

NEWSLETTER 29 - MAY 2000

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The AGM and Social Evening was held on 24th March at Plockton Village Hall. Once again the existing committee was re-elected en bloc. The office bearers and committee members are as follows:-

Chairman	John Holt	Committee Members	Jean Camilli
Vice-Chairman	Pat Mucklow		Tim Godfrey
Secretary	Brian Neath		Iain Matheson
Treasurer	Andree Bishop		

Our thanks are due again to Andree for all her hard work in providing the excellent buffet, to John and Tim for setting up the hall and to the many willing volunteers who coped admirably with the washing-up and clearing away at the end of the evening. We are grateful to everyone who helped to make this such an enjoyable occasion.

BOAT TRIP FOR 2000

It was decided at the AGM to try for Loch Coruisk again as we missed out last year because of the weather. Arrangements will be the same as planned for 1999 i.e. leaving Armadale at 10.00am and returning between 5.00pm and 6.00pm. The date will be Saturday 10th June and the cost ø14 per head. Please sign and return the enclosed form if you wish to go on the trip.

ISLAND EAGLES

Highly recommended to anyone with an interest in Golden Eagles is a new book entitled "Island Eagles". This summarises 20 years of personal observations of Golden Eagles on Skye by Ken Crane and Kate Nellist. This is not a book of the glossy coffee table genre but a down to earth account of intimate encounters with eagles which few naturalists would have the patience or skill to experience. Copies can be obtained direct from Cartwheeling Press, Downbye Cottage, Glenbrittle, Isle of Skye, IV47 8TA for ø10 including postage and packing.

LATE WINTER/EARLY SPRING 2000 - WILDLIFE REPORTS (Compiled by Brian Neath 01599 555341)

Without doubt the bird of the winter was the Water Rail in Jean and Luke Camilli's garden at Ratagan. As reported in the January Newsletter this bird first appeared around Christmas but amazingly it remained there until the middle of March. To see what is normally such a shy skulking bird at such close quarters from the comfort of one's house and over such a long period is quite extraordinary. On the two occasions I saw the Water Rail it appeared within 5 minutes of me entering the house, feeding on bird seed under and around the bird table.

It was good to see a pair of Whooper Swans with 4 juveniles on Loch Shiel for the second successive winter. If only our wintering flock of Greenland White-fronted Geese could breed as successfully! The flock remains at a perilously low level with just 10 birds returning this winter and not a young bird amongst them. At least they did appear this year after not being observed at all during the 1998/99 winter. On 19th January I watched them fly north-east over An Dubh-aird and drop down on to Kishorn Island. They were also seen in the fields at Dubh-aird on 3rd February and 12th March.

Despite their presence on Skye White-tailed Sea Eagles are still a rare sight in Lochalsh. So it was exciting to see one over Loch Duich and Carr Brae on 15th February especially as it was in the company of a Golden Eagle. I had been looking forward to seeing these two mighty birds in the air together since I moved to the area 12 years ago and it was particularly satisfying to witness the

incident from my own garden. The Golden Eagle stooped half-heartedly once or twice at the larger bird but if one hadn't noticed the different flight silhouettes they could easily have been taken as a pair of the same species from their behaviour. Probably the same sea eagle was seen the following morning by Rod Stenson near Eilean Donan. As if this wasn't enough excitement for one month 10 days later there were 4 adult Golden Eagles low over the trees around our house. Almost certainly the local breeding pair was escorting a pair of intruders out of their territory (or home range as raptor enthusiasts prefer to call them).

Immature Iceland Gulls were seen at Nostie on 21st and 23rd January and at Kyle Rhea on 28th February and there was a surprise report of a male Black Grouse (or Blackcock) at Ard Hill on 26th February.

Another unexpected sighting, albeit of a more common species, was of a pair of Stonechats at about 480 metres above sea level in a remote and inhospitable area to the east of Dornie on 9th January. It would be surprising to find Stonechats in this area in summer so to find them there in mid-winter with snow on the ground was quite amazing.

The Reed Bunting is an uncommon resident species in Lochalsh and seems to have become scarcer in recent years so I was pleased to record one in my garden for the first time on 10th January. Another was seen in a garden at Auchtertyre on 4th February. As Reed Buntings are known to be occasionally attracted to feed on bird seed in gardens it is worth looking out for them amongst your local flock of Chaffinches or House Sparrows. I would be pleased to hear of any sightings.

One of the first signs of spring is usually the return of Skylarks to the area. Dubh-aird and Drumbuie are good places to look out for the earliest arrivals which are usually in small flocks and occasionally in large flocks. In 1998 I saw flocks of about 100 in both localities in late February/early March. This year I didn't see any flocks at all but heard my first two singing Skylarks at Dubh-aird on 12th March. The Wheatear is the only true summer migrant which consistently appears before the end of March and this year was no exception with the first birds in evidence from 27th March.

The Highland Biological Recording Group is including bumblebees amongst its surveys for the year 2000. Murdo MacDonald, who gave a talk about orchids to the Field Club in September 1998, is a leading authority on bumblebees and has already done much fieldwork in various parts of the Highlands and Islands. With the anticipated greater coverage from this year's survey it is hoped to produce a distribution atlas to follow on from the butterfly atlas and pending mammal atlas. The bumblebee year got off to a good start with the first individual seen on 19th March and 6 species identified in our garden by 4th April. I found it surprising that there should be so many bumblebees out and about and such a variety of species at a time when there were so few wildflowers available for foraging. Subsequently I have found that only *Bombus hortorum* is attracted by primroses which were the only abundant plants in flower during this period. Clearly the bees have adapted to foraging on introduced plants in gardens despite the relatively small total area of cultivated gardens in the north west Highlands.

