

NEWSLETTER 58 – DECEMBER 2007

HIGHLAND BIRD REPORT 2005

This is now available from Alastair F McNea, Liathach, 4 Balnafettack Place, Inverness, IV3 8TQ. The bird report is a very professional publication and is essential reading for anyone interested in the birds of the Highlands. Compiling all the data from such a vast area is a mammoth task and Dave Butterfield, the editor, is to be congratulated on producing this impressive record of the year 2005 before the end of the current year. Lochalsh and Skye records are shown separately from those of Wester Ross and separate to each other so are easy to pick out. The current report includes the Bittern, Little Egret and Blackpoll Warbler seen on Skye and the Kingfisher seen near Strathcarron as well as much information about the breeding and wintering birds of the area. The report costs £9.50 including postage and cheques should be made payable to the SOC Highland Branch (HBR Account).

BIRD ATLAS 2007 - 2011

As mentioned in the September Newsletter fieldwork commenced on 1st November for a new atlas of wintering and breeding birds of Britain and Ireland. The fieldwork will continue until the summer of 2011. Anyone can participate by recording any birds that they can recognise as long as they specify which 10km square the birds were seen in. For these "Roving Records" there is not even a requirement to specify the number of each species. More experienced birdwatchers can take on one or more tetrads which require timed visits of one or two hours. A 10km square is divided into 25 tetrads of 2km x 2km and the aim is to survey a minimum of eight tetrads in each 10km square. From my experience so far two hours is really necessary to cover the variety of habitats we tend to get in local tetrads. One of the good things about such a survey is that it makes you go to places you wouldn't normally visit and also every bird you see or hear counts. The difference between this atlas and previous ones is that records can be submitted on line and the results for any square can be viewed instantly. I was surprised to find that someone had recorded Snow Bunting in "my" 10 km square (NG82)! It is worth looking at the website (www.birdatlas.net) even if you don't feel confident enough to participate .

NATIONAL MOTH RECORDING SCHEME

Butterfly Conservation is the conservation organisation which is responsible for saving butterflies, moths and their habitats. It combines the conservation aims of the RSPB with the surveying methods of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) for butterflies and moths. Although many counties, local groups and individuals have been recording moths for many years, trying to incorporate these into a meaningful central database is a daunting exercise. BC have now come up with a National Moth Recording Scheme which it is hoped will centralise all records of macro-moths. Again the availability of the worldwide web and the fact that many moth recorders store their records in various computer databases has prompted BC to introduce the new scheme which should be compatible with most systems currently in use. As Moth Recorder for Vice Counties 104 (Skye) and 105 Wester Ross I have been surprised how many visitors there have been in the last two years who have brought their moth traps with them and have sent their results to me. I am still going through a learning curve with the MapMate system but hopefully I will get there in the end. In the UK as a whole something like 900 macro-moths have been recorded. Fortunately in Lochalsh and Skye we are only approaching the 300 mark but it is still a formidable task to submit all our records into the new scheme. As usual these days there is a website where you can find out much more about butterflies and moths and the National Moth Recording Scheme, the latter featuring under the Moths Count link (www.butterfly-conservation.org).

WILDLIFE REPORTS

After the early promise in March and April it turned out to be a disappointing year for butterflies but a late influx of Red Admirals helped to brighten up the autumn days. During a good year for Red Admirals one tends to take them for granted but when seeing the first for several months one cannot help but be stunned by the sheer beauty of this butterfly. Butterfly Conservation asked people to nominate their favourite butterfly this year and I have to confess to voting for the Red Admiral although the Peacock was the overall winner.

Following the reports of a pair of Mute Swans at the head of Loch Duich during June, July and August a pair was seen at the fishfarm at Letterfearn on 24th October and subsequently in Broadford Bay. It seems reasonable to assume that the same birds were involved. Balmacara Bay usually has a flock of gulls on the shore at the mouth of the burn but c.170 Herring Gulls on 5th October and c.150 Black-headed Gulls there on 19th November were exceptional counts. Grey and Pied Wagtails are mainly summer visitors to the area with just the odd birds staying around for the winter. Pied Wagtails are usually the more conspicuous as they tend to winter in the villages where they find scraps of food dropped deliberately or otherwise by humans. School playgrounds and car parks are favourite Pied Wagtail winter sites. Although they were plentiful during the breeding season I haven't seen many since August whereas I seem to be seeing more Grey Wagtails than usual. The Greys seem to prefer the shore where they presumably find a good supply of insects amongst the banks of seaweed thrown up by the tide. Last winter one wintered in the fank area on Carr Brae for the first time to my knowledge

and this autumn/winter period one has appeared several times in our garden. There were three on the shore at Conchra on 19th September, possibly migrants, and others have been seen on the shore at Ardelve, Bundaloch and Nostie during November.

The arrival of the winter thrushes, Redwing and Fieldfare, was not as spectacular as it is in most years. There were one or two Redwings in Dornie and Ardelve on 27th September with small numbers subsequently. The only large flock that I saw was at Rubha Mor, Plockton on 7th October when there were at least 70 birds in the woodland along with my first two Fieldfares. During November flocks of about 40 Fieldfares were seen in the Kirkton and Ardelve areas but I didn't hear of any large flocks on the mainland comparable to those reported passing through Skye.

Audrey Sinclair has again had Bullfinches feeding on peanuts. This is still an unusual development and I would be interested to hear from anyone else who has had Bullfinches at their feeding station.

GARDEN BIRD DISEASE

Many people who feed the birds in their gardens have been upset this year by finding an exceptional number of birds dead or dying. Greenfinches and Chaffinches have been the most affected species and it definitely seems to be a finch problem. I haven't heard of any Robins, Dunnocks, Blackbirds or tit species being affected. There was a couple of weeks when it seemed that the disease had almost wiped out the finch population with hardly any flocks of finches feeding in gardens. However numbers subsequently increased again and it may be that during those two or three weeks the finches were finding plenty of natural seeds in the birches, alders and even Sitka spruce. It has been encouraging to find good numbers of Greenfinches again in Dornie, Ardelve, Nostie and Balmacara Square. They haven't as yet returned to our isolated garden on Carr Brae but our Chaffinch flock is back up to 40 or 50 birds.

The latest issue of the BTO's magazine Bird Table reports that the disease involved is Trichomoniasis and "the effects of this emerging infectious disease are currently being investigated by BTO researchers, working alongside other scientists involved in GBHi (the Garden Bird Health initiative)". Any further information that becomes available will be passed on in future newsletters.

In the meantime the advice is to keep the feeding area as clean as possible. There are a number of proprietary disinfectant sprays available including ARK-CLENS and Clinell.

SKYE AND LOCHALSH RSPB WILDLIFE EXPLORERS MOTH TRAPPING EVENT

At the request of Alison MacLennan and Sarah Kay four moth traps were set up by Barbara Soutar at the Lochalsh Woodland Garden on 28th September. I also ran my own moth trap at home on Carr Brae the same evening with the hope of attracting some of the more attractive moths to show to the children the following morning. Over 20 children plus parents duly turned up at the Woodland Garden on the Saturday morning along with Sarah Kay. We were able to show them some 19 species of moth including Pine Carpet, July Highflyer, Autumnal Rustic, Angle Shades, Merveille du Jour and Green-brindled Crescent. However the highlight was an Orange Sallow which was a new species for the Balmacara Estate and for the Lochalsh area. The children (and adults) were fascinated to see the variety of attractive species at such close quarters and were able to answer a number of questions put to them by Sarah on their way back to the cars.

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