

NEWSLETTER 40 - JANUARY 2003

THE WEATHER IN 2002

Thanks again to Duncan Glen-Riddell for providing us with his Reraig weather statistics. The readings shown are for 2002 with the 18 year averages from 1985 to 2002 in brackets.

	Rainfall		Temperature (Celsius)	
	mm	ins	ave max	ave min
January	254	10.00 (8.86)	10.1 (7.74)	3.9 (1.73)
February	278	10.94 (8.11)	9.1 (8.32)	1.8 (1.54)
March	158	6.22 (7.95)	10.3 (9.73)	2.8 (2.41)
April	122	4.80 (4.25)	13.7 (11.89)	4.1 (3.42)
May	84	3.31 (3.23)	16.9 (15.76)	5.1 (5.89)
June	164	6.46 (3.86)	17.6 (17.15)	9.3 (7.86)
July	134	5.28 (4.29)	17.6 (18.48)	9.6 (9.70)
August	73	2.87 (5.24)	19.0 (18.40)	9.8 (9.60)
September	60	2.36 (5.87)	18.3 (16.49)	7.5 (7.76)
October	130	5.12 (8.15)	13.1 (13.29)	4.9 (6.07)
November	138	5.43 (7.87)	11.4 (10.02)	5.0 (3.48)
December	37	1.46 (8.07)	8.1 (8.00)	1.8 (1.82)
Total	1632	64.25 (75.75)		

2002 was the third driest year at Reraig since records began in 1985. Only 1987 (62.09ins) and 1996 (61.38ins) had less rainfall. The 5 months from August to December all had well below the average rainfall whereas in 2001 it was the first 5 months of the year that had lower rainfall than usual. February was the wettest month of 2002 and produced the wettest day of the year when 42mm (1.65ins) fell on the 8th. Only 7 more days during the whole year had 25mm or more rainfall. In contrast to the last two years when it was the wettest month by far, October had a modest 130mm (5.12ins). December was the driest month of the year despite having one of the highest rainfall averages overall. This also happened in 1995 when even less rain (1.10ins) fell in December. It is not surprising therefore that the longest dry spell was also in December – the 16 day period from 5th to 20th.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the dry December was that it was also quite mild. Long dry spells in mid-winter are usually associated with periods of frost. The classic example was February 1986 when no rainfall at all was recorded and the average minimum temperature for the month was -2.07 degrees Celsius and the average maximum temperature was +5.11 degrees. In December 1995 the average minimum temperature was -1.70 degrees and the average maximum +7.10 degrees. So for December 2002 to have only 1.46ins of rain and yet have an average minimum temperature of +1.8 degrees was quite remarkable.

The highest temperatures recorded during 2002 were 28 degrees Celsius on 7th June, 27 degrees on 1st August and 25 degrees on 2nd, 5th and 6th August, 11th and 12th September.

Both the average maximum temperatures and the average minimum temperatures were higher than the 18 year averages from January to April. This corresponds with the figures for the whole of Britain. The UK Phenology Network reports that every characteristic phenological event in spring 2002 occurred earlier than in 2001 due to the higher than average temperatures during the first four months of the year. On average, insects such as bumblebees and butterflies were three weeks earlier, plants flowered two weeks earlier and bird breeding activity was up to one week earlier.

If you are interested in participating in recording "Nature's Calendar" for the UK Phenology Network you can contact them c/o The Woodland Trust, Autumn Park, Dysart Road, Grantham, NG31 6LL or at their website www.phenology.org.uk

HIGHLAND BIOLOGICAL RECORDING GROUP

The Field Club is an institutional member of HBRG and as such receives 3 copies of its annual newsletter. The 2002 Newsletter contains a wealth of interesting papers and notes covering a wide range of subjects such as bumblebee and mammal atlases, oak galls, winter galls, beachcombing, Muntjac Deer and requests for information. Copies can be borrowed from committee members Pat Mucklow in Kyle, Iain Matheson in Plockton and John Holt in Balmacara.

LATE AUTUMN/WINTER 2002 - WILDLIFE REPORTS

I don't think I have ever seen so few Redwings and Fieldfares during November and December. I never saw more than 2 Fieldfares together and even Redwings I saw only in single figures. However Josephine and Roy Dean saw larger numbers of these thrushes in the Lochcarron area so the lack of birds in Lochalsh may not have been of great significance. A male Blackcap in our garden on 12th November was followed by a female on 15th, and again on 26th. The female fed on birdseed on the ground and was not prepared to give way to an aggressive Robin. Rod Stenson also saw a female Blackcap in his garden on 29th while a pair was seen in a garden at Leacanashie, near North Strome, in mid-December. Single Bramblings

also fed in our garden on 16th October and 18th November. Bramblings never seem to stay with us for more than one day: their urge to migrate further south seems to outweigh the obvious attraction of a regular supply of food.

This is the most likely time of year to encounter Goldfinches, which are particularly attracted to the seed heads of Lesser Knapweed. Flocks of at least 12 were seen in Dornie on 31st October and on croft land at Drumbuie on 16th December. In the April 1999 Newsletter I referred to the increasing trend for Goldfinches to feed on peanuts in gardens but I have had disappointingly few subsequent records. However on 27th November Colin Parsons reported one feeding on peanuts in his garden at Achmore and Josephine and Roy Dean had one behaving similarly at Lochcarron on 8th January. It has been discovered in recent years that Goldfinches are attracted in large numbers to birdfeeders containing Nyger seed. The multi-million pound wild bird food supply industry is now supplying Nyger seed and special feeders with small port holes suitable for this fine seed. They also claim that Nyger seed attracts Siskins and Redpolls. In our garden, Siskins seem to prefer the naturally occurring Alder seeds to peanuts at this time of year. The closely related Redpoll is also an Alder feeder but it has not yet followed the Siskin in becoming addicted to peanuts. Redpolls will, however, occasionally feed on birdseed on the ground.

Golden Plover breed on many of our local hills in small numbers but they are not often seen during the winter months. It was a pleasant surprise therefore to find a flock of 28 at Dubh-aird, Plockton on 11th December and 10 near Duirinish Station on 16th December. Unfortunately the heavy frosts at the turn of the year were not to their liking and they did not linger into the New Year. A drake Common Scoter in Glenelg Bay on 12th December was another unusual winter sighting for the Lochalsh coast.

Our small flock of Greenland White-fronted Geese was back at Dubh-aird on 8th November; sadly, still just the 10 birds. How much longer can they survive without producing young? Nearby at Rowan Barn there was a flock of about 50 Rock Doves on the same day. They were busy helping themselves to the grain put out for the ducks and chickens. This was the largest flock of Rock Doves that I have seen in the Plockton area. We used to have a flock appear in the Ardelve area each autumn up until 1997, but few have been seen there since. They have obviously found an easier source of food in Plockton!

A Kingfisher was reported along the Glenmore River at Galltair on 4th December. The only previous local record I know of was one seen by Peter MacKenna at Duncraig in the 1970s. The Kingfisher is a rare bird in the Highlands but a small population has become established in the Inverness area since 1970 and along the River Spey in Badenoch since 1988 with between one and three pairs in each area. Odd birds have occasionally wandered down the Great Glen as far as Lochaber and recently there have been some sightings as far north as Assynt. However such a small population is highly vulnerable should we have any severe winters, especially as it is so isolated from the main Scottish range of this species, which extends from the Solway to the Clyde and Tay. Nevertheless it is worth keeping an eye open for a flash of brilliant blue and emerald green along our local rivers; a sighting of a Kingfisher is not an impossibility

2002 produced my highest annual total of moth species (113) since I started recording the larger (macro) moths in 1996 and the most "new" species (16) since 1997. These included some scarce species and others that are not supposed to occur so far north including Lunar Marbled Brown, Barred Carpet, Chestnut-coloured Carpet, Scotch Annulet and Northern Arches. One advantage of moth recording is that it is a round-the-year activity and we often get as many moths attracted to our windows in December and January as in the summer months. However, far fewer species are involved. For example on 28th December 55 moths of 3 species were attracted to our windows. These included 51 Winter Moths, 3 Mottled Umbers and a Red Sword-grass, which should have been in hibernation. By contrast, on 21st July 15 moths of 15 species were attracted to the windows, there being just one of each. The amazing thing is that I have been able to record 172 species of moth so far without the use of a trap. Many of these moths are very attractive creatures and I will be showing slides of some of them at the meeting on 14th February.

(Newsletter compiled by Brian Neath (01599 555 341). Recent observations and/or short articles always welcome.)