

NEWSLETTER 33 - APRIL 2001

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The AGM and Social Evening was held on 24th March at Achmore Village Hall with 36 members and friends in attendance. In view of his recent move to Sleat Tim Godfrey resigned from the committee and Bill Ramsay was elected in his place. All other committee members were re-elected and so the current committee is as follows:-

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

Thanks to Andree as usual for all her hard work in preparing the buffet and to all those who helped with setting up the hall and clearing away afterwards. The new venue was a great success and our annual social event was as enjoyable as ever.

HIGHLAND BUMBLEBEES

Don't forget our final meeting of the present programme which will take place on 27th April at Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm. Murdo Macdonald is the leading authority on bumblebees in the Highlands and he has been making lots of interesting discoveries about bee distribution and behaviour during the last few years. Several species are spreading northwards into the Highlands and we are in a good position to record the rate of expansion of these populations. I am sure his talk will give us all a new level of interest in these important garden insects.

BIRDS BEFORE BREAKFAST/DAWN CHORUS

In conjunction with the Countryside Ranger, John Phillips, we will be getting up ridiculously early on Saturday 5th May to listen to the dawn chorus and find out what other birds are about at this time of day. We will be meeting at Dornie Hall car park, walking around Ardelve and Dornie and then up Carr Brae to Culag for some breakfast. If we have time and energy left we may continue up to the View Point to add some more species to the list. Numbers will be limited so book early with John on 01478 613606 when he will also confirm the starting time. BOAT TRIP FOR 2001 It is hoped that we will be able to visit the island of Muck this year. However as with most outdoor activities at present this will depend on developments in the foot and mouth epidemic. If we are able to proceed as planned then booking slips will be sent out as usual.

LATE WINTER/EARLY SPRING 2001 – WILDLIFE REPORTS (Compiled by Brian Neath 01599 555341)

It is unusual for the North West Highlands to be the driest place in the British Isles during the first three months of the year but that appears to have been the case this year. The 12 month period from April 2000 to March 2001 was reported to be the wettest for over 230 years in England and Wales!! That was certainly not the case here. What effect this dry spell has had on our flora and fauna is hard to judge. The dry sunny weather in March seems to have suited the Primrose which flowered early but not the Lesser Celandine which was almost two weeks later coming into flower. The hard ground must have made life difficult for worm-eating birds such as Blackbird and Song Thrush and may have brought more to feed in gardens than usual. The numbers of Blackbirds were exceptional in the second half of the winter. We had unprecedented numbers in our garden from mid-January to mid-March with a minimum of 9 birds and a staggering maximum of 15 on 2nd March.

The Lochcarron Water Rail became rather secretive in the New Year and was seen only occasionally. Sometimes its tracks in the snow were the only indication that it was still

around. It was last seen on 29th March and that was after such a long break that Josephine and Roy wondered if it might have been a different bird. Whose turn will it be for a Water Rail in the garden next winter?

The Waxwing influx into Lochalsh was restricted almost entirely to January although Jean and Brian Saville had one in Glenelg on 26th December and one or two lingered into the first few days of February in Bill Ramsay's garden in Kyle. I know of over 20 records during January with birds seen in Glenelg, Inverinate, Dornie, Ardelve, Allt nan Sugh, Kirkton, Kyle and Stromeferry. Strangely I have no records from Plockton so if anyone can rectify this situation I would be pleased to have details. Apart from a flock of about 15 which flew low over our garden on 1st January the most birds seen together was 5 in two gardens in Kyle.

One of the most interesting occurrences during this period involved a Woodcock which Sheena and Roger Knight found in an upstairs bedroom on 28th January! It is almost certain that a cat had carried the bird indoors as there were no windows open at the time. Like the Kestrel found under similar circumstances at Camas-luinie a few years ago the bird appeared unharmed and flew off a few seconds after being placed on a low level roof. Both of these birds seem rather large for a cat to carry and it may be that in both cases they had stunned themselves by flying into a window to enable the cat to catch them. However it is feasible that the Woodcock had been stalked by the cat. Woodcocks do occur quite regularly in gardens during the winter months especially during snowy or frosty conditions.

Another bird which has been making a big impression in local gardens this winter is the Great Spotted Woodpecker. In the August Newsletter I mentioned the woodpecker which had become a regular visitor to Sheena and Roger Knights garden feeding on peanuts. Subsequently several gardens in Dornie and Ardelve have been visited by this spectacular bird and Jean and Luke Camilli have also had woodpeckers in their garden at Ratagan. On 19th February and again on 14th March a male Great Spotted Woodpecker perched on the post of our birdtable but on neither occasion did it move on to the peanut holder. However on 18th April a female at last fed several times on the peanuts, the first time in nearly 40 years of feeding birds in various parts of Britain that I have managed to attract a feeding Great Spotted Woodpecker! A red-letter day indeed!

It isn't often that one actually witnesses the arrival or departure of our wintering Whooper Swans but on 30th March four swans flew down Loch Duich past our house. These were almost certainly the family of 2 adults and 2 young birds which had spent the winter on Loch Shiel and it was fascinating to see them setting off on their return journey to Iceland and wonder where their next stop would be.

Redwings are most conspicuous during the autumn migration in October and November when large numbers pass through the area on their way south. Small numbers spend the winter here, often feeding with other thrushes on playing fields or grazing meadows. The spring migration usually also involves relatively small numbers of birds but occasionally larger flocks occur and attract attention by their noisy Starling-like chattering. Two such flocks were reported in early April, by Irene Gibson near Achmore and by Rosemary McClelland at Ardelve. Both commented on the noise and bustling activity of the birds.

Other interesting sightings included a Little Auk in Balmacara Bay on 12th January, a Little Gull in Ardelve Bay on 29th January and a Bar-tailed Godwit at Camas Dubh-aird on 5th February.