



South West Ross Field Club

NEWSLETTER 63 - JANUARY 2009

THE WEATHER IN 2008

During 2008 I was continuously boasting to friends and relatives in the south about the good weather we were experiencing in the north west Highlands. To substantiate this I was quoting that I had not missed a single one of my weekly butterfly transects, which are carried out from the beginning of April to the end of September, due to bad weather. Also my total number of butterfly sightings for the year was the highest since I started keeping detailed records in 1995 whereas many parts of the UK were reporting a dismal year for butterflies. When parts of southern Britain were experiencing severe flooding we were basking in sunshine.

Therefore it came as something of a shock when I received Duncan Glen-Riddell's Reraig weather report for 2008 and found that overall it was another wetter-than-average year, the fifth in a row, with a total of 2141 mm. rainfall. How can I have got it so wrong? To some extent this is explained by the fact that over half of the total rainfall fell in January, February, October and November, although I had successfully carried out fieldwork for the BTO Bird Atlas during three of these months, and I was away in the second half of October when the wettest spell of the year occurred. 223mm of rain fell between the 19th and the 27th causing flooding at Reraig.

The usual details are shown below with the average readings from 1985 to 2005 in brackets.

	Rainfall			Temperature (Celsius)		
	mm	ins		ave max		ave min
January	253	9.96	(9.29)	8.32	(7.84)	2.00 (1.90)
February	254	10.00	(7.72)	9.66	(8.40)	2.00 (1.46)
March	181	7.13	(7.80)	9.55	(10.00)	1.19 (2.50)
April	121	4.76	(4.21)	12.80	(12.19)	2.27 (3.62)
May	35	1.38	(3.43)	19.65	(15.67)	7.63 (5.86)
June	130	5.12	(3.98)	17.37	(17.21)	7.50 (8.03)
July	88	3.46	(4.17)	20.53	(18.56)	10.13 (9.77)
August	165	6.50	(5.28)	19.10	(18.61)	10.45 (9.73)
September	93	3.66	(6.34)	17.00	(16.57)	7.04 (8.01)
October	393	15.47	(7.95)	12.34	(13.38)	6.14 (6.01)
November	268	10.55	(7.95)	9.73	(10.17)	2.83 (3.56)
December	160	6.30	(8.23)	7.60	(8.12)	0.93 (1.92)
Total	2161	84.29	(76.42)			

As can be seen from the table May was the driest month with rain recorded on only four days while October was the wettest month with rain falling on no fewer than 27 days. Rainfall was recorded on 231 days compared with the average to date of 227 days.

24th July was the hottest day with the temperature reaching 30.4 degrees and 30th December was the coldest day when the temperature dropped to -6.0 degrees. The average maximum temperatures continued the recent trend of gradually increasing above the 21 year averages until we got to October (with the minor exception of March). The last three months of the year all had lower maximum temperatures than the long term average. This is the first time this has happened since we have been reporting the weather details in this format i.e. since Newsletter 28 (January 2000) "The Weather in 1999". The average minimum temperatures were more erratic than they have been in recent years with six months having higher average minimums and six months having lower average minimums than the 21 year averages. The temperature fell below zero on 41 days compared with only 20 days during 2007 and 30 days during 2006. Is this the beginning of the end for global warming? Watch this space!

IN PRAISE OF THE COUNTRYSIDE RANGERS

Those who missed John Phillip's talk on 16th January missed the opportunity to hear about the wide range of activities that the rangers are involved with. Particularly impressive is the work they carry out with local primary schools and John showed us many examples of projects that have been carried out by the children in recent years. The Highland Council rangers also run the Skye and Lochalsh Wildlife Explorers Group for youngsters and the NTS rangers (Alison French and Rule Anderson) run a similar group called the Kintail Watch Club. The Field Club has made substantial donations to both clubs since 2005 enabling them to carry out projects or make special outings that would not have been possible without our support. Unfortunately our list of paid-up members has dropped significantly during the last two years and consequently so has our bank balance. It will be a great pity if we are unable to continue to support these excellent local groups for young children. If you have not paid your subscription for this year please send it to our treasurer Vi Beaton or pay it in at one of our forthcoming meetings.

Sarah Kay has been a great asset to both the rangers' office and to the Wildlife Explorers Group. She has recently resigned from her post as a ranger in order to raise a family and she will be sorely missed. We wish her well and look forward to meeting her successor Sandy MacPhee.

Don't forget that the Highland Council rangers run an impressive programme of walks throughout the year. If you prefer to walk in a group rather than doing your own thing, or if you wish to explore new areas, these guided walks are ideal. You will have the benefit of a knowledgeable guide to identify wildlife and to point out notable archaeological and geological features. Details can be found in your local library and are also advertised in the "Criomagan" section of the West Highland Free Press.

WAXWINGS

Further to the Waxwing records reported in the November newsletter John Leiper has informed me that Waxwings were present in the Frithard area of Plockton from 5th to 9th November with a peak of about 100 birds, the largest flock to be seen in Lochalsh this winter. Dr John Adamson also had Waxwings in his garden in Kyle for several days with a maximum of about 50 on 12th November. The last birds reported were seen by Donald McIntosh at Inverinate on 23rd November – a group of 11. The strange thing is that the Waxwings, Fieldfares and Redwings seemed to move on while there were still lots of berries on the Hawthorn bushes. One would normally expect them to strip the berries before continuing their southward migration. The photo of a Waxwing was taken at Frithard, Plockton by John Leiper. It can be seen in colour on our website.



OTHER WILDLIFE REPORTS

A Water Rail was seen again at Ardelve on 3rd December, typically skulking along in a ditch. Wagtails seem to be scarcer than usual this winter but both a Pied and a Grey Wagtail were present at the fank on Carr Brae on 6th December associating with the resident pigs. No doubt the presence of the pigs attracts a certain amount of insect life even in mid-winter. This probably also accounts for the Dunnocks, at least four of which also seem to be wintering at the fank, well away from any natural cover. Dunnocks are also attracted to the coast in winter, especially to the mounds of seaweed which get washed up along the high water mark. Ardelve and Kirkton Bay often have concentrations of Dunnocks close to the shore, presumably again attracted by the insect life to be found along the tide line, another surprising habitat for this shy garden bird.

Loch Achaidh na h-Inich continues to be the best site in the area for Goldeneye and there were 12 there on Boxing Day, including four splendid drakes. Goldeneye used to be frequent winter visitors to the head of Loch Duich and on Loch Shiel but have been quite scarce there in recent years. However three were present at the head of Loch Long on 21st January, another of their regular sites.

Woodcock are best known locally as the plump birds which fly up in front of the car at dusk during the short winter days. Although this is a widespread breeding bird in Britain there are very few breeding season records from the Lochalsh area. It is much more numerous as a winter visitor with huge numbers arriving from Scandinavia and northern Europe. The birds can be flushed in a wide variety of habitats from scrubby areas close to the shore to heather moorland at quite high altitudes. They are more conspicuous during hard weather when they often feed in gardens and may also be driven to feed along the shore. Dr John Adamson saw several in Kyle during December, both in his garden and on the Plock. There are signs that Woodcock numbers are declining and it will be interesting to see what results the new Atlas will throw up for this species.