



NEWSLETTER 62 - NOVEMBER 2008

ATLAS OF BUTTERFLIES IN HIGHLAND AND MORAY

This new butterfly atlas is an update of a provisional atlas published ten years ago by the the Highland Biological Recording Group. The new atlas has been produced by the Highland Branch of Butterfly Conservation in conjunction with HBRG and the four authors have done a superb job. It has a very attractive cover, detailed distribution maps of all 30 resident and regularly occurring migrant species and coloured plates of those butterflies which may present identification difficulties. The four authors, David Barbour, Stephen Moran, Tony Mainwood and Bill Slater are to be congratulated on bringing this project to a successful fruition. The range expansion of four species is given particular prominence. These are Orange-tip, Speckled Wood, Peacock and Ringlet which have all increased significantly during the last ten years. Although the total number of species in the region is small compared with southern Britain the area covered by the atlas is a stronghold for some uncommon species such as Chequered Skipper, Dingy Skipper, Small Blue, Northern Brown Argus, Marsh Fritillary and Mountain Ringlet. The bulk of the British population of Scotch Argus occurs in the Highlands and the Large Heath is also predominantly a northern species. Some butterflies which are declining rapidly in the south such as Pearl-bordered and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries still have strong populations here. Copies can be obtained from Tony Mainwood, 13 Ben Bhraggie Drive, Golspie, Sutherland, KW10 6SX. The cost is a modest £4 +£1 postage (£3 +£1 postage for members of Butterfly Conservation) and cheques should be made payable to Butterfly Conservation Highland Branch.

HIGHLAND BIRD REPORT 2006

The 2006 Highland Bird Report has also been published recently. The high standard of recent years has been maintained and the report is a very comprehensive record of the status of birds within Highland Region (excluding Caithness) during that year. The report contains some superb photographs including several taken by Bob McMillan on Skye. Copies can be obtained from Alastair F McNee, Liathach, 4 Balnafettack Place, Inverness, IV3 8TQ. Cheques for £9.50 should be made payable to Scottish Ornithologists Club (HBR account).

GREY PHALAROPES AND WAXWINGS

Two bird species hit Skye with a bang in the last week of October. The Grey Phalarope is classified as a wader but spends most of its time swimming rather than wading and actually spends the winter at sea. In Europe it breeds only in Iceland, Spitzbergen and Bear Island. The birds found wintering off western and southern Africa are thought to be from breeding populations in Greenland and Canada and it is not known where the relatively small European population spends the winter. It is when there are westerly gales during the autumn migration that Grey Phalaropes turn up in western Britain. There was an exceptional influx in south west England in September and October 1960 when over 1000 were seen off St. Agnes in the Isles of Scilly. In Scotland the Western Isles and Argyll are the areas where this species is most frequently seen, usually in September or October. The maximum count given in the recently published "The Birds of Scotland" was 77-117 off the Outer Hebrides during the period 3-24 September 1990 although it doesn't mention any actual flock sizes. Prior to 2008 there had been only three records of single birds on Skye and when Bob McMillan examined a stormbound bird that eventually died at Kilmarie on 24th October he could not have anticipated what was about to follow three days later. A report of what seemed an extraordinarily large flock of 30 at Gedintailor, Braes on the 27th was followed by increasingly larger counts until a peak of 197 was reached on 2nd November. Numbers then tailed off rapidly but odd ones were still being reported until 18th November. This was clearly the largest number of Grey Phalaropes ever seen in Scotland and as on previous occasions the influx followed westerly gales.

By contrast the Waxwing is not such a scarce bird in the Highlands and Islands but numbers fluctuate wildly from winter to winter. Large influxes occur every few years when there is a shortage of berries in Scandinavia and northern Europe but in some years none are seen in Skye and Lochalsh. This year has seen a massive arrival of Waxwings on Skye and in Applecross although no large flocks have been reported in Lochalsh. A single bird at Elgol on 30th October was followed the next day by 30-40 at Isleornsay and 42 in Portree. The 3rd and 4th November saw 400-500 in Portree and birds widely scattered throughout Skye but numbers then seemed to tail off rapidly. Kyle is usually a good place to see Waxwings when there is such an influx but I have heard of only one group of about 30 seen by Donald McIntosh on 5th November. I

eventually caught up with a flock of 17 at Sallachy on 12th November and 12 at Inverinate on 18th. Other reports included eight at Strathcarron on 6th November (Bob McMillan) and 30 at Glenelg on 13th November (Peter Jones).

OTHER WILDLIFE REPORTS

Skye's purple period continued when a Lesser Whitethroat arrived in a garden in Waternish on 9th November. Surprisingly for a warbler it was feeding on peanuts and continued to do so until at least 20th November. It is a summer visitor breeding regularly only as far north as Fife so this bird was almost certainly a migrant from northern Europe.

Another unexpected warbler was a Chiffchaff which I found in Camas-luinie during one of my Bird Atlas timed visits on 16th November. This bird was flitting about in a bramble patch allowing me to see the dark legs which distinguish it from the very similar Willow Warbler. With milder winters there are increasing numbers of Chiffchaffs wintering in Britain, even in Scotland, but those in Scotland are thought to be migrants from Scandinavia or northern Europe rather than Scottish breeding birds remaining for the winter. However there are very few records of Chiffchaffs wintering in the north west Highlands.

Another good find was a Water Rail at Ardelve on 9th November. Water Rails are probably regular winter visitors to Lochalsh but they are rarely seen due to their skulking behaviour. However sometimes they discover bird-friendly gardens and become regular visitors to bird feeding areas. This has happened in the past at Ardelve as well as at Ratagan and Lochcarron.

The Grey Phalarope/Waxwing period also coincided with a large movement of Redwings and Fieldfares. Bob McMillan estimated at least 2500 at Camastianavaig on 3rd November. Often these thrushes have stripped the Rowan berries before the Waxwings arrive but apparently the Waxwings in Portree were feeding mainly on Rowan berries. Redwings and Fieldfares are perhaps less likely to visit town and village centres and this may have benefitted Waxwings which are more frequently seen in built-up areas and are not the least bit shy of humans. Hawthorn berries seem to be the next favoured berries after Rowans while Cotoneaster is generally avoided by Waxwings and thrushes except as a last resort. Some Blackbirds and Greenfinches do go for the berries of Cotoneaster but neither species occurs in large numbers so there are usually still some berries left for the Waxwings to move on to in mid-winter.

It was disappointing that Common and Arctic Terns failed to breed on Glas Eilean this year following two successful years in 2006 and 2007. Birds were back in good numbers on 6th June but a month later on 6th July no terns were visible. This suggests predator problems, either Mink or possibly gulls.

Three Whooper Swans were present in the Loch Carron/Glen Carron area from 1st July onwards and presumably had remained in the Highlands for the summer rather than return to their usual breeding grounds in Iceland. The regular wintering pair were back at Loch nan Corr, Inverinate on 18th November and for the third year running failed to bring any offspring with them.

A pair of House Martins was still feeding young at a nest in Dornie on 10th September while a late Wheatear near Port-an-eorna on 25th September was probably a migrant of the Greenland race. An Osprey was seen in Kirkton Bay on 16th September and was reported to Iain Turnbull by Rachael Browett

Fiona and Bruce Williams have seen a Barn Owl frequently since August hunting over the Ardelve meadows and one was also seen at Glenelg by Peter Jones on 19th August. The Applecross Peninsula is not included within the known range of this species in "The Birds of Scotland" but one was seen at Applecross on 16th November by Lynn Evans.

The better than average weather during the spring and summer months resulted in good numbers of butterflies being recorded. Green-veined White, Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, Dark Green Fritillary, Speckled Wood, Scotch Argus, Meadow Brown and Small Heath were all common and widespread. A Large Heath was seen at a new site near Kirkton Bay on 4th June and nine were seen at a site near Upper Sandaig on 8th July. Along with those seen in the Scalpaidh area on 2nd and 7th June this represented my best year for a species which is rather locally distributed in Lochalsh. However the most significant feature of the butterfly season was the continuing increase in the Peacock population. Following on from the six records in April and May the offspring of those early individuals began to appear in August and this spectacular butterfly was a familiar sight throughout August and September with the last sighting on Carr Brae on 5th October. Red Admirals were conspicuous by their absence after the two early records reported in February and April. It was 5th September before the next one was reported by Jean Saville at Glenelg and subsequently they were seen at Carr Brae, Drumbuie, Avernish and Achintraid, all occurring between 7th and 28th September. There were no reports of more than three Red Admirals together. Ishbel Cameron saw up to three at Drumbuie on five dates and Ishbel also had the only Small Tortoiseshell to be seen later than May, a single at Drumbuie on 3rd September. Four years ago it would have been inconceivable to imagine the Peacock becoming more numerous than Red Admiral and Small Tortoiseshell.