

NEWSLETTER 39 - NOVEMBER 2002

SITE VISITS TO ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

Two site visits were made by Field Club members along with Jill Harden, the Archaeologist for the National Trust for Scotland, on the 5th October. The first was to Glenshiel - a much under-rated and unacknowledged site, where on the 10th June, 1719, the last battle involving foreign troops was fought on British soil. Not only was it extremely interesting climbing up to the Spanish Battery, where only one of our party had been before, but more importantly because it is the only known battle site where there are surviving features. Breastworks and other structures were partially visible, albeit under a great deal of bracken and other undergrowth. The weather was excellent and we were well able to understand the disposition of the opposing forces and visualise the 3 hour battle - a summary of which is that after the Government troops obtained command of the heights, they shelled the Battery at the centre. Those Spaniards not killed were advised to surrender and the Jacobites melted away with less than 10 casualties.

A better-known site was next visited, that of the Open Air Church at Plockton, where sadly a disgraceful sight of litter and glass bottles met our eyes. There was also much evidence of cattle, which had loosened and dislodged many of the stone seats. We were told of an Interpretation Panel, which would be arriving shortly, and that the tin shed would be taken down and replaced, having become dangerous. The "battle" here seems to be the never-ending task of keeping the gorse and bracken at bay - one that nature seems to be winning at the moment! *Contributed by Lynne Mackenzie.*

ARCHAEOLOGY WORKING GROUP

Following on from the above site visits it is proposed that the Field Club "adopts" these two sites and helps the National Trust for Scotland with some of the necessary maintenance. Work at the battle site will include improving the footpath from the road up the hillside to the Battery, cutting back bracken where necessary, applying wood preservative to signs and footpath markers and generally keeping an eye on this important site.

As Lynne has indicated above, the main work at the Open Air Church will be gorse and bracken control as well as removing litter and possibly some trees and scrub. Work at both sites will be under the guidance of Jill Harden.

Anyone interested in joining the working group is invited to a meeting at Auchtertyre Community Education Centre at 3.45pm on 26th November. If you are interested but cannot attend please phone Brian Neath on 01599 555 341.

LATE SUMMER/AUTUMN 2002 - WILDLIFE REPORTS

Although September produced some of the best weather of 2002 I saw only two species of butterfly after 26th August, the date of my last Scotch Argus. Speckled Woods were widespread throughout September and for the 3rd year running almost made it into October. The latest sightings have been on 30th September 2000, 29th September 2001 and 29th September 2002. Perhaps 2003 will be the year in which we add Speckled Wood to the October list! A single Red Admiral remained in our garden throughout September and until at least 16th October after which date we were away for almost two weeks. Whether it was the same individual butterfly or a progression of different individuals we will never know but I saw remarkably few elsewhere and I heard of no large gatherings of Red Admirals comparable to those which occurred in 1999 and to a lesser extent in 2000. Sadly the large influx of Peacock butterflies into the Moray Firth area in late September failed to progress across country to Lochalsh.

There were plenty of bumblebees about in September and early October but they were mainly of the two common species *Bombus lucorum* (White-tailed Bumblebee) and *Bombus pascuorum* (Common Carder Bee). They included a high percentage of males, which are generally more difficult to identify than queens. In April and May I have recorded 8 species of bumblebee during each of the last three years but in late summer and autumn I am lucky if I see 4 species. Presumably the less common species are less dependent on gardens at this time of year than they are in the spring.

There were several reports of dolphins during the summer in coastal waters stretching from Glenelg to Loch Carron. Tom and Carol Weale were fortunate enough to have a very close encounter with dolphins off the south coast of Applecross. They found themselves surrounded by 20 or more Bottle-nose Dolphins which were heading eastwards towards Kishorn. Later in the day back on shore they watched the same group heading back towards Kyle. There was some doubt over the species involved in some of the sightings so it is not certain whether the same pod was seen as it progressed along the coast or whether there was a more widespread influx. Details of any positive identifications would be welcomed. Harbour Porpoises were present as usual in Glenelg Bay, Loch Duich, Loch Alsh and Outer Loch Carron.

Evidence of Badgers excavating wasp or bee nests was found at both Ardelve and Nostie, whilst at Reraig they have started digging up lawns, presumably searching for earthworms. Hopefully this won't become a widespread habit or the Badger may lose some of the popularity it has with the general public!

Roger Cottis found a dead adult Water Rail at Isle Ornsay on 26th August. It had flown into overhead wires. This was a surprising record as we tend to think of the Water Rail as an uncommon winter visitor to Skye and Lochalsh. However the New Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland 1988-1991 does show breeding on Eigg and presence on Canna during the breeding season so perhaps the odd pair breeds on Skye as well.

Summer migrants seem to have departed early again this year. I saw my last Willow Warbler on 1st September, last Spotted Flycatcher on 5th September, last House Martins on 12th September and last Swallows on the mainland on 23rd September when there were 4 at Nostie.

No Common or Arctic Terns returned to breed on Eileanan Dubha, Kyle this year as they had done during the two previous years. In fact 4 birds off the Plock of Kyle on 3rd September were the only terns I saw in Lochalsh during 2002; my worst year to date for tern sightings. However some lucky observers had exciting finds. Cath Coster saw what was almost certainly a Long-tailed Skua at Plockton on 4th October. Its silhouette reminded her of pictures of Frigate Birds. A visitor who saw a Red-breasted Flycatcher at Totaig was so excited at seeing this scarce migrant from eastern Europe that he had to tell someone about it and so informed the staff at Glenelg Candles who in turn informed Brian Saville. The Lochcarron/Glen Carron area continued its good run of rare birds when a White's Thrush from Siberia was identified at Craig on 15th October.

The saltings at the head of Loch Duich are probably the best place in Lochalsh to see Greenshanks. 1 or 2 can be found there at almost any time of year but 7 birds on 22nd September was an unusually high total. They are often in the company of their close relative the Redshank and this was the case on this occasion. 26 Redshanks was an equally good total for the Shiel Saltings.

2 early Little Grebes were back in Loch Long on 20th July, still in their breeding plumage. 2 or 3 Wigeon had returned to Balmacara Bay for the winter by 28th August and numbers gradually increased to 33 on 9th September, 47 on 20th September and 61 on 27th September. Our regular wintering pair of Whooper Swans returned without any offspring for the first time since 1997. They probably deserve a year off, assuming of course that they are the same birds. Brian Saville witnessed the spectacular arrival of 13 Whooper Swans in Glenelg Bay. He saw them flying north up the Sound of Sleat at a good height and then spiralling downwards before settling on the sea.

The Canada Goose is an introduced species which has become naturalised in Britain and is common and increasing in many parts. So much so that it is now considered a pest in some places due to the mess created by its droppings and its aggressive behaviour towards indigenous species. However it is still a rare sight in this area. I have just 3 sightings over the last 15 years: one at Ardelve in May 1994, 11 off Glas Eilean in August 1997 and one with 5 Greylag Geese on the Shiel Saltings on 7th August this year. The latter record was notable not only because the Canada Goose is an uncommon visitor but also because it was my first sighting of any geese on the saltings at the mouth of the River Shiel. Although Greylags are common and widespread in Lochalsh they tend to avoid the area at the head of Loch Duich. A few have occurred in the last two years in fields near Shiel Bridge but I have still never seen any between the Clachan Duich causeway and Morvich. During a short break in the Fort William/Balachulish area in October I was surprised to find flocks of more than 40 Canada Geese at both Gairloch and Cuil. If they are resident there then it is perhaps surprising that we see so few here.

There was an early Redwing in our garden on 26th September but then I had to wait until 7th October for a second bird and until 8th October before there were any large flocks. On the latter day about 350 Redwings flew south east over Carr Brae and numbers remained high until we went away on 17th. On our return on 29th I was surprised to find all the rowan berries gone and very few Redwings about. Numbers must have been high during our absence for the good crop of berries to be so decimated and Brian Saville confirmed that there had been large numbers in Glenelg during this period.

2002 continued to be a wonderful year for wildflowers. Bell heather and Ling gave us the traditional "purple mountains" during late August and September but the pinkish-coloured Cross-leaved Heath didn't seem quite so prolific. Grass of Parnassus, my particular favourite, was plentiful on Carr Brae but the most conspicuous colours at lower levels were provided by Rosebay Willowherb, Goldenrod, Lesser Knapweed, Devil's Bit Scabious, Yarrow and the less popular but undoubtedly colourful Ragwort. During a climb on A'Ghlas-bheinn on 24th September, Jean and Luc Camilli and myself came across some extensive patches of Thrift. It still takes me by surprise on the odd occasion that I see this common shore plant at 2000ft or higher.

Newsletter compiled by Brian Neath (01599 555 341). Recent observations and/or short articles always welcome.