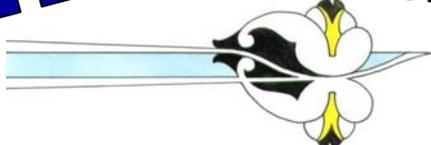


The Eider



The Eider is the Quarterly Newsletter of the Argyll Bird Club: Scottish Charity Number SC 008782

Editorial

Late last year I asked Margaret Staley if she could design a new logo for the club's new website. Margaret provided four very attractive designs that were circulated early in the New Year to the committee for their opinion. The logo at the top of this page was chosen unanimously! This will now be used in *The Eider* and on the new website—thanks Margaret.

This leads me onto the acquisition of illustrations for *The Eider*. To date this has relied heavily on one person—Margaret Staley! While we all greatly appreciate Margaret's superb pen drawings and paintings, I'm beginning to exhaust the supply that she kindly provided. So, this is a desperate plea to all you budding artists. It's also an appeal to photographers. Over the last few issues, the number of colour photographs has slowly increased, and I could now use more in each issue. They don't all have to be of birds! Hopefully, many of you will have received a digital camera for Christmas—so now's your chance to show what you can do!! I'm sure you'll agree that the use of sketches, paintings and photographs greatly enhances the appearance of our newsletter.

The club's new website will be accessible from 20th April at:

<http://www.argyllbirdclub.org>

The club's new website (<http://www.argyllbirdclub.org>) will be accessible from 20th April. The site is not yet complete, as you will soon see. It is anticipated that it will take about a year to complete most of the blank pages. I would be interested in any feedback about how you think the site can be further improved.

A recurring theme in the last few issues has been the dilemma of mink predation

on seabirds. As a result of these articles, the need for urgent action is now appreciated by a wider audience. We hope this publicity will lead to an increase in funding for locally-based action plans. Clive Craik's article below, further highlights this problem, and ably demonstrates that mink-depleted waterbird communities can be restored!

For contributions to this issue, I would like to thank Clive Craik, Paul Daw, Jim Dickson, Bob Furness, Mike Gear, David Merrie, Alan Spellman, Margaret Staley and Michael Thomas

Spring Meeting

Will be held in the Royal Marine Hotel, Hunter's Quay, Dunoon on Saturday 27th March 2004

The programme is on page 5

Autumn Meeting

To be held at the Cairnbaan Hotel, near Lochgilphead on Saturday 6th November 2004

St Kilda of the Sealochs

Here's something to think about.

Waterbirds (seabirds, wildfowl and waders) breeding regularly on St Kilda—16 species

Waterbirds breeding regularly on Eilean Inshaig in Loch Craignish—16 species

Waterbirds breeding regularly on Eilean an Ruisg in Loch Feochan—13 species

Eilean Inshaig is a small, rather unprepossessing islet (a mere 150 x 25m in size) by the marina at Ardfern, surrounded every summer by bustling yachts and small

March 2004

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boats. Eilean an Ruisg is another small, insignificant-looking islet (90 x 60 m) close to the marina in Loch Feochan, just south of Oban. These two tiny islets have the highest waterbird diversity (variety of breeding species) of all 150 or so small islands that I visit every year. However, my main point is that most small islands like these are very rich in this way. To

To receive the electronic version of *The Eider* in colour, members should send their e-mail address to the Editor (contact details above). Past issues (since June 2002) can be downloaded from the club's website (address on back page).

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find eight or ten waterbird species breeding alongside each other is not unusual. Most strikingly, the vast lengths of mainland shore, just a stone's throw away, are barren in comparison. A few species such as **Oystercatcher**, **Common Sandpiper** and **Mute Swan** breed, spaced singly, along the mainland shore, but most of the sealoch species rarely or never breed there. The mainland certainly has nothing like the fantastic densities of gulls, terns and **Eiders** found on the tiny islands. In May, you have to look where you tread to avoid the eggs; and in June and July, if you don't bend down and part the vegetation with every step, you are likely to crush the chicks that are hiding there. That is why some of these islands now have "please don't land" notices, not to spoil everyone's holidays, but to discourage unintentional slaughter. Incidentally, in Finland and some other Nordic countries it is illegal to land on islets like these in the breeding season, and everyone knows why and respects the tradition. Interestingly, it is the small islets high up the sealochs that hold the greatest number of breeding species, probably because they offer the most varied habitat. Larger islands in sounds and firths may hold much greater numbers of nests but they have many fewer species.

For obvious reasons I won't press the comparison of these two islets with St Kilda any further, but it does raise a few more interesting points.

First, many of the sealoch species are different from those on pelagic St Kilda and different again from more typical seabird colonies closer to the mainland, such as the Treshnish Isles. I don't need to list the St Kilda or Treshnish species (see an excellent article on the club's visit to the Treshnish Isles in the September 2003 *Eider*), but you may be interested in the sixteen species breeding regularly on the islet at Ardfern - **Mute Swan**, **Canada Goose**, **Shelduck**, **Mallard**, **Eider**, **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Common Sandpiper**, **Oystercatcher**, **Black-headed Gull**, **Common Gull**, **Herring Gull**, **Lesser Black-back**, **Great Black-back**, **Common Tern**, **Arctic Tern**, **Black Guillemot**. The list for Eilean an Ruisg lacks a few of these, but includes **Greylag Goose** and (sometimes) **Redshank**. **Cormorant**

"these unique sealoch communities are rapidly disappearing because of mink predation"

and **Shag** are regulars at islands in bigger sealochs, making *twenty species* altogether. These breeding bird communities of the sealochs are *unique reservoirs of biodiversity*.

Second (and you knew I'd get round to this), these unique sealoch communities are rapidly disappearing because of mink predation. Introduced, American mink are the only land predators that easily and routinely reach such islands. Whole-island breeding failures due to mink predation are widespread. Repeated year after year, they eventually drive the colonies to extinction. When I started visiting such sites in the early 1980s, every sealoch between Loch Ailort in the north and West Loch Tarbert in the south held one or more tern colony (always with other species, as above), usually on the islet furthest up each loch. Now most of these have gone. When such a variety of species disappears locally, whole sealochs become strangely empty and silent each summer. Where they survive, it is almost always because mink are controlled in the area, either by gamekeepers for pheasants or by amateur conservationists committed to saving seabirds.

Finally, for many years I have counted the breeding numbers and species, and investigated breeding success and causes of failure on most islets along the coasts of mainland Argyll and part of Lochaber. At present, the above two unremarkable islets (that most readers have probably never even noticed?) are the most species-rich in this large area, but at one stage both had severely reduced waterbird communities that were approaching extinction after many years of mink predation. On 15 June 1985 at Ardfern, I remember adult terns and gulls hovering in a dense flock just above the ground on Inshaig, intently but helplessly watching a mink killing their young. On 22 June I removed armfuls of dead adult terns, gulls and **Black Guillemots**. There was a much bigger kill of adults there in 1987, and after three successive years of total breeding failure during 1992-1994 and one of near-complete failure in 1995, very few birds remained. Mink control by local people began in 1996 and the colony has recovered steadily ever since. In 1991 you could stand on the Feochan shore and watch a mink running about killing chicks on Ruisg in broad daylight. Here, breeding success was zero or nearly zero in every year from 1991 to 1997. Effective mink control began in 1997 and subsequently the colony has strongly recovered. In 1995, at Tayvallich, Sarah Walker and her mother watched as a mink carried off all chicks from the **Black-headed Gull** colony on the islet in the bay, and the consequent loss of this colony was mentioned

by a member at the club AGM in November 2003. Regrettably, no-one has yet controlled mink enough at Tayvallich, or

"Mink control doesn't bring back just the terns or the Black-headed Gulls, but many species"

at many other islets, although there have been brave attempts. Mink control doesn't bring back just the terns or the **Black-headed Gulls**, but many species – perhaps all twenty, perhaps even more! The success at Inshaig, Ruisg and elsewhere shows that, with enough effort, it *can* be done. Anyone else interested in restoring these St Kildas of the sealochs?

Clive Craik

Field Trip to the Farne Islands—Cancelled

Due to a lack of interest, this trip on 4-6th June (see December 2003 *Eider*) has been cancelled.

Editor

Committee Meeting Notes

The committee last met at the George Hotel in Inveraray (as usual) on the 3rd February for a pleasant supper and get-together before the meeting. Once the minutes of the previous meeting and related matters had been dealt with, the agenda included items on forthcoming indoor meetings, field trips and promotional and publicity material for the club.

It was agreed that liaison with the **Scottish Ornithologists' Club** was best facilitated by reciprocal advertisements in both organisations' publications of field trips and other club matters that were of mutual interest.

Thanks to data input by several extra helpers and the labours of Paul Daw and others, the delayed *Argyll Bird Report* was now at the proof stage, and should be at the printers shortly. Further, it is hoped that new computing facilities, extra helpers and perhaps direct electronic submission of field records in a standard format,

will help to avoid such prolonged delay in the publication of future reports.

John Anderson (Club Secretary) showed several draft versions of a promotional leaflet for the club that was aimed at attracting new members and informing a wider public of the activities of the club. The drafts were helpfully displayed on a screen so that alternatives could be easily and quickly assessed. Title, cover picture and contents were all considered, and after much discussion it was agreed that John Anderson, David Wood (Chairman) and Bob Furness (Treasurer) would finalise the design and then progress to printing and distribution (perhaps with Tourist Board packs).

The draft programme for the spring meeting on the 27th March in Dunoon was presented by Bob Furness (see page 5). Possible topics include **Red Kites**, Ailsa Craig, **Merlins** and Wildlife crime. Many ideas were forthcoming for the autumn meeting, to be further developed at the next committee meeting.

The Birds of Argyll Book is progressing well, with many species accounts completed. We are aiming for publication in Spring 2005.

Dates for the next two committee meetings were arranged for the 23rd March and 24th August. Ideas, suggestions or offers of help from members would be welcome.

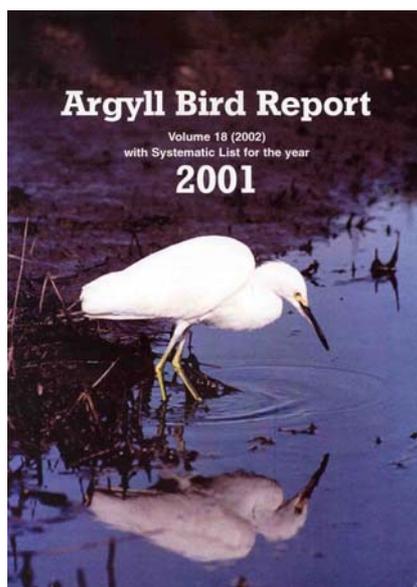
Mike Gear

The Woodland Bird Survey 2003–2004

There are worrying signs that some bird species of British woodlands are in decline. Several such species have been proposed for the 'red list' of the forthcoming revision of Birds of Conservation Concern including **Capercaillie**, **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker**, **Spotted Flycatcher** and **Marsh and Willow Tit**. Fifteen further species have been proposed for the new 'amber list'. However, little is known about factors affecting these populations as there has not been a great deal of relevant research or survey effort in recent years.

To fill this gap and to get a more precise fix on where these species stand today in terms of distribution and population, a survey is being carried out jointly by the *British Trust for Ornithology* and the *Royal Society for the Protection of Birds*. During 2003 and 2004, a total of around 350 mostly broadleaved woods in England, Scotland and Wales that were first surveyed in the mid 1980s or earlier, will be revisited. At least 100 of these sites will be past *Common Bird Census (CBC)*

The Latest Argyll Bird Report—Just Published!



The latest *Argyll Bird Report* (volume 18, with systematic list for 2001) has just been published. Clive Craik and Paul Daw are to be congratulated on producing another excellent report. The front cover shows a superb photograph of a **Snowy Egret** photographed at Balvicar (Seil Island, Argyll) by Bill Jackson. Members of the Argyll Bird Club receive the report free. Additional copies can be purchased from the Treasurer (Bob Furness, address on back page) for £7 (including postage and packing). Why not buy one for a friend?

Editor

plots (surveyed from 1964 onwards) and the remaining 250 will be woods originally surveyed for the *RSPB* between 1982 and 1986. The *CBC* plots will be surveyed using territory mapping in both 2003 and 2004 while 20% of the *RSPB* sites will be surveyed (using point counts) in both years and the remaining sites surveyed for a single year.

A limited amount of habitat data is available for *CBC* plots, but fairly detailed vegetation surveys were carried out for most of the *RSPB* woods. For the present survey, the aim is to obtain detailed habitat data for all sites surveyed. The relationship between the woods themselves and the surrounding landscape will also be assessed.

Possible factors related to any reduction in woodland bird numbers include both **squirrels** and **deer**, and the impact of both is being assessed at each site by recording drey counts and frequency of deer tracks.

The surveying is being carried out mainly by contract workers, of whom (during the 2003 season) I was one. My sites were all in Argyll and chiefly comprised predominantly birch and oak woods, many of them on very steeply sloping terrain.

It is too early to draw conclusions from just one year's fieldwork in Argyll alone and in any case the data will require sophisticated computer analysis. However, here are a few entirely personal comments.

First, before any field work was carried out, access permission had to be obtained from landowners and contact made with farmers, keepers etc., who would other-

wise wonder who was wandering about on their land with a clipboard and festooned with gadgets (GPS unit, laser range finder etc.). I was struck by the fact that, almost without exception, those approached were co-operative, helpful and interested. Nearly everyone wanted to see a copy of the survey results and many had useful information and advice to give. With the possible exception of someone who wanted to know how to obtain a licence to shoot **Buzzards** (but was otherwise every helpful!) they all seemed to care about the welfare of the birds on their land, except of course for **Hoodies**. Attitudes to other forms of wildlife were more mixed, with foxes, mink and, perhaps surprisingly, pine martens high on the list of named villains.

Second, there was obvious evidence in several woods of heavy grazing pressure, mainly from **cattle** and **sheep**. Despite widespread control measures, **Roe** and/or **Red Deer** were also present in many woods although it is hard, at this stage, to be sure how much damage they were doing. On the evidence of tracks, deer were present in lower densities than at the wood in Suffolk we visited during our training programme. One or two **Red Squirrels** were seen, but **Grey Squirrels** were entirely absent, so the latter animals are clearly not a significant factor in Argyll.

Third, initial results from woods visited so far do seem to indicate an overall drop in bird numbers. **Coal** and **Great Tits** in particular were recorded at much lower densities in many woods than in 1985 (when the previous survey was carried out). However, curiously, in the majority

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of woods **Blue Tit** numbers were actually higher. **Tree Pipits** and **Common Redstarts** were holding their own in most woods, but had declined in a few. **Robins** were also maintaining their numbers in most woods and increasing in a few. **Chaffinches** and **Willow Warblers** are two of the most numerous species in Argyll woodlands and there appeared to be little overall change in numbers at most sites. **Willow Warbler** and **Treecreeper** numbers also seemed to be little changed in most woods. Two species, **Wren** and **Song Thrush**, appeared to have increased noticeably since the earlier surveys. In the case of **Wren** this may be due to a recent run of mild winters rather than any changes in habitat.

Fourth, as far as other species were concerned, **Pied Flycatchers** had apparently disappeared from all but one of the woods where they were recorded in 1985, but **Garden Warblers** and **Blackcaps** were present in woods where they were previously unrecorded. So, overall, a mixed picture at this stage.

Weather can be an important factor in recording birds especially as most of the observations in woods relate to sound

(songs and calls) rather than sight. In 1985 the field workers in Argyll were fortunate enough to experience fine, dry weather for most of the survey period. After a fine dry early spring in 2003 things went down hill during May and June with significantly more wet and windy weather than in 1985. This must have had an effect on the counts although I am told that cunning mathematical formulae are used to compensate for this, as well as for variations in observer effort/expertise.

It will be interesting to see what differences there are in woods that are surveyed for a second time this year, and even more fascinating to see what emerges from the completed survey. The results will also be used to assess the effectiveness of existing methods of monitoring woodland bird species (*Breeding Bird Survey* etc.) and what additional approaches may be needed in the future.

Paul Daw (The views expressed above are entirely personal and in no way represent those of the participating sponsors of the *Woodland Bird Survey*. This article first appeared in the Autumn 2003 Newsletter of *The Native Woodlands Discussion Group*).

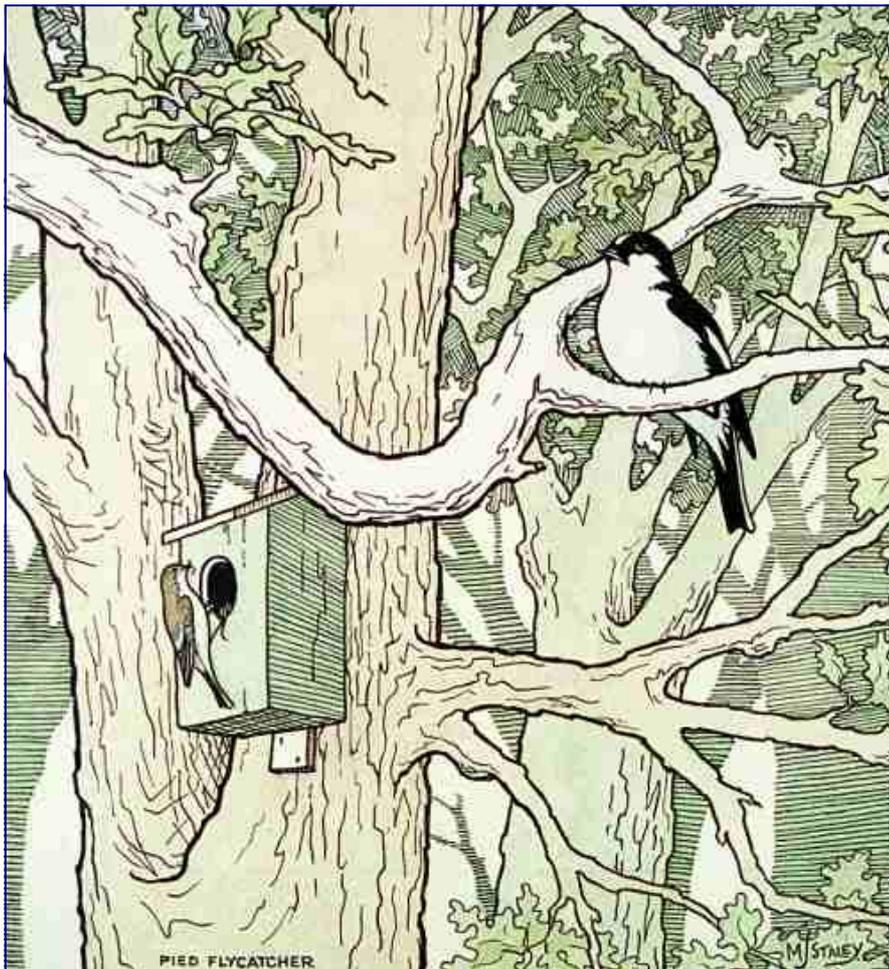
40-years Ago

A Day on Bute

On the 4th April 1963 we went to Bute, primarily to see the geese. Driving by the Rest and be Thankful to Strachur, we crossed by the ferry at Colintraive and arrived in Bute about 09.30. Almost at once we saw a few **Partridges** in a field, **Duncock** and **Blackbird** in the woods and in the Kyles of Bute **Goldeneyes**, **Red-Breasted Mergansers**, **Eiders** and **Oystercatchers**. The first geese we saw were four in a field by Ettrick Bay. By climbing a sloping field we were able to see more geese in further fields; in total 251. A few **Mallards** paddled in pools. Ettrick Bay was sandy and nearly devoid of waders. In this area, however, we also saw **Chaffinches**, **Skylarks**, **Starlings**, **Hooded Crows**, **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** and **Pied Wagtails** - all of which we later found to be well distributed. **Pheasants** were calling and a **Song Thrush** was singing. At our next stop we saw 440 **Greylags**. A bit further on were parties of 8 and 80.

We then took a look at Greenan Loch; 165 grazing **Wigeon**, 2 **Teal**, 7 **Goldeneye**, 1 **Mallard**, 8 **Tufted Duck** and 1 **Redshank**. We turned toward the west coast and found 238 geese very well hidden in hollow ground, which may also have contained some of the previous lot, which had flown in that direction. More geese were flying about just beyond here; a party of over 100 flew south and may have joined the flocks we saw later opposite Inchmarnock. Spread over several fields, were 620 **Greylags** with 1 **Pinkfoot** and 6 **Barnacles**, and 95 **Greylags** further on. From a good viewpoint on a hill we could also see the sound, smooth as glass, and picked up **Curlews**, **Redshanks**, **Mallards**, **Wigeons**, 1 **Turnstone** on the shore, 1 **Great Northern Diver** and 3 **Slavonian Grebes** and some **Black-headed Gulls**. In the fields were a party of, what we considered were genuine, **Rock Doves**, also 1 **Stock Dove** flying. Other birds on farmland included **Wood-pigeons**, **Yellowhammers** (common), and a large flock of **Fieldfares** with **Redwings**, some **Greenfinches**, a **Kestrel**, and lots of **Jackdaw** flocks, and **Robins**, of course.

We took our lunch to Ardschalpie Point and had a sea watch. The sea was very calm, but the birds were far out - we could see them up to 2-3 miles away. We managed to identify at least 1 **Great Northern** and 5 **Red-throated Divers**. Between the Point and Inchmarnock were several auks, mainly **Razorbills**, and 1 **Guillemot**. a few **Gannets** flew by, and 1 **Common Scoter** came down the sound and flew round the south end of the island. There



Pied Flycatcher by Margaret Staley

was also a grebe seen briefly; with long neck, tufted head and very pale throat. It is most likely to be **Great Crested**, but I hardly had a good enough view for certain identification. On the rough pasture, both **Meadow** and **Rock Pipits**, as well as **Pied Wagtails** were common.

Loch Quien and the neighbouring coast seemed to be the centre of another flock of geese. They were restless, but gave us a moderately good view when they settled closer to us. We counted 750 **Greylags** with 20 **Whitefronts** and about 6 **Pink-feet**.

We then drove up between Lochs Fad and Askog to Rothesay. On Loch Fad we saw **Mallards**, **Wigeon**, a few **Coots**, 2 **Goldeneyes** and a drake **Gadwall**. On and above Loch Askog were more geese, drifting off in small parties to a field just over the horizon. At first we saw 270 **Greylags**, with 40 **Wigeon**, **Mallards**, **Coots** and 2 **Goldeneyes**. We then went into

Rothesay and to the fields on the hill at the back. No geese, but we saw a **Raven** overhead; also **Blue Tits** and a rookery or two.



Goldeneye (photo Jim Dickson)

Coming out of Rothesay on the road behind Loch Askog we saw only about 70 geese left on the loch. Further on there were 480. We therefore decided that the Loch Askog flock was about 500. We

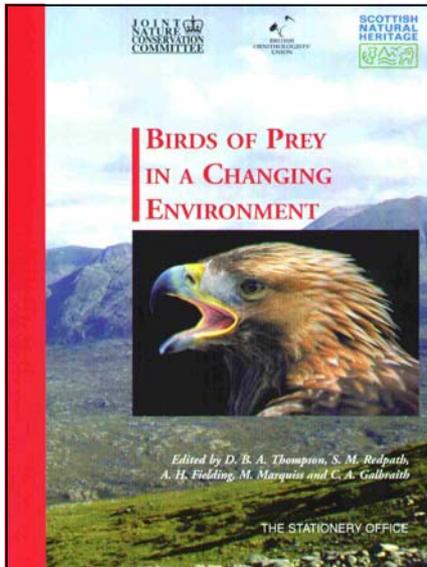
were going out to the southern peninsular of Bute when we saw several hundred geese moving north along the shore. Thinking that these were our Loch Quien birds, we chased them and lost them. There were no more than 20 by Loch Quien. However, by returning along the coast a mile or so and striking across the fields we found a flock of about 450 **Greylags** and 20 **Whitefronts** feeding below the inland cliff on the grassy foreshore. Fifty or so were flying by Loch Quien, and further along we found about 150, which accounted for most of the birds seen previously.

On the way home we checked up on the other main parties, but, with only a quick look, missed some of the smaller ones. Our total for the island was 2982. Even allowing for possible duplication this still leaves a minimum of about 2500-2600.

David Merrie

Spring Meeting Programme
Saturday 27th March 2004
Royal Marine Hotel, Hunters Quay, Dunoon

09.30-	Doors open, coffee and tea
10.15-10.20	Welcome & introduction— <i>David Wood (Chairman of the Argyll Bird Club)</i>
10.20-10.30	Round up of recent bird sightings— <i>Paul Daw (Argyll Bird Recorder)</i>
10.30-11.15	Red kites: reintroductions and current status— <i>Duncan Orr-Ewing (RSPB)</i>
11.15-11.50	Coffee
11.50-12.30	Ailsa Craig: from a rat infested rock to a wildlife paradise— <i>Bernie Zonfrillo (Glasgow Univ.)</i>
12.30-12.45	Owls in Argyll— <i>Cristina McAvoy (SNH)</i>
12.45-14.15	Lunch (available in the hotel)
14.15-15.00	Merlins at risk?— <i>Neil Forbes (Veterinary Surgeon)</i>
15.00-15.20	Arctic Skuas definitely at risk!— <i>Sarah Davis (Glasgow University)</i>
15.20-15.40	Famous ornithologists from the west of Scotland: Alexander Wilson— <i>Nigel Scriven</i>
15.40-16.15	Raffle, tea and coffee



Birds of Prey in a Changing Environment: Edited by Thompson, D.B.A., Redpath, S.M., Fielding, A.H., Marquiss, M. & Galbraith, C.A. (2003) 550 pages, 14 colour photographs. Published by The Stationery Office, Edinburgh ISBN 0-11-497308-3. Softback. Price £35 excluding postage.

In December 2000, the British Ornithologists' Union and Scottish Natural Heritage organised a conference in Scotland about "birds of prey in a changing environment". This book is based on presentations given at that meeting.

The 41 chapters are arranged under six sections: (i) numbers and status (ii) population studies and behavioural interactions (iii) predation and ranging behaviour (iv) implications of land use changes (v) conservation and management and (vi) conflicts and the search for solutions. Each section has a brief introduction and a final chapter examines how to resolve raptor-human conflicts.

Ian Newton's excellent review of how natural factors limit bird of prey numbers gets the book off to a first-rate start. Not surprisingly, the book has a strong Scottish theme, with 22 chapters devoted to accounts of raptors in Scotland, including studies on **White-tailed Eagles**, **Hen Harriers**, **Northern Goshawks**, **Sparrowhawks**, **Common Buzzards**, **Golden Eagles**, **Ospreys**, **Common Kestrels**, **Merlins**, **Peregrines** and **Barn Owls**. The full reference for each of these studies is given in "recent publication" on pages 14-15, four of which were based in Argyll. The breadth of the book is greatly enhanced by three excellent contributions from elsewhere in Europe; **Gyrfalcons** in Iceland (Ólafuf), **Montagu's Harriers** in France and Spain (Arroyo *et al.*) and predators and **Rabbits** in Spain (Viñuela & Villafuerte).

Overall, the book is one of the better conference proceedings on birds of prey to appear in recent years. The editors should be congratulated on their effort, the product of which will provide both a reference source for many years to come and essential reading for the many raptor enthusiasts in Scotland.

Editor

Sound of Gigha Field Trip—3rd April

In addition to one of the largest winter gatherings of **Slavonian Grebes** in the area, the Sound of Gigha is noted for large numbers of divers (especially **Great Northern**), **Long-tailed Ducks**, **Common Scoters** and **Common Goldeneyes**. It is also our most reliable site for the scarce **Velvet Scoter**. There are large flocks of **Greenland White-fronted** and **Greylag Geese** in the Tayinloan area and waders (and sometimes **Snow Buntings**) along the shore.

A field trip to look for these birds and others is planned for Saturday 3rd April 2004. For less experienced birders the intention is to also offer some guidance on how to identify these species and any others that we may see.

Meet at the car park at Ronachan Point just off the A83 (NR741548) at 10.30 am. From here we will call in briefly at the coast near the West Coast Salmon site and then onto Tayinloan. If the weather and tide conditions are suitable we will walk along the shore towards Rhunahaorine Point to look for waders. We will then take the ferry to Gigha, mainly to look for birds in the Sound and break for lunch, when those who wish to, may order snacks at the hotel on the island. After returning from Gigha we may check some of the morning's sites on the way back, if time, the weather and stamina allow.

This trip depends very much on suitable weather. Will those who intend to come please contact me, by phone or e-mail, at the latest on the evening before (Fri 2nd Apr), so that I can confirm we shall be going ahead with the trip 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.

Paul Daw (Tel 01546 886260. E-mail monedula@globalnet.co.uk)

Kites by the Flock!

Two weeks ago we went to visit **Argaty Red Kites**, and can really recommend this as a great day out.

Lynn and Niall Bowser run a farm close to Argaty, which is just by Doune, near Stirling. In collaboration with the RSPB and SNH, they provide food each day throughout the winter for a flock of **Red Kites** that numbers from about 20 to 35 birds. Most of these are young from last year's nests of the population re-introduced to Scotland over the last few years. They provide a large and comfortable hide from which to observe the kites, and a member of RSPB staff is present to explain the kite reintroduction and feeding programme to visitors. You can visit only by booking (phone 01786 841373 or book by email through the web site). Booked visitors meet at 1330 at the farm car park, and the session ends at 1530. There is a charge of £3 per person and numbers are limited to a maximum of 20 people per day. So far, kites have been seen every day at the feeding site, often accompanied by **Buzzards**. There are also good prospects of seeing **Sparrowhawks**, **Kestrels** and occasionally a **Peregrine**. The farm has good habitat for finch flocks and we saw **Mistle Thrushes** feeding in the fields too. Many of the birds disperse during spring to breeding sites, so a visit as soon as possible in the next few weeks would be recommended. More details of the project, including advice on travel by road and maps, can be found at <http://www.argatyredkites.co.uk>

If you have time to spare, we can recommend Doune Castle (Scottish Heritage) which is only a few minutes drive from Argaty.

Bob and Sue Furness

Mull of Kintyre Field Trip—6th June

David Merrie will lead an excursion to the Scottish Wildlife Reserve at Largybaan on Sunday 6th June. This is an upland and seacliff reserve north of the Mull of Kintyre lighthouse, and an SSSI on account both of its bird population and, especially, for its botanical interest. A rare species of *Oxytropis* grows here, which is found in only a few other sites in Scotland; it should be in flower at the date of our visit. Bird wise, there are breeding **Golden Eagles** and **Barn Owls**, sea bird cliffs, and there should be **Ring Ousel**, **Twite** and **Peregrine**. The ground is fairly rugged, and I would expect to cover about 6 miles of walking. The farmhouse of Largybaan lies about 1 mile from the point to which normal cars can drive, so if anyone can bring a four-wheel drive vehicle, it would help our logistics enormously.

I propose that we meet in Campbeltown at 09.30hrs, at the ferry terminal for Ireland

(or if this service is actually running this year, as near as possible to it). We can then sort out car-sharing for the drive to the reserve and park any surplus cars.

Please let David Merrie know if you would like to join the field trip by 31st May at the latest (phone: 01250 884273 or email: david@merrie1035.fsnet.co.uk)

A Day to Remember A Birder's Tale

I am sure we have all had a special day birding with memories that remain clear and vivid, often for the species seen or for the circumstances of the sightings. Over the years I have been fortunate to have had many "special days". However, one fine day last October stands out from the rest. This experience occurred only 35 miles from the Argyll recording region, on the Isle of Barra.

Having travelled to Barra twice before for short visits several years ago, I have been keen to return and do some 'proper' birding by systematically searching for migrants in a style similar to that employed by birders checking favourable areas in the Northern Isles, often with great results.

Fortunately, my desire to check out this previously under-watched island coincided with six similar minded birders from Fife and the Lothians, who were returning for their second autumn visit after a highly successful fortnight in 2002. This group travelled to Barra on 25th September. However, I was unable to get there until late on 30th September. So, I was eager to receive news of what they were finding. It looked like they had hit the ground running with **Blyth's Reed Warbler**, **Paddyfield Warbler**, **Citrine Wagtail**, **Rustic Bunting**, **Rosy Starling**, **Barred Warbler**, **Yellow-browed Warbler** and **Red-breasted Flycatcher** in their first four days!

During this spell I was on Islay, though all was not lost, having found a juvenile **American Golden Plover** at Ardnave Loch and was fortunate enough to see a **Yellow-browed Warbler** found by Clive McKay in his garden, first seen flying past his kitchen window!

My expectations for Barra had always been set low, so as not to be disappointed, though finding something like a **Yellow-browed Warbler** would make the trip a worthwhile success. Anyway, Barra and Watersay are lovely islands and I was keen to get to know them better, whatever turned up!

I set off from Oban on the afternoon of

30th September. It was a fine sunny day with the most superb visibility. After leaving the Sound of Mull, views of Rhum and the surrounding islands to the north showed amazing detail. Good numbers of feeding **Gannets**, **Kittiwakes** and **auks** were all around. The first bonus came with the sighting of a **Basking Shark** not too far away, quickly followed by two **Sooty Shearwaters** flying past the ferry, lit up in amazing detail by the sun. Somewhere north off Coll a group of four small waders were seen flying directly towards the ferry, about 10 metres above the water.



Melodious Warbler on Barra (photo Jim Dickson)

As they approached closer they rose higher and flew almost overhead giving excellent views—**Grey Phalaropes**, the first ones I had seen in Argyll. I had a feeling this holiday was going to be enjoyable, and even if nothing else was spotted, I was happy.

The ferry arrived in a dark Castlebay late that evening, the darkness making it difficult to find the caravan that would be home for the next two weeks. The following day was to be that 'special day'

Setting off at first light on 1st October, I was keen to get cracking and headed for the football pitch in Castlebay in search of the **Citrine Wagtail**. After about half an hour without anything, I decided to make my way around the island. A male **Blackcap** was to be my first migrant warbler of the day - well hopefully there would be a few other birds about! A couple of miles further along the road I spotted my first 'birder'—with telescope locked onto something in the garden at Northbay House. The birder was Stuart Rivers the editor of *Birding Scotland* who had found a *Hippolais* warbler. This bird was to give some fantastic views over the next 12 days, it was the first **Melodious Warbler** that I have seen in Scotland. What a great start to the day. With spirits up I joined Stuart and the other two in his 'team' and continued around the island.

We checked a garden out at Skallary where I caught sight of a **Lesser White-**

throat flying into a bush. After we all had good views of it we moved to the next hotspot where a juvenile **Rosy Starling** was seen a couple of days earlier. Almost immediately Stuart Green spotted a 'reed warbler' and called us over—my hopes were for another **Blyth's Reed Warbler**, although there were too many contrasting tones in the wings, long primary projection and a 'warm' rump. Well **Eurasian Reed Warbler** was still a good find for the west of Scotland.

Moving a bit further round the road to Creachan Wood, another **Lesser White-throat** showed readily while the sound of Ravens mobbing something could be heard. In the bright clear sky two **Ravens** were giving a **Golden Eagle** a hard time, but I wasn't complaining. So far the island had exceeded all my expectations.

After another failed look for the **Citrine Wagtail** we got a phone call from the other 'team' claiming to have found an odd duck on Loch Tangusdale about a mile away. I set off and soon met up with this threesome and located the duck about 500 metres away with some **Tufted Ducks**. It was clear that this juvenile/female duck was similar to a **Pochard**, but the head profile wasn't right. Discussion centred on **Redhead** and the possibilities of some kind of hybrid. If it was a **Redhead**, it would be a new species for Scotland - high powered digi-video and stills were taken just in case! Currently, it looks like the initial ID was correct, and if accepted would be the first female **Redhead** for the Western Palearctic. I left Calum Scott filming the duck and set off on lap two of the island to gather my thoughts.

At Grean I decided to stop for a snack and scan the gardens, but before I had time to stop and reach for binoculars, a plump long tailed sparrow-like bird shot across the garden and out of sight into a tree about 50 metres away—what was it? After about five minutes it flew back out of



Juvenile Woodchat Shrike on Barra (photo Jim Dickson)

cover and through the bins this time clinched it as a juvenile **Woodchat Shrike**, the pale 'shoulder' patches being very prominent. Thoughts of lunch were

abandoned and the priority was to contact the other guys by mobile. I could get a signal, but unfortunately most parts of Barra does not, and the guys were in the 'does not' zone. I desperately wanted them to see the bird, but knew they were probably still examining the 'Redhead' As I could get a signal, I phoned Angus Murray at *Birdline Scotland* and put the news out - juvenile **Woodchat Shrike** at the Old Manse House, Grean. Angus was on Fair Isle at this time! While phoning, the shrike disappeared and panic set in. Amazingly, within five minutes the guys arrived, jumped out their cars, asking where is the 'Woodchat'? How did they know? It turned out Angus had paged them from Fair Isle with the message 'Woodchat at the Old Man's House!' Fortunately, with many pairs of eyes searching, we found it some distance away in another garden hunting for bees and posing for our cameras—a real star performer.

After an hour or so of watching this bird I pulled myself away and continued round the island heading for 'home'—what a day, it all seemed a bit unreal. Well, not your usual west coast birding! However,



Red-eyed Vireo on Barra (photo Jim Dickson)

the day was not over as a stop at the first **Lesser Whitethroat** garden produced an immaculate immature **Red-breasted Flycatcher** posing in a Sycamore. What a great end to a great first day on the island. The remainder of the fortnight was less intensely packed with variety, but still produced some good finds—the highlights being a **Red-eyed Vireo**, only the seventh record for Scotland and a **Little Bunting** found behind my caravan, just in time to show it to the guys before they headed for the ferry home. More **Grey Phalaropes** were seen from the ferry rounding off a fantastic trip, which has raised a number of questions and expectations about what can be found in the Western Isles and perhaps parts of Argyll during a favourable autumn.

Jim Dickson

Results from the 2002 Peregrine Survey

It is estimated that there was a new high of 1,402 pairs of **Peregrines** breeding in the UK and the Isle of Man in 2002, a 9% increase since the last survey, in 1991. There is much variation across the UK, with major declines in many areas. The results are published in the latest edition of *BTO News*.

The **Peregrine** is an icon of success for conservation. In 1961, the year of the first survey organised by Derek Ratcliffe on behalf of the BTO, **Peregrines** were found to have all but disappeared from southern England and were severely reduced throughout Wales, northern England, Northern Ireland and southern Scotland. The organochlorine pesticides DDT and dieldrin were soon implicated in these declines and as a result of concerted conservation efforts over decades, these pesticides were eventually phased out of use and **Peregrine** and other raptor populations began to recover.

Peregrines are top predators and can act as indicators of the quality of the food chain and of the surrounding environment. The UK also holds an important component of the total European population.

Using the counting method that Derek Ratcliffe has used in past surveys, we can say that there were 1,402 breeding pairs in 2002, compared with 1,283 in 1991 and 874 in the 1930s (before the population crash) (see table). Thus, the population has increased by 9% since 1991 and is 60% higher than in the 1930s (see note 3).

Peregrine numbers have continued to

expand in some areas, particularly southern and central England, where they have recolonised the southeast coast and expanded into inland counties where **Peregrines** have not previously been recorded. They have also increased in south Wales, parts of northern England and southern Scotland. These increases have occurred



Peregrine (photo Tommy Holden—BTO)

through the use of new sites, particularly in quarries and on tall buildings (see note 4).

The declines in north and western Scotland (dating at least from 1971) have continued, with 30% declines recorded in the Highland region between 1991 and 2002. Shetland now has no breeding **Peregrines** at all. This phenomenon has apparently spread further south, with 30% declines also occurring in Argyll, a decline of 15% in inland north Wales and a decline of 12% in inland Northern Ireland (see note 5). These declines have been generally attributed to food shortage, marine pollution and in some areas persecution (see note 5).

BTO Press Release

Some interesting nest observations

- The most inhospitable site for a nesting **Peregrine** was probably a maintenance platform of a chemical works. It was within 4m of a conveyor belt that carries 1,200 tonnes of limestone per 24 hrs! Very noisy and loud. The pair regularly raises young successfully.
- At one site the male started hunting at night and, although the main prey was **Starling**, it was also recorded bringing in **Sanderling, Dunlin, Knot, Water Rail, Moorhen, Ringed & Golden Plover, Lapwing, Woodcock, Snipe, Slavonian Grebe, Redwing, Song Thrush, Blackbird, Fieldfare, Kittiwake, Teal** and **Redshank**.
- Well-publicised examples of birds nesting on buildings include those nesting on Battersea Power Station in London and Chichester Cathedral in Sussex. Other man-made sites included bridges, a castle, power stations, a radio mast, a gasometer and a railway station.
- One nest was destroyed by goats!

Results by region of the 2002 national Peregrine survey

Region	Estimated no. occupied 1991	Estimated no. occupied 2002	Change in estimated no. occupied
SE England: coastal	6	25	317%
SE England: inland	0	14	-
SW England: coastal	96	128	33%
SW England: inland	19	71	274%
South Wales: coastal	52	67	29%
South Wales: inland	78	105	35%
North Wales: coastal	23	23	0%
North Wales: inland	110	93	-15%
W Midlands & Lancs lowlands	15	49	227%
NW England: coastal	20	29	45%
NW England: inland	81	77	-5%
Pennines	51	84	65%
Cheviots	13	23	77%
NE England: coastal	3	6	100%
NE England: inland	1	4	300%
Central East England	0	9	-
Shetland	5	0	-100%
Orkney	22	26	18%
Western Isles	12	20	67%
Highlands: coastal	54	41	-24%
Highlands: inland	120	79	-34%
NE Scotland: coastal	12	17	42%
NE Scotland: inland	51	42	-18%
Tayside: coastal	2	4	100%
Tayside: inland	94	94	0%
Central	40	37	-8%
Argyll: coastal	63	43	-32%
Argyll: inland	40	30	-25%
South Strathclyde: coastal	7	13	86%
South Strathclyde: inland	17	21	24%
Dumfries & Galloway: coastal	23	26	13%
Dumfries & Galloway: inland	51	52	2%
Lothian & Borders: coastal	5	10	100%
N Ireland: coastal	26	23	-12%
N Ireland: inland	73	70	-4%
Totals	1316	1492	13%

Additional notes about Peregrine surveys

- Peregrine** surveys took place in 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991 and 2002. The 2002 survey was scheduled for 2001 but rescheduled due to Foot-and-Mouth. The aims of the survey were to visit known and potential sites at least twice in the season, to check for site occupancy by **Peregrine** pairs or singletons.
- In the past, the national **Peregrine** surveys have attempted to cover all known breeding **Peregrine** territories within the UK and Isle of Man. This is a huge task for volunteer surveyors, especially in the remoter parts of north and west Scotland. So in 2002, for the first time, BTO provided fieldworkers with a randomised selection of eyries to check and, very helpfully, RSPB organised professional fieldworkers to assist in filling some of the gaps in these areas. This randomised approach aimed to ensure a representative and unbiased coverage of those difficult-to-get-to sites.
- Since 1991, the number of known potential **Peregrine** territories in the UK and Isle of Man had risen by 26% to 2,032 sites. Some 1,899 of these were visited in 2002, giving a coverage of 93%. The grand total of occupied territories is now estimated to be 1,492, an increase of 13% above the 1,316 thought to be occupied in 1991. This figure is based on observed occupancy at 1,415 sites, with an additional 77 unvisited sites predicted to be occupied (estimated by multiplying regional occupancy rates by numbers of un-surveyed eyries). We can also estimate how many breeding pairs the UK and Isle of Man actually supports, taking into account that unmated birds occupy some of the territories. Using the counting method that Derek Ratcliffe has used in past surveys, we can say that there were 1,402 breeding pairs in 2002, compared with 1,283 in 1991 and 874 in the 1930s (before the population crash). Thus, the population has increased by 9% since 1991 and is 60% higher than in the 1930s.
- Regional figures (number of territories) are given in the table.
- N.B. that a proportion of occupied territories are held by non-breeding **Peregrines**, so the number of breeding pairs is lower than those reported in this table.
- The declines in Scotland have generally been attributed to food shortage, possibly due to the declines in productivity of moorland, associated with over-grazing and regular burning, although research is needed to investigate these possibilities. In coastal areas, marine pollution has been suggested as a reason for declines, as well as the influence of **Fulmars** that defend their nests from attack by regurgitating foul oil over intruders, such as **Peregrines**. The decline in breeding pairs in north Wales is a new phenomenon that may also be linked to declines in prey availability. Substantial declines have been recorded among upland and moorland birds in Wales over the last decade. Surveyors indicated that failures and desertions at 95 sites across the

UK may have been due to persecution which, for example, appears to explain absences from some traditionally occupied sites in certain parts of Scotland.

7. The UK and Isle of Man holds about 15% of all **Peregrines** in Europe, so we have a special responsibility to steward these populations. It is important for government and conservation organisations to receive up-to-date population estimates to ensure that these populations are being maintained.

8. We would like to thank all the volunteer birdwatchers, many of whom are in **Raptor Study Groups**, for the great efforts that they put into checking and re-checking known and potential **Peregrine** nesting sites. We are particularly grateful to all the volunteer local area coordinators who liaised with the surveyors to ensure such a complete coverage for the survey. Many thanks are also due to Derek Ratcliffe, who has advised on many aspects of the survey and its analysis.

9. We are pleased to acknowledge the support and funding for the survey by the Esmée Fairburn Foundation, by the businesses, individuals and trusts supporting the BTO Peregrine Appeal and by the Environment and Heritage Service, Department of the Environment (Northern Ireland) (on behalf of the Statutory Conservation Agencies/RSPB Annual Breeding Bird Scheme (SCARABBS)) and the Scottish Ornithologists' Club. Professional fieldwork in Scotland was organised and managed by RSPB with funding from RSPB and Scottish Natural Heritage.

Win a Bottle of Wine!

Can you identify the tree seeds in this photograph and the bird that has opened some of the seeds? A 20-pence coin gives the scale. The seeds were collected in Cowal in autumn 2002. The first **Argyll Bird Club** member with the correct answer (both tree and bird species) will be able to collect a bottle of wine from me at the Spring Meeting in Dunoon.

Answers (one per person) to the Editor (contact details on the front page)



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Recent Bird Reports from Paul Daw (November 2003-January 2004)

Winter is often a quiet time for both birds and bird watchers and this one has been fairly typical. Not surprisingly, it appears that the wet weather during November and December did not tempt many of you out. However we still received a good number of records from the islands – so come on you mainlanders, lets hear from you!

*The highlights of the period were the **Black-necked Grebe** at Loch na Keal. Mull on 2nd/3rd Dec, the **Hawfinch** seen by Douglas Trigg on a bird table in the garden of a Mrs Sheila McKay at Benderloch, N Argyll on 19th Jan and a **Common (Mealy) Redpoll** at Balephuill on 1st Nov.*

The much delayed *Argyll Bird Report* for 2001 should have reached you with this copy of *The Eider*. Because of the ever increasing volume of work involved in processing individual bird records onto the computer prior to writing the Systematic List, not to mention the writing of the list itself, the annual bird reports have been falling further behind year-by-year. Until now this work has been carried out solely by myself as bird recorder. In the last few months a small, but dedicated band of assistants has materialised and we are now well on the way to completing the processing of 2002's records. I would like to take this opportunity to express my heartfelt thanks to Jane Mitchell, Mary Gregory, Morag Rea and Tom Callan for their efforts so far. The aim is to get the 2002 report out this year and eventually produce each year's report by June of the following year.

But, this depends on you too!!

There are still plenty of opportunities for others to help. All you need is access to a PC with a recent version of Word or, preferably, Excel software. Morag Rea has proved that our input system also works fine on an Apple Mac. Instructions will be provided. The more helpers we have the quicker the job will be done and the less work there is for each volunteer.

If you do not have time to offer assistance with processing other people's records

you can still save us a tremendous amount of time by sending in your own records in machine readable format. I now have a standard template for recording bird records in Excel or Word format and will be happy to send this on disc or by e-mail to anyone who asks.

Failing this it makes the work of the volunteers so much easier if you send in your records using the standard layout, as shown in the table at the bottom of the page:

Please enter the species in the same order as they appear in the Argyll Bird Report. If you have a problem finding map references I have an alphabetical index giving 4-figure map references for more than 3,700 place names in Argyll that I am happy to let you have a copy of on disc or by e-mail. Map references are essential if the records are to have any value. It takes a lot of time for our volunteers to look them up for each record.

N.B Don't forget to keep a note of arrival dates of migrants. There have been extraordinary reports 'down south' of both **House Martins** and **Barn Swallows** arriving during February, so keep your eyes peeled!

Stop Press

On 12th Feb a very early **Great Skua** was seen flying S at Claggain Bay, Islay.

A male **Great Spotted Woodpecker** seen flying north from Ballard, Coll on 24th Feb may well be the first record of this species for the island. A great find for new RSPB warden **Simon Wellock**.

Divers to Wildfowl

A single **Black-necked Grebe** was with 18 **Slavonian Grebes** on Loch na Keal, Mull on 2nd and 3rd Dec. The Black-necked Grebe was the first on Mull since 1982 and could possibly have been the

Table showing the format to be used for submitting bird records

Species	Date	Map ref.	Location	No. of birds	Details
Red-throated Diver	19/01/03	NR7786	Achnamara, Mid-Argyll	1	1 st winter bird
Great Northern Diver	21/04/03	NM7619	Ardencaple Ho., Seil, Mid-Argyll	1	off-shore
Common Guillemot	17/09/03	NR9897	Crarae Gardens, Mid-Argyll	30	or more flying down Loch

same individual that was seen on Islay on 19th Oct 2003. A total of 22 **Little Grebes** were found during the WeBS survey on Loch Sween on 15th Dec. On 17th Nov, 120 **European Shags** were counted at Feall Bay, Coll.

A total of 221 **Whooper Swans** were counted on Tiree on 6th November, but numbers had dropped to 113 by 9th Dec. 36 **Whooper Swans** were present at Ulva Lagoons, Mid-Argyll on 16th Nov. Three adult **Tundra (Bewick's) Swans** were reported from Ardnave, Islay on 13th Nov, the first record of this species in Argyll since 1996. Also on Islay, the identity of a group of 5 geese first seen nr Port Ellen in Oct was confirmed, on 22nd Nov, as **Bean Geese** of race *fabalis* (or **Taiga Bean Goose**). An all island count of **Greenland White-fronted Geese** on Tiree on 8th-9th Dec found 740 birds. Of an aged sample of 515 birds only 4.3% were juveniles. A flock of 212 **Greylag Geese** were counted nr Barsloisnoch Farm (Moine Mhor), Mid-Argyll on 26th Jan, 279 were counted on Coll on 12th Jan and 100+ at Glenforsa, Mull on 14th Jan included a single **Pink-footed Goose**. An all island count of **Barnacle Geese** on Tiree on 8th-9th Dec found a new record count of 2,796 birds and on 22nd January there were 100 **Barnacle Geese** near the boathouse at Gribun, Mull while 840 were counted at Uig, Coll on 22nd Jan. What is presumably the same returning **Red-breasted Goose** was seen again at Loch Gruinart, Islay on 13th Nov.



Wigeon (photo Jim Dickson)

31 **Common Shelducks** were at Loch Don on 12th Jan and 35 were at the mouth of Loch Sween on 26th Jan. Up to 320 **Wigeon** were in Balvicar Bay, Mid-Argyll during Nov and 310 were counted in Loch Gilp, Mid-Argyll on 21st Nov. A male **Green-winged Teal** first reported at Loch Gruinart on 12th Nov was also seen subsequently. A single **Greater Scaup** was seen at the head of Loch Spelve from 22nd – 25th Jan, 148 **Tufted Ducks** were at Loch Bhasapol, Tiree on 1st Dec and 38 **Common Pochards** were at Loch Bhasapol on 29th Jan. An impressive 26 **Long-tailed Ducks** were in Loch Feall, Coll on 17th Nov and a flock of 84 **Common**

Goldeneyes were just offshore on Loch Fyne at Furnace, Mid-Argyll on 2nd Jan. The WeBS count of **Red-breasted Mergansers** in Loch Sween on 15th Dec totalled 33 birds and 17 were on Loch na Keal on 30th Dec. There were regular sightings of **Goosanders**, often in pairs, on Mull including records from Lochdon, Aros Estuary, Loch Tuath, Garmony and the Mishnish Lochs.

Raptors to Gamebirds

Merlins were recorded at several locations on Coll and Tiree during Nov and early Dec and a female was at Achnabreck (nr Lochgilphead), Mid-Argyll on 26th Dec. An immature **Peregrine Falcon** found dead under power lines at Kilmoluag, Tiree on 8th Oct had been ringed as a nestling 'near Benbecula', Outer Hebrides in Jun 2003. The Crinan Canal between Lochgilphead and Ardrishaig was an unusual location for a **Common Moorhen** seen on 7th Dec and a **Water Rail** was found at Arinagour, Coll on 20th Nov.

Waders

An all island survey of Tiree on 10th & 12th Nov found a total of 3,447 **Golden Plovers** and Breachacha, Coll had a flock of 250 **Northern Lapwings** on 2nd Nov. The highest count of **Ringed Plovers** on Tiree was 220 at Gott Bay on 3rd Jan. Single **Grey Plovers** were found on 2 dates in Nov on Tiree and at Loch na Cille, Mid-Argyll during the WeBS count on 16th Nov. **Purple Sandpipers**, a nationally declining species, were scarce on Tiree this winter with a maximum count of 35 at Hough Bay on 6th Dec. A **Woodcock** was feeding in a garden in Dervaig, Mull on 31st Dec. At least 50 **Common Redshanks** were present at the top of Loch Gilp, Mid-Argyll on 21st Nov. On 30th Dec, 4 **Common Greenshanks** were at Loch Don, Mull as well as 16 **Bar-tailed Godwits**, 30+ **Ringed Plovers**, **Curlews**, **Oystercatchers**, **Common Redshanks** and a single **Ruddy Turnstone**. A single **Common Greenshank** was at the head of Loch Feochan, Mid-Argyll on 10th Dec and **Bar-tailed Godwit** numbers on Tiree peaked at 23 at Gott Bay on 19th Dec. **Ruddy Turnstones** were well in evidence with a flock of 26 on the shore of Loch Fyne at Minard, Mid-Argyll on 17th Jan, 32 along the shores of Loch na Keal Mull in late Jan and 45 in Balephetrish Bay Tiree on 5th Nov.

Skuas to Woodpeckers

A single **Glaucous Gull** was reported at the fish farm on Loch Spelve, Mull on 30th Dec and a 3rd year **Iceland Gull** at Loch Scridain, Mull on 3rd Jan was feeding on a seal carcass, gave excellent views and stayed until 9th Feb. A **Little Auk** was



This Iceland Gull stayed on the shores of Loch Scridain, Mull feeding on the carcass of a seal from 3rd Jan to 10th February (photo Alan Spellman)

seen in the Sound of Gigha, off Tayinloan, Kintyre on 26th Oct. A count of 210 **Rock Pigeons (Rock Doves)** was made at Coll RSPB Reserve on 17th Nov. Two **Short-eared Owls** were hunting at dusk at the Reef, Tiree on 1st Dec, when one came in and perched on the roof-rack of the RSPB Landrover! A **Common Kingfisher** was seen close to the waters edge on Loch Fyne, nr Inveraray and a late **Barn Swallow** was reported at Lodge Plantation, Coll on 21st Nov.

Passerines

Only a few **Bohemian Waxwings** were sighted despite reports of larger numbers arriving on the east coast. One was at the St Columba Hotel, Iona on 1st Nov, 6 were seen briefly in a garden at Lochdon, Mull on 5th Nov and one was in a Rowan tree at Ballochgair, Kintyre on 23rd Nov. A flock of 220 **Redwings** was seen at Uig, Coll on 3rd Nov and among the many **Song Thrushes** on Tiree during Nov were a few showing characteristics of the darker, more heavily spotted *hebridensis* type. This form became widespread on Tiree during Dec. During Nov at least 10 **Blackcaps** (some male, some female) were reported from gardens on Mull including sightings at Lochdon, Salen, Killychrochan, Fionnphort, Arle, Tiroran, Dervaig, Aros Park and Buessan. There were also **Blackcaps** on Coll (a female at Lodge Plantation on 21st Nov) and Tiree (a male at Kilmoluag on 10th and a male at Crossapol on 20th Nov). A **Chiffchaff** showing the characteristics of the Siberian form *tristis* was seen around The Lodge, Coll on 19th Nov and subsequently. Five **Blue Tits** were unusual visitors at The Lodge, Coll on 17th Nov while a total of 30 were counted around bird feeders in my garden at Tullochgorm, Mid-Argyll on 6th Feb, the most I've ever counted there at one time. A flock of 30 **Long-tailed Tits** were feeding in a garden at Craignure, Mull in early Dec. A flock of 600 **Common Starlings** was found at Uig, Coll on 5th Nov and 800 were at Loch an Eilein, Tiree on 3rd Nov.

On 9th Nov, 3 **Jays** and 2 **Bramblings**

were sighted at North Shian, N Argyll. There were also reports of **Jays** calling at Garmony and Fishnish on Mull (where they are very scarce indeed). **Bramblings** were also reported during Nov from Mull, at Fionnphort (2) on 8th, at Salen (2 in garden) on 8th and at Dervaig (3) on 11th, from Coll at The Lodge Plantation and Roundhouse (7 on 6th Nov) and from



Male Brambling photographed in mid January in a local garden at Dervaig, Mull feeding with chaffinches (photo Alan Spellman)

Tiree (one at Cornaigbeg on 6th Nov). Large numbers of **Greenfinches** appearing on Coll and Tiree were unusual and included a flock of 30 at Coll RSPB Reserve on 17th Nov, 13 at Hynish, Tiree on 12th Nov and 15 at Vaul, Tiree on 2nd Jan. Also unusual were several records of **Goldfinches** on Coll during Nov, including 12 at The Lodge Plantation on 16th. More to be expected were 220 **Twite** at The Reef, Tiree on 26th Nov and a flock of 210 at Cliad, Coll on 15th Dec. The **Hawfinch** seen by Douglas Trigg was feeding with Chaffinches on a bird table at Benderloch, N Argyll on 19th Jan. Curiously this is only just over a mile from our last Hawfinch record, at Achnacreebeag in April 2000. A single **Snow Bunting** was reported from Kilnave, Islay on 16th Nov and one was at Uig, Coll on 1st Nov. And lastly a lone, large and 'frosty' looking Redpoll at Balephuill, Tiree was identified at a **Common (Mealy) Redpoll**.

Paul Daw (Tel: 01546 886260. E-mail: monedula@globalnet.co.uk)

Terns Nest on Mussel Raft at South Shian

Terns were much more numerous and widespread in the past. Some interesting early records for Argyll can be found in "Narrative of a Cruise in Loch Fyne, June 1899" by John Paterson and John Renwick (Transactions, Natural History Society of Glasgow (New Series) V:366-372). They visited most of the small islands in Loch Fyne and (unusually for the time) counted all the birds they found breeding. On two of the islands they dis-

turbed Red Grouse, a species not found there today. But the most striking difference was that, in 1899, most of the small islands held breeding Common and Arctic Terns; today they hold large numbers of Herring Gulls and smaller numbers of Great and Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

The last of the tern colonies in Loch Fyne was on the small island off Inverneill, just south of Ardrishaig. In the late 1980s this held a marvellous mixed colony of over a hundred pairs of terns with similar numbers of **Black-headed Gulls**, **Common Gulls** and other species. The colony was annihilated by mink in the 1990s (I have photographic evidence) and, like many such sites, it is now empty every year - except for a faithful pair of **Mute Swans** which predictably lose all their eggs every May. Are any residents of Inverneill interested in restoring this superb mixed seabird colony right on their doorstep?

Although terns have disappeared from much of the mainland coast, the good news is that they can be attracted back. **Common Terns** and **Common Gulls** used to breed on the small island at South Shian in Loch Creran but (you've guessed) in the early 1980s, many of the

age them, he nailed some plywood boards to one of his mussel rafts to give a surface of about 10 x 8 metres; I then placed some gravel and grassy turfs on it, together with some crudely painted model terns. We were very encouraged when, the same year, a pair of **Common Tern** nested and raised one young.

Numbers have increased since then (see table). In April 2003 Rob Lightfoot and I renovated the boards, which had become dangerously rotten, and put a fence round the breeding area to stop chicks falling to their death. Last year turned out to be by far the best year to date: 27 pairs fledged 50-60 young. The numbers breeding are still modest in the context of Argyll as a whole (ca 1400 prs **Common Terns** in the Seabird 2000 census, including the 768-pair Mull colony, the largest in Scotland and second-largest in the British Isles), but we are hoping that the South Shian colony will continue to grow.

Every year I have ringed all chicks found on the raft. Some of the adults nesting there in 2003 had probably been hatched and reared there in earlier years. Certainly a lot of them had rings in 2003, but we haven't been able to read any yet, so per-

Table—Number of Common Terns breeding on mussel raft at South Shian, Loch Creran

Year	Pairs breeding	Young fledged
1996	1	1
1997	1	3
1998	3	5-6
1999	12	0 (mink reached raft)
2000	14	19
2001	ca.12	0
2002	ca.5	1+ (?)
2003	27	50-60

*Incidentally, although the **Common Tern** is the most numerous tern along the mainland coast of Argyll, "Common" is a misnomer. In Argyll as a whole, it is less numerous than the **Arctic Tern**, and in the British Isles it is outnumbered many times by the **Arctic** and exceeded even by the **Sandwich Tern**.*

adult gulls were killed on the nest by a mink and, one evening, I saw a mink in the colony. In fact, this was the first colony where I recorded such events.

Roger Thwaites, who runs a mussel and oyster farm just alongside the island at South Shian, noticed that terns were still appearing in May every year and staying in the area for a few days, but never settling to breed. In 1996, hoping to encour-

haps the next step is to set up a hide on the raft. At such short range, reading the ring numbers with a telescope should be easy, and close-up photographs of the adults and young would be wonderful!

A great advantage of the fence is that we can now catch and ring all the chicks on each visit and log their progress. On islands this is rarely possible, as the chicks scatter so widely and hide so well. In

2003, we could say definitely that almost all chicks that hatched on the raft eventually flew, and that there was no detectable predation.

Now, every summer, Roger is rewarded by being able to watch the adult terns making their spectacular plunge-dives right in front of his house. The young that fly around the loch in late July owe their existence to his enterprise. For much of the day he and his family work close to the nesting area, operating heavy machinery and moving around with noisy outboards. Perhaps the most interesting thing, is that the South Shian terns have become so accustomed to all this that they have changed their behaviour towards human visitors.

Normally when I visit terns breeding on small islands, they rise up when the boat is still about 200 metres away, circle high above while I'm on the island, and don't come down again until I'm safely distant. Amazingly, at South Shian the terns don't leave their eggs and young until the boat is about ten metres away. While I'm ringing and weighing the chicks, some of the adults fly around my head, others settle on the fenceposts a few metres away and noisily watch what I'm doing. If they get still tamer, they might even settle on my head or shoulders (like the **Arctic Terns** on the Farnes in that introductory bit of Bill Oddie's TV programme, or like the **Common Terns** at Ian Nisbet's colonies in North America).

Regular human activity doesn't seem to bother nesting terns, provided that eggs and chicks are not trampled and can be properly tended by the adults. In Argyll, predation is the main threat. At first we thought the mussel raft was inaccessible to mink. It was a nasty shock in 1999 when a mink climbed aboard one night and removed most of the eggs, hiding them under wooden fish boxes in the colony area. The terns deserted immediately. Since then various precautions have been taken and, luckily, this has not recurred.

In several other sealochs, mink control has allowed terns to nest successfully again on their former islands (for example, see "St Kilda of the Sealochs" on pages 1-2). If you see terns anywhere along the mainland coast next summer, the chances are that they are there thanks to mink control. Perhaps they are breeding at a protected site nearby, or perhaps they themselves hatched at one some years ago - or perhaps both. But, when you next see the terns flying and fishing in Loch Creran, spare a thought and a silent "thank you" for Roger and Judy Thwaites and their very special mussel farm!

Clive Craik

The Oystercatcher's Tale

Oystercatchers are the most easily spotted of all of Bute's shore-birds. Its bold black and white plumage, its orange-red bill, its pink legs, and its size make it impossible to overlook—quite unlike **Ringed Plover**, **Dunlin** and **Turnstone**, all of which are easily missed. The **Oystercatcher** is found on virtually every shore on Bute.

Two questions arise regarding this species. Does it catch oysters? And why is it so conspicuously coloured when most of the other species in the grouping Charadriiformes are cryptically coloured i.e. their plumages normally help them to vanish into the landscape, particularly at the nest?

The answer to the last question is, we don't know!! The **Black Oystercatcher** of the west coast of North America is black, no white plumage at all. At the nest it may be said to be cryptically coloured. But the **European Oystercatcher** is easily spotted on the shore, or in fields away from the shore, where it frequently feeds and often nests. During the time I lived in Lancashire the **Oystercatcher** moved up the river Lune, probably in response to the collapse of the Morecambe Bay cockle population during a series of hard winters in the early 1960s. It now regularly nests north of Kirkby Lonsdale, more than 20 miles from the coast, returning to the shore in winter, weather permitting. When at the nest on a field of grass or on ploughed land, it is easily observed.



Oystercatchers (photo Jim Dickson)

And what of its oyster catching abilities? Adult **Oystercatchers** feed on various types of molluscs, typically bi-valves buried in sand and limpets, mussels and oysters attached to rocks. The **Oystercatcher** has evolved a very special mechanism for opening bi-valves. If the shell is open, the bird inserts its bill and cuts the adductor muscle with its scissor-like bill action, when the flesh is then chiselled out. If the shell is closed, one side may be hammered with the bill until it cracks. The name **Oystercatcher** originated in America, and was used by Thomas Pennant in his book on British birds published in

1768. In America, the bird's principal prey is indeed the oyster. In Britain, the bird might better be called by one of its Scottish names; "**Musselpicker**". Its Latin name is quite clear: *Haematopus ostralegus*-haematopus meaning blood stained feet, ostra means oyster and lego is the verb to pick.

When you are out bird watching, don't overlook the behaviour of **Oystercatchers**. Watch out for what is called "sham sleeping". The bird has its head tucked into its scapulars [in its back feathers] and it is probably standing on one leg. To all intents and purposes, it is asleep. But put your binoculars on its head, and you will see that its eye is wide open. It will be looking at you, taking your measure.

The other thing to watch out for is the "piping display". This display can take place at any time of year, but it is very frequent at the beginning of the breeding season. A group of three to six birds start with necks stretched stiffly forward, bills down, neck and mantle ruffled. Loud piping ensues. Birds may turn in a tight circle, or move forward together. The display may attract other birds—piping parties of up to 30 birds have been recorded. The basic driver is the defence of territory—three birds in the breeding season suggests an intruder! Also look out for the birds' "butterfly flight". A calling bird will fly over its territory with slow, exaggerated wing beats, looking a bit like a large butterfly.

Our breeding population is probably sedentary. However, in winter there is a large influx of **Oystercatchers** into Britain from the north. In winter, Bute may hold birds from Iceland and the Faeroes. Some of our juvenile birds—**Oystercatchers** do not breed until they are four or five years old—may move south as far as France and Iberia.

The call of the **Oystercatcher** is distinctive. It is rendered in Gaelic as "bi glic, bi glic, bi glic," [be wise...]. When scolding an intruder it utters "peep, peep, peep". I frequently hear them flying over my house on Crichton Road, during the day—and night. The birds often feed at night, a pattern set by the rise and fall of the tide.

The Rev. F.O. Morris in "*British Birds*" [1850] records that the young, very active immediately after hatching, "if pursued...hide their heads in the first hole they come to, as if thinking, like **Ostriches**, that if they cannot see you, you cannot see them".

Michael Thomas

(Editor's note: this account is taken from *Ornithological Tales Book III*, which Michael is preparing about Bute's birds)

Recent Publications

This section provides readers with information about publications (papers in journals, reports, books etc) that have appeared since the last list appeared in the September 2003 *Eider*. The criteria for selection is that a publication must have a link to birds in Scotland. The selection is biased towards what I read, so I would welcome information about other publications for inclusion in future lists – **Editor**

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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.

The Eider is published around the 15th day of March, June, September and December. Articles for each issue must be with the editor before the 1st day of each publication month. However, it greatly helps if material can be submitted well before these deadline dates.

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 generate and encourage an interest in wild birds and their habitats in Argyll; an area of outstanding and diverse natural beauty.

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 Lochgilthead. The autumn meeting/AGM is held in a convenient central location, usually near Lochgilthead. The club organises field trips for members. It publishes the annual *Argyll Bird Report*. Your annual subscription entitles you to one copy of this, 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:

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