

NEWSLETTER 53 - JUNE 2006

GLEN SHIEL BATTLE SITE

A working party visit to the Battle Site has been organised for 2.00pm on Wednesday 12th July. If you would like to join Jill Harden of NTS, John Holt, Roger Knight, James Merryweather and Brian Neath in clearing the path up to the site then please contact John on 01599 566 300 on 10th or 11th July. It would be advisable to bring boots and a strong pair of work gloves with you.

THE HIGHLAND AND MORAY BIRD RACE 2006

The Highland and Moray Bird Race was held for the second time on 19th February. The same team as last year (Martin Benson, Roger Cottis, Bob McMillan, Brian Neath and John Phillips) competed, but this year we concentrated our efforts on Skye to restrict the amount of travelling in the limited daylight hours. We started at Isle Ornsay in order to pick up as many garden birds as possible in Roger's garden then headed off to Ord where we were fortunate to see Great Spotted Woodpecker (less common on Skye than the mainland), Long-tailed Tit (not a bird that can be guaranteed anywhere) and a pair of Golden Eagles as well as the more certain Great Northern Diver and Black Guillemot. Along the route we also spotted Goldeneye and Teal on small freshwater lochs. The Ardnish peninsula was the most productive site of the day with Slavonian Grebe, Lapwing, Golden Plover, Grey Plover, Purple Sandpiper and Jack Snipe being the highlights. Bob's advanced knowledge of what is out there enabled us to see the pair of Gadwall at the head of Loch Sligachan (a rare species in Skye and Lochalsh) and with a bit of imagination the feeding flock of Barnacle Geese way out on an off-shore island off Trotternish. Whooper Swan and Goosander were found on the Storr Lochs whilst the Kilt Rock again provided Fulmars. We had to travel as far as Staffin before seeing any Redwings which were scarcer than usual during the winter months. Another pair of Golden Eagles, Kestrel and Reed Bunting were seen in the north of Trotternish but not the hoped for Hen Harriers. Altogether we clocked up an impressive 75 species which was three more than last year's excellent total. Sponsorship money raised by the event was donated to the Scottish Wildlife Trust.

BIRDS BEFORE BREAKFAST

As the Skye and Lochalsh Rangers had arranged a "Birds Before Breakfast" walk in Kyle on 6th May we joined forces with John Phillips this year rather than have our own Field Club dawn chorus walk. We met in the swimming pool car park at 04:30 to find that some birds were way ahead of us. Several Blackbirds and Robins and a Song Thrush were in full song, a Cuckoo was calling and a Starling chorus could be heard in the distance. Even Greylag Geese were already on the move and cackling away. A tortuous overgrown path eventually led us out on to the Plock and we added Collared Dove, Wren, Dunnock, Willow Warbler, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Chaffinch, Greenfinch and Lesser Redpoll to the list of singing birds and also saw a pair of Bullfinches. Out to sea we spotted Red-throated Diver and Red-breasted Merganser and heard the calls of an exceptionally early Common or Arctic Tern. An Otter was also seen emerging on to a rock to eat its catch so we were well rewarded for rising early. We then retired to the Service Point for (a still early) breakfast provided by the Ranger Service.

LATE WINTER/SPRING 2006 – WILDLIFE REPORTS

The Mallard is not a species that normally makes headlines or tends to feature in our newsletter but a gathering of about 140 at the head of Loch Long on 29th January was impressive. The loch seemed to be functioning as the local "Palais de danse" with much courtship activity and lots of splashing and diving. On 22nd February much of the loch was iced over and there were few ducks to be seen. The cold snap at the beginning of March produced some interesting sightings as many birds were driven to feeding along the shore. In Kirkton Bay on 3rd March there was an unusual concentration of at least 14 Stonechats on the seaweed piled up along the high water mark and on 6th March there were 11 more Stonechats along the shore at Ardelve. Other birds seen feeding or roosting on the shores at Ardelve, Kirkton and Balmacara between 3rd and 6th March included Jack Snipe, Woodcock, Rock and Meadow Pipits, Grey Wagtail, Robins, Blackbirds, Song Thrushes, Redwings, Starlings, Chaffinches, two Goldfinches and the first returning Skylarks.

Hérons are early breeders and birds were already back at the Heronries at Eilean a'Mhal, Conchra and Totaig by the end of January. By 17th February at least 18 nests were occupied on Eilean a'Mhal, the largest and most successful Heronry in Lochalsh.

Small numbers of Slavonian Grebes winter around the coast of Skye but they are less frequently seen in Lochalsh. The few records suggest that they are scarce passage migrants. However some may have wintered in the Port Cam/Port-an-eorna area last winter as three birds were seen off that stretch of coast on 21st February and two birds were there again on 19th March. The Slavonian Grebe is one of those birds whose winter plumage is so different from its breeding plumage that it is hard to believe it is the same species. Freshwater lochs to the north and south of the Great Glen are its main breeding area in Britain. Eleanor Hunton saw three Whooper Swans on Loch Iain Oig on 24th February, the first time she has seen swans there. Single Whooper Swans remained on Loch Achaidh na h-Inich until at least 29th April and on Loch Shiel until at least 1st May. Iceland Gulls were scarcer than usual in Scotland during the winter and one at Eilean Donan on 22nd February was the only one reported in Skye and Lochalsh.

I used to see Snow Buntings on Carr Brae most winters, usually during cold spells when they were driven down from higher ground by deep snow or blizzards. However I hadn't seen any for several years until Niall Haig phoned to tell me that there was a flock at the fank near the View Point on 9th April. I was fortunate to see 10 there on the 9th and 13 on the 10th. Niall saw them for several days with a maximum count of 18. As usual this occurred during snowy conditions but it was the first time I have recorded Snow Buntings in April.

Seabird numbers have been very low in the sea lochs following several poor breeding seasons. It was a surprise therefore to find a Puffin at the head of Loch Duich (my first record for the loch) on 19th April and also a Guillemot and two Razorbills in the same area. This was especially surprising in view of the scarcity of these birds in more usual sites such as outer Loch Carron and Glenelg Bay.

There was a Barn Owl at Ard Hill on 5th March and Donald MacIntosh reported two at Inverinate in early April. The status of the Barn Owl in Lochalsh is something of a puzzle. There is little of the traditional habitat of this species in the area and as far as I know there is only one confirmed breeding record but from time to time we get a spate of sightings. Please report any sightings of Barn Owls, particularly any potential breeding birds.

The arrival of summer migrants was somewhat erratic this year. Wheatears and House Martins seemed to be very late whilst other species such as Tree Pipit and Garden Warbler were rather early. It appears to be a very good year for Swallows and Cuckoos with good numbers everywhere. The first Cuckoo to be reported was heard by Ishbel Cameron at Drumbuie on 21st April. Cuckoos have been scarce in the Drumbuie/Duirinish area in recent years but there have been at least three calling birds there this year.

The weather has hardly been conducive to butterfly activity except for a three-day spell from 8th to 10th May and a ten-day spell from 5th to 14th June. Nevertheless all the anticipated species have been seen and there has even been an influx of migrant Red Admirals and Painted Ladies along with Silver Y moths and the odd Peacock. I saw the first ever Small White in our garden on Carr Brae on 11th June and this was almost certainly a migrant as well. The common white butterflies seen locally are Green-veined White, the Small White and Large White (or "cabbage white") butterflies being scarce in the north west Highlands. The Orange-tip was unusually numerous on Carr Brae from 5th May until 2nd June. I have only three previous records of singles but during this period I recorded 17 butterfly-days. Pat Mucklow saw an Orange-tip at the north end of Loch Lundie on 4th June and a Red Admiral up near the radio mast overlooking Plockton Bay on the same day. There were still Orange-tips on the wing at Coille Mhor on 6th June, a late date for this species.

Moth trapping sessions at Audrey Sinclair's on 6th June and at Pat Mucklow's on 8th June produced a total of 52 species of macro-moth. The most numerous moth at Audrey's was the Bordered White, a moth of mature conifer woodland, whilst the most numerous at Pat's was the Pale-shouldered Brocade, a more generalist species of broad-leaved woodland, scrub and moorland. The largest moth was a Poplar Hawk-moth, the rarest was The Saxon, the most unusual in northern Scotland were two Clouded Silver, the cutest was a Peach Blossom whilst The Shears was a new species for Lochalsh. By contrast two Heath traps set in Coille Mhor on 5th June caught only six moths of four species. However one of these was a Birch Mocha, only the second Lochalsh record, the first having been identified by Roddie Rankin at Badicaul on 28th June last year. Subsequently I have trapped a third Birch Mocha in my garden on Carr Brae. Perhaps this is another moth which is increasing in the area.

BUMBLEBEE ATLAS

The Highland Biological Recording Group has now published Highland Bumblebees, the results of a comprehensive survey of the distribution, ecology and conservation of bumblebees during the period 2000 to 2005. At £3.50 it is extremely good value for money. (Only £2.00 to members of HBRG). Copies can be obtained from HBRG, "Tigh nam Beithe", Strathpeffer, Ross & Cromarty, IV14 9ET. Cheques should be made payable to Highland Biological Recording Group and please enclose s.a.e. suitable for an A5 book, 50p stamp 2nd class or 68p 1st class.

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