

NEWSLETTER 20 - JANUARY 1998

PROGRAMME

- 23rd January The Arctic and Antarctica - Contrasting Icecaps
Roger Tufft
Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm
- 27th February Highland Orchids
Murdo MacDonald
Auchtertyre Community Education Hall at 8.00pm
- 13th March AGM and Social Evening
Plockton Village Hall at 7.30pm
- 27th March The Balmacara Square Project
Iain Turnbull, National Trust for Scotland
Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm
- 24th April Whales and Dolphins of the West Coast of Scotland
Speaker from the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust, Mull
Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm (Postponed from October)

THE WEATHER IN 1997

Duncan Glen-Riddell has again kindly given us access to his weather records. The readings were taken at Reraig House, Balmacara and the equivalent figures for 1996 are shown in brackets.

	Rainfall		Temperature (Celcius)	
	mm	ins	max	min
January	113	4.45 (2.76)	13 (12)	-6 (-5)
February	456	17.95 (4.61)	12 (17)	-1 (-6)
March	203	7.99 (2.72)	17 (15)	-1 (-6)
April	102	4.02 (4.45)	15 (20)	-1 (-2)
May	122	4.80 (3.11)	22 (20)	-2 (-2)
June	53	2.09 (6.02)	24 (22)	3 (5)
July	107	4.21 (3.82)	26 (23)	5 (5)
August	71	2.80 (2.83)	28 (25)	7 (7)
September	194	7.64 (4.25)	20 (22)	3 (3)
October	90	3.54 (13.46)	18 (18)	-1 (2)
November	114	4.49 (9.25)	18 (15)	1 (-3)
December	189	7.44 (4.09)	14 (12)	-3 (-5)
Total	1814	71.42 (61.37)		

As usual my personal recollections of the weather are at variance with the statistics. I had thought that 1997 had been a relatively dry year whereas the total rainfall was 12% above the 30 year average figures from Achmore (1951-1981). Clearly February was the exceptional month with nearly four times the average rainfall! If February had received only its average rainfall of 4.88ins this would have brought the total down to 58.35ins which is 91% of the average annual rainfall and still far higher than I would have estimated. October was much drier than usual with only 48% of the 30 year average.

AUTUMN 1997 - WILDLIFE REPORTS

From a birdwatching point of view "autumn" is a rather loose term which covers the period from

the end of breeding to the time when winter visitors are established in their winter quarters. This period can commence as early as the end of June for early or failed breeders and can extend to the end of November for late autumn migrants such as Blackcaps and Waxwings. In 1997 the first Little Grebe was back in its winter territory off Eilean Tioram on 25th July and the first Wigeon returned to the Shiel Saltings on 31st August. Goldeneyes are always much later arriving and one off Sallachy on 13th October was quite early; it was 10th November before I saw any at other regular sites. The main wintering haunts of Great Northern Divers are along the rocky coast between Kyle and Plockton and the first one was seen on 17th October.

Although autumn was mild with plenty of insects available most of our summer migrants left early and I heard of no lingering birds. Even such common birds as Swallow and Willow Warbler which sometimes can still be seen in October were away very early. I saw only one Willow Warbler in September and my last Swallows on 17th September. My last summer migrant was a Spotted Flycatcher on 19th September.

I often wonder why the summer migrants leave Lochalsh as early as they do when there appears to be such an abundance of food and the weather generally remains mild well into the autumn. Presumably the shortening daylight hours provide the impetus to move south; perhaps the days are just not long enough for adequate feeding. On the other hand some delicate insectivorous species remain with us throughout the short days and severe weather of mid-winter and are able to survive. These include Goldcrest, Long-tailed Tit and Treecreeper. So the mysteries of bird migration continue to intrigue us. Which thought leads nicely on to Blackcaps which continue to amaze me by turning up in our garden every November without fail. A male appeared on 19th followed by a pair on 23rd, the female remaining until 27th. Probably the same pair moved down Carr Brae to Roger Knight's garden where they remained well into December. Female Blackcaps were also seen by Jean and Brian Saville at Glenelg and by Jean Camilli at Ratagan and a further male and female by Barbara and Harry Corrans in Kyle. The increasing number of December sightings suggests that these birds may now be wintering in Lochalsh, not just passing through in late autumn. I heard of no reports of Waxwings during the autumn or early winter period.

A small group of up to 7 Bar-tailed Godwits spent about 2 weeks in Kirkton Bay in September feeding on the saltmarsh whilst 2 at Galltair on 20th November were feeding at the water's edge on the sandy beach along with Oystercatchers. At this time of year these large waders are like a smaller version of a Curlew but with a long straight or slightly upturned beak rather than the down-curved beak of the Curlew. However if you were fortunate enough to see one still in its breeding plumage its head, neck and underparts would be a vivid red colour. It is sometimes hard to believe that birds with such contrasting plumages belong to the same species. Another good (local) example of this is the Black Guillemot. In breeding plumage it is all black except for white oval wing patches but in winter plumage it is nearly all white and its English name becomes rather inappropriate. Its northern name, Tystie, is much more suitable.

Newsletter compiled by Brian Neath (01599 555 341)

