

NEWSLETTER 47 - NOVEMBER 2004

PROGRAMME FOR JANUARY to APRIL 2005

Friday, 14 th January	Bird Migration on the East Coast Dr James Cobb Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm
Friday, 11 th February	Alpines John Holt Achmore Village Hall at 8.00pm
Friday, 11 th March	The Birds of Skye Bob McMillan Plockton Village Hall at 8.00pm
Friday, 15 th April	AGM (Date and venue to be confirmed)
Friday, 29 th April	Bluebell Secrets – <i>and a lot more</i> Dr James Merryweather Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm

SKYE AND LOCHALSH BIODIVERSITY PROJECT FOR PRIMARY SCHOOLS

This project was a joint venture initiated by the Scottish Wildlife Trust Skye Members' Centre with assistance from the National Trust for Scotland and Highland Council Ranger Services and in conjunction with Scottish Natural Heritage. All primary schools in Skye and Lochalsh were invited to enter. They were asked to choose a site in their local area which included one of six broad habitat types characteristic of Skye and Lochalsh and make a study of the biodiversity on that site. The results had to be summarised in a poster and scrapbook which were to be judged by the Scottish Wildlife Trust Skye Members' Centre (Skye entries) and the South West Ross Field Club (Lochalsh entries).

There were six entries from Skye and four entries from Lochalsh. The four judges from the Field Club were unanimous in choosing Kyle Primary School as the winner, with Plockton Primary School a close runner-up. Loch Duich and Glenelg Primary Schools both produced superb posters and covers for their scrapbooks but the volume of detailed work produced in the scrapbooks by Kyle and Plockton was decisive. Kyle studied the effect of traditional crofting practices on wildlife at Drumbuie with special emphasis on wildflowers whilst Plockton concentrated on the wildlife in Plockton harbour and investigated the interaction with the fishing industry and the effects of pollution.

The prize for the winning schools was a day of activities run by the Whitewave Outdoor Centre and this was thoroughly enjoyed by the Kyle pupils. The winning entry on Skye was by Sleat Primary School. All schools that entered the competition will receive a resource box containing books, information packs and CD ROMs related to biodiversity and wildlife.

An exhibition of all the entries has toured around various venues in Skye and Lochalsh. In addition an attractive overall poster has been compiled by SNH incorporating aspects of all the entries. Copies of this can be obtained from the SNH office in Portree.

GARDEN WILDLIFE SURVEY 2005

As a follow up to the "snapshot" survey carried out in 2003 a new monitoring survey is planned for 2005. Details and recording forms are enclosed with this newsletter and it is hoped that as many members as possible will take part.

THE INVASION OF WAXWINGS

There can be little doubt that the most memorable event during this period was the unprecedented influx of Waxwings. Not only were the birds exceptionally early in arriving but the numbers were spectacular. Previously a few Waxwings have arrived in late November but not every year. In winters when there have been major irruptions from Scandinavia and northern Europe such as 1995/1996 and 1999/2000 birds have not appeared until January and February. Between 1988 and 2003 I know of only one October record of Waxwings in Lochalsh and only two sightings of more than 9 birds. So for Waxwings to arrive in Kyle by 25th October and for numbers there to build up to about 300 by 28th October is clearly extraordinary. Good numbers of Waxwings were also seen in Drumbuie, Achmore, Balmacara Square and at Eilean Donan and have been widely reported on Skye and in the Lochcarron area with flocks of 100 to 200 at several sites.

Their usual food in previous years has been cotoneaster berries but as they arrived so early this year there were still plenty of rowan berries available and they seemed to go for the rowans by preference initially. As the supply of rowan berries rapidly dried up they subsequently moved on to cotoneaster and hawthorn berries. They will also eat crab apples and there is a report of them doing just that in Lochcarron.

I am grateful to Harry Corrins for bringing to my attention the first flock of 15 Waxwings near Central Garage in Kyle on 25th October and to Ruth Harris, Pat Mucklow, Colin Parsons, Ishbel Cameron, Rod Stenson, Joyce Ramsay and Caroline MacLeod for reporting the spread of birds to other areas as well as the huge increase in numbers. Please keep reporting the presence of Waxwings so that we have as full a picture as possible of their presence in the area.

NORTH OF SCOTLAND SEABIRD WRECK

An invasion of a less welcome kind occurred in September when large numbers of dead seabirds were washed ashore all around the north and west coasts of the Highlands and on the Islands. As the scale of the disaster became clear the RSPB was able to call on the network of birdwatchers who carry out an annual Beached Bird Survey every February to implement an additional emergency survey of their beaches. A total of 1900 dead birds was counted between Kinlochleven in the south and Dunnet Head in Caithness, including those found on Skye and Lewis and a few along the north east coast. The vast majority of the casualties were Guillemots, with numbers of the other 13 species found being relatively small for the length of coastline surveyed. 552 dead birds were counted around Skye while surveys of three beaches in Lochalsh produced totals of 53 in Balmacara Bay, 14 in Kirkton Bay and 40 at Glenelg. The initial assumption was that a shortage of food was causing the birds to starve to death but reports from local fishermen had indicated that good numbers of sandeels were available. We still await the final results of postmortem examinations of some of the dead Guillemots. This was a further blow to Scottish seabird populations following on from a disastrous breeding season in the Northern Isles. Prior to the birds being washed ashore it had appeared that seabirds in the Small Isles had been more successful as many young Guillemots and Razorbills were seen in Glenelg Bay and Outer Loch Carron in late August.

AUTUMN/WINTER 2004 - OTHER WILDLIFE REPORTS

It is always exciting to see a rare or elusive mammal but it is unusual to find a previously unrecorded mammal in one's home area. Nevertheless that is what happened to Jean Camilli on 26th September when she spotted a large Brown Hare close to her house at Ratagan. Roger Cottis, our local mammal recorder, says that he knows of only one previous record of Brown Hare in Lochalsh and that was of one that he and Pat saw along a forestry ride near Ardintoul. The habitat of forestry reaching almost to the shore at Ratagan also seemed unusual but Roger says that like the Red Deer, the Brown Hare was also a woodland animal prior to the wholesale clearance of native woodland by our ancestors. The Brown Hare adapted to living in flat open agricultural land while the Red Deer adapted to bare open moorland. Any sightings of Brown Hare should be reported to Roger on 01471 833325.

2004 saw the Peacock butterfly establish itself further in the Moray Firth area but I know of only one sighting, by Rowena and Kenneth Oliver at Allt nan Sugh, in our area. If anyone saw a Peacock locally I would be pleased to have the details to pass on to David Barbour, the butterfly recorder for Highland. A Red Admiral in our garden on the day that the August Newsletter was posted seemed to substantiate my comment at the end of that newsletter that there was still time for a late influx. However, it turned out to be my only garden record of the year: I did have a further six sightings elsewhere but never more than two together. It was the only year since I started keeping butterfly records, apart from 2001, in which I didn't see any Red Admirals during October. (2001 was more or less a Red Admiral-free year with just a single sighting in July.) Speckled Woods were common until mid-September and there were also a few Painted Lady butterflies about. There was a late Common Blue along the shore of Ard Hill on 6th September but it was a very worn and faded specimen. The poor weather in the second half of the month brought the butterfly season to a premature end.

It was an exciting year on the moth front and with Ishbel Cameron also now moth trapping enthusiastically at Drumbuie I hope to report on some of our findings in the next newsletter.

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