

NEWSLETTER 45 - MAY 2004

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The AGM and Social Evening was held at the Lochalsh Hotel on 2nd April. Once again the office bearers and committee members were re-elected. The Committee is as follows:

Chairman	John Holt	Committee Members	Jean Camilli
Vice-Chairman	Pat Mucklow		Iain Matheson
Secretary	Brian Neath		Bill Ramsay
Treasurer	Vi Beaton		

A departure from previous AGMs was to have a guest speaker and this was very successful. Ian Begg gave us a fascinating talk linking ancient stones, archaeology, geometry and architecture, complete with models and specimens. Some of his recent projects have involved designing hides on nature reserves so this tied in nicely with the objectives of the Field Club.

The facilities provided and the setting were ideal but the food was less than satisfactory and we shall have to think yet again about the venue for next year's AGM. Suggestions will be welcomed.

LADYBIRDS

There are remarkably few records of ladybirds from the Lochalsh area. The discovery of hibernating Orange Ladybirds in a garden in Lochcarron in January and the identification of some ladybirds in our garden on Carr Brae last October as Larch Ladybirds has aroused my curiosity in these beetles, which belong to the family Coccinellidae. A preliminary survey of ladybirds by the Highland Biological Recording Group in 1992 collated records of 14 species in the Highlands but only three of these were recorded in the Lochalsh/Lochcarron area. Many species of ladybird are likely to be found in gardens and I would be grateful if members who find any would notify me as soon as possible. The widespread use of digital cameras now makes it a simple matter to photograph ladybirds (and other insects), attach pictures to an e-mail and have the specimen identified by an expert within hours. I now have a copy of Naturalists' Handbook 10, which has good colour plates of the 24 British ladybird-like coccinellids and this should help with local identifications. However, inevitably, some species are a little tricky and photos of these could be sent to Stephen Moran in Inverness for confirmation. Ladybirds are most likely to be seen in May during their breeding season or in September/October when the new adults emerge from their pupae. I look forward to hearing from you!

FIELD MEETINGS

- Saturday, 19th June Boat trip to the Isle of Eigg, departing from Armadale at 09:30. To book please complete and return the enclosed slip to Pat Mucklow.
- Saturday, 24th July Walk to the Point of Sleat with Tim Godfrey. Meet at Aird of Sleat at 11:00. To book please phone Brian Neath on 01599 555341.
- Saturday, 7th August Ferns – Identification & Ecology. A joint meeting with Inverness Botany Group and the Fernaig Trust led by James Merryweather. Meet at Strome Wood at 10:30. If you are interested please contact Brian Neath for further details.

We would like someone to take on the role of planning and organising field meetings. If you are interested please contact the Secretary, Brian Neath on 01599 555341.

WINTER/EARLY SPRING 2004 – WILDLIFE REPORTS

Following on from the first report of a Brambling in Pat Mucklow's garden in Kyle on 8th January, unprecedented numbers of this attractive wintering finch appeared in several gardens throughout the area. Pride of place goes to Josephine Dean's garden in Lochcarron where up to 10 Bramblings fed on birdseed between 16th January and 10th April. 2 or 3 long-staying birds remained in Pat's garden until the end of March whilst 2 or 3 more graced Jean and Brian Saville's garden in Glenelg from mid-February until the end of March. Other singles were spotted in Jean and Luc Camilli's garden at Ratagan and Barbara and Bill Inglis's garden at Achnandarach during February. I was fortunate to see single birds in the Kyle and Glenelg gardens but didn't have any in my own garden this winter.

That other favourite garden bird, the Blackcap, was not so conspicuous in the new year. Only three birds were reported: single females in Roger Knight's garden in Dornie on 5th January and Elaine and Alan Horner's garden in Kyleakin on 12th –13th January, with a male present in Jean and Brian Saville's garden in Glenelg on 6th January.

The Goldfinch is another bird that is mostly reported from gardens and this has been the case again so far this year with records from Bill Inglis, Rosemary McClelland, Pat Mucklow, Ishbel Cameron and Josephine Dean. Several observers commented how aggressive the Goldfinches were to other birds. Reed Buntings tend to be rather thin on the ground and I didn't see one this year until 9th April when there was a male calling in a reed bed at Drumbuie. Ishbel Cameron went one better and had a bird coming to feed in her garden at Drumbuie during April along with Yellowhammers.

Two families of Whooper Swans wintered on Loch Shiel, one pair with 3 cygnets arrived in November and were joined by a second pair with 2 cygnets during January. However there seemed to be a rather strained relationship between the two families; they tended to keep as far apart as this small loch would allow and on occasions one family would move well up the glen towards Achnagart where they could be seen grazing in the limited grassy areas along the river.

Red-throated Divers moved back into the sea lochs in numbers during February and March when they became widespread. However I didn't see any in Balmacara Bay which is usually one of their more regular haunts.

A flock of about 30 Purple Sandpipers on rocky islets in the Eilean a'Mhal group off Kyle on 11th February was exceptional. It may be that this small wader, which usually associates with Turnstones, is a regular winter visitor to the rocky islands around the coast between Kyle and Plockton. Further investigation by boat would be a worthwhile exercise.

Eilean a'Mhal also produced one of my most spectacular sightings of the winter on 1st March when an immature White-tailed Eagle put up 43 Herons from the Herony there, causing them to circle round over the island until the eagle moved on towards Plockton. On the same day there was a Jack Snipe as well as two Common Snipe on the old golf course. These were no doubt driven to the coast by the only prolonged spell of frosts of the winter during the previous five days.

Iain Matheson was fortunate to see a male Hen Harrier on two consecutive days in January along the road between Kyle and Plockton. Although a few pairs breed on Skye, they have become a rare sight on the mainland in recent years. However another male Hen Harrier was seen at Ardelve, on 26th April, by Fiona and Bruce Williams. This may have been a migrating bird heading back to its breeding grounds further north.

Fiona Williams also brought to my attention the arrival of 3 Canada Geese at Ardelve on 20th March. I know of only three previous records of Canada Geese in Lochalsh and they were seen on just the one day. The Ardelve birds stayed around for several weeks and I am grateful to Fiona and to Rosemary McClelland for keeping me informed of their movements. Like the Whooper Swans there seemed to be some discord in their ranks and one bird eventually separated from the other two. The single bird was still present well into May. Canada Geese are not truly wild birds having been introduced into Britain more than 200 years ago. The birds which turn up occasionally in Lochalsh may be wanderers from the feral flock in the Fort William/Gairloch area.

Although the weather didn't live up to the pattern set in 2002 and 2003 there were yet again some incredibly early spring events. Roger Cottis saw a Green Hairstreak butterfly near Duirinish Lodge on 30th March. I had my earliest ever Green Hairstreak on Carr Brae on 16th April when there was also a Small Tortoiseshell in our garden. Rod Stenson heard a Willow Warbler singing on Carr Brae on 31st March and a Chiffchaff on 6th April. On the same day a Chiffchaff was also singing in Attadale Garden. There was an exceptionally early House Martin flying along with a Sand Martin near Morvich on 16th April and a Grasshopper Warbler was back in Dornie on 20th April, equalling the record early date in 2003. A full summary of the spring events will be given in the August Newsletter.

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