

SOUTH WEST ROSS FIELD CLUB

GARDEN WILDLIFE SURVEY 2003

INTRODUCTION

Questionnaires were distributed to members of the South West Ross Field Club early in 2003 and it was requested that the forms be returned by the end of March. Forms were also passed on to non-members who it was thought might be interested in participating in the survey, especially in the Glenelg area where we have no members. The deadline was extended to allow time for further forms to be completed and returned. The survey has been undertaken as the Field Club's contribution to the Skye and Lochalsh Local Biodiversity Action Plan. Participants were asked if they would be interested in monitoring the wildlife in their garden in the future using recording forms to be produced for this purpose.

The questionnaire listed 29 bird species, 7 mammals, 3 amphibians, 2 reptiles and 4 butterflies which are known to visit or reside in gardens and which were considered to be relatively easy to identify. Difficult groups such as warblers, mice, voles, shrews, bumblebees, dragonflies and moths were not included except for Blackcap which is one of the easier warblers to identify and which is known to visit bird tables during the winter months. Nevertheless not everyone was able to identify all the species listed and provision was allowed for this on the forms. It is hoped to overcome this problem in the monitoring survey by issuing a simple identification guide with the recording forms.

The same questionnaire has been distributed in Skye and results are being collated by John Phillips, Highland Council's Countryside Ranger for Skye and Lochalsh.

RESULTS

Completed forms were received for 44 gardens covering an extensive area from Lochcarron and Ardnarff to Glenelg. The distribution of the gardens is shown below.

Lohcarron	1	Barleyport	1	Auchtertyre	1	Dornie	3
Ardnarff	1	Erbusaig	2	Nostie	2	Inverinate	3
Achmore	1	Badicaul	1	Ardelve	2	Ratagan	2
Plockton	7	Kyle	5	Allt-nan-sugh	1	Glenelg	5
Achnandarach	2	Balmacara/Reraig	3	Bundalloch	1		

15 of the gardens were described as large (1/2 acre or more), 18 as medium (1/4 to 1/2 acre) and 11 as small (less than 1/4 acre). 19 are in a village with neighbours on one or both sides, 17 are in a village but well separated from neighbours and 8 are in an isolated rural setting.

Birds are fed throughout the year in 26 gardens, during the winter months only in 13 gardens and occasionally in 2 gardens. In only 3 of the gardens is food not put out for the birds. One of these is because the owners have cats, and feeding was stopped in another following an influx of Brown Rats.

24 out of the 44 gardens contain plants grown especially for butterflies or other insects, and owners of no less than 38 gardens confessed to allowing weeds/wildflowers to grow unhindered in part of their gardens whilst another added the rider “not intentionally!”.

25 of the gardens contain a pond or burn.

This represents a remarkably rich environment for wildlife which is reflected in the number of species recorded and shown in the tables below.

BIRDS

Jean and Brian Saville (Glenelg) were the only ones to record all 29 species of bird in their garden. Three gardens recorded 28 species, the missing birds being Great Spotted Woodpecker (Josephine and Roy Dean, Lochcarron), Tawny Owl (Rosemary McClelland, Ardelve) and Starling (Roger Knight, Dornie). In general those living in villages tended not to see (or hear) Owl or Great Spotted Woodpecker whilst those in more rural locations were less likely to have Starlings, House Sparrows and Collared Doves in their gardens.

Following discussion with John Phillips it was decided that the combined figures of “Frequently” and “Occasionally” gave a more realistic assessment of the status of bird species than “Frequently” alone. Whilst no clear guidance was given on the relative meanings of “Frequently”, “Occasionally” and “Rarely” it has been assumed that most people will have entered “Occasionally” to indicate at least several sightings a year and “Rarely” to indicate less than annual occurrence. As many bird species are heard more often than seen (and most people unsure of calls and songs) secretive resident birds may be recorded as “Occasionally” seen when they may be present all the time. The classic example of this is the Wren which is extremely common but relatively seldom seen. It is however very noisy and for those who know its song it would be recorded as being present “Frequently”. Others would see a Wren “Occasionally” and enter it as such on the form. This is shown clearly in Table 1 where it is recorded “Frequently” in 62% of gardens but “Frequently + Occasionally” in 93% of gardens.

The 62 % itself is quite impressive and suggests that a good number of participants are familiar with the Wren’s song and calls.

Table 1 shows the 29 bird species in order of abundance based on the combined “Frequently” plus “Occasionally” figures. The figures shown are the percentage of gardens in which the birds were recorded in each category out of the total of 44.

Robin, Chaffinch and Blackbird were the only species recorded in every garden but Blue Tit, Great Tit, Greenfinch, Wren and Siskin also occurred in more than 90% of gardens. Of species which are causing concern nationally it is encouraging to note that Song Thrush was recorded in 89% of gardens and House Sparrow in 84%. This compares with between 18% and 37% (depending on the season) for Song Thrush and between 77% and 82% for House Sparrow in the BTO Garden BirdWatch survey over the period 1995-2002.

The attraction of bird-feeding gardens to Sparrowhawks is well reflected in the figure of 48% as is the increasing use of gardens by Goldfinches (43%). However the figures for Blackcap and Great Spotted Woodpecker (both 11%) are not as high as I would have expected bearing in mind the number of reports I receive of these birds at bird tables.

Table 1

Species	Frequentl y	Occasional ly	Frequently +Occasionall y	Rarel y	Never + Left Blank
1= Robin	100	0	100	0	0
1= Chaffinch	100	0	100	0	0
1= Blackbird	93	7	100	0	0
4. Blue Tit	98	0	98	0	2
5. Great Tit	91	5	96	0	5
6. Greenfinch	55	39	94	2	4
7= Wren	61	30	91	7	2
7= Siskin	52	39	91	2	7
9. Song Thrush	66	23	89	5	7
10. Pied Wagtail	43	43	86	9	5
11= Dunnock	68	16	84	2	14
11= House Sparrow	57	27	84	9	7
13. Coal Tit	68	11	79	7	14
14. Collared Dove	55	18	73	18	9
15. Swallow	55	16	71	9	20
16. Mistle Thrush	27	30	57	18	25
17= House Martin	36	20	56	11	32
17= Bullfinch	20	36	56	25	18
19= Fieldfare	16	39	55	14	32
19= Redwing	7	48	55	11	34
21. Starling	32	20	52	16	32
22. Sparrowhawk	14	34	48	29	23
23. Goldfinch	2	41	43	20	36
24. Tawny Owl	20	20	40	11	48
25. Long-tailed Tit	7	27	34	14	52
26. Waxwing	2	18	20	23	57
27. Yellowhammer	9	7	16	27	57
28= Blackcap	2	9	11	25	64
28= Great Spotted Woodpecker	2	9	11	20	68

MAMMALS

Mammals are listed in order of abundance on the same basis as the birds. However these figures will not be as true a reflection of the mammal population as those shown above for birds. This is because the most numerous mammals are almost certainly small rodents such as Bank Vole, Wood Mouse and Common Shrew which were not included on the form due to the difficulty of identification. Of those included, bats were the most commonly recorded and the vast majority of these would almost certainly be Pipistrelles, although both Brown Long-eared and Natterer's Bats are known to occur in the area.

The Pine Marten is the only other mammal to be recorded (frequently + occasionally) in more than 50% of gardens. If we add in the rarely figure as well, an impressive 91% of the gardens have been visited by Pine Martens at some time. For an animal that is generally regarded as a rarity in Britain we are obviously fortunate to have so many in Lochalsh.

The gardens are equally divided between those that have Moles and those that don't. Moles appear to be absent from Kyle and Plockton but become frequent from Auchtertyre eastwards and in Glenelg. Have they ever been present in Kyle and Plockton and if they have what happened to them ?

Hedgehogs are recorded occasionally in 39% of the gardens and frequently in 9%. Having had the first Hedgehogs in 15 years in our garden this year these were higher percentages than I was expecting. There is no obvious geographical distribution to the occurrence of Hedgehogs except that Glenelg is again a favoured area. Otherwise they seem to be thinly scattered throughout the area.

Roughly half of the gardens have recorded Roe Deer at least once and they occur frequently in 14% of the gardens.

Although Badgers are known to have been fed regularly in at least one garden in Lochalsh in the recent past they appear to be rare visitors in general with only 14% of gardens known to have ever been visited. Foxes are equally unusual in gardens with just 16% known to have been visited.

Neither Badger nor Fox visited any gardens frequently.

The continuing absence of Rabbits in Lochalsh remains a mystery and contrasts sharply with the situation on Skye where they are very common. Ardelve is one of the few localities where Rabbits have been common in recent years but they have become scarce even there during the last year. Only one garden in our survey (2%) recorded Rabbits occasionally and none frequently.

It will be interesting to compare these figures with the results from Skye.

Table 2

Species	Frequently	Occasionally	Frequently + Occasionally	Rarely	Never + Don't Know
1. Bat	48	39	87	9	4
2. Pine Marten	23	48	71	20	9
3. Mole	30	20	50	2	48
4. Hedgehog	9	39	48	20	32
5. Roe Deer	14	23	37	14	50
6. Fox	Nil	7	7	9	84
7. Badger	Nil	5	5	9	86
8. Rabbit	Nil	2	2	9	89

AMPHIBIANS & REPTILES

Both Common Frog and Common Toad occur (frequently + occasionally) in 75% of the gardens. This is perhaps surprising as the Common Toad is much more likely to occur in

gardens with ponds whereas the Common Frog will occur regularly in gardens without ponds.

The other three species are much less frequent in the gardens surveyed. The Palmate Newt is probably the only newt species to occur in Skye and Lochalsh, although Common Newt is a possibility in low-lying areas.

Slow-worm and Common Lizard could easily be overlooked. Being reptiles they are mainly seen when basking in the sun. At other times they can be very secretive.

Table 3

Species	Frequently	Occasionally	Frequently + Occasionally	Rarely	Never + Don't Know
1. Common Frog	45	30	75	9	16
2. Common Toad	34	41	75	10	14
3. Slow-worm	11	18	29	11	59
4. Palmate Newt	7	20	27	14	59
5. Common Lizard	11	11	22	14	64

BUTTERFLIES

The high percentage of “don't knows” for the three butterflies other than Red Admiral indicates that we were being optimistic over participants' ability to identify butterflies. So the figures for Small Tortoiseshell, Speckled Wood and possibly Orange-tip are likely to be well below the true figures. All three are quite distinctive and unlikely to be confused with other species. It is just a matter of being able to put a name to them. These three butterflies are all resident species in the Highlands whereas the Red Admiral, although better known, is an immigrant whose numbers vary considerably from year to year and is dependent on migration from southern Europe and North Africa.

The Small Tortoiseshell hibernates as an adult in buildings, sheds and hollow trees. It sometimes emerges during the winter on exceptionally mild days. The Orange-tip winters as a chrysalis but the Speckled Wood has an unusual mixed strategy, some wintering as caterpillars whilst others change into a chrysalis.

Table 4

Species	Frequently	Occasionally	Frequently + Occasionally	Rarely	Never + Don't Know
1. Red Admiral	50	39	89	2	9
2. Small Tortoiseshell	20	36	56	5	39
3. Speckled Wood	5	23	28	4	68
4. Orange-tip	5	20	25	9	66