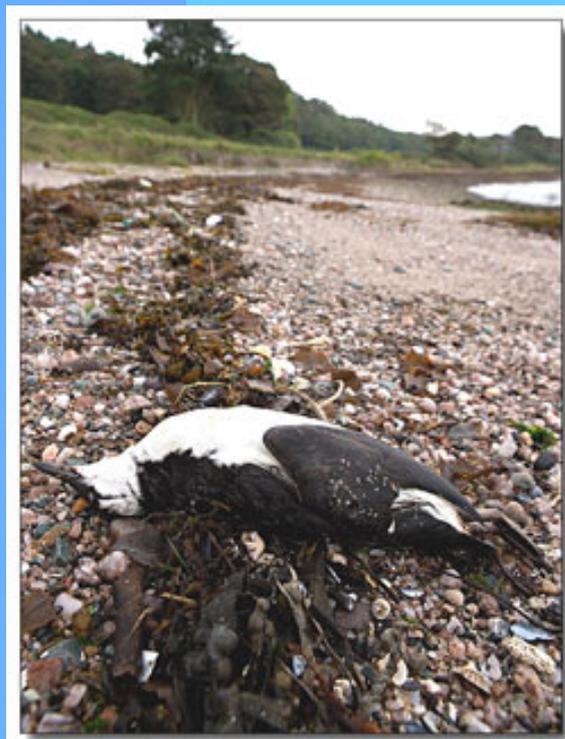


The Eider

December 2006
Number 79



Auk wreck in Argyll

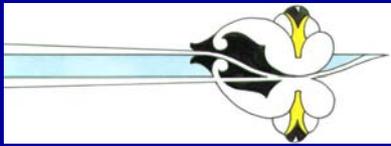
ABC spring meeting programme
Recent reports
Sparrowhawk battles!



Photos: Phillip Kirkham

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Argyll Bird Report (vol 19)

Argyll Bird Club members will find the latest Argyll Bird Report enclosed with this Eider mailing.

Those members on the *e-Eider* circulation list will receive their report separately by post. The systematic list in the report covers two years (2002-2003). The committee apologises to club members for taking so long to publish this report; due to diverting effort into completing species accounts for the *Birds of*

ABC indoor meetings in 2007

Spring Meeting

Saturday 10th March at the Royal Marine Hotel, Hunter Quay,
Dunoon (the programme is on page 21)

Autumn Meeting

Saturday 10th November at the Cainbaan Hotel, near Lochgiphead

Editorial

Do you receive the electronic version of the Eider (the e-Eider)? If you don't, and you have an internet connection, you should! All you need to do is let me have your e-mail address. This saves the club quite a bit of money in postage and Bob Furness a lot of time in photocopying and dispatching the black and white version.

The *e-Eider* has been quite a success. From a slow start, it now goes out to 72 e-mail addresses of club members, and the number is growing each month. The Argyll Bird Club has around 200 memberships. So I would like to see at least half the membership taking the *e-Eider* by early in the New Year. Come on, it's up to you!

The *e-Eider* arrives earlier than the black and white version, it's in full colour and I find its much easier to store and retrieve. All you have to do is create a folder on your hard drive and put each issue in as it arrives. You can look at them on the screen or print them. I must say that I very rarely print a copy myself, much preferring to view them on screen. And, if you do happen to mislay a copy, you can always download another from club's website!

At the end of another year, I'd like to thank all of you who have contributed to the *Eider* in the past 12 months. You make it the success it is! This is reflected in the last four issues, which have consistently been of 10 pages (20 sides). This issue is even bigger, at 22 pages! No mean feat for a relatively small club! So, have good Christmas and Hogmanay—and over the holiday you can write that article for the spring issue!! And, don't worry if it's the first one you've written, I've never refused to print one yet!

For contributions to this issue I would like to thank to Richard Allan, Rob Baker, John Bowler, Tom Callan, Danielle Clark-De Bisschop, Clive Craik, Paul Daw, Jim Dickson, Jim Duncan, Bob Furness, Ian Hopkins, Peter Kirk, Phillip Kirkham, Cristina McAvoy, Linda Petty (proof reading), Nigel Scriven, Peter & Margaret Staley and David Wood (GIS maps).

Argyll Bird Report (vol 19)

Argyll (see page 3).

Paul Daw, Tom Callan (the new editor of the report) and helpers (Jane Mitchell, Mary Gregory, Morag Rea) are now inputting data for the next report, which will also cover a two-year period (2004-2005). The club hopes to publish this in 2007.

Copies of the latest *Argyll Bird Report* (right) cost £6.00 (including postage & packing) and can be obtained from Bob Furness, The Cnoc, Tarbet, Loch Lomond G83 7DG. Please make cheques payable to the 'Argyll Bird Club'.

Argyll Bird Report

Volume 19
with Systematic List for the years

2002 - 2003



Caption competition



©Tom Callan

For heaven's sake, stand up properly and stop looking so miserable – otherwise we'll never get our picture in the *Eider*!

Birds of Argyll—update

Substantial progress has been made with the Birds of Argyll since the last update in the June Eider.

All but a handful of the 328 species accounts have now been edited and passed to David Wood. David has also completed a draft of the introductory chapter, which is being reviewed by the Editorial Group. Over the winter, David will be tackling the page layout and formatting, and he hopes to hand the book to the printers by 1st February. If everything goes according to plan, the book should be available at the spring meeting in Dunoon on 10th March.

Over the years our aspirations for the book have changed substantially. All for the better of course! This has been brought about by the development of suitable computer software that will enable us to format the book ourselves, without the need for a publisher. Probably the most radical change has been the realisation that we can produce an attractive, colourful publication. Initially, black and white was the only option.

Now we are able to use colour on each page; in the text where necessary and for the charts and tables, as well as being able to include lots of colour photographs. We will still use many of the black and white illustrations so kindly produced by Margaret Staley and Philip Snow, but latterly we have been trying to acquire good-quality colour photos for those species accounts that lack black and white drawings. In addition, Margaret Staley has recently produced two superb watercolours for the front and back covers of the book, as well as continuing to produce some terrific black and white illustrations.

ABC members will be given the chance to purchase one copy of the book at cost, which we think will be about £20 (plus postage if required). With the March 2007 *Eider* we will be enclosing a form for you to purchase your member's copy, and any additional

There were three caption suggestions for Tom Callan's photograph (left) of Tysties in the September *Eider*. These were put to the vote at the last committee meeting. The winner was Clive Craik, with the caption under the photo.

Well done Clive - you've won a bottle of wine!

Phillip Kirkham on Bute has sent in a excellent photo of Eiders (below). So, can you please let me have your suggestions for a caption for this before 15th February 2007, when the committee will again decide the winner. Another bottle of wine is the prize. So, let's have a few more of you taking part! The best caption will appear in the March *Eider*.

Any suitable 'caption' photos for future issue of the *Eider* would be most welcome.

Editor

Please send your caption to the Editor before 15 February



©Phillip Kirkham

copies at full price (not yet fixed). We hope that you all will buy at least one copy of this landmark publication. We already know of one member who wants to purchase 14 copies!

Editorial Group (Clive Craik, Paul Daw, Bob Furness, Steve Petty & David Wood)

Birds of Argyll—urgent request for information

Do you own, or have access to the following book?

Millais, J. G. 1913. *British Diving Ducks (two volumes)*. Longmans, London.

If so, can you help with the following, please?

In *Birds of Scotland* (1953) on page 410, Baxter & Rintoul comment that a male Red-crested Pochard was:

...shot on a freshwater loch in Craignish on 7 January 1862. In Millais's book, two are recorded in the same county in the winter of 1898.

Presumably the county was Argyll. For the account of this species in the forthcoming *Birds of Argyll*, we need full details of these two records (places and dates in particular, please). If you have the book, could you please let me have this information?

I know it's a valuable book and I am certainly not asking to borrow it! The Inter-Library Loan service run by the British Library is normally very good. However, in this case my request for the usual help – loan of the book or photocopy of the relevant page – was refused. They neither lend this book nor photocopy from it! This leaves me in helpless despair, wondering what useful public service they are performing by having the book, etc etc....?

Clive Craik

jcac@sams.ac.uk

In September 2006, over 1488 auks were reported dead or dying on the Argyll coast. Argyll Bird Club members helped to monitor the extent of the crisis. High spring tides swept weak birds into the sealochs in large numbers. The phenomenon was not confined to Argyll, and species other than Common Guillemots and Razorbills were affected. A poor breeding season was reported from most auk colonies, and a lack of vital Sandeels resulted in fledged chicks being particularly weak. Post mortem examination indicated that starvation was the primary cause of death.

Reports of dead or dying auks

Following reports of dead and dying Common Guillemots in Loch Fyne, a request was made on 13 September to Argyll Bird Club members, asking for sightings of auks that had been washed ashore. Many members searched their local bays and reported their findings. Within a matter of days it was apparent that the wreck was of a sufficient scale to warrant further investigation.

A total of 1488 birds were reported, with 571 definite deaths and 917 in poor condition and showing signs of distress. It should be noted that for each dead bird recorded there were probably several more that died at sea - never to be found. Therefore, these numbers can probably be multiplied several times.

Map 1 (next page) shows some interesting locations of live birds—the centre of Glasgow, Kilbirnie Loch, Baron's Haugh and Loch Awe, while Map 2 (next page) shows that dead Guillemots turned up in Crianlarich and Loch Lomond.

Most corpses were found in the Firth of Clyde and Loch Fyne, with large concentrations of dead birds washing ashore in Loch Fyne, Loch Gilp, Long Long, Isle of Bute and Campbeltown Loch. There were no auks reported on the west coast of Kintyre, indicating that birds were channelled into the sealochs to the east of Kintyre. Any west of Kintyre would have been washed out to sea and not counted. In addition, there were smaller numbers of birds further north in Argyll, at Lochs Melfort and Leven, and at Barcaldine, yet none were seen off Coll or Tiree during the peak of the wreck.

Reports indicated that the wreck peaked on 10 September and had tailed off by 24 September. The final sighting involved one live and four freshly dead adult Common Guillemots washed up in Loch Gilp on 14 October 2006, coinciding with particularly high spring tides.

Other areas affected

In addition to the sightings reported by Argyll Bird Club members, discussions with SSPCA and RSPB personnel have given a better idea of the overall extent of the wreck. First, it was confirmed that over fifty auks were collected from the Dunbartonshire area, by SSPCA Inspector Nicky Scot. These were confined mainly to the Balloch and Dumbarton areas, with none reported around Greenock.

Skye was not excluded from the event. There were approximately 90 corpses washed up in Loch Slapin, while 124 were counted in Loch Bracadale towards the end of September.

Neither was the wreck confined to the west coast. The RSPB's Reserve Manager at Loch of Strathbeg confirmed that more birds than normal were washed up along the north-east coast. Although there was no official count, numerous reports of dead auks came in during the last couple of weeks in September; more than normally associated with juvenile mortality at this time of year.

In addition, the SSPCA's Middlebank Wildlife Centre had a number of birds brought in for rehabilitation from the Fife coast, up as far as Dundee. The majority were less than the critical weight of 650g and were humanely destroyed. Only one guillemot survived to be released from the attempted rehabilitations.

This survey would not have been possible without help from many people who kindly sent in records. These include:

Ron Bowe, Roger Broad, Clive Craik, Clyde Bird Club, Tom Callan, Paul Daw, Ronnie Falconer, Bob Furness, Robin Harvey, Peter Hogbin, Ian Hopkins, David Jardine, Phillip Kirkham, Simon Lawrence, Eddie Maguire, John McAvoy, Jane Mitchell, Steve Petty, Andy Robinson, Ian Teesdale, Michael Thomas, James Towill, Blair Urquhart and David Wood

The age of birds and the stage of moult

Birds checked for age were primarily those found in Loch Fyne - at Lochgilphead, Glen Shira and The Oyster Bar at Cairndow. Counts made during the first two weekends of the wreckage showed that approximately 15% of auks were adults. As time went on, a greater proportion of adult birds were found. No accurate counts were made after 24 September, partly due to the amount of seaweed obscuring bodies.

Only a very small percentage of adults were in full wing moult - just two out of 153 counted on a one kilometre stretch of Loch Gilp on 18 September 2006. Therefore, the vast majority of birds were able to fly in order to find food. Mike Harris (Centre for Ecology & Hydrology at Banchory) told me that adults can postpone their moult if they have struggled to feed during the summer, or if they had bred early, they could have completed wing feather moult before the wreck.

Other species involved

Once the wreck had passed its worst, species other than Guillemots started to appear. Several live sub-adult Gannets found sitting on the shores in Loch Gilp, Tarbert, Campbeltown and Benderloch were so emaciated that the only humane option was to destroy them. Carcasses of Gannets were also found elsewhere along the coast. Post mortem results showed that their stomachs were empty, except for crustaceans - presumably scavenged while on the shore. In all cases, the cause of death was starvation. This is worrying considering the distances Gannets travel for food, and the depth they dive to for fish. These birds were not juveniles and should therefore have been capable of hunting successfully. In addition, Manx Shearwaters and Red-throated Divers showed signs of starvation. An adult Red-throated Diver sent for post mortem had also starved. It had an empty stomach and was critically underweight. Surveys carried out by Argyll Bird Club members located at least ten Herring Gull carcasses, but whether these deaths were related to this crisis is unclear.

Weather and tides

Wrecks such as this are often associated with gales, which are frequent at this time of the year. However, weather data for the area during September show that strong winds were lacking. It was also the warmest September on record for Scotland, with gentle southerly winds blowing for much of the month, interrupted by a couple of spells with westerly winds.

A large anticyclone developed to the west of Ireland on the 7 September and moved to the North Sea by the 10 September. This brought a sunny spell to Scotland, with a period of light south and south-easterly breezes for six days during 8-17 September. The weather broke on the 14 September, as a front moved slowly across the country.

Live birds started to appear in small numbers around 7 September in Loch Fyne, with larger rafts and deaths noted from 10 September onwards, which coincided with these light southerly winds. More vigorous weather during 18-22 September led to strong westerly winds in the Firth of Clyde area. Although this front coincided with a second influx of birds, this alone would not have been enough to warrant such large numbers of dead or dying auks in the sealochs.

The spring tides of early September were the largest for 20 years, with a peak on Saturday 9 September. On that day, tidal range was as great as 4.2 m. This is when the largest number of auks was noted in the lochs, and when the wreck started in earnest.

Breeding season

The Seabird Monitoring Programme, organised by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, monitors Common Guillemot reproduction at eight Scottish sites. Breeding success was on the low side at all colonies except for Fair Isle. The Isle of May and Skomer reported their lowest breeding productivity on record.

John Bowler, the RSPB's Conservation Officer for Tiree, summarised the breeding season at Ceann a' Mhara as 'having a late start, but involving good numbers of birds laying eggs and many Common Guillemots successfully hatching chicks. Sandeels were being brought into the colony in June, but by early July the main food supply appeared to be quite large clupeids (fish of the Herring family). Fledging success was considered to be low (Common Guillemots) or very low (Razorbills) and this was thought to be related to a lack of suitable fish in July, including anecdotal evidence of few Sandeels.'

Although Fair Isle reported their best year to date, the situation was similar to that of Ceann a' Mhara. The number of attendant adults was similar to that in 2005, but the numbers laying appeared to be low. Despite this, fledgling success was phenomenally high. However, fledglings were underweight. Derek Shaw, the warden at Fair Isle, reported there was a shortage of Sandeels at the crucial time, with a large number of Snake Pipefish being brought into the colony as alternative food. These are particularly difficult for chicks to swallow and digest, and lack the nutritional value of Sandeels. In early July, chicks were being fed 40% Sandeels, 26% gadoids (whitefish) and 5% Pipefish.

Eric Meek (RSPB, Orkney) considered 'the incident occurred almost certainly because Guillemot chicks left their natal ledges in poor condition after a summer in which their parents struggled to find enough food. The chicks were unable to improve their condition post-fledging.'

Strange behaviour

Auks only come into land to breed on the steep seacliffs on islands and along the coast – for the rest of the year they spend their lives out at sea and are tough enough to endure the worst of North Atlantic conditions. They cannot take flight from flat land, and if they find themselves ashore, they are easy pickings for predators, as their only means of escape are their clumsy feet.

For this reason, it was strange to hear of them circling inland in small groups at the head of Loch Fyne—heading into Glen Fyne, possibly in search of food. Stranger still was witnessing them swimming up freshwater burns, which they used as highways to get several miles inland—this was recorded at several locations. A number were collected from the Cairnbaan area, having travelled from Loch Gilp, whilst others only made it as far as Bishopton Road, Lochgilphead to cower under cars and endure attacks by cats. A particularly unpleasant image was of headless bodies lined up on rocks in the Corran Burn. Foxes had attacked while they were roosting, but had left most of their

bodies in situ.

A local gentleman provided me with DVD footage of very peculiar behaviour. A young boy had seen the news coverage and decided to help the birds. Armed with a tin of tuna, he managed to coax two Guillemots out of the Corran Burn onto the bank, where he handfed them. The birds didn't seem at all phased by the crowd they had attracted, and set about finishing the food on offer. I didn't believe it until I witnessed it myself! These were some of the last few Guillemots left in this area, and within the week their bodies were probably washed up onto the shore or eaten by predators. Rehabilitation attempts proved to be unsuccessful and seemed futile because releasing birds, which have been 'fed up', back into an environment where there was little food, was merely prolonging the inevitable and causing unnecessary stress to the individual.

Post mortem results

Seventeen Common Guillemots were sent to Scottish Agricultural College in Perth, to be examined by Veterinary Investigation Officer, Colin Adams. The results are as follows:

- All birds were in poor bodily condition with poor pectoral muscle development
- No birds had any food in their stomachs, except for Eel Grass in one bird
- All birds were in a severely weakened state, with no visible fat reserves
- All birds had several nematodes in their gizzards
- Salmonella, bacteria and avian influenza tests were negative

The final diagnosis was starvation, for all 17 birds.

The Centre for Ecology and Hydrology intend to analyse samples of cheek feathers for stable isotopes, which can give information on the birds' diet, and perhaps their origin. In order to analyse the age structure of the birds affected, moult scores and morphometric data will also be taken. This information is not available at the time of writing.

Significance of the September 2006 wreck

Mortality of young auks immediately after the breeding season is not unusual. For instance, on 1st September 2003 over 30 juveniles were found dead at the head of Loch Fyne (*Argyll Bird Report*, volume 19). Nor are wrecks that unusual. Gray¹ recorded "very extraordinary mortality which occurred among sea-fowl" in the Firth of Clyde in September 1859, when Razorbills "perished in extraordinary numbers". Up to 1984, 14 wrecks had "occurred in Britain since 1856, mainly off the west coast and most in late summer or autumn"². In the wreck of autumn 1969, mainly in Argyll and south-west Scotland, between 15,000 and 20,000 seabirds (mainly Common Guillemots) were thought to have perished³. Wrecks are often associated with adverse weather conditions or oil spills. Neither of these factors was implicated in the September 2006 wreck.

So what is the significance of this year's wreck? Seabird 2000 estimated about one million pairs of Common Guillemots in Britain & Ireland⁴, making it the most abundant seabird. Its numbers were about 25% higher in 2000 than in the census in 1985, and were about double the numbers counted in 1969-70 in Operation Seafarer. So, there are far more guillemots now than in the past. Thus, food shortage does not come as too much of a surprise. We cannot expect numbers to go on increasing for ever! So perhaps this wreck signals numbers reaching carrying capacity rather than necessarily a food supply 'crisis'. Although a large number of birds were involved in this year's wreck, these appear to have been a relatively small proportion of the total Scottish population – so unless this pattern is repeated in successive years, there is no immediate cause for concern.

Guillemots are often referred to as the 'coalmine canaries' of the seas—if their health suffers, it reflects the condition of our oceans.

For this reason, we need to be vigilant when mass mortality is involved. Some blame over-fishing for the decline of Sandeel stocks in Scotland, while others believe that global warming may be pushing Sandeels further north into cooler waters. There are problems in the North Sea where stocks have clearly decreased, and where the Sandeel fishery was closed in 2005. However, we know little about the dynamics of Sandeel populations in the west of Scotland, but there has been some evidence to suggest they were increasing (Kittiwake breeding success at west coast colonies has increased in recent years, and they seem to feed much on Sandeels). Clearly, more research is needed to better understand how seabird dynamics and their food-supply are affected by climate change and fishing.

Cristina McAvoy

Seabirds on the Garvellachs – the reason for their decline

In the last Eider, David Merrie described considerable decreases in the numbers of seabirds breeding on the Garvellachs¹. He found that Manx Shearwaters, Herring Gulls, Great Black-backed Gulls and Black Guillemots had all suffered large declines between his visits in 1975 and 2006, while Shags had undergone noticeable but smaller decreases. Here I would like to suggest the most likely reason.

At least twice a year, I try to visit all the small islands that hold breeding seabirds in the Garvellachs area (Fladda, Ormsa, Belnahua, Eilean Dubh Mor, Dubh Sgeir, Liath Sgeir and Dubh Fheith—see map below). I record the numbers and species

of nesting birds early in the summer and then the numbers of large or flying young in late summer.

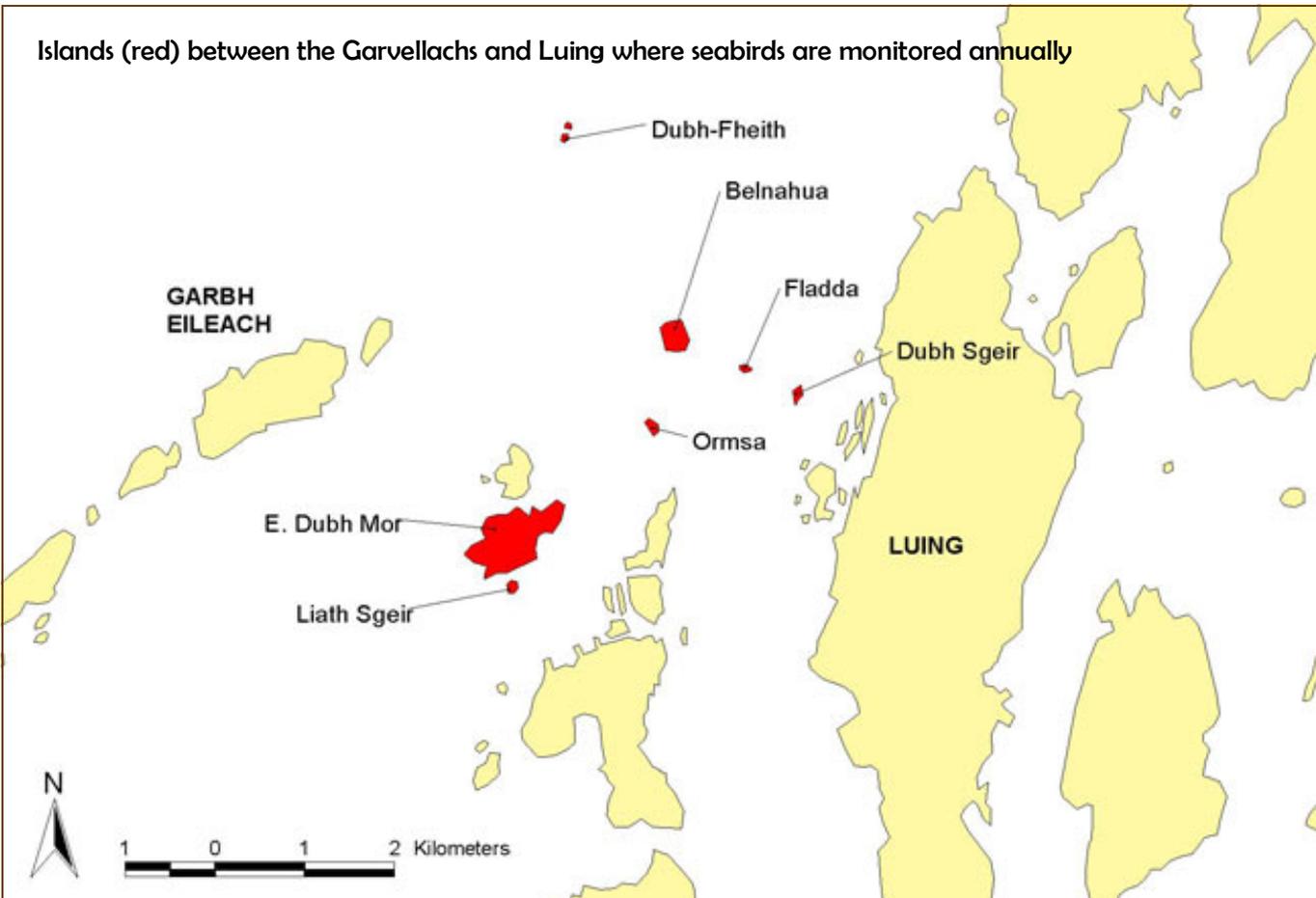
I first visited the Garvellachs themselves in 1990 and, even then, it was clear that too few birds were nesting to make regular visits there worthwhile. Also, I won't pretend that it is a safe or easy trip for my small boat. Moreover, monitoring these seven smaller islands takes the best part of a day, so that I rarely have the time or energy for the Garvellachs! Nevertheless, over the years I have built a good picture of the numbers of nesting birds, their breeding success and the causes of breeding failure in that area. One factor has

caused declines and disappearances of ground-nesting birds on almost all the sites that I visit and the same factor is almost certainly the cause of the declines noted by David on the Garvellachs.

Introduced American mink have for years been breeding here in the wild and they are now common on the coasts and rivers of Argyll and neighbouring areas. Peter Lamont has caught many mink on Luing; mink have been seen on Scarba, Rubha Fiola and Lunga, and mink have been trapped on Ormsa. Predation by mink first caused whole-island breeding failures of terns, gulls and waders on Fladda, Belnahua, Ormsa and Liath Sgeir in 1993. The

References

¹Gray, R. (1871). *Birds of the West of Scotland, including the Outer Hebrides*. Thomas Murray & Son, Glasgow.
²Stewart, A.G. (1970). The seabird wreck - autumn 1969. *Scottish Birds* 6:142-149.
³Underwood, L.A. & Stowe, T.J. (1984). Massive wreck of seabirds in eastern Britain, 1983. *Bird Study* 31:79-88.
⁴Mitchell, P.I., Newton, S.F., Ratcliffe, N. & Dunn, T.E. (2004). *Seabird Populations of Britain and Ireland: Results of the Seabird 2000 Census (1998-2002)*. T. & A.D. Poyser, London.



same was true on Dubh Sgeir in 1998 and on Eilean Dubh Mor in 2001. Since 1993, large-scale breeding failures caused by mink predation of seabird eggs and chicks have been frequent on six of the seven islands named above, although not identified annually. The exception is Dubh Fheith, where landing is difficult and visits have been fewer.

During this time, the numbers of breeding seabirds have declined sharply. This has perhaps been most noticeable on **Belnahua**, where in the 1980s Black Guillemots nested in many of the crevices and cracks of the slate spoil-heaps, Common Gulls nested on the ruined cottages, and many large gulls nested on the ground. Since 1993 almost all breeding birds have gone from Belnahua, although in 2005-2006 a small colony of Herring Gulls, with some Great and Lesser Black-backs, still maintained a precarious hold on a boulder beach there, but their breeding success was low. On **Eilean Dubh Mor**, a 50-pair Herring Gull colony, with small numbers of Common and Great Black-backs and some Black Guillemots, all disappeared after mink predation and whole-island failure in both 2002 and 2003. The few breeding gulls, Oystercatchers and Black Guillemots disappeared from **Dubh Sgeir** in 2005, but a few Common Gulls attempted unsuccessfully to breed there in 2006. **Liath Sgeir** used to hold Black-headed Gulls, Common and Arctic Terns, and smaller numbers of other species. Mink predation occurred there in 2002, when all the terns failed, and since then Liath Sgeir has been almost empty.

In several of these years, mink predation has caused whole-island breeding failures on both Fladda and Ormsa. Thus, in 1993 167 pairs of Arctic Terns laid on **Fladda** but all birds there, including all the Herring Gulls, failed after mink predation of eggs and young. In 2006, some 250 pairs of Arctic Terns laid but again all species failed completely because of mink predation. Yet birds still breed there successfully in some years, most notably in 2002 when (for unknown reasons) both Fladda and Ormsa were mink-free. On Fladda, 350 pairs of Arctic Terns (one of the largest colonies ever recorded in Argyll) raised over 300 young and 150 pairs of Common Terns raised 150-200 young; while on **Ormsa** 130 pairs of Common Terns raised 100 young and smaller num-

bers of Arctic terns and Common Gulls also did well. Few terns have bred well in the area since then. On Ormsa in 2006 no terns raised young, but a large Herring Gull colony formed and bred well (possibly refugees from Eilean Dubh Mor).

To summarise: mink are an annual or near-annual threat on these islands and, overall, many breeding birds have been lost. On four of the seven islands (Belnahua, Dubh Sgeir, Liath Sgeir and Eilean Dubh Mor) all or almost all breeding birds have disappeared; on one island (Dubh Fheith) Shags, the only breeding species, have decreased; and on Fladda and Ormsa, seabirds still nest and in some years are successful.

David Merrie's report shows that seabirds breeding on the nearby Garvellachs have also decreased greatly, although we cannot be sure about the timing as recording there is much less frequent. All seven of the above islands are fairly close to the Garvellachs (see map on page 7), certainly within swimming distance of mink. It is almost inconceivable that mink have not reached the Garvellachs. Mink are, therefore, almost certainly the reason for the losses of ground-nesting birds. This is consistent with the report that Shags and Fulmars there have declined less or not at all, since these two species are predominantly cliff-nesting, so at least some may be less accessible to mammalian predators. It is not surprising that the 2006 expedition did not report seeing any mink since, like all that family, they are rarely seen even when numerous. Often the only way to show they are present is to trap them.

The Garvellachs and the other islands off Luing are by no means alone in this respect. Losses of island-nesting birds caused by mink predation are taking place over a large area. Since before 1990, I have been monitoring 154 islands lying along the mainland coast between Mallaig and West Loch Tarbert. Originally they all held breeding seabirds. By 2005, 65 (42%) no longer held any breeding seabirds, usually after one or more years of complete breeding failure caused by mink predation. In 2005, 89 colonies still existed of which 33 (22%) were being protected by mink control. At the 56 (36%) surviving but unprotected colonies, there

was evidence of mink predation at 27, while 29 were naturally mink-free and birds bred normally. It seems likely that most or all the surviving colonies will eventually decline or disappear if not protected from mink.

Ground-nesting birds breed on small islands to avoid mammalian predators such as fox, hedgehog and, in west Scotland, pine marten and polecat. At some sites, such as the islands of Loch Teacuis, a stretch of only 25m of sea has provided this protection since time immemorial. But mink are excellent swimmers (one recently reached Sanda, some two km offshore), and most small islands along the mainland coast of Argyll are no longer sanctuaries. All ground-nesting bird species are affected but, in this habitat, particularly seabirds, wildfowl and waders.

I make no apologies for stressing again what wonderfully rich repositories of biodiversity are to be found on these small islands². The birds often breed at extraordinarily high densities, of both numbers of nests and numbers of species. Such islands are the only breeding sites in the area of some species and, if the birds are no longer able to breed, their numbers locally must decline. Indeed, this is already the case in sealochs such as Lochs nan Ceall, nan Uamh, Sunart, Creran and Caolisport, among others, where breeding gulls, terns, Oystercatchers, Black Guillemots, and ducks such as Eider and Merganser, are now either absent or much scarcer than they were. By contrast, in areas with active mink control programmes, such as Lochs Teacuis, Leven, Etive and Feochan, island-breeding birds have regained their former variety and numbers. In most years, a small island in the Sound of Mull, where I first recorded mink predation in 1989, still holds one of the largest colonies of Common Terns in the British Isles. If it had not been for the hard work of a small group of dedicated people, all these wonderful seabird colonies would almost certainly have disappeared by now. Many thanks must also go to David Merrie and, before him, Bruce Campbell³. Their records from earlier times show us how much has been lost.

Clive Craik

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View from Luing to the Garvellachs



©Steve Petty

Battle at Blairmore

Just after 2.30pm on 27 August we were aroused from our post lunch slumbers by a loud "squalling" from outside the house. Finally moving ourselves to investigate, we noticed a flurry of activity in some heather plants. Close examination revealed a first-year female Sparrowhawk and a Magpie in mortal combat!

The fight rolled and progressed slowly down the garden through the nasturtiums, lobelias and fuchsias over next 45 minutes, until finally rolling down a stone covered bank onto the gravel path outside our conservatory. Here, the fight continued for the next two and three quarter hours! The periods of activity were broken up by periods of rest, but at no time did the hawk let go of the magpie. It appeared to be holding it mostly by the head, and we were convinced that the magpie must have been blinded by the hawk's talons.

Throughout this time humans bothered them not one iota, and we and various neighbours were allowed to approach quite close allowing us to take many photographs. Around 6.00pm we all decided that the Magpie had finally succumbed, as periods of activity were becoming fewer and fewer, indeed for some minutes the hawk was actually standing upright on it.

Then, to our surprise the situation was suddenly reversed. The Magpie was on its feet and trying to stab the hawk with its bill. For its part, the hawk was bending its body and head right back and with its feet it was trying to hold the Magpie off while balanced on its tail and wings. When we next checked progress about 30 minutes later, the Magpie and Sparrowhawk had separated! The hawk was on its feet, and leaning like a drunk against the conservatory wall, head turned sideways and resting on its body. The Magpie slowly made its way under our car to the front of the house, where it rested up against a wall under a bush, looking extremely bedraggled.

The next day we found the Sparrowhawk dead by the wheelie bins. It had died with its tail and wings fully extended while supporting itself against the side of the bin. We suspect it died of exhaustion. On our return from the morning paper expedition to the local shop, the Magpie hopped along the path in front of us, fluttered (just airborne) for about 20 feet, went back into our garden and slunk under the hedge. That was the last we saw of it. So, sorry all you Magpie haters, it appears to have won the battle, which lasted some four hours.

Margaret & Peter Staley



Three photos from a sequence taken by Peter Staley during the 'battle'. The top two show the Sparrowhawk just in control while the bottom photo shows the magpie gaining ground, albeit with a pretty severe haircut!

Another Sparrowhawk tussle

Here's a strange story that happened this summer. In this year's crop of young Rooks we had one who was well behind the others (in development) and could not fly properly. One day Barb, my wife, called me over to the far side of the garden because there was a lot of fuss and commotion happening near the wall. When I arrived, I found a young Sparrowhawk struggling in vain to overcome our young Rook. Both were lying on the floor exhausted! The Sparrowhawk hadn't got the rook properly and the rook was fighting back by removing the Sparrowhawk's feathers! I decided the best thing to do to save both their lives, was to separate them. Anyway, the Sparrowhawk was so surprised and worn out that I was able to get a good photo (opposite). Needless to say both survived. We saw the Sparrowhawk the next day feasting happily on a Collared Dove, and remarkably the Rook went on to improve his flying skills!

Rob Baker



©Rob Baker

Barn Owl breeding success in Argyll, 2006

Barn Owl populations throughout the UK appear to be fragile and, generally, in decline. As a result, the British Trust for Ornithology has implemented a Barn Owl Monitoring Programme (BOMP), which incorporates nest recording, ringing and biometric data to assess annual population changes nationwide.

BOMP has been running since 2000, and I have been involved since 2005. In my first year, I monitored only two sites, as part of

Breeding performance of Barn Owls in Knapdale and Kintyre in 2006

| Sites checked | Territories unoccupied | Territories where eggs laid | Territories known to have fledged young | Minimum number of young reared | Average no. of young per successful territory |
|---------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|---|--------------------------------|---|
| 32 | 11 | 16 | 13 | 40 | 2.5 |

a wider project linked to my Open University degree – investigating variation in the diet of Barn Owls in different habitats. Having completed this small study, I saw plenty of scope for further work. I now intend to look at how Barn Owl productivity is influenced by Field Vole abundance. This will involve a longer term study using more territories.

The Forestry Commission Scotland kindly gave me permission to accompany local Ranger and Ringer, John Weir, to his nest sites in Knapdale and Kintyre in 2006, to build up the number of territories I could work with. Although the project has not started in earnest, as I have yet to incorporate any vole data, breeding productivity was monitored in 2006 (Table).

In territories where breeding was attempted 67 eggs were laid, and from these 40 chicks were reared. Thus, 60% of eggs produced fledglings. In addition, at least two territories had second clutches in autumn. Barn Owls are unique amongst British owls in being able to breed in the autumn when food is plentiful.

So, despite the Barn Owl Trust claiming that this was the worst breeding season for 20 years¹, Barn Owls appear to be doing just fine in Argyll! However, it is known from studies elsewhere that breeding productivity can differ between regions in the same year².

My aim from 2007 onwards is to work with approximately 15 nest sites within a fairly condensed area, in order to keep fieldwork time to a minimum. So, I would be very keen to hear from anyone who has any knowledge of Barn Owl nests within the Mid-Argyll/Kintyre area.

Cristina McAvoy

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¹<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/devon/5377222.stm>

²Taylor, I. R. 1994. *Barn owls: predator-prey relationships and conservation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



©Cristina McAvoy

Barn Owl Chick being ringed

Recent bird reports from Paul Daw: August—October 2006

This report is a selection from the sightings already published on the website (see box opposite). Records included are not necessarily of 'rarities' but may also relate to birds in unusual places or behaving in untypical ways. I also include records from areas that are not normally well covered. In particular, I would welcome more reports from Cowal, Kintyre and North Argyll. You can send them in by e-mail, post or telephone.

Observers full names appear in brackets except for SW = Simon Wellock, JB = John Bowler, TC = Tom Callan, PD = Paul Daw, JD = Jim Dickson, JH = John Halliday, BA = Bill Allan

Wildfowl (and Gamebirds)

A very large count of 269 **Greater Canada Geese**, with 36 **Grey-lag Geese** and two **Wigeon**, at Loch Crinan on 7th Aug was an indication of their ever increasing numbers here (JD).

Early returning ducks included a juv./female **Common Goldeneye** was seen in Loch Fyne off Furnace on 8th Aug (Janet Simpson), a female **Long-tailed Duck** present in Dunstaffnage Bay on 10th Aug (Stuart Gibson), four **Wigeon** seen at Ardfern (Mid-Argyll) on 13th Aug (BA), nine **Common Shelduck** flying N over Tay-inloan on 20th Aug (Katie Pendreigh) and two **Long-tailed Ducks** well out in Ardmucknish Bay on 24th Aug (Stuart Gibson).

A moult flock of 107 **Red-breasted Mergansers** was counted at the head of Loch Riddon, Cowal on 24th Aug and ten **Wigeon** were also present (TC). An unusual gathering of eight **Goosanders** was seen on the evening of 9th Sep at the Add Estuary (JD) and an adult **Goosander** with four juvs. were at the head of Loch Feochan on the same day (BA). A flock of 32 **Red-breasted Mergansers** was off Ardno Loch Fyne on 10th Sep (Peter Woods), 270 **Eurasian Wigeon** were counted in the Add Estuary on 12th Sep (JD) and four **Bar-headed Geese** were at the head of Loch Feochan on 14th Sep (Anne-Lise Dickie).

On 23rd Sep, 57 **Pale-bellied Brent Geese** were counted at Balephetrish Bay, with three at Gott Bay (JB) and 48 at Loch Gruinart (see photo opposite, JD). By 28th Sep there were 68 **Pale-bellied Brent Geese** at Loch Gruinart (James How).

Three **Whooper Swans** flying into Loch Don (Mull) on the evening of 28th Sep were the first of the autumn (Alan Spellman). A group of five **Greenland White-fronts** were attempting to head south off Hynish, Tiree at midday on 27th Sep in force 7-8 SSE winds with rain coming. They thought better of it and having reached the south-western tip of the island then headed back towards The Reef (JB). The first geese were also arriving on Islay on 27th Sep with 10 **Greenland Whitefronts** and a **Pink-footed Goose** returned to the Oa and four **Barnacle Geese** on Loch Indaal (Andy Schofield).

An immature **Greater Scaup** seen and photographed on Loch Gilp on the afternoon of 2nd Oct was with a possible juv. **American Wigeon** (JD), and four **Greater Scaup** were on Loch Craignish (nr Achnamara, Mid-Argyll) during WeBS count on 15th Oct (PD/TC), both unusual sites for this species. Also on 2nd Oct, 41 **Mute Swans** (35 adult, six cygnets) and seven **Whooper Swans** were at Ulva Lagoons (Loch Sween) (Morag Rea). On 6th Oct a total of 106 **Eurasian Wigeon** were counted at the head of Loch Gilp (John McAvoy) and at least 512 **Wigeon** were in the Add Estuary with 52 **Grey-lag Geese** and 84 **Canada Geese** at Barsloisnoch (Moine Mhor) at lunch-time (PD). A total of 185 **Barnacle Geese** arrived at Loch Gruinart on 9th Oct with another 400 on Loch Indaal together with six **Whooper Swans**, 450 **Wigeon** and 30 **Pintail** (Andy Schofield). Seven female type **Goosanders** were at Loch Gilp on the morning of 9th Oct (JD) and three **Goosanders** were in the mouth of the River Ruel (Cowal) on 17th Oct (Ian Hopkins).

Recent Report Updates

The latest news on bird sightings in Argyll is available on the Argyll Bird Club website:

<http://www.argyllbirdclub.org>

On the home page 'click here for latest bird reports' takes you to straight to the most recent update. This page is updated every 7-10 days

Pale-bellied Brent Geese at Loch Gruinart, Islay, 23 September



©Jim Dickson

Three skeins of **Pink-footed Geese** flew high over Arduaine (Mid-Argyll) on 18th Oct, one skein only heard, one of up to 60 birds and the third of 210 or more birds (BA). On 20th Oct, counts on Tiree included 22 **Pink-footed Geese** at Scarinish, 43 **Pink-footed Geese** at Heylipol, 142 **Greenland White-fronts** at Loch a' Phuill and 48 **Greenland White-fronts** at Loch an Eilein. Loch a' Phuill held 341 **Whooper Swans** at 16.30hrs but there was much movement, including flocks of 68 and 83 flying south (17.00-17.30hrs) (JB).

A flock of 10 **Whooper Swans** were seen flying down West Kyles of Bute on 29th Oct (Ian Hopkins) and four **Whooper Swans** (two ads and two 2 juvs.) were in the Add Estuary with four more at Lochan Caenn a' Choin (nr Ford, Mid-Argyll) on 31st Oct (JD). A drake **Goosander** in Friesland Bay on the morning of 31st Oct was a very unusual visitor to Coll and may have been the same individual that was seen later on Tiree (John Doerr per SW).

Seabirds—divers, grebes, shearwaters, herons etc (and other seawatch species)

A two hour seawatch off Aird, Tiree on the morning of 10th Aug produced 13,200 **Manx Shearwaters**, 94 **Gannets**, 25 **Fulmars**, three **Great Skuas**, 15 **Arctic Terns** and two **Little Terns**, but no **Sooty Shearwaters** or petrels (JB). Smaller numbers of **Manx Shearwaters** were reported elsewhere, including three or four off Ganavan Beach, Oban also on 10th Aug (BA), five flying down the Kyles of Bute at Colintraive on 14th Aug (PD) and nine flying up the Kyles of Bute towards Burnt Islands on 24th Aug (Graham Clark). A group of 30 **Cormorants** were just offshore at Colintraive in the Kyles of Bute on 20th Aug (Danielle Clark De Bisschop).

On 24th Aug totals of 14 **Sooty Shearwaters** (11 on the way out) and 133 **Storm Petrels** (most on the way out, including c.80 following a fishing boat) were seen from the ferry between Tiree and Barra (JB). On the whole **Sooty Shearwaters** seem to have been relatively few and far between this autumn.

On 13th Sep a lunchtime seawatch at Aird, Tiree produced two

Red-throated Divers, one **Great Northern Diver**, one **Sooty Shearwater**, ten **Manx Shearwaters**, 39 **Fulmars**, 232 **Gannets**, 12 **Great Skuas**, 63 **Kittiwakes** (eight juvs.), just five **Common Guillemots** and a **Grey Phalarope** all flying SW in one hour during a force 6-7 SSE wind (JB). A single **Sooty Shearwater** flew past Ardmore Point, Islay on 8th, 10th and 13th Sep (Andy Schofield).

Several observers have commented on the unusually high numbers of **Grey Herons** seen this autumn. Counts have included a gathering (or 'siege') of 13 assembled at high tide at the entrance to Dunstaffnage Bay 15th Sep (Stuart Gibson) and 28 during the WeBS count at Loch Sween on 17th Sep—the highest ever total, which included many juvs. (PD/TC). Five **Grey Herons** and two **Little Grebes** were at the head of Loch Creran on 1st Oct (Robin Harvey), and on 14th Oct a party of 16 **Herons** on the beach in Loch Crinan flew out to sea with a further five birds on the Add Estuary (JD).

During a coastal walk from Ardlamont Point to Portavadie (Cowal) for the Eider survey on 15th Sep, nine **Red-throated Divers** (two family parties each of two adults and one juv, one pair of adults and one single adult) were seen (Steve Petty). Considerable movement of seabirds was taking place on 20th September, when the Tiree-Oban ferry produced five **Leach's Petrels**, including one between Lismore and Oban, 26 **Storm Petrels**, seven **Great Skuas** and two **Arctic Skuas** in rain and a force 7 southerly wind (JB), and three **Storm Petrels**, two **Leach's Petrels** and 150 **Manx Shearwaters** were seen from the Kennacraig-Islay ferry (James How).

Two **Black-throated Divers** were in Calgary Bay and four **Little Grebes** were at Dervaig on 25th Sep (Alan Spellman) and 15 **Great Northern Divers** together with 12 **Red-throated Divers** were counted in Loch Indaal (Islay) (JD). Nine **Slavonian Grebes** were seen in Loch Indaal on the following day (JD). Divers of any species are very unusual in Loch Gilp but two juv. **Red-throated Divers** were feeding close in on the morning of 16th Oct (JD). Two **Red-throated Divers** in winter plumage were seen off Poll (nr. St Catherines), Loch Fyne on 20th Oct. (Peter Woods).

A late **Storm Petrel** flying fast northwards, not feeding, was seen well close to ferry north of Coll (BA) on 28th Oct and two more were seen during a seawatch made from Aird (Tiree) in a NNW force 8 wind, plus squalls on the morning of 31st Oct (JB).

Raptors, rails etc.

An adult female (possibly two) **Hen Harrier** at Balemartine, Tiree on 9th Aug was the first of autumn on the island and a female **Marsh Harrier** seen hunting at The Reef, Tiree on 11th Aug may have been the bird seen on Coll in the previous week (JB). Further sightings of female **Marsh Harriers** on Tiree occurred at Cornaig on the evening of 2nd Sep (Keith Gillon per JB) and at Balephuill on 10th Oct (JB).

At least four, and possibly five, **Ospreys** fishing in the Add Estuary on the afternoon of 12th Aug, included at least one youngster making begging calls (John Aitchison). An immature **White-tailed Eagle** was reported over Hynish, Tiree on 13th Aug (SW). The 22nd Aug turned out to be a good day for raptors. An adult male **Hen Harrier** was seen hunting at Islandadd Bridge, Add Estuary and an **Osprey** caught a flat fish before flying off to the south. Then two more **Ospreys** flew over southwards and later an adult male **Merlin** was seen just N of Loch Arail, Knapdale (BA). On Mull, an **Osprey** fishing in Loch Don on 5th Sep had been present for a day or two. It was still in the area on 9th Sep. (per Alan Spellman). A **Peregrine Falcon**, a **Hen Harrier** and a **Sparrowhawk** were all hunting at Ulva Lagoons/Danna, Loch Sween on 12th Sep (JD).

A **Red Kite** seen along the hill road from Auchindrain (nr Inveraray) to Loch Awe on the morning of 31st Aug was the first of four this autumn (Leonard McNeill). One was reported by visitors at Loch Frisa (Mull) on 2nd Oct (per Alan Spellman), another was

seen between Ardtalla and Ardilistry (Islay) on 7-8th Oct (Andy Schofield) and one was watched hunting over Keppoch Farm just south of Kilberry at about 16.00hrs. It was followed as it flew in a southerly direction before disappearing over the forest to the southeast (David Lord).

The usual autumn influx of **Kestrels** on the mainland included one being mobbed by Meadow Pipits at Powder Dams (Cowal) on 18th Sep (TC) and one being mobbed by Hooded Crows at Saulmore, near Connel on 5th Oct (BA/Stuart Gibson). A late juvenile **Osprey** was reported by local resident, Ian Boyd, while fishing on the River Awe (near Taynult) on 6th Oct. He had excellent close views as it took a fish from the river and perched nearby. Ian then caught a small Rainbow Trout which he killed and threw out onto the river. The Osprey saw this and picked up the fish. (per John Anderson).

Waders

A flock of 20 **Black-tailed Godwits** were unusual visitors to Loch Crinan on 6th Aug (JH) and a single **Black-tailed Godwit** and three **Greenshank** were at Loch na Cille (Loch Sween) on 11th Aug (BA).

The WeBS count on Tiree on 14th Aug found 216 **Sanderlings** at Gott Bay with a single **Grey Plover**, 250 **Sanderlings** at Hough Bay with 15 **Turnstones** and 73 **Ringed Plovers**, 41 **Dunlin**, three **Red Knots** and an adult **Little Stint** at Loch a' Phuill (JB). At Ledaig Point on 18th Aug there were 102 **Oystercatchers**, 101 **Ringed Plovers**, a single **Golden Plover**, 14 **Red Knot** (mainly juvs.), three **Sanderling**, four **Dunlin**, 31 **Turnstone** and a single **Common Redshank** (Stuart Gibson).

Four **Common Sandpipers** at Tayinloan on 20th Aug would have been migrants (Katie Pendreigh). The last **Common Sandpipers** were four at Hough, Tiree on 16th Sep and two at Orsay (Islay) on 18th Sep (JD).

On 16th September at Hough Bay, Tiree there were 140 **Ringed Plovers**, 210 **Sanderlings**, one **Purple Sandpiper**, 41 **Common Redshanks**, 88 **Turnstones** and four **Common Sandpipers** (JB) and a juv. **Curlew Sandpiper** was on the beach at Cliad, Coll (SW). A juvenile **Ruff** was seen and photographed at Otter Ferry on 24th Aug (TC) and 80 **Oystercatchers**, 92 **Ringed Plovers**, two juv. **Red Knots**, two juv. **Sanderlings** and 22 **Turnstones** were at Ledaig Point on the same morning (Stuart Gibson).

An amazing trio of waders were found on Tiree on 29th August. A **Buff-breasted Sandpiper** was at Loch a' Phuill in the morning, an adult **American Golden Plover** (still mostly in summer plumage) was at Greenhill at 13.30hrs (and relocated later in the day) and a **Pacific Golden Plover** found in the late afternoon at Balevullin was thought to be probably a first-summer bird (photos below)(Keith Gillon/JB). The **American** and **Pacific Golden Plovers** remained on the island until at least 2nd-3rd Sep.

A **Green Sandpiper** at Balephetrish and a juv. **Ruff** at Crossapol



Pacific Golden Plover on Tiree, 29 August

on 1st Sep were the first of the autumn on the island (JB). Waders seen at Ledaig Point, North Argyll on the morning of 4th Sep included 88 **Oystercatchers**, 112 **Ringed Plovers**, nine **Red Knots** (all juvs), 26 **Dunlins**, 16 **Sanderlings**, 14 **Curlews** and 22 **Turnstones** (Stuart Gibson). A total of 83 **Black-tailed Godwits** plus 26 **Redshanks**, one **Greenshank**, one **Bar-tailed Godwit** and 20 **Dunlins** were at Loch a' Phuill, Tiree on the same day (JB).

On 6th Sep, 25 **Black-tailed Godwits**, 37 **Ringed Plovers** and a single juv **Red Knot** were at Killiechronan, Loch na Keal, Mull (per Alan Spellman), and 100 **Turnstones** at Otter Ferry spit with 43 more at the nearby fish farm, included an unusually high percentage (c.40%) of juvs. (TC).

The 10th Sep was a good day for rare waders. A juv. first-winter **Buff-breasted Sandpiper** (new species for Oronsay/Colonsay) was found on Oronsay (David Jardine, and seen later by Mike Peacock *et al.*). Brief views were had of a juv. **Pectoral Sandpiper** flying out of Loch Gilp on the rising tide before landing in the distance; a first for this site (JD). Also, three juv. **Curlew Sandpipers** were at Aros Bay (Kildalton), Islay (Andy Schofield).

A juv. **Curlew Sandpiper** was nr Bowmore, Islay on 14th September (Andy Schofield). In the evening two juv. **Pectoral Sandpipers** were at Loch a' Phuill, Tiree with 116 **Black-tailed Godwits**, 300 **Lapwings**, 60 **Golden Plovers**, four **Ruffs**, two **Greenshanks** and one **Whimbrel** (JB). A juv. **Pectoral Sandpiper** was at Loch a' Phuill, Tiree on the evening of 18th Sep together with 14 **Ruffs**, 142 **Black-tailed Godwits** and single **Greenshank** and **Whimbrel** (JB).

Counts of 150 **Red Knots**, 70 **Bar-tailed Godwits**, 12 **Black-tailed Godwits** and six **Greenshank** on Loch Indaal were made on 27th Sep, and a huge influx of **Common Snipe** took place with dozens in any wet area (Andy Schofield). A single **Little Stint** and two **Curlew Sandpipers** were at Loch Gruinart on 28th Sep (James How).

The first **Grey Phalarope** of autumn was seen during a very slow seawatch off Aird, Tiree on 7th Oct (JB). It was followed by three bobbing about in the surf at Traigh Bhagh (Tiree) on the morning of 9th Oct, one off the pier at Arinagour (Coll) on the morning of 12th Oct and two at Loch a' Phuill, Tiree late in the afternoon of 26th Oct (SW).

A **White-rumped Sandpiper** on Port Ellen Beach, Islay on 9th Oct was flushed all day long by local dog walkers. There was no sign of it the following day but there was a **Green Sandpiper** at Aros Bay (Andy Schofield). A total of 455 **Oystercatchers**, one **Dunlin**, 23 **Curlews**, two **Bar-tailed Godwits** and 64 **Redshanks** were counted at the head of Loch Gilp on 16th Oct (PD).

A **Killdeer** was reported on the airstrip on Oronsay on the morning of 21st Oct. If confirmed, this would be only the second ever for Argyll, following one on Colonsay in Jan 1984 (Andy Schofield per JD).

Skuas, gulls, terns and auks



Black-tailed Godwit on Islay, 21 September

Up to this year, **Ross's Gull** had been recorded only once in Argyll, on Islay in 1976. So it is quite extraordinary to have had two in the last three months. An adult was found off Aird, Tiree in a force 7 NW wind on the evening of 9th August. It gave excellent views down to c.60m for almost eight minutes (JB). Then at 15.00hrs on 3rd Oct another adult, in winter plumage was seen in the mouth of Loch Gruinart from Ardnave (James How).

There have been relatively few reports of skuas this autumn. Single **Pomerine Skuas** were at Portnahaven (Islay) on 20th Sep (JD) and off Aird (Tiree) on 31st Oct (JB). Four **Arctic Skuas** and three **Great Skuas** were seen from the Oban to Tiree ferry on 25th Aug (JD/BA). A single **Arctic Skua** was off Hynish (Tiree) on 11th Oct and a **Great Skua** was with **Kittiwakes** and a **Little Auk** off Aird (Tiree) on 31st Oct (JB).

Two juv. **Mediterranean Gulls** were found on Loch Gilp (Lochgilphead) in the late morning of 21st August, at high tide. One was in slightly more advanced moult, with some grey feathers on the mantle. There was no sign of them by early afternoon (JD).

A very striking albino/leucistic **Common Gull** found on Tiree on 25th August, at Balephetrish Bay provoked a short-lived rush of excitement when JB found it! Going by the bill, it did not appear to be an adult and it has been seen on several occasions subsequently (see photo below). Four **Little Terns** seen from the Craignure (Mull)-Oban ferry on 9th Aug were unusual for this area (Alan Spellman).

There were many more reports of **Sandwich Terns** than usual this autumn. Records included nine in Loch Gilp on 31st Aug (JD), six in Port Ellen Bay, Islay on 14th Sep (Andy Schofield), four or more fishing in Loch Gilp (PD), three fishing off Otter Ferry (TC) on 2nd September, eight during a coastal walk from Ardlamont Point to Portavadie (Cowal) on 15th Sep (Steve Petty), five at Western Ferries, Hunter's Quay on 21st Sep (TC) and one at Traigh Bhagh (Tiree) on 2nd Oct (JB).

A total of at least 65 **Common Terns** sitting on a promontory between Lochgilphead and Ardrishaig on 11th Aug included at least 18 juveniles, some still being fed. This would seem to indicate a good breeding season locally (BA). Six **Common Terns** were around Ledaig Point and two more flew close inshore at Corran esplanade, Oban on the morning of 22nd Aug (Stuart Gibson), a flock of 18 heading S were seen from the Portavadie/Tarbert ferry on 3rd Sep (Steve Petty) and three late **Common Terns** were at Ledaig Point, North Argyll on the morning of 4th Sep (Stuart Gibson). A juv. **Black Tern**, always a scarce species in Argyll, was at Loch a' Phuill, Tiree on the evening of 18th Sep (JB).

Doves, owls, woodpeckers etc.

Three **Stock Doves** were seen at Knockdow Estate (nr Toward, Cowal) on 26th Oct. This is a traditional area for this scarce Argyll species (although there have been few recent records there) and the keeper says they nested here this summer (George Ne-



Albino Common Gull, Tiree, 24 August

The Eider

wall). Two imm. **Turtle Doves** were found at Balephuill on the afternoon of 23rd Sep (BA/JB), one was near Coullabus (Islay) on 24th Sep (JD) (photo opposite) and one which turned up in a garden at Scarinish on 3rd Oct was still present on 9th Oct (JB/Brian Milne). A good autumn for Turtle Doves in Argyll! A rufous morph **Cuckoo** at Keills (Loch Sween) on 8th Aug was presumably a juvenile at this time of the year (John Aitchison). **Short-eared Owls** were reported on Tiree, at Balephuill on 16th Sep and on Ben Hynish on 20th Oct (JB).

Three **Swifts** were still over Oban on the evening of 2nd Aug after most had departed on 31st July (Stuart Gibson) and one was over Lagganmore, Kilninver (nr Oban), also in the evening (BA). Later records of *Swifts* included six seen over Tesco's car park in Oban on 9th Aug—possibly passing through (BA)? On 18th Aug, a single was seen flying over Oban in thundery conditions in the afternoon (Stuart Gibson) as well as four seen with **Barn Swallows** and **House Martins** over Lagganmore in the evening of (BA).

An unusual number of **Kingfishers** have been reported this autumn. One was spotted perched on a pole in the water at Achnamara (Loch Sween) on 20th August. It was seen fishing in the loch and coming up with a small fish in its bill. What may well have been the same bird was seen nearby on 17th Sep (TC/PD). Another was seen perched on a wooden upright in Holy Loch, just opposite Kilmun Church on 23rd Aug (Frances Lynn) and on 22nd Sep a pair were seen on the rocks outside Kilmory Guesthouse, Lochgilphead where Rob Baker obtained excellent photographs. There had been reports earlier of a Kingfisher in Loch Gilp on 11th and 18th Sep (Cristina McAvoy). In Oct, one was seen perched on the shores of Loc Awe nr Blarghour on 4th (Delys Marks), one was seen at Ormisdale Lodge (Loch Riddon), Cowal on 17th (Ian Hopkins) and another was on the River Ba near Knock Bridge (Mull) on 22nd Oct (Alan Spellman).

Passerines

Late reports of young birds still being fed by parent birds included an adult **Sedge Warbler** still collecting food for young at Lagganmore, Kilninver (nr Oban) on 3rd Aug (BA), an adult **Spotted Flycatcher** carrying food for young at Tayinloan on 5th Aug (Katie Pendreigh), a female **Common Stonechat** still carrying food for young at Loch Leacann (nr Inveraray) on 7th Aug (PD), lots of **Sand Martins** were just about to fledge at four small colonies along the River Add near Dunadd and on 8th Aug (John Aitchison) and an adult **Goldfinch** still feeding young in Inveraray on 12th Sep (PD).

A great spectacle of 350-400 **House Martin** and c.50 **Swallows** was noted resting on the roof of the new hospital in Lochgilphead on the morning of 10th September. Presumably these were migrating birds, as all had gone by the evening (JD).

A nice influx of 35-40 **White Wagtails** was noted on the evening of 9th Sep at the Add Estuary—with only six **Pied Wagtails**. A big increase in **Linnet** numbers was noted in the same area, with a flock of around 120 accompanied by c.20 **Twite** (JD). Reports of Greenland-type **Northern Wheatears** included 12 at The Reef on 14th Sep and some 25 noted around the west end of Tiree on 28th Sep (JB).

The first single **Redwing** was at The Manse, Scarinish and a single **Fieldfare** was at Heanish, Tiree on 2nd Oct (JB). The first on the mainland was on telephone wires N of Ardfern (Mid-Argyll) on 6th Oct with 24 **Mistle Thrushes** (BA), and a few **Redwings** were moving on Coll in the afternoon of 12th Oct (SW). A nocturnal passage of **Redwings** was heard over Oban late on 12th Oct (Stuart Gibson) and during the following days larger numbers than usual were widely reported. Flocks included 85 north of Tayvallich on the afternoon of 13th Oct, c.300 at Appin (North Argyll), at least 400 the Head of Loch Awe at Taynult and up to 100 at Loch Tulla (North Argyll) (BA), 400 or more in Glen Lonan on 14th Oct with other smaller flocks in the area (PD), 150 at Tayvallich on 15th Oct (PD/TC) and groups of 30-100+ birds moving



Three photos by Jim Dickson: a Turtle Dove on Islay on 24 September (top), a Kingfisher in Loch Gilp (middle) and a Redwing at Moine Mhor on 15 October (bottom)

steadily N up Kilmartin Glen, with at least 700+ during 10.40-11.25hrs on 15th Oct (JD). Lots of Redwings were about on Tiree on 20th Oct including 650 at The Manse, 290 plus six **Fieldfares** at Heylipol, 350 at Carman Mor plus scattered groups of 20-50 birds—in total some 2,000 birds in west Tiree.

A flock of 120 **Fieldfares** seen flying over Cairnbaan (Mid-Argyll) on 31st Oct was the first large group reported so far this year (JD). Flocks of **Mistle Thrushes** included at least 21 flying across the main road near Kilmelford on 1st Sep (BA), c.20 at Benmore Gardens (Cowal) on 2nd Sep (Steve Petty), a loose flock

of 34 at Ardmarnock, Cowal on 19th Sep eying up the abundant Rowanberry crop (TC) and 22 at Foreland (Islay) on 21st Sep (JD).

A very skulking warbler seen in the drizzle in a garden at Heylipol on 24th Sep finally proved to be a juv. **Grasshopper Warbler**—the first JB had ever seen on Tiree in autumn. A juvenile **Barred Warbler** preening in the sun on the lee side of a clump of gorse at The Manse, at 12.30hrs on 28th Aug was the first JB had seen on Tiree in six years! A **Booted Warbler** found at Balephetrish Tiree on 30th Aug was showing well (Keith Gillon per JB). It stayed until 2nd Sep and allowed some good photos to be taken. Continuing the Tiree 'purple patch' of warblers, a fine **Bonelli's Warbler** was found at Carnan Mor on the evening of 8th Sep. Both calls and plumage fitted **Western Bonelli's Warbler**. If accepted, this will be the first Bonelli's Warbler in Argyll to be specifically identified since this taxon was split into two species. Insufficient details were available for the only other record, on Islay in 1976, to assign it to either the Eastern or Western species.

A juv. **Barred Warbler** seen down to 10m between Acha and Kilbride, Coll on the morning of 15th Sep with a **Common Whitethroat** nearby. The **Barred Warbler** (or another) was seen again at Uig in the evening together with a **Spotted Flycatcher**. On 3rd Oct, Tiree had two Argyll rarities for the price of one! A juv. **Barred Warbler** new in that afternoon at Balephuill, Tiree with a **Lesser Whitethroat** in attendance (both photographed). Both birds spent much of their time hopping about in the open along a fence-line (JB).

A late male **Common Whitethroat** was showing well on brambles at Lochgair, Mid-Argyll on 14th Sep (PD) and a late **Garden Warbler** was in the Sycamore hedge at Hynish, Tiree on 30th Sep (JB). Finding three **Blackcaps** in his garden at Heylipol on 21st Oct encouraged JB to check the bushes elsewhere on Tiree in calm conditions. He found a total of 13 at four sites in west Tiree including seven together at Balephuill. A single late **Chiffchaff** was at Hynish (Tiree) on 29th Oct (JB).

Good views were had of an **Arctic Warbler** on the morning of 26th Sep feeding in umbellifers in a cornrake-corridor near the RSPB's car-park below Totronald, Isle of Coll (SW). If confirmed this would be a 'first' for Argyll. A **Yellow-browed Warbler** was found amongst a large mixed tit and Goldcrest flock at Ardistry (Islay) on 9th Oct (there has been a massive increase in the **Goldcrest** numbers over the last couple of days). It was still present on the following day (Andy Schofield).

A second **Yellow-browed Warbler** was found on the morning of 12th Oct in alders and willows in a garden at Uig (Coll) (SW). Altogether an impressive autumn for scarce warblers!

A flock of 23 **Long-tailed Tits** were seen at the head of Linne Mhuirich (Loch Sween) during a WeBS count on 15th Oct. (PD/TC). Late **Spotted Flycatchers** were reported at Balephuill, Tiree on 23rd Sep and at Ulva Ferry (Mull) on 25th Sep (per Alan Spellman). A juv. **Red-backed Shrike** watched well (and photographed) during 10.10–10.40hrs on 2nd Oct at Milton was a 'first' for Tiree (see photo at top of page, JB).

A scattering of **Magpies** were reported outwith the core area round Dunoon, including one spotted in Ardrishaig (Mid-Argyll) on the evening of 9th Oct (Colin MacFarlane), one over Lochgilphead Meadows on 13th Oct (JD), one flying north in Ardrishaig on 30th Oct (John McAvoy) and two in a garden near Slockavullin (on 30th Oct and 1st Nov). The farmer at Barsloisnoch (Moine Mhor) says there were three around the farm (Brian John).

The largest flock of **Goldfinches** reported was 115 at Keills (Islay) on 19th Sep (JD). Sightings of **Common Crossbills** have been relatively few and far between recently, but include two (including a dark wine red male) drinking at a roadside puddle near Barnluasgan at the start of the Tainish road on 11th Aug giving beautiful views (BA), one at Benmore Gardens (Cowal) on

Red-backed Shrike at Milton, Tiree on 2 October



2nd Sep (Steve Petty) and four (two pink males, one green female and one streaky juv.) in a conifer at the bottom of a garden at Lagganmore, Mid-Argyll on 16th Sep (Anne-Lise Dickie).

A **Lapland Bunting** was at The Reef, Tiree on 28th Sep (JB) and a second was heard and seen calling in flight heading E over Heylipol (Tiree) at 17.30hrs on 22nd Oct (JB). A singing male **Corn Bunting** near the New Castle at Breachacha, Coll on 7th Aug was the first Argyll record for some while, and the first on Coll since 1984 (SW).

Other sightings

Sightings of cetaceans included pods of **Harbour Porpoises** in the Sound of Mull and a single **Minke Whale** near Coll seen from the Tiree ferry on 17th Aug (Alex Nicol), three **Common Dolphins** and four **Harbour Porpoises** in Arinagour bay, Coll, seen from the ferry to Tiree on 24th Aug (BA/JB), a **Minke Whale** south of Coll (BA), a pod of at least 12 **Bottle-nose Dolphins** moving up Loch Fyne just off Largiemore, Otter Ferry on 14th Sep (TC) and a **Minke Whale** breaching off Aird, Tiree on 3rd Oct (JB).

Single **Basking Sharks** were reported in Calgary Bay, Mull on 5th Sep (per Alan Spellman), in Arinagour Bay, Coll on 24th Aug (BA/JB) and in Gunna Sound on 7th Sep (BA).

Paul Daw

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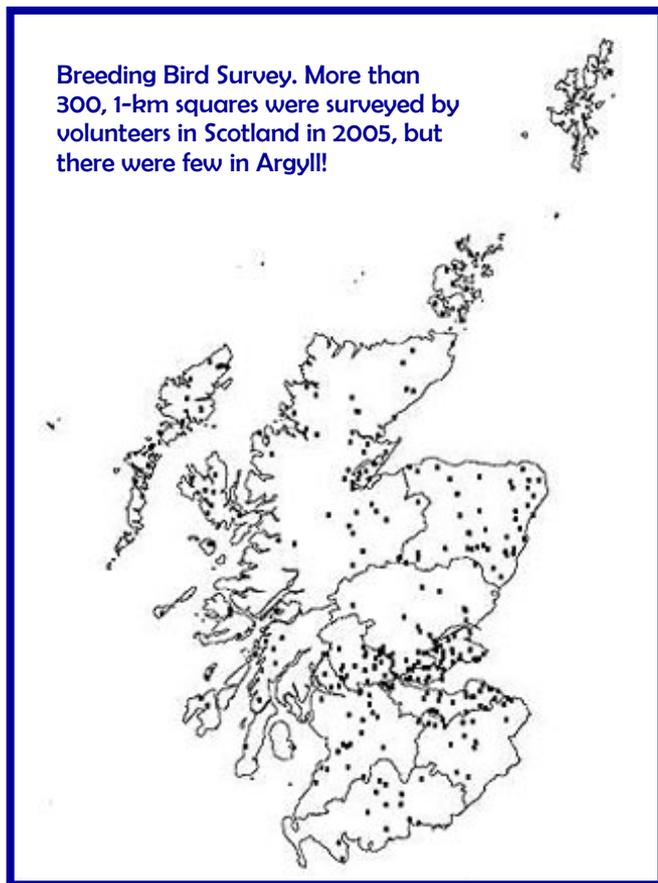
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BTO Surveys in 2007

The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) has been undertaking the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) since the 1994. The information collected is used in various ways but, importantly, to show population trends for around 100 species, which is nearly half the total number breeding regularly in the UK.

Birds are at or near the top of the food chain and are thus good indicators of the general health of our wildlife and the environmental changes taking place. They are the most visible group of vertebrates in the countryside and are relatively easily counted. For this reason, data from the BBS are used to calculate the government's *Quality of Life Wild Bird Indicators*, which was first published in 1999 and is updated annually in a joint project between various national organisations.

Professionals employed by the BTO, the RSPB, the Joint Nature Conservancy Council and various other organisations play a major role in planning field work for the BBS and other surveys, and later help to analyse the data collected. However, the field work has been undertaken largely by volunteers (see map of BBS square locations in Scotland on the next page).



In order that the information collected is meaningful, surveys must be carried out at sites chosen at random, and census methods must be standardised. Forms are issued for each randomly chosen site. However, in our area some sites are well nigh impossible to cover due to the nature of the ground. This is understandable and is accounted for in the statistical analyses that follow. The forms include one for describing the nature of the site. This preamble is written in the hope that some more volunteers will come forward to add to those already taking part in the BBS.

There are a variety of other surveys scheduled for 2007. A very important one is for the new Atlas project, which begins next autumn and continues for four breeding and wintering seasons. It requires small teams of 3-4 surveyors. Team members should be able to identify most birds in Argyll by eye and ear and, importantly, they must have a reasonable pair of legs to tramp up and over rough ground! Many club members process these skills.

Other surveys to be undertaken in 2006/2007 include:

- **Winter Plover Survey.** The sighting of 100 or more Lapwings or Golden Plovers between now and the end of February 2007.
- **Breeding Ringed Plover Survey.** Fieldwork to be undertaken during the 2007 breeding season. This was last done in 1984.
- **Wintering Warbler Survey.** The third survey of wintering warblers. Birds of interest are Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Goldcrest (and Firecrest) and Willow Warblers. This survey is already underway and will end on the 31st of March, with the exception of the Blackcap survey, which continues until 15th April. Records from previous winters (2004/05 and 2005/06) if not already submitted, would be welcome.
- **Non-estuarine Coastal Waterfowl Survey (NEWS).** This requires a single count of selected coastlines on any date between the 1st December 2006 and 31st January 2007, so long as it is within three and a half hours either side of low tide.
- **New Atlas.** Finally, and most importantly, the fieldwork for the new atlas (2007-11) begins in November 2007. For the first time the atlas will cover both the winter and breeding seasons. This will be the third atlas produced by the BTO; two earlier ones covering the breeding season while one covered the winter period. The winter work will begin during November 2007-February 2008, and in total will cover four winters during 2007/08-2010/11. The breeding season surveys will begin during April-July 2008, and in total will cover four breeding seasons during 2008-2011. It is hoped that a sufficient number of teams (see above) can be found for all sites selected in Argyll.

The BTO is hoping to arrange a 'survey methods' course for volunteers somewhere in Argyll in late summer 2007 if there sufficient demand. Please contact me if you are interested.

To find out more about the BTO surveys, you can look at the BTO website (www.bto.org) or contact me. I can also supply survey forms and help with any other enquires.

Richard Allan, BTO Regional Representative for Argyll, Arran & Bute

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An account of the autumn meeting 2006

Nigel Scriven arranged a varied and interesting program for the Autumn Meeting at the Cairnbaan Hotel. More than 60 members were present and most enjoyed lunch at the hotel.

Michael Thomas explained about the life and works of William MacGillivray (1796-1851), a leading naturalist and artist of his time. He produced many scientific papers and books, and was much-loved by his university students, but could be abrasive with his peers. His sensitive and realistic watercolours, painted from a naturalist viewpoint, really made him the unsung hero of Scottish Ornithology (*Eider* June 2006, page 17). However, despite his enormous contribution to zoology he re-

mains largely unrecognised, even today!

Liz Parsons talked about a project to conserve Glasgow's farmland birds, under contract to Glasgow City Council with money from the landfill tax. The program started three years ago on two farms north of Glasgow and three farms to the south. The funding allowed farmers to sow bird cover/food crops such as linseed, oats, quinoa and mustard in spring and leave them untouched over winter for the birds to feed on the seeds. The project also provided for supplementary feeding, such as barley and wheat, during the winter months on demand, which benefited many birds, including Yellowhammers and Reed Buntings. Currently, the project is focus-

ing on habitat enhancement, by trying to convince farmers to not cut hedges every year, so providing berry crops in the autumn/winter and nesting cover and invertebrate food during spring/summer, in order to increase numbers of breeding birds, such as bullfinches, greenfinch and linnets. New hedges were being planted and sowing wildflower seeds was being encouraged (such as poppies, marigold, yarrow) and ponds were being created. They also hope to increase lapwing numbers by convincing farmers not to drain fields. Guided walks are being planned as farmers welcome visitors. However, the landfill tax rules have changed and this

might create a funding problem for this project in the future.

Mel Tonkin covered the conservation of Red Squirrels, which are under threat from the spread of Grey Squirrels, including the squirrel pox virus they carry. The Grey Squirrel is immune to this virus, but it is deadly for the Red Squirrel. Extensive conifer forest appears to provide the safest habitats for Red Squirrel as these forests lack the preferred food of Grey Squirrel. Grey Squirrels are able to detoxify more of the tannin present in the fruits of large-seeded broadleaves, such as oaks and sweet chestnuts than are Red Squirrels. Managing conifer forests for Red Squirrels is achieved by increasing the variety of conifer species so that conifer seed is available over a greater part of the year, having mixed-aged stands of trees, retaining links between suitable patches of forest and avoiding planting or reducing the extent of large-seeded broadleaves. The aim of the Scottish Squirrel Survey (*Eider* June 2006, pages 17-18) is to improve the coverage of recording, to identify areas of Grey Squirrel population expansion and to define priority woodlands for Red Squirrel conservation. Argyll is crucial for Red Squirrel conservation because there is so much suitable habitat. You can get involved by reporting all Red and Grey Squirrel sightings (online at www.scottishsquirrelsurvey.co.uk or by email to mtonkin@swt.org.uk), by ac-

tively looking for squirrels, starting a local squirrel group or getting involved in surveys in your local woodlands.

The club's AGM was held after lunch. David Wood stepped down as Chairman. Paul Daw thanked him for his great effort in moving the club forward. The vacant chairman post was accepted by Nigel Scriven, the Vice Chairman. He pointed out he has done it before and knows what he is in for! But, he would have preferred somebody else to take the club forward, and he was only accepting the post for one year because of commitments in other organisations. Tom Callan was elected to the post of Vice Chairman and David Wood was elected to the committee. All other posts remained unchanged.

Gillian Gilbert followed with a talk on Bittern ecology and conservation. Until recently, very little was known about Bitterns in Europe or the UK. Research by the RSPB over the last few years has changed that. First, a method was developed to individually identify 'booming' birds so that numbers could be assessed. This was followed by detailed work on their habitat requirements. Bitterns catch most of their food at the edge of reed beds. They prefer a long-sloping edge from the reed bed to open water, but in the past mechanical diggers had dug ditches with vertical sides that were little used by bitterns. Constructing reed beds with the correct sloping edges and the creation of

new wetland habitats has resulted in a slow increase in the numbers of Bitterns in Britain.

Unfortunately, Neil Brown was unable to give the last talk due to personal reasons. Instead, Richard Allen, the BTO representative for Argyll, Arran and Bute explained the importance of bird recording and especially the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS). The BTO is trying to arrange a training course next summer in Argyll for people wanting to participate in the BBS (coverage of selected squares in Argyll is only 50%) and in field work for the new atlas project, which is due to start in autumn 2007. Anyone interested in this training course should contact Richard. This winter there is a survey of Golden Plovers and Lapwings and next spring a survey of breeding Ringed Plovers and possibly Little Grebes. The BTO can provide CDs (free of charge) with songs of lowland and upland breeding birds. Please get in touch with Richard if you are interested in participating in the surveys (contact details on back page).

Nigel Scriven closed the meeting with a few slides of the Humpback Whale that was present in Loch Long for five days during October, and with an invitation to members to join the field trip to Dumfries and Galloway on 11 November that he was organising.

Danielle Clark-De Bisschop

Field trips in 2007 and beyond

(1) Bute - Saturday 17 March 2007

I am willing to lead a trip to Bute on the above date. Meet at Colintrave at 10.00hrs. I can arrange to hire a mini-bus to save the cost of taking cars across by ferry. (£9.65 return). The cost of a 16-seater minibus is £20, plus fuel. The plan is to drive round the island checking lochs, shore etc for wildfowl, waders and anything else. No long hikes! Please bring your own snack, or we can call in at a local hostelry. If you would like to go on this trip, please let me know ASAP.

Ian Hopkins

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(2) Sound of Gigha – Saturday 14 April 2007

I will lead a field trip to the Sound of Gigha on the above date. For less experienced birders, some guidance on identification will also be provided. Meet at the car park at Ronachan Point just off the A83 (grid reference NR741548) at 10.00am. From here we will call in at the

coast near the West Coast Salmon site and then onto Tayinloan to check the fields. We will then take the ferry to Gigha, mainly to look for birds in the Sound and break for lunch. Snacks can be ordered at the hotel on the island. After returning from Gigha, if the weather and tide conditions permit, we will walk along the shore towards Rhunahaorine Point to look for waders. If time, the weather and stamina allow we could re-check some of the morning's sites before the end of the day.

This trip depends very much on reasonable weather. Will those who intend to come please contact me, by phone or e-mail, at the latest on the evening before (Friday 13 April), so that I can confirm that the trip will go ahead and to give me some idea of how many people to expect. If the weather forecast is really atrocious it may be possible to postpone until the following Saturday.

Spring birding in the Sound of Gigha can be a rewarding experience. This trip will be a repeat of similar spring field trips, accounts of which have appeared in the *Eider*. Some of the highlights from previous visits have included all three species of diver, **Slavonian Grebes** (some in full summer plumage), **Common Scoters**,

Long-tailed Ducks and **Greenland White-fronted Geese**. There is always the possibility of finding the elusive **Velvet Scoter**. As we will be a little later in the spring than on previous visits, we will also be on the look-out for the first spring migrants.

Paul Daw

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(3) Mull, weekend of 15-17 June 2007

If you are interested in a trip to Mull during the above weekend please let me know ASAP. It is hoped to include a visit to the White-tailed Eagle viewing facility (if they nest in a suitable site in 2007) and a boat trip to the Treshnish Isles. So far, I have made no arrangements.

Steve Petty

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(4) Spain - spring 2008

The idea of a club member's foray to Spain for a week in 2008 was raised at the AGM. I would be happy to organise such

The Eider

a trip, if there was enough interest. The two areas I know best are the Picos de Europa (part of the Cantabrian Mountain) in northern Spain and Extremadura (central Spain, east of Portugal). It would not be feasible to go to both areas in the same week, as there would be far too much travelling, and each area warrants at least a week's stay. The proposals below include staying in comfortable hotels with good Spanish food.

Extremadura

Most of the time would be spent in the area north of Cáceres/Trujillo, in the dehesa/steppe habitats surrounding Monfragüe National Park (see March 2006 *Eider* pages 2-3). We could get there either by a direct flight from Glasgow to Faro (Portugal) with a cheap airline, or to Madrid (via Heathrow) with BA, and then hire minibuses/cars for the drive to Extremadura. There is a new hotel (Hospedería del Parque de Monfragüe) on the edge of Monfragüe, where we could be based. Other more luxurious alternatives are nearby paradores at Cáceres, Trujillo, Oropesa or Guadalupe. We might decide to have a night elsewhere on the journey to and from the airport, dependent on flight times. For instance, if we flew into Faro, we could spend a night on the north-eastern edge of the Coto Doñana

(<http://www.andalucia.com/environment/protect/donana.htm>) where there is a parador at Mazagón (<http://www.paradores-spain.com/spain/pmazagon.html>). The best time would be during week commencing Saturday 12 April, at least for me anyway! This would be too late for some of the winter visitor (e.g. European Crane), but many of the summer visitors would have returned (e.g. Bee-eater).

Picos de Europa

I enjoy going overnight by ferry from Plymouth to Santander, as bird and cetacean watching in the Bay of Biscay can be good. But, the ferry takes time and if we have only a week, probably the best option would be to fly with BA from Glasgow to Bilbao via Heathrow. There are cheap airline options too, e.g. Ryanair from Preswick to Santander via Stansted (but not quite so reliable—and we might not get back!). Again we would hire minibuses/cars. It's about a two hour drive from Santander (a little longer from Bilbao) into the Picos. My favourite hotel is Hotel del Oso (<http://www.hoteldeloso.com/>), where I propose we stay. The Hotel is comfortable and the food wonderful!

In the area there are extensive broadleaved woodlands where Western Bonelli's Warbler, Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Booted Eagle, Honey Buzzard etc can all be seen within walking distance of the hotel. There's a Griffon Vulture colony nearby and Red-backed Shrikes and Cirl and Rock Buntings can be found in the hay fields. The cable car at Fuente De (10 minutes drive) gives quick access to the alpine habitats of the high Picos with such wonderful birds as Alpine Accentor, Snow Finch, Water Pipit, Wall Creeper etc and alpine flowers, butterflies and of course marvellous scenery (see the following article about the Pico de Europa). A trip, week commencing 8 June, would probably be the most profitable, as many passerine will still be in song (Bonelli's Warbler) and late migrants (Honey Buzzard) will have returned.

Please contact me if you are interested in either excursion, and say which you prefer. If there is enough interest, I'll work out an estimated cost for the most popular trip. The trip would probably have to be paid for by the end of 2007.

Steve Petty

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Green Spain

If you enjoy Spain, but find the summers too hot, you should try the north. We discovered the Picos de Europa over thirteen years ago and we keep being drawn back year-after-year by its beauty, climate, wildlife, people and a pace of life reminiscent of years gone by!

The northern slopes of the mountains, facing the Bay of Biscay, have a temperate climate, not too dissimilar to Scotland. In fact, many components of the vegetation and wildlife are remarkably alike. The transition on the southern slopes, facing inland Spain, is dramatic, with arid mediterranean scrub predominating. However, it is the sierras in between these two extremes that we find so fascinating. Here is a wonderful mix of two climatic zones in a part of Spain that is truly green throughout the summer. The whole area is interspersed with tracks, traditionally used for moving livestock from high to low ground and vice versa and between valleys and villages. These provide unlimited access for the walker and naturalist.

The Picos comprise three limestone mountain massifs dissected by spectacular gorges forged by the past action of ice and water. The scenery is breathtaking and the diversity of habitats stunning! From alpine communities above the tree line (upper photo opposite) to rich, extensive broadleaved forests in the valleys and lower slopes (lower photo opposite). Just like Scotland, the fast flowing streams are home to Grey Wagtail and Dipper!

The lower, rolling hills of the Picos are well wooded and interspersed with small villages surrounded by hay fields. Before cutting in June/July, these fields are a mass of flowers and butterflies, and we have never heard so many grasshoppers and crickets! Here Red-backed Shrikes abound, as do Yellowhammers, Cirl Buntings and Serins. Hay provides forage for cattle and sheep throughout the year. Traditionally, cattle spent the worst of the winter in stables on the ground floor of the farm building, with their human carers living upstairs. This way of life still per-

Alpine habitats



Extensive forests in the valleys



sists in the more remote villages, but is disappearing fast as houses are modernised for holiday homes.

The forests are extensive and mainly deciduous, although small groups of conifer have often been planted close to villages. The valleys contain a wide range of broadleaved trees, the middle slopes are predominantly oak and the higher slopes often beech. The calls of countless Middle Spotted Woodpeckers and Nuthatches echo through the forest. Blackcaps are by far the commonest warbler, and many of the other avian inhabitants can also be found in Argyll's oakwoods, such as Blue, Great and Long-tailed Tit, Wren, Robin, Blackbird, Song Thrush and Jay.

The mixed woodland in the valleys gradually gives way to Pyrenean Oak forests on higher ground. These forests hold many secrets, but one of the gems is Bonelli's Warbler. It is the only *Phylloscopus* warbler we have seen in the Picos, where it can be quite common, but only at higher altitude. It fills a similar niche to the Wood Warbler in Argyll's oakwood. Even in July, many birds are still singing well. It is quite grey on the back with a yellow rump and poorly defined eye stripe, and about the size of the Willow Warbler, with a distinctive call note and song. Like the Wood Warbler, it is approachable and good views are often had as it forages through the lower tree canopy, with occasional forays to the forest floor.

In the high forest, just below the tree line, Great Spotted Woodpeckers replace Middle Spotted Woodpeckers. This altitudinal separation occurs with other species too. In Scotland, Blackcaps and Garden Warblers appear to have similar habitat requirements, but in the Picos, the Garden Warbler is mainly a high altitude bird, where it can be found in the dwarf tree/scrub around the tree line, and above the tree line in scrub thickets, often with Dartford Warbler.

Throughout these forests Jays are widespread and abundant, but Carrion Crows are remarkably scarce; Ravens being more abundant. During autumn and winter, Red- and Yellow-billed Choughs often descend from their lofty breeding areas to feed in the hay meadows. During one October trip, we were surprised to see large (100+) mixed flocks of choughs feeding in these lower fields. We suspect this is a common occurrence at this time of the year.

Common Buzzards are ubiquitous, but three other fascinating forest raptors are also abundant. Honey Buzzards are elusive, but frequently seen, and this is the only place I have observed their fascinating display flight, where the male claps his wings above his back. Booted Eagles, which feed mainly on forest birds, are one of our favourite raptors. Northern Goshawks occur here too, but are relatively scarce. Over the years in the Picos we have seen very few, but this year on an early morning walk into the forests above the casa we had rented, we located a recently fledged brood on a high ridge clothed in Pyrenean Oaks. Previously we had seen an adult male soaring over the same ridge. He was a magnificent bird, very grey on the back, white beneath and with fluffed-out white undertail coverts. Later in the week, the female flew through the village, just below our casa, with the local pair of Carrion Crows giving frantic chase. In fact, it had been alarm calls from the crows that had alerted us to the presence of the female.

The central limestone massif of the Picos is visually spectacular. The highest peak is Peña Vieja at 2,600m, but many other peaks exceed 2000m. Here, Wall Creepers must surely be one of the most fascinating and beautiful inhabitants of these jagged limestone crags, and are wonderful to watch as they forage for insects in fissures on precipitous rock faces. Alpine Accentors and Snow Finches flit amongst the boulder fields at the base of crags and Water Pipits breed alongside streams. Griffon Vultures are abundant and have many breeding colo-

nies in the valleys, but this is the habitat where they are seen at their best, as squadrons soar around the crags, expertly utilising the up-draughts and thermals in their search for carcasses. Equally impressive are the massive mountain dogs, which shepherd their own flocks of sheep and goats with little or no human intervention. Presumably they are fed occasionally! Undoubtedly these are excellent deterrents against wolves.

The easiest way to gain access to these alpine habitats is by the cable car at Fuente De. At the top station you will be greeted by a flock of Alpine Choughs and you can watch Griffon and Egyptian Vultures as



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they glide past at eye level, literally just metres away! Also, the panoramic views are breathtaking! Within a few minutes of arriving at the top you can enjoy a great variety of alpine plants, Apollo butterflies etc, and of course, the birds!

The Cantabrian Mountains are also home to some of the larger mammals that were lost from Scotland centuries ago. In the forests, wild boars are abundant, as are both Red and Roe Deer. The Wolf population is increasing in this part of Spain, in part due to land abandonment and the corresponding flush in semi-natural vegetation resulting in increasing deer numbers. However, the future of a small fragmented population of Brown Bears is not so rosy.

We should mention that one of the joys of holidaying in the Picos is meeting the local people, who always seem to be happy, always willing to help and serve up the most delicious food with, of course, excellent wine. Very few of the locals speak English, so a little knowledge of Spanish is helpful! Most restaurants offer the usual paella and calamari, but also hearty fare in the form of a

cocido, a filling stew of pork, sausages and black pudding with chick peas or haricot beans. The fresh fish and scrumptious salads are favourites of ours, as is the baby roast lamb. Try to diet before your visit so you can sample these delights without worrying about the waistline! If you are counting calories, beware the desserts (postres), which usually include copious quantities of sugar, cream and eggs, but do sample the fig ice-cream, which is heavenly! For an al fresco lunch, try spicy sausages (chorizo), Serrano ham and the local cheeses, together with fresh bread and fruit. Asturias and Cantabria are also famous for their cider.

This fascinating area is easily accessible from airports at Santander and Bilbao. We prefer to take the ferry from Plymouth to Santander, an 18 hour crossing that can be great for seabirds and cetaceans. It is also very relaxing. Once off the ferry in Santander, we can be in our favourite hotel in the centre of the Picos, in less than two hours. Roll on next year!

Steve & Linda Petty

The Argyll Bird Club—21-years old

A bit of history

How many of you realise the Argyll Bird Club is 21 years old this year?

When Peter Staley was searching through his loft for material for his article on the history of the *Eider* in the September issue (page 12), he came across the programme for the inaugural meeting/conference of the Argyll Bird Club on 30 March 1985. Peter kindly photographed the programme, which is reproduced opposite. As you can see, Clive Craik gave the opening talk.

Editor



Logo mark 1!

ARGYLL BIRD CLUB

A one-day conference to launch the Argyll Bird Club will be held in the Argyll Hotel, Inveraray on 30th March 1985. Anyone having an interest in ornithology, ecology or conservation is welcome to attend.

PROGRAMME

| <u>Time</u> | |
|-------------|---|
| 10.00-10.40 | Dr. C. Craik: The breeding of Common and Arctic Terns in Scotland. |
| 10.40-11.20 | Professor J.C. Smyth: 'Conservation' |
| 11.20-11.45 | Coffee |
| 11.45-12.45 | Club Business |
| 12.45-2.00 | Lunch |
| 2.00-2.40 | Dr. Eric Bignal and Dr. P Monaghan: Breeding Ecology of the Chough on Islay, 1983-84. |
| 2.40-3.45 | RSPB Film Unit (Roger Broad) "The Osprey" |
| 3.45-4.00 | Final discussion session and close of meeting |

A fee of £2.00 includes admission and coffee. Lunches will be available at the Hotel.

Further details are available from C.A. Galbraith, 4 Achagoil, Minard, Inveraray.

Decade of wildlife persecution proves the need for National Wildlife Crime Unit

Coinciding with the launch of the National Wildlife Crime Unit (based in Edinburgh), the RSPB has released information highlighting some of the worst blackspots in the UK for confirmed persecution incidents against birds of prey.

Information extracted from the RSPB's crime database has revealed that between 1995 and 2006, there were 1,113 confirmed persecution incidents against birds of prey.

Scotland had the highest total of recorded incidents with 494, while England suffered 454 incidents. Wales and Northern Ireland recorded 142 and 23 incidents respectively.

Commenting on the results, the RSPB's director of conservation, Dr Mark Avery, said: 'Persecution of birds of prey is holding back the recovery of several species. The hen harrier, golden eagle and red kite are all too frequently the victims of illegal persecution.

The ten worst counties in England with confirmed crimes against birds of prey between 1995 and 2006: Northumberland, (41); Devon, (34); Norfolk, (30); North Yorkshire, (29); Cumbria, (29); Derbyshire, (24); Lancashire, (20); Nottinghamshire, (17); Shropshire, (16); and Merseyside, (15). The number of recorded incidents per county are recorded in brackets.

The ten worst regions in Scotland with confirmed crimes against birds of prey between 1995 and 2006: Tayside,

(98); Highland, (89); Strathclyde, (87); Grampian, (66); Borders, (54); Dumfries & Galloway, (51); Lothian, (14); Fife, (14); Central, (13); and Western Isles, (8). The number of recorded incidents per region are recorded in brackets.

RSPB Public Relations department, 18 October 2006



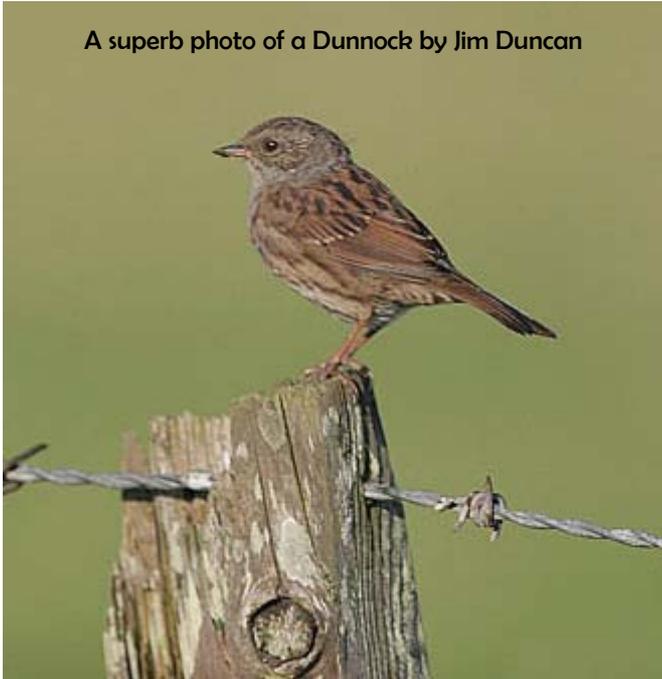
Golden eagles are too frequently the victims of illegal persecution

Programme for the ABC's Spring Meeting
 Saturday 10th March 2007
 Royal Marine Hotel, Hunter's Quay, Dunoon

| | |
|------------------|--|
| 0930 | Doors open, coffee and tea |
| 0950-1000 | Welcome and introduction — <i>Nigel Scriven (Chairman)</i> |
| 1000-1015 | Recent bird sightings — <i>Paul Daw (Argyll Bird Recorder)</i> |
| 1015-1100 | Puffins' progress: Ailsa Craig 2006 — <i>Bernie Zonfrillo</i> |
| 1100-1120 | Coffee/tea |
| 1120-1210 | Bean Geese in Scotland — <i>John Simpson</i> |
| 1210-1255 | White Wagtails: an update — <i>Iain Livingstone</i> |
| 1255-1400 | Lunch (available in the hotel) |
| 1400-1430 | Birds of Scotland 3: an update — <i>Ron Forrester</i> |
| 1430-1515 | Birding in Lesbos — <i>Jimmy Maxwell</i> |
| 1515-1545 | Coffee/tea and raffle |
| 1545-1630 | ABC trips: Sanda2005/06 and Dumfries & Galloway 2006 — <i>Nigel Scriven</i> |
| 1630 | End of meeting |

Articles for the next issue of *The Eider* should with the Editor before 25th February 2007 (see the box opposite for more information)

A superb photo of a Dunnock by Jim Duncan



Officials and Committee of the Argyll Bird Club (2006/2007)

Chairman: Nigel Scriven, 2 Allt na Blathaich, Loch Eck, Dunoon, Argyll PA23 8SG (phone 01369 840606 & 01505 843679)

Vice Chairman: Tom Callan, Corra, Otter Ferry, Tighnabruaich, Argyll, PA21 2DH (phone 01700 821212)

Secretary: Katie Pendreigh, The Whins, Ferry Road, Tayinloan, Argyll PA29 6XQ (phone 01583 441359)

Treasurer: Bob Furness, The Cnoc, Tarbet, Loch Lomond G83 7DG (phone 01301 702603)

Membership Secretary: Sue Furness, The Cnoc, Tarbet, Loch Lomond G83 7DG (phone 01301 702603)

Committee: Richard Allan (Oban), Roger Broad (Killlearn), Danielle Clark-De Bisschop (Colintraive), Paul Daw (Minard), Ian Hopkins (Bute), Steve Petty (Tighnabruaich) and David Wood (Bellanoch)

Editor of the Argyll Bird Report: Tom Callan (see vice-chairman above)

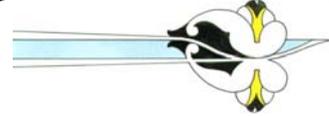
Editor of the Eider: Steve Petty (contact details on page 2)

Argyll Bird Recorder: Paul Daw, Tigh-na-Tulloch, Tullochgorm, Minard, Argyll PA32 8YQ (phone 01546 886260 e-mail monedula@globalnet.co.uk)

BTO Regional Representative for Argyll, Arran, Bute & Gigha: Richard Allan (phone 01852 300 359)

Argyll Bird Club Website: <http://www.argyllbirdclub.org>

The Eider



The *Eider* is the quarterly newsletter of the **Argyll Bird Club**. The editor welcomes articles about birds, wildlife conservation and ecology in Argyll, including articles of a wider natural history interest, notices of forthcoming events, book reviews and press releases. Whenever possible, contributions should be submitted to the editor as e-mail attachments in Microsoft Word or rtf format. But, this should not deter potential contributors, as hand-written scripts are also acceptable. If in doubt about whether an article is suitable, please contact the editor for advice.

Suitable illustrations greatly enhance the attractiveness of the *Eider*, and artists and photographers are encouraged to submit artwork and digital photographs (jpeg files preferred) of birds and their habitats to the editor. Digital photographs of Schedule 1 species taken at or near the nest will not be accepted for publication unless the photographer was covered by an appropriate SNH licence.

The *Eider* is published during the first week in March, June, September and December. Articles for each issue must be with the editor before the 25th day of the month prior to publication. However, it greatly helps if material can be submitted well before these deadline dates. Contributions are accepted in the order they are received, which may result in some late submissions being held over until the next issue.

Opinions expressed in articles are those of the author/s and not the **Argyll Bird Club**.

Advertising rates: £80 for a full page, £20 for a quarter page, 7p per word for smaller adverts. Payment must accompany adverts, with cheques made payable to the **Argyll Bird Club**. Contact the Editor for further information.

More about the Argyll Bird Club

The club was established in 1985. Its main role is to encourage an interest in wild birds and their habitats in Argyll; an area of outstanding natural beauty and biological diversity.

The club endeavours to provide a friendly and sociable forum for members of all ages, to meet and enjoy their common interest. This in itself provides a challenge as the population of Argyll is relatively small and widely dispersed. The club hosts two one-day meetings each year, in spring and autumn. The venue of the spring meeting is rotated between different towns, including Dunoon, Oban and Lochgilphead. The autumn meeting/AGM is held in a convenient central location, usually near Lochgilphead. The club organises field trips for members. It publishes the annual *Argyll Bird Report*. Additional or past copies can be purchased from the Treasurer. Your annual subscription entitles you to one copy of the *Argyll Bird Report*, four issues of the *Eider* and free admission to the two annual meetings. New members are always welcome, whether you live in Argyll or not. Membership categories and rates are:

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Ordinary | £10 |
| Junior (under 17) | £3 |
| Family | £15 |
| Corporate | £25 |

Subscriptions are due on 1st January and can be paid by cheque or standing order. New members joining after 1st October are covered until the end of the following year. Further information can be obtained from the Membership Secretary (see the box opposite).