

SOUTH WEST ROSS FIELD CLUB

GARDEN WILDLIFE SURVEY 2005

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INTRODUCTION

Following on from the successful Garden Wildlife Survey of 2003 it was decided to carry out a more detailed survey in 2005. The original survey had not been a true survey in the recognised sense. It was a snapshot assessment based on the observers' perceptions of the frequency of occurrence of certain specified birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles and butterflies in their gardens rather than an actual record of observations over a specific period of time. Nevertheless the results of the 2003 survey provided a valuable guide to the wide variety of wildlife that is taking advantage of the food and shelter available in Lochalsh gardens. As a result the published report of the survey was re-printed in the Highland Biological Recording Group's Newsletter No. 17 in April 2004 at the request of the HBRG committee and editor.

METHODOLOGY

For the 2005 survey a simple recording form was sent out to all members of the Field Club and to those non-members who participated in the 2003 survey. This required the observer to tick columns showing the monthly occurrence of the same 29 species of bird and 17 other wildlife species as the 2003 survey. The option was given to enter the maximum monthly count rather than a tick if the observer so wished. Observers were also encouraged to record other species that visited their gardens as well as those specified and the form made provision for a substantial number of additional species.

The instructions emphasised that only species actually using the garden should be included, not over-flying birds unless they were actually hunting over the garden. Low-flying Swallows and House Martins catching insects over the garden were acceptable as were hunting Sparrowhawks and Buzzards but not high-soaring birds of prey, migrating geese or birds visible on the shore from the garden.

The same garden details were requested as in the original survey.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Unfortunately there was a disappointing response to the new survey. Only 21 completed forms were returned compared to the 44 for the 2003 survey and eight of those were from non-members. However the forms were completed to a high standard and included some fascinating records. No fewer than 58 bird species occurred in the 21 gardens during the year. Robin, Chaffinch and Blackbird were again the three most common garden birds and the top 15 species were the same as in the previous survey albeit in slightly different order. Four of the 29 specified birds did not feature in the top 29 (Fieldfare, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Blackcap and Waxwing) and were replaced by Hooded Crow, Treecreeper, Goldcrest and Herring Gull.

The varied nature of the gardens in Lochalsh resulted in a number of species being recorded which would not normally be regarded as garden birds. The garden of Moira and Adrian Quinn at Conchra is on the shore of Loch Long and has extensive grassy areas which attracted Greylag Geese and Barnacle Geese as well as Curlew, Common Gull, Grey Heron and Rock Dove. Further along Loch Long at Allt-nan-sugh, Rowena Oliver's garden attracted the only Twite. The only garden to be visited by a Stonechat was that of Fiona and Bruce Williams at Upper Ardelve while Ishbel Cameron at Drumbuie was the only participant to record Reed Bunting. She had a male feeding regularly in her garden from January until 1st July with two males on 18th April. Jean and Brian Saville had the only Sedge Warbler in their garden at Glenelg. My own garden on Carr Brae is surrounded by exceptionally good native woodland and I am fortunate to have Tree Pipit, Redstart, Garden Warbler and Wood Warbler in and

around the garden in most years. I was the only observer to record Lesser Redpoll and recorded this attractive small finch in nine months. It is not an easy bird to observe unless you are familiar with its flight call and I suspect that it occurs more widely in gardens than the results suggest. If you have alder or birch trees in or bordering your garden then there is a very good chance that Lesser Redpolls could be found feeding on the seeds of these trees, often in association with Siskins.

THE TABLES

BIRDS Table 1 shows the 58 bird species in descending order of reporting frequency. This was measured by adding up the number of gardens in which a species was recorded in each month, the maximum possible total being 240 for a bird recorded in every garden in every month (i.e. 12 months x 20 gardens = 240 garden-months). The Robin was the only bird that achieved maximum points. The 2005 survey included a garden in Kyleakin but as the 2003 survey included gardens on the mainland only the Kyleakin garden is excluded from this column for comparison purposes between the two surveys. However it is included in the column showing how many gardens each species occurred in during the year.

Seven species were recorded in all 21 gardens. These were Robin, Chaffinch, Blackbird, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Greenfinch and Siskin. A further five species were recorded in 19 or 20 gardens:- Dunnock, Coal Tit, House Sparrow, Song Thrush and Wren. Swallows were recorded in an impressive 18 gardens, Goldfinch in 17 and Yellowhammer in 11. It is surprising that Great Spotted Woodpecker was recorded in only four gardens as it has generally become much more frequent as a visitor to gardens with peanut feeders. The Waxwing occurred in only one garden, at Reraig (Tina Glen-Riddell). Although Waxwings had been more numerous than ever before in October 2004, the birds moved on rather quickly during November and very few were reported during the rest of the winter. There was no similar Waxwing invasion the following autumn so 2005 was not a “Waxwing year” and as a result it did not feature prominently in our survey.

The Cuckoo was recorded in five gardens but the one that visited Elspeth and Bill Page’s garden in Glenelg sadly flew into a kitchen window and was killed; a most unusual window fatality.

Comparing the results of the two surveys shows Dunnock moving up from 11th to 6th place and Coal Tit from 13th to 8th. I suspect that this reflects better identification skills amongst the participants in the later survey rather than a genuine increase in either of these species. However the improved positions of Sparrowhawk, Yellowhammer and Goldfinch probably do indicate increased use of gardens by these three species.

Some species frequent relatively few gardens but are regular visitors to those gardens so feature higher up the list than would be expected. Examples of this are Mistle Thrush, Hooded Crow, Goldcrest and Herring Gull which occurred in only nine, six, six and five gardens respectively yet feature in the top 29 places. Conversely other species are lower down in the table than would be expected from the number of gardens visited. This is because they tend to visit gardens only occasionally or at certain times of year and Bullfinch, Redwing, Fieldfare and Blackcap are typical examples.

MAMMALS 13 species of mammal were recorded during the survey and these are shown in Table 2. Neither Fox nor Badger were seen in any gardens during the current survey although they occurred “occasionally” in 7% and 5% of the gardens in the 2003 survey. Pine Marten and “bat” were again the two most frequently recorded mammals, the bats almost certainly being Pipistrelles. Pine Martens were recorded most frequently in May and June and their measure of reporting frequency was 51 garden-months. They were seen in 13 of the 20 gardens that recorded mammals on the recording form and were seen in all months except November. Bats occurred most frequently from June to September, had an overall total of 50 garden-months and were recorded in 11 gardens. It is interesting to note that bats were also seen in all months except November.

Mole (45 garden-months), Bank Vole (26), Hedgehog (14), Roe Deer (13) and Wood Mouse (11) were the only other mammals to reach double figures. Mole and Hedgehog were the most widespread of these and both occurred in nine gardens. Mole and Bank Vole were the only mammals to be recorded in every month. However the survey appeared to confirm the findings of the 2003 survey, which indicated that Moles do not occur in the western coastal area from Kyle to Plockton. Reraig was the most westerly village in which Moles were recorded.

The presence of Rabbits in Jean and Brian Saville's garden in Glenelg from March to September was a surprise but they have not occurred there since. The only garden where Rabbits were recorded "occasionally" during the 2003 survey was at Ardelve and they have also disappeared from that area.

Two gardens were visited by Otters during 2005; Bill Ramsay's in Kyle during January and Kathleen Webster's in Plockton during October. Ishbel Cameron recorded a Mink on two occasions in June and August, a much less welcome visitor than our native fauna.

The less frequent observations of mammals, compared with birds, are highlighted by the disparate measures of reporting frequency shown in Tables 1 and 2. The 13 most common birds had totals of between 120 and 240 garden-months compared with the 51 garden-months of Pine Marten. Nevertheless, Pine Marten and "Pipistrelle" Bat would feature in 19th and 20th place in a combined bird and mammal table, higher than Goldfinch, Mistle Thrush, Hooded Crow and Treecreeper.

AMPHIBIANS AND REPTILES Three amphibians and two reptiles are shown in Table 3. Common Frog, Common Toad and Slow-worm were reasonably well distributed but it seems to have been a poor year for the Palmate Newt and Common Lizard. Newts were seen in only one garden, that of Fiona and Bruce Williams at Ardelve, and lizards in only three gardens. The occurrence of frogs and toads does not appear to be directly related to whether there is a pond in the garden but they would obviously only spawn in gardens with ponds.

BUTTERFLIES Ten species of butterfly were recorded and these are shown in Table 4. Once again Red Admiral was by far the most frequently reported butterfly and was recorded as early as March in one garden and as late as November (in three different gardens!). Small Tortoiseshell and Speckled Wood were the only other species to be seen in six or more gardens. Six sightings in five gardens were further evidence of the spread of the Peacock butterfly into Lochalsh. (Even more were reported during 2006.) Orange-tip and Green-veined White were also recorded in five gardens but Meadow Brown was seen in just the one garden at Allt-nan-sugh. Carr Brae is particularly good for fritillary butterflies and I was fortunate to have single visits from both Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary. However no Dark Green Fritillary was seen during 2005. It was a poor year for the migrant Painted Lady and none were reported in Lochalsh.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS Thanks are due to all those who completed and returned the recording forms. From the various comments and anecdotes that accompanied the forms it is clear that participants thoroughly enjoyed the exercise and I apologise for the delay in summarising the results. Completed forms were received from the following:

Jessie MacGregor, Pat Mucklow and Bill Ramsay (Kyle), Maryon Gardiner (Erbusaig), Ishbel Cameron (Drumbuie), Kathleen Webster (Plockton), Josephine Dean (Lochcarron), Eleanor Hunton (Coilliemore), Tina Glen-Riddell and John Holt (Reraig), Rosemary McClelland and Fiona and Bruce Williams (Upper Ardelve), Moira and Adrian Quinn (Conchra), Rowena Oliver (Allt-nan-sugh), Janice and Chris Nixon (Bundalloch), Jessie Carter, Roger Knight and Brian Neath (Dornie), Elspeth and Bill Page and Jean and Brian Saville (Glenelg) and Hugh Davies (Kyleakin).