

NEWSLETTER 34 - AUGUST 2001

PROGRAMME FOR 2001/2002

- 21st September The Galapagos Islands
 John Love
- 12th October * Highland Place Names
 Scott Russell
- 16th November From Iona to Fair Isle - Archaeology and the National Trust for Scotland
 Jill Harden, NTS Regional Archaeologist for Highlands & Islands
- 7th December * Muckle Flugga to the Mull of Kintyre - A tour through Scotland's islands
 Norman Newton
- 11th January * Scottish Geology in One Hour
 Stephen Cribb

All the above meetings will be held at Kirkton Church Hall commencing at 8.00pm. Those marked with an asterisk have been arranged in conjunction with University of Aberdeen KEY Learning Opportunities (formerly the Centre for Continuing Education).

FIELD MEETINGS

Two outings were organised earlier in the year in conjunction with John Phillips, the Highland Council's Countryside Ranger for Skye and Lochalsh.

"Birding by Bus" was held on 24th February when we toured round Lochalsh in a minibus starting in Kyle and visiting Drumbuie, Plockton, Balmacara, Ardelve, Loch Shiel and Ratagan recording as many bird species as we could. Although there was not time to look for woodland and garden birds we recorded a respectable 40 species despite the inclement weather with snow blizzards blanking out the views at times. The highlights included a confiding flock of about 20 Skylarks in the snow at Dubh-aird, 8 Rock Doves feeding with chickens near the airstrip, a male Stonechat along the Duirinish/Balmacara road, a drake Goldeneye and several Ringed Plovers at Balmacara, 4 Little Grebes at Ardelve Point and 4 Whooper Swans, 8 Teal and 6 more Goldeneye on Loch Shiel. We also saw 4 Roe Deer at Drumbuie and Feral Goats with young kids by Loch Shiel.

By contrast we couldn't have wished for a better day for our dawn chorus walk on 5th May. It was well worth the effort of getting up before 4.00am and we all felt extremely virtuous. However it was rather a shock to find an almost continuous flow of traffic down Carr Brae at such an early hour and realise that we weren't the only people up and about!

Highlights of this outing included a Goldcrest singing in the grounds of Graham House, singing Chiffchaff, Blackcap, Wood Warblers and Tree Pipits on Carr Brae and a male Great Spotted Woodpecker feeding on the peanuts as we ate our breakfast at 6.00am. Rod Stenson and I carried on walking around Ardelve after the rest of the party had dispersed and we added several more species to the list including Sparrowhawk, Whimbrel, House Martin, Sedge Warbler and Yellowhammer, bringing the total number of species for the morning up to 50 – and all before the normal breakfast time!

SPRING/SUMMER 2001 - WILDLIFE REPORTS (Compiled by Brian Neath 01599 555 341)

Restricted access to much of the area due to foot and mouth precautions limited the number of wildlife sightings during the good weather in April and May and the frustration was aggravated when the weather deteriorated just as access was being opened up again. My own observations were therefore mainly in our garden or from the road over Carr Brae. Luckily it was an excellent spring for bumblebees, butterflies, moths and other insects and gardens are as good as anywhere for seeing these. Once again I recorded 8 bumblebee species including the beautiful *Bombus monticola* with its completely orange abdomen and the cuckoo bumblebee *Psithyrus bohemicus*. There were also good numbers of the orange-tailed *Bombus pratorum*.

Small Tortoiseshells were as usual the first butterflies to appear followed by Green-veined Whites, Green Hairstreaks,

Orange-tips, Speckled Woods and Pearl-bordered Fritillaries. Orange-tips do not occur on Carr Brae but I saw several at Nostie near the Episcopal Church where the meadows are a favourite site. Several people reported seeing this attractive butterfly which is rather local in its distribution. It also has a very short flight period so you are only likely to see it from the second week in May to the first week in June. It was an exceptional year for the Pearl-bordered Fritillary which has become extremely scarce in much of Britain. Much reduced grazing on Carr Brae resulted in far more bugle flowers than usual and this may have helped this small population of fritillaries. The more common Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Dark Green Fritillary also did well as did Small Heath, Meadow Brown and Common Blue. The unseasonably low temperatures and low sunshine hours in July and August cannot have helped the later butterflies although there were still plenty of Scotch Argus and Speckled Woods to be seen and there was an influx of Small Tortoiseshells in mid-August.

Whilst watching bumblebees on early-flowering heathers in the garden on 6th May I came across a Beautiful Yellow Underwing – an attractive small day-flying moth. Other interesting day-flying moths seen during May and June included Speckled Yellow, Peacock Moth, Six-spot Burnet and numerous Clouded Buff. A large spectacular Emperor Moth was found in the toilet block at Reraig caravan site in early May and an equally spectacular Poplar Hawk-moth was found in a shower room at Ardelve on 14th July where it had laid a number of green eggs on the window frame – not the best of food sources for the caterpillars had they been allowed to hatch! Of the other large moth species a Northern Eggar was found on Carr Brae on 25th June and no less than 7 Drinkers were attracted to our windows on 7th July. Unfortunately 5 remained there the following morning and were almost certainly eaten by birds!

Apart from the annual interest generated by the arrival of summer migrants such as Cuckoos, Swallows, House Martins, Wheatears and Willow Warblers notable bird sightings seemed to be fewer than usual. However I was fortunate to see an adult White-tailed Eagle over the house on 4th May and perhaps more surprisingly an Osprey soaring over Carr Brae a week later. The most unexpected occurrence though was the Waxwing which Pat and Roger Cottis saw feeding on their birdtable at Isle Ornsay on 11th and 12th June. Apparently several of the Waxwings which wintered in Britain this year stayed on longer than usual but to see one in June on the west coast is extraordinary.

The Great Spotted Woodpecker saga took on a few more twists. Following the first feeding by a female on 18th April the male also learned the technique and became a regular feeder on peanuts from 28th April until 12th May when sadly it was found dead under a window on the opposite side of the house to the feeding area. This is still a puzzle. Why should an experienced adult woodpecker which had been feeding in the garden for 2 weeks get so close to the house on the “wrong” side? There was no mark on the window but the assumption is that it flew into the glass, perhaps pursued by a predator such as a Sparrowhawk. I did not see or hear the female again so assumed that breeding had failed. However on 15th July a juvenile woodpecker appeared and fed skillfully from the peanut holder like a veteran for about 15 minutes. It is still a regular visitor at the end of August. So did the local pair breed successfully after all and the female manage to rear the brood single-handed? Or is this a bird which has wandered from another territory further afield? Rev. Donald Beaton had woodpeckers feeding in his garden at Inverinate during May and June which is not too far away.

It is always distressing when birds get killed flying into windows, especially when you are attracting birds to the danger zone by putting out food for them. I find that it is mainly recently fledged birds that fly into our windows and mostly Chaffinches and Greenfinches. Older birds usually know their way around and probably develop regular safe routes in and out of the garden. However they do sometimes come to grief like the woodpecker already referred to above and the arrival of a Sparrowhawk can cause panic with birds dispersing in all directions. Even bird of prey sentinels (silhouettes for sticking to the windows) are not foolproof in all circumstances. Sometimes the marauding Sparrowhawk will come to grief itself, missing its target prey and crashing into a window. Usually they just stun themselves and soon recover but I have just seen a young Sparrowhawk which died when it clattered into the window of Olive and Norman Campbell’s bungalow in Dornie. Tragic though such incidents are they can produce some interesting information if the bird happens to have been ringed. Brian Saville found a dead Siskin which had flown into their window in Glenelg on 7th May. This bird had been ringed at Invergowrie near Dundee on 10th March 1993 when it was already in its second year. This means it was about 10 years old – an exceptional age for a small finch. Siskins seem to be relatively good subjects for bird ringers with a higher than average recovery rate. Jean and Luke Camilli had one a few years ago which had been ringed in south west England and one caught by a cat at Lochcarron in July 1998 had been ringed at Catterick, North Yorkshire the previous April. So if you do find a dead bird, whether in the garden or elsewhere, always check if it is carrying a ring on its leg and find out the history of the bird from the British Trust for Ornithology, the organisation which supervises ringing in Britain.

