

NEWSLETTER 57 - SEPTEMBER 2007

FIELD MEETINGS

One of the main objectives of the Field Club is to organise field meetings but, with the exception of the annual boat trip, field meetings have had a chequered history. James Merryweather has taken over the planning of field meetings but he is not finding a great enthusiasm for field meetings amongst the membership. The outing planned on Calum's boat from Plockton had to be cancelled due to a lack of bookings. We had intended to have an extended cruise out around the Kishorn islands not just the usual seal viewing trip within Plockton Bay. Even the boat trip to Muck was within a whisker of being cancelled and was only saved by some last minute bookings. Other field meetings have been poorly attended. In order that the Committee can gauge the requirements of the membership would you please complete the enclosed questionnaire so that a programme can be prepared for next year which will hopefully be more in line with what our members would like to do.

SPRING 2007

As indicated briefly in the May newsletter the early months of 2007 suggested that it was going to be another 2003 with many species of butterfly and moth emerging earlier than usual and migrant birds also being reported on good early dates. The season began with an unprecedented number of March butterfly sightings. Peacocks were seen at Glenelg on 25th and at Allt-nan-sugh on 27th. There was a Red Admiral at Conchra on 26th while Small Tortoiseshells were seen at Allt-nan-sugh on 25th and at Ratagan, Drumbuie and Plockton High School on 27th. In addition I saw what was almost certainly a Speckled Wood in our garden on Carr Brae, also on the 27th. I am grateful to Jean Saville, Jean Camilli, Ishbel Cameron and Kenneth and Rowena Oliver for providing details of these sightings. I personally recorded eight species of butterfly, excluding the above-mentioned Speckled Wood, on the earliest dates since I started keeping records in 1995, the most outstanding being Small Heath on 9th May and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary on 13th May. The rare Pearl-bordered Fritillary was on the wing on Carr Brae from 29th April, only the second year in which I have recorded this species in April. During May I searched potential habitat in Gleann Beag and Reraig for this butterfly without success and Carr Brae remains the only known occupied site in Lochalsh.

On the down side the Orange-tip did not re-appear on Carr Brae this year even though it seemed to have established itself there in 2006. However good numbers were present in the Balmacara/Reraig/Kirkton area and Orange-tips were also seen at Dubh-aird, Duirinish, Plockton, Nostie, Ardelve and Inverinate.

There was a spectacular invasion of the immigrant Painted Lady throughout the Highlands from 9th to 15th June. As many as 70 were spotted along a 1.7km stretch of the Banffshire coast on 14th June. Locally numbers were much smaller but Painted Ladies were observed at Drumbuie, Kyle, Kyleakin, Coilliemore and Nostie. It was the first time that Hubert Hunton had seen a Painted Lady in his garden at Coilliemore. What happened to these butterflies as the weather deteriorated is hard to imagine but I heard of no more sightings after the 15th. If anyone has further records of Painted Ladies I would be pleased to receive details.

The first summer migrant to arrive on Carr Brae was the Willow Warbler on 12th April and by the end of the month there were 29 singing males between Dornie and Carr Brae View Point. This warbler remains the commonest of the summer migrants in the Highlands despite its demise in southern Britain. During a week spent at my daughter's on the eastern outskirts of Bristol in the second half of May I didn't hear a single Willow Warbler. This would have been inconceivable a few years ago. The first Swallows were at Lochcarron on 14th and 17th April while Sand Martins were seen at Kelso and Loch Shiel (Rule Anderson) on 17th April. The first Cuckoo to be reported was heard by Donald Cameron at Drumbuie on 23rd April and there was the usual flurry of arrivals in the last week of April with Tree Pipit (23rd), Common Sandpiper (24th), Grasshopper Warbler (26th), Wood Warbler (27th) and Whinchat (30th).

Both Sedge Warbler and Whitethroat were singing in the Plockton area by 3rd May and these species along with Grasshopper Warbler were present in good numbers throughout the area in appropriate habitat. John Adamson has informed me that Whitethroats were present on the Plock of Kyle and even bred on Eilean Ban. It will be interesting to find out whether this is a regular site for this species in the next few years.

SUMMER 2007

Despite the promising start to the season the weather deteriorated as we moved into summer and on the whole subsequent observations did not live up to the earlier promise. Butterflies became harder to find and moth catches were well down both in overall numbers and in the variety of species recorded compared with previous years. August did produce good numbers of the Scotch Argus butterfly as usual and the Speckled Wood also seemed better able to cope with the conditions than other species. During July and August Speckled Woods could usually be seen during the briefest of sunny spells.

Garden birds, despite the weather, appeared to have a successful breeding season. Whether this was due to the ever increasing number of people feeding birds in their gardens throughout the year is open to speculation. Certainly this year many people have commented on the frantic feeding of garden birds during the summer months. Whether this is just because the food is there and easy to find or whether it reflects a shortage of natural insect food is hard to know. The early start to the season referred to above may not in the long term have been in the best interests of butterflies and moths and subsequently to the availability of birds' natural foods. A lack of caterpillars may have resulted in birds having to resort to seeds, peanuts and other "artificial" foods in gardens. The concentration of birds in gardens may have given the impression of a successful breeding season whereas there may not have been many birds left foraging in the surrounding woodland. The forthcoming fieldwork for the new Breeding and Wintering Bird

Atlas may give some idea as to whether bird populations are becoming more concentrated in built up areas than in the wider countryside. (See below.)

One of the most pleasing aspects of the year was the presence of good numbers of terns in Loch Alsh. Tern numbers are known to fluctuate wildly from year to year and they have suffered badly in recent years from the continuing spread of Mink which predate on their eggs and chicks. However terns reappeared to breed on Glas Eilean in 2006 after a gap of about 10 years and they returned again this year. Most of the birds tend to be Common Terns but on 19th July a good proportion were identified as Arctic Terns. Because of this sizeable breeding population terns became a frequent sight all around the coast from Ardelve and Nostie through to Reraig, Balmacara and Kyle. I understand from Jan Storey that terns were also present in the Kishorn area in good numbers and presumably bred on the islands there.

OTHER WILDLIFE REPORTS

On 19th July I was lucky enough to spot a Black Tern circling round over Glas Eilean amongst the breeding Common and Arctic Terns. Bob MacMillan had no records of Black Tern on Skye when he wrote his book "Skye Birds" so this was almost certainly the first record for Skye and Lochalsh. This was a strange record in that Black Terns are primarily freshwater terns and the bird should have been at its breeding grounds on the European mainland at this time of year. By an extraordinary coincidence an adult Little Gull in breeding plumage was found in Broadford Bay on the same day by Martin Benson. The Little Gull breeds in similar freshwater habitats in Europe as the Black Tern and is almost as rare in North West Scotland as that species. There did not appear to be any weather related reasons for these two birds to appear in our area at the same time.

Two birds that are common in Britain as a whole but which are rare in Skye and Lochalsh both appeared in the Morvich area. A Magpie was seen at Lienassie at the end of April and a pair of Mute Swans visited the Croe Saltings during June, July and August. The Lapwing has become extremely rare in Lochalsh in recent years although it does still occur regularly in parts of Skye. However single Lapwings were reported at Conchra on 22nd March by Farquhar Macrae, in Gleann Lichd on 27th March and 6th April by Rule Anderson and at Drumbuie on 17th April by Ishbel Cameron.

Two young Herons fell out of their nest on the Inverinate Estate in late August. One died on the spot and the other died later in the care of Grace and Paul Yoxon at Broadford. While it was thought that a helicopter may have caused the birds to fall, Grace has told me that the bird they saw was in very poor condition and may have been starving. It was rather a late date for young Herons to still be in the nest and it may be that something had happened to the adults. Herons successfully reared plenty of young at Totaig and on Eilean a'Mhal so shortage of food is unlikely to have been the problem.

THE LOCH DUICH WHALE

Probably the most remarkable event of the year was the stranding of a young whale on the Croe Saltings in early February. It had been sighted a few times off Kintail Lodge when there was some confusion about its identity. It is hard to imagine what would prompt a whale to swim through the narrow gap in the Clachan Duich causeway, especially as this would only be possible during a very high tide. Whales which get separated from the other members of their pod do become highly stressed and this can lead to erratic behaviour whether the animal is sick or not. It was eventually identified as a young Long-finned Pilot Whale and after examination by strandings officers from the Scottish Agricultural College in Inverness it was buried in-situ near Carn-gorm. Bob Reid of the SAC has informed me that it was a young male 4.98 metres long and that it had a generalised bacterial infection. Pilot Whales are social animals and young that get separated from their parents rarely survive. Another sad tale!

BIRD ATLAS 2007 - 2011

The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) is about to embark on the field work for a new atlas which will cover both breeding birds and the winter distribution of birds. Three previous atlases have been produced by the BTO, two for breeding bird distribution during the years 1968-72 and 1988-91 and one showing the distribution of wintering birds during the three winters 1981/82 - 1983/84. This time the ambitious plan is to produce a combined atlas of breeding and wintering birds. Field work is due to commence on 1st November and everyone is encouraged to participate. More experienced birdwatchers will be required to make timed visits to specific tetrads but anyone can contribute "roving records" of any species that they can identify. Details can be found on the BTO website www.bto.org/birdatlas The new atlas will highlight the dramatic changes that have occurred since the 1988-91 Atlas. Although there is continuing concern for many farmland and woodland birds other species have increased or extended their ranges in spectacular style. These include Little Egret, Buzzard, Osprey, Marsh Harrier, Nuthatch and Dartford Warbler as well as the re-introduced White-tailed Eagle and Red Kite.

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