

# North-East Scotland Branch Newsletter

October 2016



Welcome to your autumn newsletter from your local SOC branch.

Another local newsletter to all our members with an update of where we are with the current programme of talks, plus a few more articles. Please do contact me if you have anything you would like to include in a future edition, or with any other comments. Other ways to keep up to date with branch news are through our page on the SOC website (<http://www.the-soc.org.uk/whats-on/local-branches-2/grampian/>) and by email.

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 me at [grampian.secretary@the-soc.org.uk](mailto:grampian.secretary@the-soc.org.uk).

*John Wills, Branch Secretary*

## **This winter's talks programme**

**Monday 7<sup>th</sup> November** – Nick Littlewood - NE Scotland Mammal Atlas

**Monday 5<sup>th</sup> December** – Catriona Reid - Muir of Dinnet

**Monday 9<sup>th</sup> January** - Martin Cook – 100 years of Moray birding

**Monday 6<sup>th</sup> February** -Stuart Benn - 50 years a Slav-the changing fortunes of Slavonian grebes in Scotland and beyond

**Monday 6<sup>th</sup> March** - Hywel Maggs & Allan Perkins - Cranes and corn buntings in the North East

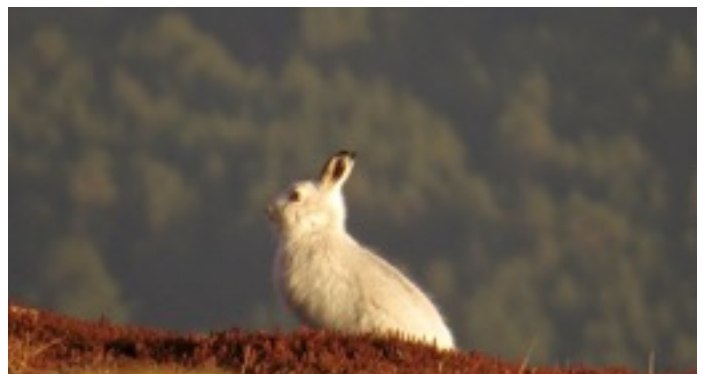
**Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> April** - Branch AGM, followed by Graham Rebecca – Hen harriers in NE Scotland

Meetings are held at The Sportsman's Club, 11 Queen's Rd, Aberdeen, AB15 4YL at 7.30 pm. To cover the hire of the room a small donation is requested - £2 for members and £3 for non-members.

By way of an introduction to the next branch talk (hopefully in good time), here is a note from our speaker Nick Littlewood:

## **Mammal Atlas of North-East Scotland and the Cairngorms**

Mammals hold universal appeal among naturalists and the wider public alike. Some species are conspicuous and easy to identify and provide a perfect route for a wide range of folk to engage in biological recording. Yet, despite there being two regional bird atlases for the North-East, there has not, until now, been a mammal atlas. Even at the national scale, the last hectad (10km squares) scale maps were published were 22 years ago. This is about to change, with the forthcoming publication of the *Mammal Atlas of North-East Scotland and the Cairngorms*.



Between 2012 and 2015, the North-East Scotland Biological Records Centre (NESBReC) made a dedicated drive to encourage and promote mammal recording throughout the region. New initiatives to encourage people to start submitting records were launched and such is the nature of this project, that it has been quite possible for anyone with an interest to make real tangible contributions to the collection of dots on the map. Significant volumes of data also exist in established datasets and recording schemes, held either by NESBReC or other organisations, and these have, where possible, been incorporated into this atlas. The result is a collection of 75,000 individual records, covering 43 land mammal species (including seals, which give birth on land).

Maps for each species will show records at a tetrad resolution in two date classes; 1960-1999 and 2000-2015. As with any atlas project, there are biases related to how conspicuous a species is, as well as its actual abundance. Thus, Foxes, deer and Moles (from molehills) are better-reported than most species of mice, voles and shrews. Some species have benefitted from targeted surveys. For example, Water Voles are fairly well-recorded and the distribution of bats in the region is far better understood now than previously, thanks to the dedicated efforts of the North East Scotland Bat Group. The best-recorded species, though, at least in terms of the volume of records available, are Red and Grey Squirrels, thanks to ongoing management and awareness-raising carried out by the Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels Project.

We hope that this atlas will be one of the most complete regional mammal atlases ever published. As well as the 43 species given full treatment by a team of 29 authors, a similar approach is taken for Human. Further sections summarise the status of 14 cetacean species, 11 additional species that do not meet the



criteria for full treatment and eight livestock species that, whilst in no way wild or feral, have a significant impact on our landscape and on the resources available for our wild fauna. Further comprehensive chapters discuss key habitats and mammal conservation of in the atlas area.

The book is planned for publication in late February 2017, will be 160 pages long, A4 size, well-illustrated, full colour throughout and very affordable, thanks to sponsorship gained. Its availability will be publicised through a range of channels, but do keep an eye on the NESBReC website ([www.nesbrec.org.uk](http://www.nesbrec.org.uk)) and Facebook page (NESBReC North East Scotland Biological Records Centre) to be sure of being notified as soon as it becomes available.

*Nick Littlewood*

## **Breeding Little Gulls at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg**

Little Gulls are regular winter visitors to the east coast of the UK, but at the RSPB Reserve, Loch of Strathbeg, there are many more records during the summer months.

For the third year in a row there was a pair of displaying Little Gulls at the Loch of Strathbeg during spring 2016. They arrived in mid April and, after a little display and courtship, they settled on the shingle island right in front of the visitor centre. They shared this island with almost 140 pairs of Common Terns and about 30 Black-headed Gull nests.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> June we noticed a change in their behaviour and a quick check of the nest revealed the first Little Gull egg ever to be seen in Scotland ! We immediately put a 24hr watch in place to make sure they weren't disturbed and waited with bated breath for three weeks before hatching. On the 4<sup>th</sup> July there were two chicks in the nest – the first Little Gulls ever proven to have hatched in the UK, EVER !! They fledged on the 25<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> July – fingers crossed for 2017 !!

For more details please see *Scottish Birds* volume 36(3) September 2016 p246-248 - with photographs.

*Richard Humpidge*

## Breeding Cranes in North East Scotland update

During 2016, two pairs of Common Cranes bred. Two sites were used, both being peatlands. However, one included an extensive area of wet woodland and this is where the cranes chose to nest.

One pair raised two young to just eight days old when both were apparently predated by a fox. The woodland nesting pair hatched two young, which survived for 40 days, at which point one was lost along with one of the adults. Fox predation is the most likely explanation for this disappearance. The remaining adult raised the single chick through to fledging. This constitutes the first known UK occurrence of woodland nesting Common Cranes and of a single parent raising young to fledging.

*Hywel Maggs*

## Grampian Ringing Group Update

Grampian Ringing Group (GRG) has been active in Aberdeen for over 30 years and 12,000 birds per year of a wide variety of species have been processed. GRG undertake a wide variety of project ringing activities, including a BTO constant effort site and a large number of single species projects.

At our recent autumn meeting we discussed the summer season just gone and looked forward to the winter and highly anticipated waxwing arrival – Raymond Duncan has colour marked waxwings to look at their movements during invasions over the last 20 years; contributing to our understanding of the movements of these charismatic migrants once they reach the UK.

Nationwide there is increasing interest in redpolls, not least because of the recent taxonomic debates regarding their separation and their increasingly frequent visits to garden feeders. Along with ringers in Highland, Moray and elsewhere we are targeting effort to understand more about their movements throughout the UK. Several birds ringed elsewhere in the UK have been caught amongst over 1100 ringed in Lower Deeside this autumn and it is expected that a good number of these will be caught if they move south and hopefully next summer on their breeding grounds.



*Common and Lesser Redpoll*

As well as passerines the group has a strong interest in waders and several group members have travelled across the world carrying out research on them. Closer to home most of our wader efforts focus on the Ythan estuary where we have been colour ringing greenshank and more recently redshank to understand more about how the waders use the estuary - how long they stay, where they go once they leave and when they come back. This means that as well as catching birds members of the group spend a large amount of time following up and locating these birds. Colour ringing is a useful tool in being able to identify individuals to look at movements and survival without having to capture them again.



Every couple of years we hear about the work of the ringing group at the SOC evening talks program which are always lively and fascinating talks. If you want to know more about the current projects and news then keep an eye on the group's blog: <http://grampianringing.blogspot.co.uk/>. If you see a ringed or colour ringed bird then we'd be really interested to hear about it so please let us know: [grampianringing@gmail.com](mailto:grampianringing@gmail.com).

*Jenny Weston*

## Nightjars in the North East in 2016

For an unprecedented third year in a row Nightjars have been found in the NE, though we are still well short of proving breeding. As we reported in the last newsletter <http://tinyurl.com/je5ndju>, three weatherproof audio recorders were placed in NE forests this summer. They were out from mid-May until the end of August recording continuously through the night, and several observers (or, rather, listeners) ventured forth on a number of occasions in the evenings searching for birds around the county. Data from the recorders was downloaded via SD cards about once a week and software scanned the audio files looking for Nightjar song.

This was another poor spring and summer for the weather. I didn't come across any Nightjars myself but the recorders picked up one bird singing at one site for three nights in late May and another singing briefly early one morning about two weeks later in early June, at the same site. The birds were identified as different by their vocal characteristics. In addition, one was seen by a keeper in mid-Deeside on the evening of 18 July. It was not relocated. Despite the adverse weather, Nightjars are continuing to occur up here in likely breeding habitat and, considering how much apparently suitable habitat there is out there just now, they may well have been present at other locations. Maybe next year we'll get better weather and the birds will stay longer. Three years in a row is certainly a very positive sign.

*The audio recorders were purchased with generous grants from The North-East Scotland Atlas Fund, the SOC Research fund and the North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership.*

*Alan Knox*

## Notable birds of the year, contd. (June to October)

"It hasn't been a really notable year for scarce and rare birds in the region this year- so far." That's how I started the last newsletter in late May - has it improved as we move into November?

Late May ended with single Great White Egret and Glossy Ibis at Loch of Strathbeg and a Pacific Golden Plover at Slains Pool, though only the former stuck around into June. It was seen sporadically in July and August before turning up again on 30 September. The King Eider, alternatively on the Ythan and on the beach at Blackdog - Murcar, stuck around for the earlier part of summer as usual, was last reported on 7 July.

**Little Gulls** are regular though scarce visitors to the North East every year, and no more so than at Loch of Strathbeg where nesting attempts were noted in 2015. This year a pair joined the numerous Black-headed Gulls on the tern island in front of the Visitor Centre and were suspected to have made a nest and laid. This was confirmed by an overflying drone and the birds went on to fledge two young. See the account by Reserve Manager Richard Humpidge elsewhere in this newsletter.

A probable **Night Heron** was recorded flying over Loch of Strathbeg on 19 June.

Local Quails appear to be few this year - the only reports that I have heard of were calling birds at Old Rayne on 20 June and New Deer on 9 July.

A **White-winged Black Tern** was seen at Strathbeg on 23 June. Another was at Cotehill Loch on 24 July before relocating to Meikle Loch where it was regularly seen until the 30th; another was seen at the same site on 5-7 August.

The first mega-rarity for the summer was an adult drake **White-winged Scoter** (the North American subspecies *deglandi*) found by Chris Gibbins off Murcar on 25 June, only the second for the region after the first in 2011 (that one the first for the UK). It stayed around for a long time in the scoter flock, last being recorded on 26 August. It was joined by the first Surf Scoter of the summer on 29 June, and subsequently up to three until early September.

The saga of Aberdeen's wandering drake Mandarin 'Mac' continued when he reappeared back at Walker Dam on 26 June, a bit earlier than his usual autumn appearance here or at the nearby Johnston Gardens where he regularly overwinters. A photograph taken of his ringed leg confirmed it was the same bird. Read Harry Scott's full account in the latest issue of *Scottish Birds*. Talking of ducks, another American Wigeon was at Waulkmill from 28 to 30 June.

July recorded the first returning passage waders - Common Sandpiper, Ruff, Knot, Whimbrel, Green Sandpiper, seen on the Ythan and at Strathbeg. A **White-rumped Sandpiper** at Strathbeg stayed from 22



to 25 July, and another very confiding bird was foraging around a Girdle Ness carpark from 10 to 14 August. Also from July were regular sightings of Mediterranean Gulls at Rattray, Strathbeg, Girdle Ness, Stonehaven. A **Leach's Petrel** was caught and ringed at a night-time ringing session at Girdle Ness on 29 July.

Somewhat different, well very different but a crowd-puller nevertheless, was a **Humpback Whale**, probably two - a mother and calf, seen and photographed ranging between Collieston and Balmedie from late July to mid October.

Notable birds in August included a sea-faring **Bee-eater** filmed on the Shetland ferry MV Bigga on the 4th, **Spotted Crake** and Pectoral Sandpiper at Strathbeg on the 10th, a lone **White-billed Diver** swimming south between Blackdog and Murcar on the 14th, a Hobby at Nigg Bay on the 20th (and another at Waulkmill on 4 September). There were a few passage warblers: a **Greenish** on Forvie NNR on 19-20 July, a Reed Warbler at Girdle Ness on 20th, and an Icterine at Rattray on 25th. A Red-backed Shrike was seen at Collieston on 20 July, and another stayed longer on Forvie NNR from 25 September to 3 October.

September usually heralds the first significant passage migrants of the autumn. This year it started off fairly quietly with a Wryneck at Strathbeg on the 1st and little else of note until the middle of the month when some of the regular migrants turned up: Red-breasted Flycatcher at Foveran 15-16th, Lesser Whitethroat at Rattray on 17th, a juvenile Common Rosefinch at Nigg Bay on 17th, and single Yellow-browed Warblers at Troup Head on 17th, Girdle Ness on 21st, Newtonhill and Rattray on 22nd. More significant was a possible **Nuthatch** heard but not seen at Haddo House on the 8th. This species has turned up a few times in the North East in the last few years but never sticks around to be seen by many. However, as its breeding range is slowly extending north from the Borders and Central Belt, surely it will become a fixture eventually. A **Sabine's Gull** briefly kept company with feeding Kittiwakes off Girdle Ness on the 12th.

A juvenile **Semipalmated Sandpiper** graced the Ythan Estuary, usually around the Waulkmill bridge area, from 16 to 24 September, only the second for the region. A Slavonian Grebe was noted on Loch of Skene on the 17th, with two there in mid October. The first of the wintering Pink-footed Geese, a hundred or so, turned up at Loch of Strathbeg on the 15th and on the same date ten pale-bellied Brents were seen at Newburgh. Finally, to top off the month, a **Pallid/Montagu's Harrier** was seen in flight over Collieston on the 30th; subsequent photographs posted on the internet, presumably the same bird, suggested it was an adult female Pallid.

Meanwhile, the UK's autumn migrant action seemed to be happening elsewhere as strong easterlies swept numerous migrants to Shetland to the north and along the northeastern English coast from Northumbria to Yorkshire to the south. It seemed that the winds bifurcated north and south leaving us very little in the middle, but...that all changed in the first week of October. First, a major invasion of Yellow-browed Warblers occurred on the 2nd, with birds scattered from Catterline northwards to Strathbeg, and around the north coast to Gardenstown. There were multiples seen at several sites and it was estimated that there must have been at least 150 over the whole region. Birds continued to turn up in coastal sites until the middle of the month. A few other commoner migrants turned up as well: Lesser Whitethroats, Red-backed Shrike and Blue-headed Yellow Wagtail at Forvie NNR, Lapland Buntings at Troup Head and Strathbeg, several Siberian Chiffchaffs, Red-breasted Flycatcher at Newtonhill on the 15th, and a possible heard-only **Radde's Warbler** at Collieston on the 8th. A juvenile Black Tern was also observed off Collieston on the 8th. A **Corncrake** was found at Blackdog on the 3rd. Passage waders weren't left out either with the year's second Pacific Golden Plover at Rattray 9 October and a Pectoral Sandpiper at Strathbeg 12-15 October (once a fairly common passage bird here but scarcer of late).

Meanwhile, elsewhere (of course) Britain's first Siberian Accentor made it across the North Sea to Shetland on the 9 October, maybe not such an event in itself given that there was a major invasion happening all across northern Europe at the time, but what followed was truly remarkable as a further ten were found in the next two weeks from the northern isles down to Yorkshire. Our region had apparently been left out again until a first-winter **Isabelline Shrike** was discovered at Girdle Ness on the 18th, the first for the region, staying around for another couple of days. Around the same time three to six **Northern Long-tailed Tits**, little snowballs, flitted around the trees at the Peterhead Power Station Viewpoint from 16th to 19th, caught by several photographers, accompanied by a Mealy Redpoll on the 17th. A single Hoopoe stopped all-to-briefly at Rattray on the 15th and single Pallas's Warblers were found at Kings Links, Aberdeen and Stonehaven on the 16th.

A late Garganey was on Loch of Skene 13 to 16 October and another American Wigeon turned up at Strathbeg on the 16th. A Tundra Bean Goose hung around St.Fitticks Church ruin, Nigg Bay 17-18 October and was possibly the same lone bird seen on Cotehill and Meikle Lochs at the end of the month. A further three Tundra Bean Geese were observed at the south end of Loch of Strathbeg on 22 October. Three blue-

phase Snow Geese were noted in the large Pink-footed Goose dawn roost at Loch of Skene at on 22 October, possibly returning birds from the little family group which stayed around the loch and nearby fields earlier in the year.

The first Great Grey Shrike of autumn-winter was briefly seen through the rain at Girdle Ness on 14th, followed by further individuals at Durriss on the 25th and Forest of Birse on the 29th.

A long-staying Barred Warbler was found in a garden in Newtonhill on 20 October, last seen on the 28th, and another was found by the Balmedie CP carpark on the 25th., a short-stayer this one. Single Richard's Pipits were noted at Murcar Golf Course on 22nd and at Troup Head on the 29th. The first Waxwings of the season have turned up at scattered sites throughout the region, so far just a few but given what's been happening in Scandinavia maybe hopefully the vanguard of a lot more to come yet. With a bumper season of red berries around the area they could turn up just about anywhere. Meanwhile flocks of incoming Redwings and Fieldfares have been enjoying the feast. Not many white-winged gulls in the area yet though.

Finally, the month ended with a handsome male **Pied Wheatear** at Donmouth on the afternoon of the 30th, but it had gone by the next morning. Altogether though it has been a good month.

That takes us to November with its wintering geese, ducks, etc, and possibly some late migrants - still a little time left for some goodies before Christmas. Good Birding!

*John Wills*

### **Please note your Chiffchaffs!**

This is a reminder that we are asking that you make a note of all the breeding or potentially breeding (singing) Chiffchaffs you came across this year and submit these either to BirdTrack (<https://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack/bird-recording>) or include them along with your annual returns to Nick Littlewood as our Local Recorder. Chiffchaff numbers have increased greatly up here in the last few years and it will be interesting to see just how widespread and common they have become. Grid references will add greatly to the usefulness of the records.

*Alan Knox*

### **Tower Pool Hide, RSPB Loch of Strathbeg**

Approximately 10 to 15 years ago someone took the decision to move the Tower Pool hide from its location beside the Savoch Burn to the elevated position in which it is located today.

Over the last few years, whilst it is acknowledged that the Tower Pool Hide provides a great vista over the reserve, good views of birds are limited to those with good optical equipment. As a result some visitors to the reserve are frustrated by poor distant views of birds.

The local RSPB members group, in conversation with the RSPB management team at Strathbeg, agreed that it would be a good idea to re-site the hide to its original position. Over a period of a few months discussions have taken place with local birders, RSPB members, SOC members and the RSPB Strathbeg management team and as a result I am pleased to report the following progress.

Approximately 75 metres of the old existing boardwalk has been replaced, with the local members group buying the materials and local charity Aberdeen Foyer

([www.aberdeenefoyer.com](http://www.aberdeenefoyer.com)) supplying construction trainees and supervisors to carry out the works. Over nine days the existing boardwalk was removed and replacement panels were attached on to the existing posts which were still in remarkably good condition.

Although first thoughts were to take the existing Tower Pool Hide and move it back to its original position this did not meet with universal approval and a fortunate discussion between Richard Humpidge, Reserve



Manager at Strathbeg and the staff at HMP Grampian brought about an ideal opportunity to please the majority. HMP Grampian were looking for projects to utilise their new joinery workshop and give the inmates experience which could help them find employment in the future. A discussion which started out about nest boxes developed in to an offer to manufacture a replacement hide providing the RSPB supplied the materials. I am pleased to say that with the funds raised by the RSPB Local Members Group and a four figure donation from the SOC North East Scotland Branch, it has now made this a viable possibility. However, despite the fact that we are reinstating an existing path, boardwalk and hide to the original site, the local Planning Department require us to apply for planning permission and building warrant. As a result, an architectural technologist has prepared drawings for submission to the Planning Department, resulting in a delay to the process not to mention costs incurred for the preparation of drawings and fees for the planning and building warrant applications. Hopefully we can get the Planning Permission and Building Warrant in the not too distant future and it would be the intention to enlist assistance from Aberdeen Foyer to carry out the works. Ideally we could all have access to the new hide in late spring/early summer 2017.

*Rob Leslie*

### **The Atlas Fund - a reminder**

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 Committee 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 branch(es) 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)).

### **Birding Guide to NE Scotland Reprinted**

The first print run (the first 1000 copies) of this popular local guide has sold out, and we have had to re-print a smaller number of copies (250) without subsidy. (The original print run was part-funded by Aberdeenshire Council and the SOC.) The price has therefore had to be increased as a consequence: direct sales by the local RSPB Members Group at events are £10, while customers who purchase through the post will pay £12.50 including postage & packing. Copies can also be bought at Waterstone's and through NHBS for £12.50.

Please order using the order form which can be downloaded from the Aberdeen and District RSPB Group website [www.rspb.org.uk/groups/aberdeen/news/424814/](http://www.rspb.org.uk/groups/aberdeen/news/424814/) All monies raised will go to local conservation projects.

If you have not yet got your copy - why not?! - you are missing out on loads of interesting local places to visit and see wildlife.

*Mark Sullivan*

### **Branch Committee and Contact details**

After three years filling the position our treasurer Graham Cooper has indicated his wish to stand down. Following an appeal to branch members, happily answered, the committee is very pleased to welcome Paddy Grant as our new branch treasurer. Paddy will fill this position on an interim basis until we formalise it at the next AGM in 2017. On behalf of all of our branch members, we thank Graham wholeheartedly for his time diligently fulfilling this post; Graham will continue on the committee albeit in a supporting role. Graham has served the branch for many years, filling several posts particularly in the dark years when we had a much reduced committee and were in danger of folding. His long service to the branch was acknowledged with a SOC Branch Recognition Award in 2014.

Details for the current North-East Scotland Branch Committee are given below.

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

Jenny Weston (Chair & Programme Coordinator)	Tel: 01224 749915 Email: <a href="mailto:jenny.weston@rspb.org.uk">jenny.weston@rspb.org.uk</a>
John Wills (Secretary)	Tel: 01467 651296 Email: <a href="mailto:grampian.secretary@the-soc.org.uk">grampian.secretary@the-soc.org.uk</a>
Paddy Grant (Treasurer)	Tel: 01224 861757 Email: <a href="mailto:patrick.grant5@btinternet.com">patrick.grant5@btinternet.com</a>
Alan Knox (Council Representative)	Tel: 01224 861185 Email: <a href="mailto:a.g.knox@abdn.ac.uk">a.g.knox@abdn.ac.uk</a>
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