

NEWSLETTER 51 - NOVEMBER 2005

PROGRAMME

Friday, 9 th December	St. Kilda Revisited Donald Paterson Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm
Friday, 13 th January	British Deer Roger Cottis Kyle Free Church Hall at 7.30pm
Friday, 10 th February	Planting with your Post Code Michael Scott Achmore Village Hall at 2.30pm
Friday, 10 th March	Swamp and Savannah in Botswana John Love Kirkton Church Hall at 8.00pm
Thursday, 23 rd March	AGM Achmore Village Hall at 7.30pm
Friday, 21 st April	The Remarkable Trees of Scotland Jim Paterson Kirkton Village Hall at 8.00pm

TRIP TO THE ISLE OF EIGG

Our later-than-usual boat trip proved successful in that we were able to get to our planned destination at last after the disappointments of recent years. The weather wasn't ideal and it is a pity that we hadn't opted for 20th August rather than the 27th as that had been a glorious day. Nevertheless everyone enjoyed the day and it was good to see the island thriving under its community ownership. An impressive new jetty had been built since our previous visit and this alone made for an attractive walk.

Our group dispersed in various directions on the island, some walking out along the cliffs, some heading across towards the west shore and a few even climbing up the Sgurr despite the low cloud. It was not a day for butterflies on the wing but John Holt and I almost trod on a resting Peacock, one of the increasing number of sightings of this butterfly in the NW Highlands and Islands, and we did also see a Speckled Wood in flight.

From the boat we saw many Gannets, Fulmars and Manx Shearwaters but very few Guillemots or Razorbills, reflecting the poor breeding success of the auk family in the last two years. Highlights included two Arctic Skuas harassing a Kittiwake as we arrived at Eigg and 10 Great Skuas and two Storm Petrels on the return journey. Unfortunately there were no positive sightings of whales or dolphins.

THE SEASHORE AT CRAIG

A select group of five turned out to enjoy the equinoctial low spring tide on 12th September. Twice a year, at the spring and autumn equinoxes, the sun and moon conspire to pull the tide in and out an extra long way. At low tide an area of sea floor beyond the normal beach is exposed along with a lot of creatures not normally seen, high and dry or within wellie-wading depth. When we reached the shore the tide seemed to be well in and we wondered if our leader had got it wrong, but this has been noted before. The lower shore slope is shallow so the tide goes out very rapidly during the last hour or so and if the atmospheric pressure is high, it goes out a bit extra. On this day we were privileged to explore a very large expanse of what was essentially sea bed.

It is probably better to set the scene in general terms rather than catalogue this particular visit. The erroneously named 'coral' beach between the mainland and SWT reserve Eilean Na Creige Duibhe consists of a deep layer of dead skeletal fragments of the coralline red seaweed *Lithothamnium coralloides* or maerl. Most of the living alga grows below low water mark, but some purple living fragments can be found, sometimes concentrated in patches. This is a good foundation for high biodiversity, so there are more than half a dozen crab species (including several spider crabs), a similar number of solitary and encrusting colonial sea squirts and numerous brightly coloured sponges. The mollusc diversity is extraordinary, unusual ones including turban top shell, beds of horse mussels, several 'squirters' such as gapers, carpet shells and small razor clams and, in the

holdfasts of sugar kelp, the spectacular file shell *Limaria hyans* with its fringe of scarlet tentacles. Hermit crabs scuttle about the sea bed everywhere and the more you are aware of them, the more there seem to be.

When digging to see which squirts were squirting we uncovered a specimen of *Golfingia vulgaris*, a weird rigid worm-like creature which is a *sipunculid* and has few relatives, all of which are obscure. The book says that in deeper water it is not rare, but it is certainly rarely seen. It is said to have got its name because of its first discovery by marine biologists at St Andrews! We were attracted by a snapping sound and turned to watch fascinated as a razor clam got a grip of the maerl with its foot, upended and burrowed in a matter of seconds.

We returned to the site a month later for an unscheduled meeting and another good low tide. At least seventeen people from SWRFC and SWT attended in many cars. We'll go again, though somebody else can be car park attendant!

James Merryweather

LATE SUMMER/AUTUMN 2005 – WILDLIFE REPORTS

Sadly, the weather continued its dismal course through most of this period thwarting many planned outings and surveys. The second half of the butterfly season did produce surprisingly good numbers of Small Heath and Scotch Argus but Common Blue, Dark Green Fritillary and Meadow Brown were in very short supply. In fact for the first time ever I failed to record a single Meadow Brown in Lochalsh. September and October saw the arrival of a few Red Admirals, at last, but mainly it was just singles that were reported. There were also some autumn reports of Peacock butterflies to add to those seen in early spring. John Holt had one in his garden at Reraig on 15th and 21st September and Ted Carter reported one in his garden at Dornie on 15th and 16th October. In view of the continuing northward spread of the Peacock all records of this butterfly would be appreciated.

Several species of moth also appear to be spreading north. I recorded V-Pug and Scorched Wing for the second year running and Lunar Marbled Brown for the third year out of the last four. This seems to confirm the presence of these moths further to the north west of their currently recognised range. During 2005 I also added Clouded Silver, Satin Beauty and Angle-striped Sallow to this list of possible colonising species. On 8th June Ishbel Cameron found an Argent and Sable moth on the wall of her house at Drumbuie and in August Barbara Soutar and Tom Prescott found a caterpillar of this species at Scalpaidh. As well as being a Nationally Scarce B moth the Argent and Sable has also been designated as a Biodiversity Action Plan priority species. It is hoped to make a detailed search for this species next year on the moorland between Kyle, Erbusaig and Balmacara to assess its status in the area. On 28th June Roddie Rankin found a Birch Mocha on the window of his house at Badicaul. This moth has a very local distribution in northern Britain and this was almost certainly a first record for Lochalsh and possibly for Wester Ross.

Few interesting bird sightings were reported, probably due to the discouraging weather for observers rather than a lack of birds. Skua sightings are relatively scarce from the Lochalsh mainland shore compared with the coasts around Skye and from Applecross northwards so it was unusual to spot 7 Great Skuas from the shore near Port-an-eorna on 9th August. There was also an exceptional count of about 40 Black Guillemots in the same area on the same day. The first migrating flock of Pink-footed Geese was seen heading south east over Loch Duich on 16th September. Redwings were late arriving, the first two birds being noted near Coillimore on 6th October and it was 16th October before any large flocks appeared. Irene Gibson reported exceptional numbers at Achmore around the 20th and 21st October, decimating the crop of rowan berries. Relatively few Fieldfares were identified amongst the Redwings. Most summer migrants departed early but there was a very late Arctic Tern fishing around Eileanan Dubha, Kyle on 1st October and an equally late Wheatear near Port-an-eorna on 14th October.

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