

NEWSLETTER 37 - APRIL 2002

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The AGM and Social Evening was held on 16th March at Achmore Village Hall. Andree Bishop decided to resign as treasurer after many years service in this position. No volunteers offered to take on the role so at present we have no treasurer and duties will be carried out by the other office bearers. The following office bearers and committee members were re-elected:-

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

Andree will remain on the committee as an honorary member. The social evening was as enjoyable as usual and thanks are again due to Andree and her team of helpers for preparing the excellent buffet and for setting up the hall and clearing up at the end.

HIGHLAND MOTHS

Our final meeting of the 2001/2002 programme of talks will be held at Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm on 26th April. David Barbour will give an illustrated talk about Highland Moths. David is an authority on moths and butterflies and was co-ordinator in the Highlands for the ambitious 5-year Butterflies for the Millenium atlas project organised by Butterfly Conservation.

BIRDS BEFORE BREAKFAST

Once again we will be getting up before the crack of dawn on 4th May to listen to the dawn chorus in the Ardelve/Dornie/Carr Brae area. We cannot guarantee a repeat of the glorious morning last year but there should be a good variety of birds to see and hear before we converge on Culag for breakfast. Please book through the Countryside Ranger, John Phillips, on 01478 613 606.

BOAT TRIP FOR 2002

It was agreed at the AGM to make Canna the destination for our boat trip this year. On a show of hands 1st June was chosen in preference to 17th August. Please complete the enclosed booking slip if you wish to take advantage of the opportunity to visit this special island.

LATE AUTUMN/WINTER 2001/2002 – WILDLIFE REPORTS

The pair of Whooper Swans which winters on Loch Shiel had a 4th consecutive successful breeding season last year returning from Iceland in October with 4 juveniles. This pair also reared 4 juveniles in 1998 and 1999 and 2 juveniles in 2000. A more unusual sight was a Mute Swan, which flew up Loch Duich and then back down again on 14th December, the first Mute Swan record I know of in Lochalsh since the demise of the resident Dornie bird in 1997.

Although total numbers are never large, Goldeneye winter in a wide variety of localities around the coast, in the sea lochs and on freshwater lochs. However this winter numbers were very low in all habitats and I never saw more than 3 birds together.

It wasn't a particularly good winter for the so-called "white-winged gulls", i.e. Iceland and Glaucous Gulls, so I was fortunate to see a Glaucous Gull by the Dornie Bridge on 7th November. Tom and Carol Weale were even more fortunate as a Glaucous Gull spent several hours right outside their cottage at Portneora on 1st January giving them superb views. An Iceland or Glaucous Gull was flying along parallel to the road at Reraig on 26th February but I was unable to stop to confirm which species it was.

Of the 9 records of Little Gull in Lochalsh since 1990 7 have been in January or February and all

except one were immature birds. 23rd January was therefore a typical date on which to find one in Balmacara Bay but it was a nice surprise to see an adult bird with its distinctive dark grey underwings.

I recorded Little Auks in December for the first time, possibly because of the unusual number of clear calm days suitable for sea-watching. The first was seen in Kyle Rhea on 6th December, then there were at least 10 off An Dubh-aird on 10th, followed by over 50 off Portneora on 12th. 15 in Kyle Rhea on 17th January was a more typical record whilst the last was seen in Ardelve Bay on 1st March. These tiny seabirds are only 8 inches long and are fascinating to watch as they fly low over the water with rapidly whirring wing-beats and a rolling side to side motion before splashing down clumsily and starting to dive.

Guillemots are larger and commoner relatives of the Little Auk. They are often washed up dead on the shore following autumn and winter gales. A Beached Bird Survey organised by the RSPB found 9 Guillemot corpses on beaches in Skye and Lochalsh over the week-end of 23rd and 24th February. There were also 8 more unidentified auks, 2 Razorbills, one Black Guillemot, one Puffin, one Shag, one Cormorant, 6 Fulmars, 5 Manx Shearwaters and 19 gulls of various species. The main object of this annual survey is to monitor oil pollution. Fortunately none of the beaches surveyed showed any sign of oiling and only 3 out of 53 bird corpses were slightly oiled. A stranded live Guillemot was found near Morvich on 2nd February by Cran (?) Lee. It was being blown across a field during a gale. It was caught and released in the sea where it appeared to dive energetically and hopefully recovered from its ordeal.

A Barn Owl reported frequenting a cave along the Ard Hill shore was subsequently found dead. Whether it died of natural causes or was killed by a larger predator is not known but by the time I saw the remains there were only feathers and a few bones left.

The only wintering Blackcaps I heard of were a female on Josephine and Roy Dean's birdtable at Lochcarron in the autumn and a male seen by Donald MacIntosh at Inverinate on 16th December. We had a Brambling feeding on seed in our garden on 8th November and two days later one was feeding on peanuts and fat in Jean and Brian Saville's garden in Glenelg. Typically both birds were seen for one day only as was another Brambling in our garden on 14th February.. The poor beech mast crop in the autumn meant that no small flocks of Bramblings were to be found in their favoured areas at Balmacara and Conchra.

Other interesting sightings included a Slavonian Grebe at Portneora on 13th March and a drake Pintail seen by Dr John Adamson on Loch Achaidh na h-Inich on 24th February; only the second record in Lochalsh that I know of.

A Skylark was back at Dubh-aird on 6th February and there was a restless flock of 40 at Drumbuie on 13th March but I didn't hear one singing on Carr Brae until 24th March.

Josephine and Roy Dean saw the first Wheatear of the year on Carr Brae on 1st April and the first two Willow Warblers were singing on 14th April.

Bumblebee activity began on 13th March and Small Tortoiseshell butterflies were on the wing from the second week in April.

Newsletter compiled by Brian Neath (01599 555 341). Recent observations or supplementary records always welcome.