

NEWSLETTER 46 - AUGUST 2004

PROGRAMME FOR SEPTEMBER to DECEMBER 2004

Friday, 24 th September	Scottish Mammals Bob Laing Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm
Friday, 22 nd October	The Southern Isles (Islay, Jura, Colonsay, Oronsay and Gigha) Norman Newton Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm
Friday, 19 th November	Highland Agriculture and Nature Conservation Roy Dennis Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm
Friday, 10 th December	Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania From Teutonic Knights to the Singing Revolution Lisbeth Thoms Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm

All the above talks arranged in association with the University of Aberdeen KEY Learning Opportunities.

FIELD MEETINGS

Our recent run of bad luck with planned outings continued during 2004 when both the boat trip to Eigg and the walk to the Point of Sleat had to be cancelled due to the weather. On 26th July four members along with Jill Harden and Simon Franks of the National Trust for Scotland made another working visit to the Glen Shiel Battle Site and cleared the path up to the site and areas around some of the battlements. If any other members would like to join the working party please contact the Secretary. The fern identification joint meeting with the Inverness Botany Group went ahead at Strome Wood on 7th August as planned but only three Field Club members attended other than the leader James Merryweather. James is the author of the definitive guide to ferns so it was an opportunity missed for anyone who would like to be able to separate their spleenworts from their lady ferns, male ferns and buckler ferns. Like other people who take an interest in a specific group of plants or animals James is discovering species locally which have not been recorded in the area previously.

Note: *The Fern Guide* by James Merryweather (price £6.95 inc. p&p) can be obtained from FSC Publications, Preston Montford, Montford Bridge, Shrewsbury, SY4 1HW Tel. No. 0845 3454072

THE SAGA OF THE SQUARE-SPOTTED CLAY MOTH

Brian Neath

In August 2000 I photographed a moth which had been attracted to our lighted windows on Carr Brae and which I had been unable to identify. It was initially identified as a Barred Chestnut, a moth which is widespread in northern Britain and which I had already recorded fairly regularly. However, as many moths vary considerably in colouring and markings I did not query this identification. Purely by chance, two years later, I gave David Barbour a number of spare slides including one of this particular "Barred Chestnut". After consulting with two well-known authorities on moths, Roy Leverton and Mark Young, David informed me that what I had photographed was actually a Square-spotted Clay which has Nationally Scarce B (Nb) status. This designation indicates that a species has been recorded from between 31 and 100 10km squares in Great Britain since 1st January 1980. (There are over 3800 10km squares in the British Isles.) This in itself was not particularly outstanding as several moths which occur locally have this status. What made it significant was that there were only four other records for the whole of Scotland since 1980 with this one being the most northerly.

Early this year I was informed by Tom Prescott of Butterfly Conservation (Scotland) that two staff members from Writtle College in Essex were coming to Scotland to search for the larvae of Square-spotted Clay at the five sites where the species had been recorded. Robin Field and Tim Gardiner duly arrived in Dornie on 22nd March and along with Tom Prescott and myself searched an area of woodland around our house. Amazingly, two caterpillars were found feeding on the leaves of Primrose, the first larvae of this species ever to have been reported from Scotland and hence the first confirmed breeding record. Four days later another caterpillar was found at a site in Argyll but none were found at the other three sites. Subsequently on 8th August I had my second record of an adult Square-spotted Clay (right) attracted to the windows, so bringing the story to a very satisfactory interim conclusion.



SPRING/SUMMER 2004 - WILDLIFE REPORTS

Spring migrants arrived more or less on time and in the usual sequence. An exceptionally early House Martin was seen near Morvich on 16th April but I didn't see any more until 13th May at Shiel Bridge. Cuckoos and Swallows arrived in good numbers and it was another good year for warblers; Blackcap and Garden Warbler in particular. There were a remarkable eight species of warbler between Dornie and Carr Brae View Point during the spring and early summer. Grasshopper Warbler, Sedge Warbler and Whitethroat all sang in the fields adjoining the Carr Brae junction in Dornie whilst Willow Warbler, Wood Warbler, Blackcap, Garden Warbler and Chiffchaff all occurred in descending order of frequency on the western side of Carr Brae. The minimum numbers of singing males were 20, 6, 5, 5 and 2 respectively. Grasshopper Warblers and Blackcaps were both widespread throughout the area in suitable habitat. It was a disappointing year for Spotted Flycatcher on Carr Brae but birds were seen elsewhere at Lochalsh Woodland Garden, Reraig, Nostie, Killilan and Gleann Beag so hopefully there was some breeding success.

Resident garden birds seem to have had a successful breeding season and many people have commented on the high numbers of young birds in their garden despite the poor weather. This may be due to the number of people now feeding birds throughout the year which helps the adult birds to readily feed themselves and so gives them more time to search for insects for their nestlings. Whether the summer migrants have fared as well is difficult to judge as their fledglings are much less conspicuous. Some birds such as Tree Pipit and Redstart tend to sing for a few weeks only, in late April and May, and then become hard to locate. Indications of breeding success usually come from bird ringers who concentrate on mist netting birds at the same sites year after year and also from the bird observatories who compare percentages of juvenile birds trapped on migration with figures from previous years. However it is usually the following breeding season before the overall situation can be assessed.

A pair of Great Spotted Woodpeckers bred successfully on Carr Brae and the fledged young dispersed remarkably quickly. Several people reported seeing woodpeckers feeding on peanuts in their garden for the first time ever, the young obviously learning very quickly what a nut feeder is all about. They presumably learned this from the male which had been visiting our garden since last October whereas the female had not been seen at all feeding on peanuts. The juveniles are easy to identify with their red caps but the male is only separated from the female by a tiny red patch on the back of its head.

Of the less common species Great Skuas (or Bonxies) were watched by Tom Weale on several occasions in Outer Loch Carron and he wondered if they could be nesting on the Crowlins; 2 splendid Long-tailed Skuas were seen in Loch Alsh by Hugh Insley and Grant McIntosh on 20th May; there was a pair of Crossbills at Strathie on 2nd June in exactly the same spot where one was heard on 7th June 2003; an Osprey was seen carrying a small fish near Morvich on 1st July and there was an out-of season drake Wigeon on the Croe Saltings on the same day. This was the third summer running that Ospreys have been recorded in Lochalsh so there is a distinct possibility that they may be nesting locally. They can easily be overlooked as they don't have a characteristic bird of prey profile; from some angles they can look remarkably like a large gull.

The low sunshine hours during late spring/early summer meant that it was not a vintage year for butterflies. However during two sunny days on 21st and 27th May I managed to locate 14 and 24 Pearl-bordered Fritillaries respectively at their only known local site on Carr Brae, even though the temperature was only 14 degrees C on the 21st. The Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary is usually more widespread and numerous but 15th June was the only day on which I found this species in comparable numbers (about 20). The Orange-tip has a very short flight period and this year it seemed shorter than ever. One was seen by Josephine Dean in Lochcarron on 7th May; there were two at Achnandarach on 9th May including one in Maud and Roger Tufft's garden; Roger Cottis reported one near Killilan on 23rd May and Jean Camilli saw one in her garden at Ratagan on the same day (only her second record); 3 males and 2 females were seen along the old road opposite Lochalsh Dam on 25th May. Orange-tips are mostly seen in low-lying areas so it was a surprise to see one in our garden on Carr Brae on 12th May. The site along the north road is at an even higher altitude (160 metres) and yet this was the only site where females were seen.

Warmer, sunny weather during August resulted in numerous sightings of Speckled Wood and Scotch Argus and I saw more Common Blues than in the previous two years. Red Admirals on the other hand have been few and far between so far but there is still time for a late influx of migrants from the south.

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