

NEWSLETTER 55 - JANUARY 2007

On checking back through the files I find that this is the 55th newsletter to be produced since regular newsletters were introduced in May 1993 so the newsletters will be numbered from now on. If anyone would like back copies of any newsletters please let me know. It may be possible to include all the newsletters on a website in due course.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The AGM will be held at Achmore Village Hall at 7:30pm on Thursday, 22nd March. The meeting will follow the same successful format as last year and Audrey Sinclair will again coordinate the provision of refreshments.

THE WEATHER IN 2006

I ventured to suggest in the January 2006 Newsletter that based on historical evidence 2006 would not be a very wet year as we do not tend to get three consecutive wet years. This turned out to be wishful thinking as the total rainfall for the year was 2160mm or 85.04ins, which is 111% of the average rainfall for the period 1985 to 2005. However 685mm (26.97ins) of this fell in the last two months of the year hence my recollection of the year as being fairly good in general, and particularly good for butterflies, was not totally inaccurate. As usual the weather readings are from Reraig House, courtesy of Duncan Glen-Riddell. The figures in brackets are the average readings at Reraig for the period 1985 to 2005.

	Rainfall		Temperature (Celsius)	
	mm	ins	ave max	ave min
January	173	6.81 (9.29)	8.29 (7.84)	2.13 (1.90)
February	113	4.45 (7.72)	8.68 (8.40)	1.61 (1.46)
March	192	7.56 (7.80)	9.13 (10.00)	0.52 (2.50)
April	159	6.26 (4.21)	11.13 (12.19)	2.50 (3.62)
May	176	6.93 (3.43)	15.58 (15.67)	7.02 (5.86)
June	117	4.61 (3.98)	18.75 (17.21)	8.73 (8.03)
July	79	3.11 (4.17)	21.35 (18.56)	10.65 (9.77)
August	77	3.03 (5.28)	18.42 (18.61)	9.87 (9.73)
September	193	7.60 (6.34)	19.33 (16.57)	9.67 (8.01)
October	196	7.72 (7.95)	15.45 (13.38)	7.28 (6.01)
November	302	11.89 (7.95)	10.37 (10.17)	4.40 (3.56)
December	383	15.08 (8.23)	8.97 (8.12)	3.20 (1.92)
Totals	2160	85.04 (76.42)		

The inconsistency of the weather from year to year in the north west Highlands is highlighted by the fact that the wettest months during 2005 were January and September whilst in 2006 November and December had the highest rainfall. July and August were the driest months in 2006 whereas the average figures indicate that traditionally May and June had the least rainfall. Looking back at the figures from 2000 to 2006, in only two years has May featured as one of the two driest months and June has not featured at all. Clearly the pattern is changing. The wettest day of 2006 was 30th November with 67mm (2.64ins). Although July and August had the least rainfall February was the only month in which rain was recorded on less than 10 days (nine). Rain fell on a total of 220 days, more or less identical with the 219 days in 2005.

All months except March, April, May and August recorded higher than average maximum temperatures and all months except March and April recorded higher than average minimum temperatures. The highest temperature recorded on any one day was 30 degrees Celsius on 10th June and 19th July and the lowest was -7 degrees from 2nd to 4th March. Overall July and September were the warmest months and in the UK as a whole it was the warmest September on record.

THE BLACKCAP

Blackcaps have been widely reported at bird feeding stations this winter. Although the Blackcap is an increasing breeding bird in our area the birds that breed here migrate to southern Europe and north Africa for the winter. It has been established from ringing records that the birds that are increasingly wintering in Britain originate from Germany and for some reason developed a westerly migration route to Britain rather than head south in the traditional manner. Having found a wealth of food available here as well as a relatively mild climate a proportion of the German population has now firmly developed this as a regular migration strategy. As an insectivorous warbler, which supplemented its diet with berries and other soft fruits, it has become surprisingly adaptable and has learned to feed on peanuts as well as seed mixes and apples. It has also become quite aggressive and is able to hold its own at the feeding areas against more robust-looking and more numerous birds such as Chaffinches and House Sparrows. The male is easy to identify because of the black cap that gives it its name. The female has puzzled many

people because it has a brown cap and this is not always shown in some of the general bird books. Further reports of Blackcaps and what they are eating would be welcomed.

LATE AUTUMN/WINTER – OTHER WILDLIFE REPORTS

A male Black Grouse (or Blackcock) was seen by Sarah Kay perched in a tree by the roadside at Loch Cluanie on 21st October. There have been very few confirmed records of Black Grouse in Lochalsh in recent years. Black-headed Gulls are seen regularly in the sea lochs outside of the breeding season, especially at Glenelg, Kyle Rhea and Balmacara, but a flock of about 230 at the mouth of the Balmacara Burn on 27th October was exceptional. Another gull species, the Kittiwake, was present in large numbers, along with other gulls, in Loch Carron between Plockton and Kishorn on 6th December and I estimated between 250 and 300 Kittiwakes. This is the least likely time of year for such an influx but there were still good numbers in the same area on 18th December. The Kittiwake tends to be unpredictable in its visits to Lochalsh although more regular around the coast of Skye. Swirling dense flocks sometimes appear well up the sea lochs in March/April, prior to the breeding season, and influxes can also occur in late summer and autumn. Single birds, however, can turn up anywhere around the coast at almost any time of year.

The gales in early December resulted in many sightings of the rare Leach's Petrel being reported from the whole coast of western Britain including Skye. I saw a petrel at Ardelve on 4th December, which I identified as a Storm Petrel, but it was a poor view in difficult conditions and I didn't have a telescope with me. With the benefit of hindsight and the subsequent knowledge of the influx of Leach's Petrels I suspect that my Ardelve bird was also a Leach's. Bob MacMillan saw two Little Auks at Kyle Rhea on 11th December and these may also have been storm-driven although we usually have small numbers in the area during January and February whether there are gales or not. Iceland Gulls also appeared on Skye during December and I was fortunate to see one in a field at Dubh-aird, Plockton on 18th. I am not sure what made me look at the solitary gull walking about in the field as I would have assumed that it was a Herring Gull or Common Gull. However I am glad that some instinct caused me to raise my binoculars and have an excellent view of the first Iceland Gull I have ever seen in a field as opposed to on the shore or in flight over the sea.

The Pied Wagtail is a common breeding bird in Lochalsh, but the majority of birds leave us for the winter. One or two usually remain in Kyle and can often be seen in the main car park or even in Main Street. Odd birds occasionally turn up elsewhere on the coast or in one of the villages but until this winter I have never known one to spend the winter on Carr Brae. However a female has remained in the fank area into January and is probably taking advantage of insects attracted by the family of pigs that are being contained within the fank and adjoining inclosure. Even more surprising was to find a Grey Wagtail in the same area on 7th January. The Grey Wagtail is a more local breeding bird that also leaves the Highlands for more hospitable lowland sites during the winter except for the odd hardy individual.

Albino and partial albino birds are not a particularly rare sight with Blackbirds and House Sparrows perhaps being the most common species to be seen with varying amounts of white in their plumage. However a male Chaffinch in Jean and Brian Saville's garden at Glenelg in October had them puzzled for a while. It sported a white cap and a white collar, which made it look like some rare species of finch or bunting until it became a regular visitor to the peanut feeder when its identification became more obvious. Amazingly a similar bird appeared in Plockton in December and was seen both on The Brae and in the garden of Sandra Glasgow.

Although the books will tell you that the Otter is a secretive nocturnal animal, those that live in the sea off the north west coast are positively diurnal and spend much of the short winter days hunting. As a result this is the best time of year to see these highly attractive and entertaining creatures. Avernish, the Plock of Kyle, the coast between Drumbuie and Port-an-eorna and Fernaig are all excellent places to watch Otters. For anyone who has still not seen an Otter, a walk along these shores is highly recommended, preferably with a good pair of binoculars and on a day when the sea is flat calm. On such a day you also stand a good chance of seeing Harbour Porpoises and Common Seals, which are also present throughout the year in the sea lochs.

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