg on 6 March, with at least three pairs established soon after. Finally, an unringed drake **Bufflehead** was found at Sand Loch, Forvie NNR in late March, another first for the region assuming it is treated by BBRC as a wild bird. It would appear to have all the credentials to tick the right boxes.

nb. all of the above is based on information gleaned from various, mostly reliable, sources (e.g. ABZ-RareBirds, Facebook, WhatsApp) but are unconfirmed. All records of rare and scarce birds are provisional until ratified by the appropriate rarities committee (NESRC, SBRC, or BBRC).

John Wills

## Finally , a couple of repeat notices:

### The Atlas Fund

As a result of the publication of our local atlas, *The Breeding Birds of North-East Scotland* in 2011, we have a sum of money that is currently held on account. While we're not looking to spend it in a hurry (some, for instance, may be used to support a future atlas), the editors (Ian Francis and Martin Cook) along with the North-East Scotland Branch have decided that money can be made available to support birds and ornithology in the region. For the purposes of the fund, this region comprises of Moray, Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City, in accordance with the published atlas. In order to ensure transparent distribution of any of the money, the following rules have been drawn up:

- Applicants must be able to demonstrate that their project will benefit ornithology in North-east Scotland (including Moray).
- Grants are available only for amateur projects.
- Applicants are expected to be existing members of, or to join, the SOC.
- Where applicable, it is expected that recipients will disseminate the results of their project to local birdwatchers. This may be by a talk to the local SOC branches or through publication in the *North-East Scotland* or *Moray Bird Reports*, or *Scottish Birds*.
- Any publications relating to the project results should state that a contribution towards costs was received from The North-East Scotland Atlas Fund.
- The fund is administered by the North-East Scotland SOC Committee or by an alternative committee or subcommittee that they entrust with this role. Awards are entirely at the discretion of the awarding body.
- Applicants must state whether or not they have applied for, or intend to apply for or have received, grant aid from other sources.
- Where appropriate, applicants are expected to have applied for an SOC Research Grant and to be aware of other funding sources.
- The grant must be used for the purpose stated in the application unless otherwise approved in writing by the awarding body. The grant must be returned to the awarding body if it is not used by the recipient as agreed by the awarding body.

Applications may be made at any time by writing to the Secretary of the North-East Scotland SOC Branch ([grampian.secretary@the-soc.org.uk](mailto:grampian.secretary@the-soc.org.uk)).

### Branch Committee

*The current branch committee is:*

chair: Alan Knox re-elected 2022 (also branch representative on Council)  
secretary: John Wills re-elected 2022  
treasurer: Mark Sullivan elected 2023

*additional committee members:*

Claire Marsden elected 2023  
Ian Broadbent ex officio (NES Recorder)

### We welcome nominations or suggestions for new members of the committee at any time.

Our branch relies on its committee to help keep it running. The duties are not onerous but we would welcome volunteers to help with ideas or practical support. If you would like to help, please contact the Branch Secretary John Wills at any time.

Please contact me if you have anything you would like to include in a future edition, or with any other comments. My email contact details are: [grampian.secretary@the-soc.org.uk](mailto:grampian.secretary@the-soc.org.uk). Other ways to keep up to date with branch news are through our page on the SOC website (<http://www.the-soc.org.uk/local-branches/north-east-scotland/>).

If you'd like to receive email updates about branch news and events, it would be great to have your email address. If you think that we might not have your correct (or preferred) address, please send an email to [admin@the-soc.org.uk](mailto:admin@the-soc.org.uk). However, please note that we require members to give specific consent to be contacted by email and SMS text messages for the delivery of what are deemed promotional communications (Club news and events notices, including branch events, and third party information). Members can visit <http://www.the-soc.org.uk/members-area> for more information.

*John Wills, Branch Secretary*