

NEWSLETTER 65 - AUGUST 2009

BOAT TRIP TO CANNA

The rearranged boat trip to Canna went ahead on 18th July as planned. The weather was unsettled and there was still some uncertainty as we arrived in Armadale as to whether we would be able to sail as far as Canna. However skipper Bruce Watts must have been confident that the conditions would improve so we did head off into the choppy waters of the Sound of Sleat.

There were terns on and around the Armadale islands as usual and seabird numbers were high in the Sound of Sleat and round beyond the Point of Sleat, especially Manx Shearwaters and Gannets. The difficulties that are being experienced by many seabirds was evident from the low numbers of Razorbills, Guillemots and Puffins and the fact that only adult Kittiwakes were observed with no immature birds. The return journey was notable for regular sightings of Great Skuas and some Fulmars. On the island I was lucky to spot both Puffin and Black Guillemot flying up to their nesting burrows high up on the western cliffs of Sanday. In the sheltered bay between Canna and Sanday there were good numbers of Eiders including several females with broods of ducklings. Wading birds were represented by Oystercatchers, Ringed Plover, Snipe, Redshank, Greenshank and Common Sandpiper whilst land birds included Buzzard, Wheatear, Skylark, Linnet and the ubiquitous Willow Warbler and House Sparrow.

I had been hoping for a good butterfly day as on our last visit in August 2006 I was fairly certain that I had seen a Scotch Argus amongst the nine species recorded that day. Not realising that this would have been a first record for the Small Isles I hadn't double checked to confirm my identification. However although it remained dry on this visit there was a strong wind and butterflies were few and far between. I did find several Meadow Brown and two Small Heath in sheltered spots along the south shore of Sanday and a very worn Painted Lady during the walk back to the pier. A frustratingly brief glimpse of another possible Scotch Argus left the presence of this butterfly on Canna still to be confirmed.

It was interesting to note Grass of Parnassus, Lesser Knapweed and Devil's-bit Scabious already in flower on Canna several days before I found any in flower in Lochalsh.

The sail back to Armadale was very pleasant with excellent visibility and a much calmer sea. The only disappointment was that no whales, dolphins or porpoises put in an appearance for us.

Several of the passengers were visiting Canna for the first time and like most of us were captivated by this wonderful island.

BUTTERFLIES

The huge arrival of Painted Lady butterflies in the UK continued to attract widespread attention in the media and the species eventually arrived in Lochalsh from 30th May and throughout June and July. However numbers were not as high here as in 1996. Six at Balmacara on 30th May and five at Drumbuie on 11th July were the highest counts that I am aware of. It continued to be a good year for fritillary butterflies. Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries carried on from where Pearl-bordered left off in early June and then Dark Green Fritillaries overlapped with the Small Pearl-bordered from 23rd June. Both these species were widespread in Lochalsh but again we failed to locate any Pearl-bordered Fritillary populations away from Carr Brae.

I have seen very few Red Admirals or Small Tortoiseshells so far this year despite visiting many parts of Lochalsh during fieldwork for the BTO Bird Atlas. However Pat Mucklow has been seeing Red Admirals in Kyle and Ishbel Cameron has had good numbers of Small Tortoiseshell in Drumbuie. Red Admiral numbers often peak in September

so please keep an eye open for this butterfly and report your sightings. The second brood of Peacock butterflies has been in evidence since 25th July and it looks as if it will be another record year for this species.

There was an exceptionally early Scotch Argus in Dornie on 10th July but it was not until the more typical date of the 25th July that large numbers began to appear. Once into August Scotch Argus became the most numerous and widespread butterfly in Lochalsh as usual.

OTHER WILDLIFE REPORTS

Iain Turnbull has had Bullfinches attracted to his bird feeders in the garden at Lochalsh House, Balmacara this year so it looks as if the habit may be spreading eastwards from the Kyle/Badicaul area at last. Please continue to monitor this behaviour.

During Bird Atlas fieldwork in June I came across Goldfinches at Inverinate and Sallachy. Goldfinches have become more frequent in the area during the autumn and winter months and are now regular feeders in gardens but there are few records of successful breeding. Details of any breeding season records, especially evidence of successful breeding would be appreciated.

Most of our summer migrants winter in Africa and many species are causing concern nationally including Cuckoo, Whinchat and Spotted Flycatcher. However these three species have been present locally in good numbers and my own impression has been that there were more Cuckoos than ever this year. Many of our summer migrants spend as little as a quarter of the year in the British Isles and the British Trust for Ornithology has launched an “Out of Africa” appeal to fund research into what is happening to these migrants in Africa and during their long migrations between there and northern Europe. Read more on www.bto.org.

The Dornie Glaucous Gull has remained in the area during the summer and has continued to feed in Sheena and Roger Knight's garden. Not to be outdone Skye has also had a summering bird in Portree, this one feeding on chips at the harbour!

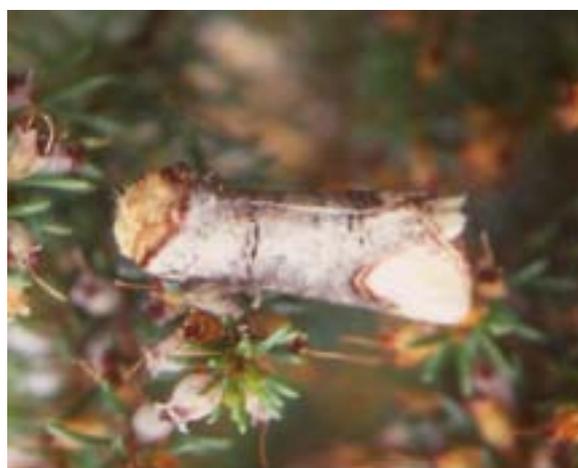
Eider ducks occur in Loch Duich mostly during the breeding season and a flock which consists mostly of drakes usually gathers off the fish farm near Letterfearn. On 5th June I saw a typical flock of about 35 near the fish farm. On looking again in that direction the ducks seemed to have vanished but then I was surprised to see that they had somehow got inside the cages. Eiders feed principally on molluscs with fish forming a very small part of their diet so it is almost certain that they were attracted by shellfish or crustaceans which may gather within the cages. It was still a surprise that they would be so bold as to enter the cages.

James Merryweather had a Wood Wasp in his Auchtertyre garden on 7th August. It is a large fearsome looking insect but is harmless to humans. It is able to use its long ovipositor to drill into the trunks of conifers where it lays its eggs.

Donald MacIntosh of Loch Duich Plants has had a beech sapling stripped of leaves by Buff-tip caterpillars. The Buff-tip is quite a common moth in the area and its caterpillars are known to feed on a wide range of broadleaved trees and shrubs. Fortunately for Donald they persisted on just the one beech tree. The adult Buff-tip is quite a large moth but at rest it folds its wings in such a way that it just resembles a broken piece of birch twig.



Buff-tip caterpillar (Photo: Brian Neath)



Adult Buff-tip moth (Photo: Brian Neath)