

NEWSLETTER 23 - NOVEMBER 1998

PROGRAMME OF FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

- 11th December Vikings in the Highlands and Islands
Alan Small
Auchtertyre Community Education Hall at 8.00pm
- 15th January You Call That Work? A Ranger's Year in Skye and Lochalsh
John Phillips, Highland Council Countryside Ranger
Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm
- 5th February Building a History of the Hebrides
Roger Miket
Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm
- 5th March Countryside Recreation Since the Industrial Revolution
Derrick Warner
Auchtertyre Community Education Hall at 8.00pm

SUMMER 1998 - WILDLIFE REPORTS (Compiled by Brian Neath 01599 555341)

What summer you may well ask! It was certainly the most disappointing spring/summer in my 11 years experience of the area and we had to wait until September for the first protracted spell of sunny weather. To make matters worse there is little doubt that the most conspicuous wildlife creature between May and October was the mighty Highland Midge which was in its element in the dreich conditions. The most exciting visitors however were somewhat larger - the two Northern Bottlenose Whales which spent over 5 weeks in Broadford Bay. Roger Cottis's summary of this major event follows this report.

Surprisingly the weather conditions appeared to suit the Swallows which had an exceptional breeding season and other birds which did well included species as diverse as Greylag Goose (5 broods reared on Eilean Tioram), Buzzard, Stonechat and Mistle Thrush (flock of 35 on Carr Brae on 23rd July). On the down side Lapwings failed to consolidate their small advances of the two previous seasons and terns failed to return to Loch Alsh and Loch Duich.

A male Hen Harrier was seen in the Coille Mhor/Erbusaig area during June but a comprehensive survey of 10km. square NG82 found no evidence of any breeding pairs. A Corncrake was heard near Glenelg, Nightjars were reported from two localities and Crossbills were widespread during June and July. Unfortunately the poor weather prevented a follow up of the Nightjars. Nightjar numbers declined steadily in Britain from the 1950s through to the 1980s due to loss of their favoured heathland habitat. However in recent years they have taken a liking to clear-felled forestry plantations and their numbers are beginning to build up again. Although generally thought of as a lowland species the Nightjar has been breeding successfully in clear-felled areas in Wales at altitudes above 300m. It seems feasible that similar habitat in our area would prove attractive to Nightjars and it will be well worth listening out for their strange churring song in such areas next May and June especially between 10.00pm and midnight when the birds become active.

NORTHERN BOTTLENOSE WHALES IN BROADFORD BAY

Considerable interest was generated when two Northern Bottlenose Whales arrived in Broadford Bay from the north on Wednesday 5th August. The whales were migrating south for the winter having travelled north during spring to spend the summer months probably around the coasts of

Iceland or Norway. Their usual route follows the deep trenches to the west of the Outer Hebrides where they dive up to 1000 metres in search of squid. There they would use echolocation to find their prey but on occasions they move into shallower warm waters. Three years ago two were sighted near the head of Loch Eishort on Skye and this year two (the same animals ?) stayed in Broadford Bay for more than 5 weeks. In such shallow waters, occasionally as little as three metres deep, they employed quite different feeding tactics. One method was to breach (leap almost clear of the water) which has the effect of frightening the fish into concentrated shoals enabling the whales to dive amongst them. Another method was vigorous tail slapping sometimes with enormous power which would have the effect of stunning some fish and leaving them as easy prey. In between these frenzied bouts were calmer moments when they would lie on the surface, always in close proximity to each other. Then they would lift their very distinctive dome-shaped forehead and slender beak vertically out of the water and occasionally pivot around the axis of the body before submerging. Before longer dives there would be several blows from the single vent on top of the head and they would emerge again often as far as one kilometre away. There was some debate about the whales' gender with initial thoughts that they were a female and calf because of their differing size. However because of their confiding nature close observations were possible from the boats and on one such occasion the larger of the two at around 8 metres long revealed 2 stumpy teeth in the lower jaw. This almost certainly means it was a male, as the teeth rarely erupt in females, and that the two animals were in fact a pair. After some concern about their welfare the whales departed on 11th September apparently in good health.

Many people were able to share the experience of watching the whales using a variety of methods including organised boat trips, canoes and inflatables but mostly with binoculars and telescopes from the shore. Unfortunately some boating techniques caused concern to the extent that guidance notes were deemed necessary and posted by Scottish Natural Heritage. Subsequently boats have been seen chasing Harbour Porpoises in Broadford Bay and Bottlenose Dolphins in the Sound of Sleat. Such activities are illegal and should be reported to the nearest harbour master or police. It would be most useful should anyone see any species of whales, dolphins or porpoise whether alive or stranded to advise Brian or myself. Detailed records help towards good conservation. *Roger Cottis 01471 833 325*

