

NEWSLETTER 50 – AUGUST 2005

PROGRAMME

- Monday, 19th September Maerl Beaches around Eilean na Creige Duibhe (for shore life at low tide)
Leader: James Merryweather
Meet at car park at Craig Highland Farm at 1.00pm
To book and to obtain information sheet contact Brian Neath (01599 555 341)
- Friday, 23rd September Antarctica
John MacMillan
Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm
- Friday, 14th October High Pasture Caves, Kilbride, Strath – Recent Excavations
Steven Birch
Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm
- Friday, 11th November The Remarkable Trees of Scotland
Jim Paterson, MBE
Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm
- Friday, 12th December St. Kilda Revisited
Donald Paterson
Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm

FIELD MEETING AT DRUMBUIE

On 8th June we had a very successful joint field meeting with the Scottish Wildlife Trust Skye Members Group. A circular route commencing at Duirinish Station was followed, heading first across the meadows to Drumbuie village then over the railway bridge and along the shore to Port-an eorna and back up the road to the level crossing. A singing Yellowhammer, a scarce bird on Skye, got us off to a good start and singing Sedge Warbler, Whitethroat and Whinchat plus two Lesser Redpolls were all located before we got to Drumbuie. A spectacular aerial display by four Snipe over the village was a totally unexpected bonus in the middle of the day. Both Swallows and House Martins were nesting in or on buildings in the village and then Ishbel Cameron was able to show us a small colony of Small White Orchid before we reached the railway bridge. This orchid is a speciality of the north west Highlands but is quite local and we were grateful to Ishbel for locating the flowers in advance for our benefit and also showing us more of the special plants that grow on the croft land including Globeflower.

Two Otters swimming out across Port Cam was the next highlight and everyone was able to get a good sighting of them through the Secretary's telescope. A pair of Eiders, two Black Guillemots and a few common Guillemots were identified despite the choppy sea and during our picnic lunch at fisherman's rock the other highlight of the day was spotted - a Puffin preening and wing-flapping within reasonable telescope range.

Singing Skylarks could be heard throughout the walk but only one definite Linnet was identified although other probables were seen in flight. There was a Common Sandpiper along the road on our way back and then a close view of a recently fledged young Pied Wagtail just before the level crossing provided a satisfying end to the outing.

DRAGONFLY WEEK-END

Another successful event was the Dragonfly Week-end on 25th and 26th June organised by Barbara Soutar of the National Trust for Scotland. She had managed to persuade Pat Batty, the dragonfly recorder for Scotland to come up to Lochalsh to help identify some of the scarcer dragonflies and damselflies which were first recorded by Ray Collier in a survey on the Balmacara Estate some 20 or so years ago. Two full days of field work were complemented by an illustrated talk by Jonathon Willet in Plockton Hall on the Saturday evening. The weather was not particularly suitable for flying adults although Loch Achaidh na h-Inich was alive with Common Blue and Large Red Damselflies on the Saturday morning. The main recording was done by pond-dipping for larvae and this confirmed the presence of Northern Emerald on the Estate as well as finding White-faced Darter in the area for the first time. Interesting by-products of the field work included a Wood Tiger moth at Loch Achaidh na h-Inich, possibly a first for Lochalsh, and finding Pale Butterwort near Loch Erbusaig. Large Heath butterflies and a Six-spot Burnet moth were also seen near Loch Scalpaidh.

SUMMER 2005 – WILDLIFE REPORTS

Once again the common garden birds seem to have had a very successful breeding season despite the disappointing weather. Large numbers of juvenile birds have appeared at feeders, especially Blue Tits, Great Tits, Chaffinches and Siskins. Great Spotted Woodpeckers continue to attract attention as they become more frequent visitors to peanut feeders. Catriona Ferguson was the latest person to be surprised by the arrival of these spectacular birds in her garden at Achmore. In our garden on Carr Brae it was a female woodpecker that was feeding daily on peanuts this year whereas last year a male was the regular visitor. I was surprised one day when two females were present in the garden. One pair certainly bred successfully again on Carr Brae but I couldn't be certain that there were two pairs. Woodpecker chicks could also be heard calling in a nest near Kirkton on 7th June. It will be interesting to see whether the current garden wildlife survey suggests an increase in the woodpecker population compared with 2003.

Three Black-throated Divers in full breeding plumage in Nostie Bay on 19th May was a surprise sighting. This is the height of the breeding season and the birds should have been on their freshwater breeding lochs. However there was no sign of the birds the following day so hopefully it was just a social gathering rather than an indication of failed breeding. The Puffin near Port-an-eorna on 8th June was followed by another close to the shore at Reraig on 23rd. Subsequently it transpired that unusual numbers were seen in Loch Alsh and Loch Carron during June and July probably reflecting another difficult breeding season for seabirds in general.

I was aware of only one pair of Twite in the Carr Brae View Point area this year but by 28th July a flock of at least 40 had built up in the field opposite the bank feeding on grass seed heads. Like most finch species Twite tend to gather in flocks at the end of the breeding season and they disperse over a wide area, especially on croft land and salt marshes. Although not true migrants Twite are scarce here during the winter months and probably move to the Outer Hebrides or coastal sites further south. The Lesser Redpoll is included amongst the species targeted in the BTO's new Scarce Woodland Bird Survey due to a significant decrease in its population in southern Britain. However in Lochalsh it seems to be more widespread than ever this year. It is an easily overlooked small finch if you are not familiar with its call but a close view of a male bird reveals a stunningly attractive bird with bright pink cap and breast and a dark bib.

LOCHALSH HERONRIES

As usual the Heronry on Eilean a'Mhal was highly productive with large numbers of young Herons being raised. The Heronry can be viewed with a telescope from the Plock of Kyle (or from a boat) and is well worth seeing. It is the largest and most successful Heronry in Lochalsh with about 20 nests and the extensive breeding season stretches from February through to August. There are other smaller Heronries at Eilean na Creige Duibhe, Conchra, Sallachy, Inverinate House, Ratagan and Totaig. It is a bit of mystery at present where Herons are breeding in the Glenelg – Arnisdale area. A successful season on Eilean a'Chuilinn (Loch Hourne) in 2002 has been followed by blank years or years when the site has been abandoned early in the season. The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) has Heronry Census data going back to 1928. It is probably the longest running of all bird surveys. If anyone knows of any Heronries in Lochalsh other than those listed above I would be interested to hear about them so that they can be included in the annual monitoring programme.

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