



NEWSLETTER68 - MAY 2010

PROGRAMME

- Saturday, 5th June Boat Trip to Muck
Depart Armadale at 8.00am. Returning by about 6.00pm.
Places should have been booked by 15th May but any enquiries should be made to Rule Anderson on 0844 4932231.
- Friday, 25th June Glen Shiel Battle Site Maintenance Day
Meet at the Battle Site at 2.00pm. Volunteers please contact John Holt on 01599 566 300 or Rule Anderson as above.

EFFECTS OF THE HARD WINTER

The effects of the exceptionally low temperatures on wintering Woodcock were referred to in the January newsletter but what effect did the hard winter have on other wildlife?

In local gardens the cold spell resulted in larger numbers of Blackbirds than usual coming to feed. We had as many as 12 Blackbirds feeding in our garden on Carr Brae on many occasions during the first three months of the year and several people reported similar numbers. Moira and Adrian Quinn had a large flock of about 40 Goldfinches visiting regularly during February and Iain Turnbull had a similarly large flock of Siskins at Lochalsh House. Generally birds that take advantage of the variety of foods now provided for them in gardens have fared better than those that have not yet learned how to do so. Chaffinches, Greenfinches, Goldfinches, Siskins, Great, Blue and Coal Tits, Robins and Dunnocks are all well catered for in gardens as are Collared Doves and House Sparrows in most local villages. More locally, Rock Doves, Reed Buntings and Yellowhammers have become regular visitors to garden feeding stations.

Wrens, Long-tailed Tits and Goldcrests are amongst the birds whose numbers are often severely depleted by exceptionally cold winters. Wrens were noticeably scarce in the first few weeks of the year but seem to have survived better than expected. From the last week in March I have heard Wrens singing widely throughout Lochalsh although certainly in lower numbers than usual. Goldcrest numbers were reported to be lower than usual even before the winter so it was thought that the freezing conditions would have aggravated the situation. So I have been pleasantly surprised to hear Goldcrests singing at three sites on Carr Brae.

One species that appears to have been badly affected is the Stonechat. This resident bird had built up a very substantial population in recent years so it has come as a shock to realise that it has virtually disappeared over the winter months. So far this year I have seen only one bird on one occasion on Carr Brae where it is usually a common sight. However I did see a male carrying food for its young near Attadale on the 12th May and an agitated male at Nonach on 18th May so there may be a small nucleus from which the population can build up again. Unlike the Stonechat its close relative the Whinchat is a summer migrant which winters in Africa. Whinchat numbers have declined in Britain in recent years and this is thought to be due to problems in its wintering areas in Africa. However the Whinchat has benefited this particular winter by migrating whilst the Stonechat has suffered by being a resident in the UK. Whinchats are known to have returned safely to several sites in Lochalsh and Skye at the time of writing.

One would assume that birds are more able to withstand low temperatures than delicate-looking insects but this appears not to be the case. Butterflies have been out in good numbers on sunny days and my moth-trapping results have shown that the usual early spring species are out and about in good numbers. Less pleasing is the fact that ticks are also making themselves felt and even attacking people who are normally unaffected by them. And we will soon discover how well the midges have survived!

Mammals such as Pine Marten and Badger have, like the garden birds, discovered which gardens provide them with supplies of food while Bank Voles and Wood Mice have learnt to tuck in alongside the garden birds on seeds and scraps. The fact that Buzzards seem to have survived in good numbers suggests that the supply of small mammals did not dry up during the winter. During a high level walk through snow on a local ridge I was surprised by the number of small mammal tracks that I saw and clearly much of our local wildlife copes better with long periods of snow cover than we do, bearing in mind the chaos on the roads.

OTHER WILDLIFE REPORTS

White-tailed Sea Eagles continue to wander into Lochalsh from time to time. Josephine Dean was fortunate to be able to watch one from her window, admittedly with a telescope, on 20th January. It was attempting to rob an Otter of its catch on one of the islands in Loch Carron – an exciting encounter to witness. Jane Walkden had several sightings of Sea Eagles in the Nostie/Avernish area last year and saw another one near Avernish House on 7th February. Alison MacLennan of the RSPB continues to monitor sightings of these birds and always welcomes details of any sightings in Lochalsh and Skye (01471 822882). Jane also saw a Barn Owl in the Avernish area on the same day – rather a nice double.

Three Skylarks on the Drumbuie croft land was an unexpected sight on 25th January considering the frozen ground conditions. The Skylarks don't usually return until late February/early March and I saw no more in the area until 2nd March when there was one on croft land at Avernish with two more birds seen flying east.

Crossbills are easily overlooked unless one can recognise their distinctive calls. They are mainly seen in coniferous woodland but one was found dead by Maud and Roger Tufft in their garden at Achnandarach on 4th March and there was one in Plockton village on 9th May. More typical sightings were of four near Duirinish on 19th January and a pair in Strathellen Wood near Plockton on 9th February.

Notwithstanding the continuing low temperatures the early breeding birds seemed to carry on regardless. The local pair of Ravens which have bred on Carr Brae for 23 years that I know of, already had their eggs hatched by 20th March and the chicks had flown by early May while one of our local pairs of Golden Eagle had a chick hatched by 17th May.

Geese are generally highly social creatures so it seems odd when a single bird appears. Alison Beaton saw a Canada Goose with the Greylags at Duirinish on 21st April while the following day there was a Pink-footed Goose on the saltings near Morvich. It would be interesting to know the origins of such individuals.

The arrival of our summer migrants has been rather mixed. Those that arrived on good early dates include Willow Warbler, Cuckoo, Swallow, Grasshopper Warbler, Whitethroat and Spotted Flycatcher while House Martins and Sedge Warblers seem to be later than usual.

Grey Wagtail, Stonechat and Chiffchaff appear to be scarce this year and any records of these species would be appreciated.

The first butterfly sighting that I know of was a Small Tortoiseshell seen by Ishbel Cameron at Drumbuie on 10th April and there were two Small Tortoiseshells and a Peacock on Carr Brae the following day. Peacocks were then common and widespread through until at least mid-May. Pat Mucklow and Audrey Sinclair reported the first Orange-tip and Green-veined White near Balmacara Square on 30th April and both species have been widespread up until the time of writing. Green-veined Whites will remain common through until September but the flight period of Orange-tips is quite short and they are rarely seen after the first week of June. Roger Cottis reported large numbers of Green Hairstreak in Glen Ling on 8th May and I found this attractive little butterfly plentiful in the same area and through to Attadale on 18th May.