

NEWSLETTER 56 - MAY 2007

MRS MARY HUDSON (1917 – 2007)

Mary Hudson was a founder member of the South West Ross Field Club and was its first secretary. The Club was inaugurated on 5th November 1955 at Duncraig Castle and we still possess the notebook in which Mary wrote the minutes of all the meetings during the first two years of its existence. In those days summaries of all the talks given by visiting speakers were written up as well as the minutes of more formal meetings such as AGMs. The first guest speaker was none other than Seton Gordon on 17th December 1955 at the Lochalsh Hotel. Seton Gordon was at that time residing at Duntulm on Skye and on 16th June 1956 he and Mrs Gordon led a field meeting at Sligachan. All this is recorded in Mary's handwriting in the notebook (a County Council of Ross and Cromarty Education Committee issue!). Mary was of course a schoolteacher at Dornie, Portree and Plockton as well as further afield.

Mary MacPherson was born in 1917 in Glenquithel, Church Road, Kyle where she lived for most of her life. Her father was Duncan MacPherson who started the first pharmacy in Kyle and who is still well remembered for the very fine collection of early photographs of Kyle and surrounding area. Mary attended primary school at Auchtertyre and secondary school at Plockton before going on to the University of Aberdeen. She then did a post-graduate degree in Cambridge studying theology and archaeology.

She had many active interests and talents. She was an accomplished artist and at least once held her own exhibition of paintings in Eilean Iarmain. She was a founder member of the South West Ross Piping Society and was involved with the Skye Horticultural Society.

In 1984 she married Col. Christopher Hudson but sadly their time together was short-lived as he died in 1986. However his family by a previous marriage became hers too and she kept in constant contact with them.

Mary's legendary zest for life continued unabated almost to the end. She was able to celebrate her 90th birthday in the Lochalsh Hotel, attended by friends and relations just before she died on 15th March. Apart from brief hospital admissions she was able to remain at home due to the dedicated help of a number of local people. She will be sorely missed.

This is an abbreviated version of the obituary written by Dr John Adamson for the local press but with additional details of her early contribution to the Field Club.

BRIAN SAVILLE

We also have to report the premature death of Brian Saville, another member of the Field Club. Whilst not an active member in terms of attending meetings he more or less acted as "our man in Glenelg". He was the person that residents in the Glenelg/Arnisdale area reported interesting wildlife sightings to and who was expected to know what had been seen from the flimsiest of descriptions. He willingly passed on his own observations and those of others for inclusion in the wildlife report section of the newsletter and so his name will be familiar to most members. Last year he photographed the emergence of two Peacock butterflies from their cocoons, the first confirmation of the successful breeding of Peacocks in the Lochalsh area. His contribution to the Glenelg community was enormous and he was always willing to help people with their mechanical, technical or computer problems. Our sympathy goes out to his wife Jean.

GARDEN BIRDS

Following my request for further reports of Blackcaps in gardens in Newsletter No 55 Hugh Scott from Kyleakin sent in details of the food that a female Blackcap was eating in his and Margaret's garden. It appeared to have a very healthy balanced diet tucking into apples, nuts, fat and a home-made mix of porridge oats and sultanas. However it wasn't seen to take seeds from a seed feeder. There were reports of both male and female Blackcaps from several gardens in Dornie during January, feeding on both peanuts and seeds, but there have been few reports from February onwards. We now have the breeding summer visiting Blackcaps back but they occur less frequently in gardens than their wintering cousins and are not attracted to bird tables at this time of year.

Another bird that seems to have recently discovered the benefits of gardens as places to find easily accessible food is the Bullfinch. Both Jessie MacGregor and Audrey Sinclair have had Bullfinches feeding on peanuts this year. I have never heard of this behaviour before and it would be interesting to hear from anyone else who has had Bullfinches feeding in their gardens. Could this be the solution to the bird's unpopularity due to its habit of eating the buds of both fruit and ornamental blossom trees?

John Adamson had four or five Lesser Redpolls in his garden in Kyle on 9th January. Redpolls tend to leave the area during the winter months in most years and only return during April. Maud and Roger Tufft had a Snow Bunting in their garden on 19th March, the second time they have been visited by this unlikely garden bird. Josephine Dean has joined Ishbel Cameron in managing to attract Reed Buntings to her garden and has seen as many as five birds at her feeding station.

The results of the Field Club's Garden Wildlife Survey 2005 were published rather belatedly in January. An amazing 58 bird species were recorded as using gardens in Lochalsh during that year. Robin, Chaffinch, Blackbird, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Greenfinch and Siskin were recorded in all participating gardens and Dunnock, Coal Tit, House Sparrow, Song Thrush and Wren in all but one or two gardens. There were also good showings by Swallow, Goldfinch and Yellowhammer. Amongst the more unusual garden birds were Heron, Barnacle Goose, Rock Dove, Stonechat and Sedge Warbler.

Copies of the results were sent out only to those who participated in the survey. However I will be pleased to forward copies of the report, which includes mammals, amphibians, reptiles and butterflies as well as birds, to anyone who is interested.

THE GOOSANDER

The Goosander is one of the sawbill ducks and is predominantly a fish eater. It is present in Lochalsh throughout the year but is usually restricted in its distribution. The heads of Loch Duich and Loch Long are the most frequented sites with Glenelg Bay and Nostie Bay probably the next most likely sites. During the 2006/2007 winter however female Goosanders were found at more widely scattered sites than usual, albeit in small numbers. They have been seen on the coast at Ardelve and between Erbusaig and Drumbuie and inland on Lochalsh Dam, Loch Palascaig and Loch Achaidh na h-Inich. Most of the birds on the Shiel and Croe Saltings have also been females whereas the closely related Red-breasted Merganser, which is a more common and widespread species, has had a surplus of drakes.

NON-ESTUARINE COASTAL WATERBIRD SURVEY (NEWS)

This BTO survey was carried out during December 2006/January 2007, repeating similar surveys carried out in the winters of 1984/85 and 1997/98. Locally the coastline from Ardelve to Kyle and round to Plockton was surveyed between 4th January and 5th February. (Some latitude was given to northern Scotland due to the short days and limitations of weather and tides.) Some 27 species of diver, grebe, cormorant, geese, duck, wader and seabird were recorded excluding gulls, which were not counted. The most numerous bird was the Shag with 252 counted. This was followed by 116 Mallard, 114 Oystercatchers, 111 Wigeon, 76 Red-breasted Mergansers, 57 Herons, 57 Curlews, 50 Razorbills, 46 Teal, 46 Eider, 46 Black Guillemots, 41 Ringed Plover, 31 Cormorants, 30 Greylag Geese, 19 Great Northern Divers, 15 Turnstone, 12 Little Grebes and 10 Purple Sandpipers. Other species with less than 10 recorded were Red-throated Diver, Black-throated Diver, Slavonian Grebe, Pink-footed Goose, Goldeneye, Goosander, Common Snipe, Redshank and Guillemot. The survey was carried out by Brian Neath and Rule Anderson. One of the bonuses of doing such a survey is spotting other creatures that are not part of the survey and we had numerous sightings of Otters and Harbour Porpoises and even saw an immature White-tailed Sea Eagle soaring over An Dubh-aird.

OTHER WILDLIFE SIGHTINGS

Farquhar Macrae was surprised to find 15 Whooper Swans on Loch Anna on 9th March, the first time he has ever seen swans on this upland loch. On 7th March there was a record count of 60 Teal on the shore at Reraig. I had spotted only a few Teal until a dog ran across the shore and caused them to fly out on to the sea. It was one occasion when I didn't complain about dogs being allowed to disturb the wildlife on the shore!

2007 seems to be another "2003" with many butterflies, moths and migrant birds being reported earlier than ever before and a summary of these events will be written up for the next newsletter. I would be grateful if you can let me have any such records that you have not already told me about.

THE TECHNOLOGICAL AGE

James Merryweather is doing his best to bring the Field Club up to date with modern technology. He has set up a Field Club website (www.swrfc.org.uk) which is already looking impressive and can only get better. Please let us know what you think about it and also what you would like to see on the website. At present one of the best features is the link to other relevant websites and the Skye birds and Skye flora sites are particularly worth looking at.

We would also like to cut down on postage costs by sending out programmes and newsletters by e-mail. If you would like to receive these documents in this format please let James have your e-mail address.

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