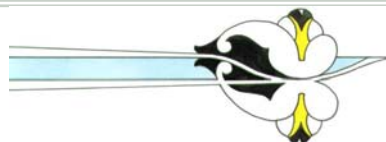


The Eider

March 2006

The Eider is the Quarterly Newsletter of the Argyll Bird Club (<http://www.argyllbirdclub.org>)
Scottish Charity Number SC 008782

Coal Tit photographed on Bute in
December 2005 by Jim Duncan



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ABC Spring Meeting 2006

On Saturday 11th March at the Royal Marine Hotel, Hunter's
Quay, Dunoon.

The programme is on page 19

Autumn Meeting 2006

On Saturday 4th November at the
Cairnbaan Hotel, near Lochgilphead

To receive the electronic version of *The Eider* in colour, ABC 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.

Mediterranean habitats are at their best in late winter, before being scorched brown by the summer heat. So, it was with great anticipation that I joined a group of friends from Northumberland on a February birding trip to Extremadura; a fascinating area in central Spain, adjacent to the Portuguese border. This was my third trip to the area with its great array of habitat and wonderful selection of birds.

The dehesa (or 'montados' in Portugal) is one of the most remarkable and extensive habitats of the area, and one of the oldest agricultural systems in Europe. It has survived, relatively unchanged, over many centuries and consists of widely spaced oak trees under which grass and cereal crops are grown. The oaks are expertly pruned to maximise the area of crown and so enhance the annual production of acorns. These are used to fatten the traditional black (dark grey) pigs that produce the delicious hams of the region. Black fighting bulls, sheep, goats and red deer also graze under the oaks, making use of both grass and acorns. Holm and Cork Oak are the two main trees of the dehesa. The latter also yields a valuable crop of bark for use in wine bottle corks, cork tiles etc. Spanish and Portuguese oaks produce most of the 13 billion bottle corks that are used worldwide each year.

The dehesa is home to a unique assemblage of birds, which at this time of the year are busily finishing off last year's acorn bonanza. These include 'gangs' of Azure-winged Magpies, often numbering 50-100 strong, vast flocks of Wood-pigeons that winter here from Eastern Europe. Hoopoes flit between trees, Short-toed Treecreeps forage on the furrowed oak bark and Firecrests feed amongst the foliage. But, most remarkable of all are



White Stork colony
(Steve Petty)

around 60,000 European Cranes from eastern and northern Europe that winter here. They spend most of the day in small family parties, either foraging for acorns or searching for grain from last year's crop in nearby rice fields. For a truly spine-tingling crane experience, position yourself under a flight line into a roost, where skein after skein pour across the evening sky uttering evocative bugling calls; around the time when the crimson sun slips below the horizon.

The dehesa is surprisingly rich in small-seeded plants, which provide a huge amount of winter food for large populations of sparrows, finches and buntings. Corn Buntings are ubiquitous, and their jangle song can be heard throughout the day. Thickets near water are often favourite roost sites for flocks of seed-eating birds, including large numbers of Corn

Buntings and Spanish Sparrows. Semi-steppe habitats, which blend into the dehesa, are also rich in seed-bearing plants, and here we found lekking Great Bustards, large flocks of Little Bustard, two species of sandgrouse, vast numbers of Sky, Crested and Calandra Larks and newly-arrived Great Spotted Cuckoos.

Not surprisingly, birds of prey were both abundant and highly visible at this time of the year, when nuptial displays and nest building occupy much of the day. Black-winged Kites hunt for rodents and reptiles in open areas between the trees, and we were lucky enough to locate one pair displaying and nest building. Griffon Vultures have breeding colonies on most cliffs, and many pairs were already incubating. A large proportion of the world population of Black Vultures breed in Extremadura, but unlike Griffons, these build nests in trees and breed a little later. Both species feed on the carcasses of domestic animals both within the dehesa and on adjacent semi-steppe habitats. However, a pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles provided one of the highlights of the trip. I'd had excellent views on previous visits, but this time we located a pair displaying and nest building opposite one of the main view points in Monfragüe National Park. At times the displaying male was no more than 100m away. It was encouraging to see so many Spanish birdwatchers enjoying the experience too!

On the last day, I was enjoying the warmth of the February sunshine while slowing meandering amongst oak trees. Parties of cranes were bugling in the distance, periodic bouts of beak-clapping emanated from a nearby White Stork colony as new arrivals were greeted, and singing Woodlarks fluttered over the



Pigs foraging in the dehesa
(Steve Petty)

trees—what a place! So, when you next buy a bottle of wine with a screw-top or plastic cork, just consider the implications. You may well be contributing to the decline of one of the most sustainable and

outstanding agricultural systems in Europe.

For contributions to this issue, I would like to thank Richard Allan, John Bowler, Tom Callan, Clive Craik, Paul Daw, Jim

Dickson, Jim Duncan, Bob Furness, Robin Harvey, Eddie Maguire, David Merrie, Linda Petty (proof reading), Tristan ap Rheinallt, Nigel Scriven, Michael Thomas and Simon Wellock.

ABC field trips in 2006

Details of four field trips in spring 2006 appeared in the December Eider (pages 2-3). A summary of each is given below. Please contact the organisers if you are interested and refer to the last Eider for more information.

Sound of Gigha—5th April

Meet at the car park at Ronachan Point just off the A83 (grid reference NR741548) at 10am. This trip depends very much on reasonably good weather. Will those who intend to come please contact me, by phone or e-mail, at the very latest on Monday 3rd April, to give me some idea of how many people to expect. Please leave your phone number. If the weather forecast is really atrocious it may be possible to postpone until the following week.

Paul Daw

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E-mail: monedula@globalnet.co.uk

Coll—6-7th May

It is hoped to arrange a field trip to Coll over the weekend 6-7th May (not 13-14th May as given in the last *Eider*). Please contact me if you are interested.

Simon Wellock

Tel: 01879 230301

E-mail: simon.wellock@rspb.org.uk

Warden RSPB Coll Reserve, Totronald, Isle Of Coll, Argyll PA78 6TB

Garvellochs—26-28th May

I have arranged with Duncan Phillips, the man who took the ABC group to Scarba in 2004, for a trip to the Garvellochs on Friday 26 May, returning on Sunday 28 May. The boat will leave Cruibhaven at 6pm, but this can be rearranged nearer the time within reason if members of the party so wish. It will call at Garbh Eilach between 6.15pm and 6.30pm for the return trip home.

The party needs to bring good tents, sleeping bags, waterproofs and food and cooking gear for two days. Depending on what I hear about conditions on the island, I will advise nearer the time if drinking

water is required. The Garvellochs comprise four or so islands and we will camp on the largest, which used to have a cottage (now usable).

Party members with kayaks or canoes might be able to bring them along, and so visit other islands, but this will be entirely at their own risk. Please let me know in good time if you are interested in this and I will check with the boatman.

Based on a party of eight members, the cost per person will be £20. If the group is larger there might be a chance of a reduction. Conversely, with fewer folks the price might go up.

Those who braved the storm on the trip to Scarba in 2004, and were rewarded by a fabulous second day, will no doubt be able to testify to the thrill of exploring a remote island. The Garvellochs are home to a colony of Manx Shearwaters, so some late night viewing might be possible.

Please contact me in good time if you are interested.

David Merrie

Tel: 01250 884273

E-mail: david@merrie1035.fsnet.co.uk

Craigie House, Craigie, Clunie, Blairgowrie PH10 6RG

Sanda—17-18th June

There are various options available for the weekend. A day trip on the Saturday and Sunday will cost £20 for the boat. We hope to depart at about 9am from Campbeltown and return at about 5pm. For those wishing to stay overnight, there are two rooms available in the Farmhouse for B&B at £30 per person per night. Alternatively, there are 10 spaces in the Bunkhouse at £10 per person per night. All the above prices are for 2005 and may be subject to a small increase in 2006. The boat can take 12 people, so places are limited and subject to confirmation and the weather.

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BTO/SOC conference

A one-day joint BTO/SOC conference is being held at the University of Glasgow on Saturday 18th March. The theme of this year's conference is *Bird conservation counts: the challenge of change* and will cover seabirds, raptors, local and global conservation programmes and there will be a variety of information displays. More details can be found on the BTO website home page <http://www.bto.org>

Breeding Bird Survey (BBS)

Once again volunteers are wanted to take part in the BTO's BBS, which in cooperation with the RSPB and the Governments Joint Nature Conservation Committee, is now the main scheme for tracking changes in the breeding numbers of widespread bird species in the UK. The survey is very important and enables monitoring of population changes of over 100 species nationwide. Mainland Argyll, in the widest sense (i.e. including Arran), is not well covered in the surveys. There are 29 randomly selected BBS squares in the area, of which only 10 were surveyed in 2005.

BBS observers need to have a reasonable knowledge of the songs and calls of common birds. You DO NOT need to know every call of every species!! A free tape or CD containing the songs and calls of the more difficult to identify species is available to all new volunteers on request.

Results from the scheme are now being used to set conservation priorities by Governments and non-Governmental organisations. Summarised trends are used to update the UK Government's Wild Bird Indicator, one of 15 Quality of Life measures used to report on the Governments progress towards sustainable development. The BBS results are also included in the Pan-European Common Bird Monitoring Project (PECBM) and the PECBM Farmland and Woodland Indicators. These projects aim to monitor the health of bird populations at both a national and European scale.

Other surveys, such as the Waterways BBS and the Scarce Woodland Bird Survey are also important. Details about all surveys can be obtained from the BTO regional representative for Argyll mainland, Bute & Gigha

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[Editors note: see page 18 for details about BTO survey technique workshops in Scotland in 2006]

The Observatory opened on 13th March and was manned daily until 10th October for a total of 1,400 hours. An Observatory leaflet, sponsored by SNH and WHELK, was distributed around Kintyre and helped to attract record numbers of visitors (2,500+) to appreciate birds and other wildlife (particularly seals!) around Machrihanish. Grants from SNH and WHELK enabled us to purchase much additional digiscoping equipment including an auxiliary camera (Nikon Coolpix 4500).

An exceptional feature at the Observatory, is the presence of a 15inch flatscreen monitor, which can be attached to any digital camera using the camera's video output lead. Throughout the season I used this to showcase our extensive digital library of local and migratory wildlife images. This proved extremely popular with visitors of all ages. In addition, the flatscreen can be used as a monitor when digiscoping from the Observatory, making it so much easier to focus than having to rely on the tiny LCD monitor of the digital camera. Another advantage is that visitors enjoyed live views of the wildlife around the Observatory via the monitor.

Meeting so many visitors with such a wide variety of digital cameras was a constant source of amazement to me. Many were able to 'hook up' to our equipment and take high-magnification images of ever present **Grey** and **Common Seals** hauled out on the rocks and off-duty nesting shorebirds, such as **Oystercatcher** and **Ringed Plover**. Others just simply placed their camera against the eyepiece of our telescope and many came up with really decent images.

Argyll Bird Club members are very welcome to bring their digital camera/digiscoping equipment along to the Observatory. The advantage of the controlled conditions with a large monitor and a concrete floor (reducing camera shake) could lead to an improvement in your digital image! Don't forget to bring the video output lead for the camera.

In the last Seabird Observatory report I predicted that, during 2005, there would be an upsurge in records for **Mediterranean Gulls** in Argyll. I tried in vain to justify this prediction around Machrihanish/The Laggan. However, at least two birds were found in other areas of Argyll (Knapdale and Lochgilphead) and both were digiscoped by their finder, Jim Dickson. Therefore, I feel partially vindicated—many thanks Jim!

2005 Highlights

The following seasonal notes highlight the very best of 2005 and include data on an unprecedented summer influx/movement of seabirds, a remarkable visible migration

Little Grebe (Eddie Maguire)



of **Northern Wheatears** in September and a couple of major rarities—a **Macaronesian Shearwater** in July and single **Roseate Terns** in early and mid August.

Spring

An easterly near-gale on 28th April brought a summer-plumaged **Little Grebe** to shelter in the rock pools in front of the Observatory, allowing an opportunity to bring the digiscoping gear into action. This individual had a lime-coloured gape patch (see photo), which should have been yellow. **Purple Sandpipers** peaked at 22 on 17th March with the last bird of the spring logged on 19th May. **Iceland Gulls** (all records refer to first-winter birds) were present when the Observatory opened on 13th March and were showing well daily (usually 1–3) for an unbroken 47 days to 28th April, with a peak of 5 together at the Marine Research Laboratory outflow on 18th–21st March. The only record after this was one >S (flying south) on 21st May. **Glaucous Gulls** were much thinner on the ground, with only a first-winter regular during March/April. A colour-ringed **Black-legged Kittiwake** was ashore (briefly) on 14th March. This adult was ringed at La Pointe Du Raz, Finistere, France during late June 2002 and was resighted seven times in its natal colony during 2nd May–27th July 2004, behaving as a male. This is our fourth (first adult) from France (3 first-summer birds in 2000).

Some migrant arrival dates in March were as follows; **Northern Wheatear**, one on 14th and three on 22nd; **White Wagtail**, one on 24th with a peak of 39 >S/2hrs (flying south in 2 two hours) in a NW wind force 2/3 on 6th May. Obviously, these birds should have been orientating N, but the wind was against them. April saw the arrival of **Sandwich Terns** with two on 2nd (peak 18 on 25th April), then the **first Swallow** on 6th, a **Whimbrel** on 14th

(peak only ten on 25th April) and two **Arctic Terns** on 24th (main arrival 13th May).

Other interesting spring arrivals included four **Bewick's Swans** (at Stewarton) on 15th March, a **Hoopoe** (at Muasdale) 3rd–11th May, an **Osprey** on 27th April and 9th May and a **Hobby** on 27th May.

The wintering **Lesser Canada Goose** was still present during early April (to at least 10th) whilst the **Canada x Barnacle** hybrids (74 birds) remained at The Laggan all summer.

Summer Seabird Bonanza

The period 7th–10th July was rousing at the Observatory, with breathtaking numbers of seabirds appearing in/off Machrihanish Bay. In fact, numbers of many species were unprecedented and the overall total of birds passing was at times overwhelming, especially on 9th July, when c.20,000 birds were logged.

On the 9th July, with poor visibility, fog banks and calm weather, it was obvious as I approached the Observatory that, like yesterday, massive numbers of seabirds were still all around the point and in Machrihanish Bay. **Gannets** were plunging everywhere, hordes of **Black-legged Kittiwakes** were patrolling off-shore and 'trains' of auk spp., up to 80 strong at times, were rushing into and out of the bay. During 10 hours of observation, the following astonishing numbers of seabirds were logged flying south (data for 8 hours observation on 8th July appears in brackets and an asterisk indicates record numbers).

Manx Shearwater 2,500 (4,000); **Storm Petrel** 130 (60); **Gannet** 1,000+ (460); **Arctic Skua** 6 (8); **Arctic Tern** 170, including 2 immature (70); **Common Tern** 118 (30); ***Black-legged Kittiwake** 7,400 (3,800); *auk spp. 9,000 (8,000) with samples showing the vast majority (70%) were **Razorbills**. The Observatory record

one day-total for ***Puffins** was well shattered (three times) during this period with 210 (160) and 107 on 7th July! In addition, around a dozen **Bottlenose Dolphins** were logged.

So, where did these birds come from? The nearest major seabird colony to Machrihanish is RSPB's Rathlin Island Reserve some 16 miles to the west, in Northern Ireland. Regular age sampling of **Kittiwakes** showed that a massive 96% were adults (and therefore potential breeding birds) whilst tiny **Guillemot** and **Razor-bill** chicks were abundant on the sea, indicating that a very recent exodus had taken place from a nearby large colony, and, that huge numbers of other foraging seabirds (i.e. **Kittiwakes** and auks carrying sand-eels to the south) were obviously still feeding youngsters ashore. The numbers of seabirds involved in these movements (excluding **Gannets**) suggests that the majority were probably breeding birds from Rathlin Island foraging at a major food source. During this period, the Marine Research Laboratory adjacent to the Observatory reported well above average numbers of sand-eels in their salt water intake tanks.

Autumn

Small numbers of **Red-throated Divers** were noted regularly heading for the North Channel narrows, but peaked at only 28 >S/4 hrs on 27th Sep. Single **Black-throated Divers** were seen >S on 28th Sep and 5th Oct and at least one **Great Northern Diver** summered.

Manx Shearwater passage was dreadful (almost non-existent) over the autumn; the best movement occurred, unusually, during late summer when 2,100 >S/3 hrs on 21st July. On this date came the most notable rarity of the year—a fly-by **Macaronesian Shearwater** (formerly **Little Shearwater**). This is my second (single observer) claim for this species at the Observatory (one in Sep 2000) and since that first claim, I have looked at around 100,000 **Manx Shearwaters** (including 10,000+ in one day) before finding this second bird! Amazingly, one was reported a few days later at Corswall Point (Dumfries and Galloway). All past records of this species are currently under review by *British Birds Rarities Committee* (I won't be holding my breath!).

Sooty Shearwaters were scarce (again) with only seven >S/1 hr on 2nd Aug, six >S/1 hr on 5th Aug, one on 24th Aug and four >S/10 minutes on 14th Sep. Continuing a run of lean years, **Balearic Shearwaters** had a poor showing too, with only one on 29th Aug and two on 8th Sept. For years, Argyll was the area to get to grips with this species, but it now appears to be more frequent on the east coast of Scotland.

Leach's Petrel, an Observatory speciality during rough onshore weather conditions, managed only low profile appearances with four >S on 24th Aug, four on 23rd Sep, 18 >S/6 hrs on 27th Sep and seven >S/2 hrs on 1st Oct.

Good numbers of **Whooper Swans** were staying off-passage at The Laggan from early Oct and peaked at 70 on 27th Oct (Karen Judd). **Brent Goose** was, as usual, the earliest of the geese with 80 in off the sea on 15th Sep and c.100 >S on 30th Sep, on which date 60 **Barnacle Geese** >S too. The only **Pinkfoot** was a single (off-passage) during 23–26 Sep.

Other wildfowl included seven **Pintail** >S on 8th Sep, 55 **Scaup** >S on 30th Sep, a single **Long-tailed Duck** >S on 14th Sep with a further three >S on 27th Sep, and two drake **Velvet Scoters** >N on 25th Sep. An in-flight drake **Eider** on 24th Aug was quite early and rivals the earliest drake ever seen in flight here after the completion of wing moult. The first flight has been recorded as late as 6th Sep in some years.

Two species just made the logsheet this autumn. A **Goosander** >N on 24th Sep and an **Osprey** on 24th Sep. A **Corncrake** was at Ballygroggan (near Machrihanish) during 19–25 July. This bird was caught by a cat, rescued by farmer Malcolm Holder, then ringed and released (apparently unharmed).

The best of the waders included a superb total of 55 **Black-tailed Godwits** >S (2 flocks) on 24th Aug, regular **Ruff** at Machrihanish Bay 30th Aug (three)–22nd Sep (one) with peaks of six flying around the point on 4th and four on 7th, two **Little Stints** on 22nd Sep and a single **Curlew Sandpiper** on 4th, 9th and 11th Sep. A juvenile **Red-necked Phalarope** put in an all too brief appearance (>S) on 27th Aug and, after a tremendous autumn last year (12 birds), one **Grey Phalarope** >S on 13th Sept.

The only **Pomarine Skua** was an adult >S on 26th July whilst there was a total of 43 **Arctic Skuas** >S on 24 dates with a peak of seven >S/4 hrs on 26th July. The total included 19 dark morph, 17 pale morph, 6 undetermined as to age/morph, one intermediate morph and a second-summer type which was digiscoped in flight (see photo). **Bonxies** totalled 35 > on 17 dates during 20th July–10th Oct with a notable showing of 9 >S/6 hrs on 10th August.

The first two juvenile **Kittiwakes** appeared on 3rd Aug (bang on time), although many aged samples over the autumn period showed a worrying low mean of only 29% juvenile. After a superb autumn total last year (9 birds), **Little Gull** just made the logsheet with a juvenile >S on 30th Aug.

Apparently, breeding populations of **Roseate Terns** are doing extremely well, but the species is a major rarity in Argyll, and in many other parts of Scotland, so it was gripping to find single adults >S on 7th and 14th Aug (both calling and on passage with **Common** and **Arctic Terns**). **Sandwich Terns**, another speciality at Machrihanish, were present as usual all summer (eight birds). Coition was noted many times and many fantastic display flights were performed high over Machrihanish village. Although there was no indication of nesting, the earliest ever juvenile appeared on 8th July! The peak count later on was 8 (including two juvs) on 22nd Aug. **Little Terns** can be relied on to appear during the last 10 days of July and showed just how punctual they are when 5 (including 2 juveniles) >S on 23rd. After the amazing record numbers in early July, **Puffins** were scarce over the autumn period with only a handful of records; the last one >S on 14th Sep.

White Wagtail peaks during Sep were 45 on 1st, 50 >S/6hrs on 6th, 95 >S/5 hrs on 8th and 55 >S/3 hrs on 12th Sept. Only eight could be found around the bay on 18th and the last bird was seen on 28th



Arctic Skua (Eddie Maguire)



Northern Wheatear
(Eddie Maguire)

(none seen Oct).

A visible migration of **Northern Wheatears** took place on 10th Sep when a record 132 were logged during a 3 hour period. Birds were coming in at wave height from the W (Rathlin Island/Northern Ireland) and NW (Islay) flying strongly in small

loose groups of 3–5 birds into an easterly offshore wind (force 4), then resting for a few minutes before moving onto the NE (Machrihanish Bay). All birds that were scrutinised well had very rusty-looking breasts/underparts (Greenland race; see photo) and all were juveniles. This pas-

sage stopped around 1100 hrs and coincided with the wind dropping suddenly to force 1. Later counts included 40 the next day and 38 on 16th Sep.

Several **Swallow** movements occurred during Sept with early morning counts of 140 >S on 12th and 120 >S on 24th. These birds probably roosted in reedbeds at Machrihanish Water.

There was an extraordinary claim of a **Chough** over the uplands at Ballygroggan Farm, Machrihanish on 11th Oct!

Twite numbers have been falling alarmingly at Machrihanish for a number of years through loss of foraging habitat on Uisaed Point, so it was great seeing regular flocks of over 100 with a reasonable peak of 160 on 3rd Oct.

Other noteworthy passerines included an exceptional flock of at least 12 **Bullfinches** at Lossit Estate on 5th Oct, a couple of **Crossbills** on the shore (foraging on Seapink seeds) on 19th June, single **Snow Buntings** on 24th Sep and 1st Oct and a **Barn Swallow** on the 31st October at the first tee on Machrihanish Golf Course.

Eddie Maguire, Warden

The year 2005 on Tiree

*The short dark days of the New Year are a good time to reflect on the year just gone and to revisit some of its birding highlights. 2005 was an excellent year for Tiree's birds in lots of ways, a total of 165 species was recorded, including three that were new for the island, whilst the number of calling **Corncrakes** was the highest since detailed records began on the island in the late 1960s.*

The year started well with a huge female **Snowy Owl** on the grass strips bordering Tiree's Airport runways. First spotted by airport staff, the bird remained for just one day (29th January) and followed a similarly brief sighting on Coll just two days before. January also saw the start of an unprecedented influx of white-winged gulls to the island, in common with the rest of Argyll, involving an absolute minimum of five different **Glaucous Gulls** and four **Iceland Gulls**, with scattered birds of both species being seen around the island until June.

February's highlight was two immature, wing-tagged **White-tailed Eagles** circling together around the west end of the island on 25th. These birds had come from Mull and Canna and briefly returned to Tiree at the end of March. Winter goose numbers were high and included record counts of 4,005 **Greylags** in February and 3,700 **Barnacle Geese** in March, whilst the **Greenland White-fronts** peaked at 1,133 in March and included five neck-collared birds that had spent the rest of the winter in Ireland.

Spring migrants arrived largely on cue, although a **House Martin** at Meningie on 27th March was the earliest recorded for the island. Visible passage of northbound geese and **Whooper Swans** was heavy in March and April, and the vast annual spring gathering of **Golden Plovers** at The Reef hit a new peak of 5,300 birds in late March. **Black-tailed Godwits** also hit a spring record on their way north to Iceland, with 219 birds counted around the island's wetlands on 19th April and included a colour-ringed bird that had wintered in western France. There were marked falls of **Goldcrests** and **White Wagtails** in late March and April and a rare visit by a **Great Tit** to Mannal (3rd April).

Spring wader passage was heavy with thousands of **Dunlin**, **Ringed Plovers** and **Sanderling** passing through, plus hundreds of **Knot**, **Whimbrel** and **Turnstones**. Careful checking of the flocks revealed at least eight **Little Stints**, a handful of **Ruff**, one **Curlew Sandpiper**, one **Green Sandpiper** and best of all a **Broad-billed Sandpiper** at Scarinish (31st May), just the second record of this crackling little wader for Argyll, following a similar record at Balephetrish Bay in May 1994. Other April rarities included a first-winter **Ring-billed Gull** at Loch a' Phuill (5th), a summer-plumaged male **Lapland Bunting** in sub-song at Crossapol (19th) and an adult **Little Gull** at Gott Bay (25–26th). Whilst May produced a male **Black Redstart** at Balephuill (24th), a female **Redstart** at Kilkenneth (25th) and a sur-

prising influx of at least three **Grey-headed Wagtails** to the north coast (20th). Sea-watching produced a "blue" **Fulmar** in April, a couple of **Pomarine Skuas** in May and more unusually two spring **Leach's Petrels** off the north coast (5th–6th May). Late spring ducks included a drake **Garganey** and up to three pairs of **Gadwall** in May, whilst a drake **Green-winged Teal** at Loch Bhasapol (6th June) may well have been the returning individual from 2002 and 2003.

The summer nights reverberated to the calls of an amazing total of 310 male **Corncrakes**, which reminded some older island residents of how the island used to sound in their youth. This is just rewards for the all the concerted efforts that have been put in over the years by the island's crofters, farmers and conservationists to protect this special bird. The "wet-my-lip!" calls of up to six **Quail** joined the night-time chorus from late May, as did the voices of up to 12 **Water Rails**, two **Spotted Crakes** and four **Grasshopper Warblers**. Early summer produced the customary overshoot records of **Spotted Flycatchers**, **House Martins**, **Swifts** and **Woodpigeons**, but a late influx of up to a dozen **Lesser Redpolls** resulted in six young fledging from two nests – the first recorded breeding of this species for the island. Other scarce breeders included some 15 pairs of **Sand Martins**, 12 pairs of **Willow Warblers** and six pairs of **Colared Doves**. Seabirds had mixed fortunes

with early breeders such as **Shags** and **Little Terns** doing well. Later breeders suffered from an apparent shortage of sandeels from mid June, and there were near or complete breeding failures for **Arctic Terns**, **Razorbills** and **Guillemots**.

There were a couple of typical late-summer records of **Crossbills** in July, a rare July **Goldeneye** record and a high count of 659 moulting **Eiders** in August, but there was no repeat of the massive fall of **Swifts** that occurred in early August 2004 and just a handful of this aerial wanderer were seen in July. Return wader passage started very early with an influx of 138 **Black-tailed Godwits** on 2nd July but predominantly clear skies and northerly winds for much of July and August

meant that many birds could head on south without stopping and the autumn passage was very light compared to recent years. Highlights included three **Little Stints**, three **Curlew Sandpipers**, 29 **Ruff** and a peak count of 13 **Greenshanks** in August, although the only real rarities involved an unprecedented influx of at least three and possibly up to five **Buff-breasted Sandpipers** in the west of the island on 3rd-8th September.

Atlantic storms predominated from late August and these resulted in some spectacular dawn sea-watching throughout the autumn. Best birds were a **Cory's Shearwater** off Aird (24th) - the first for Tiree, and a **Great Shearwater**, which flew alongside the Barra-Tiree ferry some 30

minutes north of Tiree on 20th October. There were also good numbers of scarcer seabirds including some 35 **Leach's Petrels**, 53 **Sooty Shearwaters**, 11 **Pomarine Skuas** and 13 **Grey Phalaropes**, but only two **Balearic Shearwaters**, plus record counts of 178 **Storm Petrels** in one hour off Hynish (15th August) and 60 **Great Skuas** of Aird in 3 hours on 1st October. There was also the sheer spectacle of hourly passage rates of up to 5,000 **Manx Shearwaters**, 3,780 **Razorbills**, 2,170 **Kittiwakes**, 1,200 **Fulmars** and 600 **Gannets**. Oddly, the only **Sabine's Gull**, was an early juvenile loafing with a juvenile **Little Gull** in a flock of **Kittiwakes** at Gott Bay (30th August), whilst three **Little Auks** were seen from 20th October.



Some birds of Tiree: Redshank at Loch Bhasapol (bottom left), Whooper Swans at Heylipol (top left), Redhead at Loch Bhasapol (top right) and Fulmar at Ceann a' Mhara (all photos by John Bowler)



Away from the coast, autumn scarcities were in relatively short supply, but included an eclipse drake **Garganey** at Loch a' Phuill, an adult **White-tailed Eagle** at Baugh and two **Golden Eagles** at Caoles in September, plus **Waxwings** at Crosapol (25th) and Heylipol (26th), and five **Mealy Redpolls** at Balephuill (25th) in October. Goose and swan passage started early in mid-September as a result of extremely cold weather in Iceland, with 200 **Pink-feet** seen coming in off the Minch on 15th and 40 **Whooper Swans** on 26th. Nine **Whooper Swans** tracked leaving Loch a' Phuill on the evening of 27th were watched arriving at Loch Gruinart, Islay just 90 minutes later by Clive McKay, having travelled the intervening 50 miles at some 33 mph against a strong headwind! Whooper numbers peaked at 352 birds on 29th October. Thrush passage in October involved good numbers of **Redwings**, **Song Thrushes** and **Blackbirds**

and these brought at least two **Ring Ouzels** with them to the island (21st and 23rd). More dramatic, however, was the amazing influx of **Snipe** that occurred during conditions of thick low cloud and drizzle on 10th October. Some 1,430 were counted in noisy mobile flocks of up to 260 birds at wetland sites all over the island with perhaps up to 3,000 birds present in total. Three **Jack Snipe**, eight **Scaup**, two **Common Scoters** and 25 **Snow Buntings** were typical late autumn fare, and there was the customary late autumn influx of **Blackcaps** and **Chiffchaffs**, the latter including four *abietinus* birds, plus late single *tristis* birds at Vaul on 23rd November and at Hynish on 6th December.

November also brought scarcities in the form of two **Blue Tits**, two **Rooks**, a **Jackdaw** at Moss (10th), a **Mistle Thrush** at Balephuill (26th) and a very late **Wheat-**

ear at Loch an Eilein (5th). Although bird of the month was the adult **Laughing Gull** at Traigh Bhagh (7th), part of an unprecedented influx to Britain at the time and the first for Tiree. December brought a late **Lapland Bunting** to Salum (5th), a **Greenshank** to Traigh Bhagh (2nd) and a first-winter **Iceland Gull** to Aird (10th). The best bird of the year however was an elusive diving duck present at Loch Bhasapol from 14th December until the year-end, which eventually proved to be a female **Redhead**. If accepted, this will be just the third record from Scotland. This was quite possibly the same individual that was seen on Barra during the previous two winters and was responsible for the first Scottish Record.

Here's hoping for an equally bird-filled year in 2006!

Dr John Bowler, RSPB

The Wigeon's tale

The commonest duck? Most people would name the Mallard. But, from September to March on the Isle of Bute, the Wigeon holds the title, if the number present is the criterion for the title. Go to Loch Ascog or to Loch Grennod, glance over Ettrick Bay, and you may have a count of over a thousand birds. In spring I have observed a very large flock on Rothesay Bay at the entrance to Loch Striven—probably birds about to migrate north. Wigeon from Iceland regard Bute as their winter home. They are vegetarians, so they like the good grass that grows in abundance on the shore fields around our lochs.

The Wigeon is a beautiful bird. Let's start with its Latin name, *Anas penelope*. Penelope was Odysseus' wife, and she, according to legend, was exposed by her father

to the elements because he feared that she was dissolute and would disgrace her family. She was rescued by seabirds—the Wigeon claimed the title. One of the bird's Scottish names is 'baldpate', so called because the male has a yellowish forehead and crown. It has a chestnut head, grey upperparts and sides, and a prominent white band along its side. Its whistle 'whee-oo' is very familiar to anyone who has spent time watching a feeding flock.

Small numbers of Wigeon breed in Scotland, north of the Forth-Clyde valleys. According to McWilliam (1927), it may once have bred on Bute. Now it appears to be absent in summer. It is present on the island from September to March, in some numbers. Our wintering birds come from Iceland, northern Scandinavia and proba-

bly some from Russia. It seems that there is a constant turnover in wintering flocks, early autumn arrivals moving south, to be replaced by migrants from more distant places.

If you are passing along the Rothesay-Straad road, pause as you pass by Loch Grennod. The fields on the farther shore of the loch are often carpeted with feeding Wigeon.

Michael Thomas

[Editor's note: this account is taken from *Ornithological Tales Book III*, which Michael has written about the birds of Bute]

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Male and female Wigeon
(Jim Dickson)



The strange events of July 2005

The spectacle of thousands of Kittiwakes and Razorbills in a small area of Loch Crinan on 9 July (The Eider, September 2005, page 17) was remarkable enough and memorable to all who saw it. Yet it was only a small part of a much wider gathering of tens of thousands of seabirds over much of the Firth of Lorn and the Sound of Jura in early July. And exactly the same thing happened in 1985...

In 2005, the first indications came on the morning of 5 July. I was on the Oban-Mull ferry. Sometimes there are only small numbers of seabirds on this crossing, but this time, huge flocks of settled and flying birds stretched south into the hazy distance, as far as binoculars could see. All the way across the Firth of Lorn and into the Sound of Mull there were extraordinary numbers of Guillemots and Razorbills (thousands of each) with many more thousands of Manx Shearwaters, almost impossible to count from the fast moving ferry. They were still there on the return ferry in the evening, when one long ragged flock of Manx Shearwaters extended for well over a km, and there were many such flocks.

Two days later and 25 km to the south, Rob Lightfoot and I were in the area between Cuan Ferry and Ormsa. Here there were several thousand Razorbills, with smaller numbers of Manx Shearwaters, Guillemots, terns, Kittiwakes and other gulls. On our return trip later that day, many hundreds of Kittiwakes were resting on the rocky shore of the Luing mainland. They appeared tired, as if they had been driven there by wind or current. Back at Cuan, we saw the extraordinary spectacle of a continuous flow of hundreds of Razorbills being carried east through Cuan Sound by the fast tidal current. I counted sixty passing in two minutes. This went on for at least an hour, possibly two, so probably several thousand Razorbills were carried through on that one tide. Very few made return flights while we watched and most appeared passive, weak and at the mercy of the current.

Next day, another 20 km to the south, Rob and I were on one of our regular trips from Crinan to ring seabirds. Black Rock sometimes holds breeding terns and Black-headed Gulls, so we checked it first. This year nothing was breeding but, instead, the islet was completely covered by about 400 resting Kittiwakes. Then we saw the huge numbers of birds in Loch Crinan itself—this was one day before the *Eider* report mentioned above. They were mainly Razorbills and Kittiwakes with smaller numbers of large gulls, both adult and immature, and Guillemots, Manx Shearwaters and some diving Gannets. We approached for a closer view. One flock held 150

Kittiwakes and again there were many such flocks, but it was difficult to count the mobile birds from an unsteady small boat. Razorbills were coming up with bills full of small herring or sprats. The many hundreds of Kittiwakes resting on the rocks near Duntrune Castle had deposited large amounts of guano since the last tide.

Like the other huge assemblies of the previous few days, this was notable for the sheer numbers of birds. The Razorbills and Kittiwakes in the Loch Crinan area alone must each have numbered several thousand. Large numbers of both species, but less concentrated, were out in the Sound of Jura in the area between Crinan, Ruadh Sgeir, E na Cille and Liath-sgeir Mhor.

The same day (8 July 2005), another 18 km to the south, Brian and Liz Snell saw “at least 2000 auks with no young on Loch na Cille, off Danna in the Sound of Jura. It was fine and sunny and all day small groups of auks (9-40) were flying down the Sound of Jura and disappearing to the south... We also saw 100+ Kittiwakes, of which only four were first-years (second summer). Next day was foggy and calm and the loch was empty of auks.” [from e-mail of 12 Jan 2006 to JCAC]

A few days later, at various sites on the edges of this area, there were more flocks, mainly Razorbills. On 12 July in Loch Linnhe, hundreds were off Castle Stalker Hill, more hundreds at Corran Ferry, and ca 50 at Sgeirean Sallachain. On 13 July in Loch Melfort, at least 100 auks were with gulls and Gannets, and the same day in Loch Gilp, many Razorbills and Kittiwakes were with gulls, terns and Guillemots. On 12-13 July there were weak, probably dying Razorbills in Lochs Ailort, Feochan and Craignish. On 18 July I searched the beaches from Dunstaffnage to Tralee and found dead; 24 Guillemots,

4 Razorbills, 2 auks, 2 auk chicks, 2 Kittiwakes, 3 Herring Gulls and a Canada Goose. Two of the Guillemots had been ringed as adults on the Treshnish Islands, one of them on 4 July 1980 (so it was more than 25 years old).

Also in mid-July 2005, exceptionally high numbers of large chicks of Common Terns died at the three largest tern colonies in the area, in the Sound of Mull, the Sound of Jura and Loch Melfort. We found them lying intact in their territories, many as sibling pairs or triplets. Very roughly, about half or two-thirds of the large chicks starved to death at each colony.

Four hundred and twenty-eight large chicks were found dead at the colony in the Sound of Mull (where 727 pairs of Common Terns + 99 pairs Arctic Terns laid); 113 were found dead at the Sound of Jura (105 + 88 pairs); and 88 were found dead at Loch Melfort (194 + 10 pairs). A large (for Argyll) colony of Arctic Terns in the Sound of Mull, close to the Common Tern colony, was much less affected: 88 pairs fledged about 150 young and only 11 large young were found dead. But at the largest Arctic Tern colony in the area, in the Sound of Luing, all 150 pairs deserted early, having raised no young.

Interestingly, chicks did not die in large numbers like this at Common Tern colonies in Lochs Ailort, Moidart, Leven and West Loch Tarbert, although these were smaller colonies and not really comparable. Serious starvation of tern chicks seems to have been confined to the Firth of Lorn and the Sounds of Mull and Jura, the same areas where the huge assemblies of auks, Manx Shearwaters and Kittiwakes were seen.

And now the really interesting bit. Twenty years earlier, almost exactly the same things happened in exactly the

Common Tern (Jim Duncan)



same area.

In July 1985 large flocks of auks were seen in the Sound of Mull and elsewhere, just before a large wreck of auks occurred on southwest-facing beaches of Mull and the mainland. At the same time, huge numbers of tern chicks died of starvation at all the colonies in the same area (Craik 1985). Just as in 2005, both the auk wreck and the tern chick deaths were confined to the Firth of Lorn and the Sounds of Mull and Jura. In both 1985 and 2005, tern colonies did well to the north of the affected area (in Loch Ailort) and to its south (in West Loch Tarbert).

Auk wrecks are rare events in this part of the world. In most years, the small fishes on which auks depend are numerous enough for them to raise young. Likewise, usually there are enough for terns to rear one to two young per pair – as long as the tern colonies are free of predators. However, most are not, and tern breeding success in Argyll is affected far more by predation than by food shortage. But, 1985 and 2005 were exceptional—a shortage of small fishes, especially sandeels and herring/sprats, seems to have been the cause of significant seabird starvation.

Fewer birds died in 2005 than in 1985, presumably because the fish shortage was less severe. In July 1985, 2891 birds were found dead on the beaches in the auk wreck (including 2616 Guillemots). These

included 360 birds between Dunstaffnage and Tralee, a stretch where only 38 were found in 2005, although wind directions differed. Almost all Common Tern chicks in the affected area died in 1985, but only about half of them died in 2005.

The 2005 events were foreshadowed in late summer and autumn 2004. On 26 Aug 2004, Mike Murray on *Gemini* reported unusual gatherings of thousands of seabirds in the Sound of Jura; and I saw weak, dying and dead Guillemots in Loch nan Uamh on 7 Sept and at Lochs Leven and Teacuis on 8 Sept (under 100 at each loch), while auks were reported dying in Loch Linhhe at the same time. This was the southern fringe of a fairly severe auk wreck in NW Scotland in late Aug and early Sept 2004 during which well over 2000 seabirds, mainly Guillemots, were found dead and many thousands more must have died undetected (Swann 2004).

I believe that seabirds gathered in these huge numbers during 5-13 July 2005, not because fish were abundant, but because fish were generally scarce and shoals were few and far between, so that birds moved considerable distances and concentrated where they found fish. This idea is supported by the auk movements, by the auk wreck (admittedly a minor wreck in 2005, but the winds were not favourable and many more corpses may have stayed at sea), and by the fact that, at the same time and in the same area, tern chicks

died in unusually large numbers.

So just what is happening? Are the causes further down the food chain? Is western Scotland now facing the shortages of sandeels that in recent years have affected the seabirds of Shetland, Orkney and the North Sea? Or will things be back to normal in Argyll in 2006? Please would anyone who can add to this preliminary account let me have details.

Clive Craik

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Postscript: After writing this, I read Eddie Maguire's account of similarly huge numbers of seabirds off Machrihanish at the same time (page 4). This was 60km south of my southernmost report, off Danna in the Sound of Jura, from where flocks seem to have extended for another 60km north to the Sound of Mull (above). Does anyone have any observations from between Danna and Machrihanish during 5-10 July? It seems possible that the flocks stretched all the way from Machrihanish to the Sound of Mull, about 120km.

Alternative Algarve

*Stretching from Cape St Vincent in the west to the Spanish border in the east, the Algarve is the most southerly coastline of Portugal. Its name derives from the Arab 'al-Gharb', meaning 'the west'. Mention the Algarve to most people and it probably conjures up images of beautiful sun-drenched beaches, rampant coastal development and golf courses by the dozen. While this is all true, there is another attraction that is overlooked by most summer tourists. This is the bird life of the region, which is probably best seen in spring and autumn, although summer does bring species such the **Collared Pratincole** to the region to breed. The autumn is best for migrants, and with Africa only a few tens of kilometres away, there is considerable avian traffic.*

A fair number of UK birds overwinter in southern Europe, where they can often be seen close-up and in large numbers. We have a timeshare week at the beginning of March for the next 60 years (!) at Alvor, a small town in the western Algarve. In 2005, when we were just getting interested in birding again, I searched the internet for information on the region and was lucky enough to find a site with a report of a trip there by James Packer. His website has reports of many birding trips (including

one to Oban) and now a second trip to the Algarve in Oct/Nov 2005, see:

<http://www.somersetbirder.fsnet.co.uk/index.html>

This gave us a good starting point and, despite not having his party's dedication, such as 6 a.m. starts; we saw a lot of species. We also bought a telescope in advance of our visit with the aim of doing some digiscoping – more about this later.

One of the best places to start is the famous Ria Formosa Nature Reserve which extends over 60km from west of Faro almost to the Spanish border and covers around 18,400ha. It is designated primarily for its lagoons, mudflats and saltmarshes, together with their flora and fauna, but there are small areas of pine-woods, fresh water lakes, dunes, bathing beaches and, inevitably, golf courses! A short boat trip is required to reach the outer sand bars and bathing beaches across a lagoon, in which shellfish cultivation is still important. Two golf courses lie within the reserve and take a keen interest in it, with some of the best viewpoints for waterbirds beside the Quinta do Lago course. Here there is ample shaded parking, some display boards and a walkway across an inlet to a restaurant nestling in the dunes.

The official entrance to the Park is to the east of Faro, near Olhau. It is very inconspicuous and has a slightly military look with its green gate covered with chainlink fencing. Once located and inside, after paying a few euros, one is surprised to find a large visitor centre with some interpretative displays and a good café/restaurant. However, in terms of marketing they are years behind Britain, with no merchandise such as soft toy birds, fish, dolphins, turtles etc. The free footpath map is useful and they do have leaflets and books for sale. Among the man-made features are a tidal mill, salt pans and kennels with Algarvian water dogs—a large poodle-like dog with webbing between the toes!

Sea salt has been harvested for centuries and a number of disused salt pans throughout the reserve now provide excellent habitat for ducks and waders. The birds seem to have adapted well to the various human intrusions. The symbol of the Reserve is the **Purple Gallinule**—an oversized Moorhen with red list status. These can be seen easily at a large pond beside Quinta do Lago golf course, onto which they frequently stray! This is a good place to get close to them—in fact



Some birds of the Algarve: Sanderling (top left), Little Egret (bottom left) Black-winged Stilt (right) (Photos: Robin Harvey)

the environment is somewhat reminiscent of the wetland reserve at Slimbridge in Gloucestershire. I was busy setting up the 'scope to see if I could spot one when Fay pointed to one under the bank, only about 10m away! I was so excited that the pictures I took suffered from camera shake! We were able to watch one carefully stripping the outer dry layer from a reed before eating the soft interior. Other waterfowl here included **Gadwall**, **Garganey**, **Shoveller**, **Pochard**, **Red Crested Pochard** and the ubiquitous **Mallard** and **Coot**. Golf courses, hotel grounds and parks are also good for the striking **Hoopoe** that probes in the turf for insects etc. In addition to the reserve itself, the coastline is blessed with the large Arade estuary, on which Portimao stands and the smaller Alvor estuary a little further west. These are both good for waders, including **Ringed**, **Little Ringed** and **Kentish Plover**, **Black Tailed Godwit**, **Dunlin**, **Greenshank** and **Sanderling**. **Black Winged Stilts** and **Little Egrets** are common in the estuaries and **Avocets**, **Spoonbills** and small flocks of **Flamingos** can be seen. We saw a few **Kingfishers** and one **Bluethroat** and flocks of **Waxbills** were pointed out to us by the one other birder we met.

The pale rocky cliffs, which are confined to the coastline west of Faro, are often spectacular and the bird life is equally interesting with **Blackcaps** and **Sardinian Warblers**, **Black Redstarts** and occasional **Chough**—especially around Cape St. Vincent and the less visited coastline extending north from it. It was interesting to think that many of the warblers we saw or heard were probably in Britain a few

weeks after our visit. The Cape is a good spot to watch for migrants in autumn, as well as for the daring anglers who perch on the cliffs and cast their bait into the sea 70m below! We spotted two **White Stork** nests on the cliffs further north, which made a change from chimneys and artificial nest poles. Away from the coast, flocks of **Serins** and **Greenfinches** are common, various larks and two species of shrike occur, and you may be lucky enough to see **Spotless Starlings** or **Bee Eaters** perched on wires. **Azure Winged Magpies** chatter among the cork oaks, where you might spot a **Short-toed Tree-creeper**, and in the drier scrubby or cultivated areas **Red Legged Partridges** and **Little Bustards** scurry about. Further inland, still in the Castro Verde area about 60 km from the coast, **Great Bustards** can be tracked down, though they are shy and views are usually distant. There are many raptors too, including **Black Kite**, three species of **Harrier** and migration brings several species of eagle.

My first attempts at capturing bird images by digiscoping proved to be frustrating, especially with the bright light making viewing the LCD display on the camera almost impossible. Perhaps a black drape over the apparatus, like the old plate camera photographers used, wouldn't go amiss though it might raise a few eyebrows! One year on I feel I have grasped the basics, with the help of tips from club members and articles on the internet. One useful tip is to adopt the approach taken by professional photographers; take lots of pictures, they are effectively free with a digital camera, so why not? A number of cameras allow several frames to be taken in rapid succession, providing the chance to catch that special picture with the bird doing

something interesting. We are looking forward eagerly to our visit in March 2006 when we will surely see and photograph several additional species. I have also purchased a second digital camera with a 10x optical zoom for those quick shots and situations where the x 60 of the telescope/camera combination is too powerful—and too slow to set up! Maybe some of the results will be good enough to share with members at one of the indoor meetings. Meanwhile, I am afraid that readers will have to make do with examples of my earlier attempts (see box above).

For those who like to be led, at least one ex-patriot British birder takes small parties on tours of the major habitats, see:

www.casarosa.net/birding%20tours.htm

We only saw two other birders last year. So, in spring at least, you shouldn't be jostling for position with dozens of other enthusiasts. It is also unlikely to be stiflingly hot, compared to the summer. In four visits in February/March we have experienced everything from bright sunshine, cold winds and near frost at night (2005) through typical west of Scotland dreich (2003) to pleasant warm Scottish summer temperatures (2002, 2004). There are often cheap package tours in spring and autumn. You might even be tempted into the sea, and if you do the terns won't be so aggressive then! Gull enthusiasts can look out for **Audouin's**, **Yellow Legged** and **Mediterranean Gulls**. Even without total devotion to birding every day, you should easily see 60-80 species. Oh—I nearly forgot—the food and wine are great too. Boa viagem!

Robin Harvey

In the last issue of the Eider I described how my decade on Islay saw me develop from a casual seawatcher into a committed enthusiast (or obsessive, depending on one's point of view). I guess there is a certain poetic justice in the fact that one of my last seawatches on the island was also without question the best.

Autumn 2004 was proving to be good for seawatching, with a run of brisk westerly and northwesterly winds from September 12th onwards. By the 18th I had clocked up two Little Gulls, two Sabine's Gulls, one Pomarine Skua and five Grey Phalaropes, together with regular sightings of less unusual species such as Sooty Shearwater, Storm Petrel and Leach's Petrel. Then, on the 19th, the action really started. That day, a six-hour seawatch at Frenchman's Rocks produced a juvenile Sabine's Gull, 15 Leach's Petrels and no fewer than 459 pale-bellied Brent Geese flying south past the site. Unfortunately the wind, which was almost due westerly at the outset, soon backed southwest and movement fell off. The same did not happen the next day, when Clive McKay and I braved a westerly gale to record four Sabine's Gulls (an adult and three juveniles), three Grey Phalaropes, 30 Leach's Petrels, and another 325 Brents.

Seawatching involves little or no physical exertion, but it is nevertheless quite tiring, especially if conditions are cold and wet. The habit of waking up every half hour or so during the night to listen to the wind and assess its direction only makes matters worse. In fact, by this point I was starting to see seabirds in my sleep, but there was no letting up. The wind stayed westerly overnight and by dawn on the 21st had veered a little north of west—the best possible direction at Frenchman's Rocks. At around six o'clock I picked Clive McKay up from his house and we drove down the Rinns in a near-gale, armed with waterproofs and thermos flasks. Things were looking very good.

We arrived on site as it was getting light and were joined for the first couple of hours by James How and Gus Keys from the RSPB, the latter hoping to see his first ever Sabine's Gull. Just like the previous day, there was a big sea running, with a heavy swell, crashing waves, and foam and spray everywhere. The wind was touching gale force and gusting considerably stronger in the frequent squally showers. In a word, it was perfect.

We crouched in the lee of a low rocky ridge that runs from southeast to northwest, well above sea level. This gave us just enough shelter to keep our optics reasonably steady in all but the strongest gusts. Though we were some distance from the water's edge, our high vantage point made it less likely that we would



Adult Kittiwake
(Jim Duncan)

lose birds in the wave troughs as they flew past. It also reduced the effects of spray.

Almost as soon as I'd set my telescope up, I saw an adult Pomarine Skua fly past, brandishing a full set of "spoons." Unfortunately, in the half-light, I was the only one of the four of us to see it. However, we were all able to enjoy the sight of several Leach's Petrels passing by at close range, flying very slowly and occasionally hanging motionless in the wind as they normally do in severe weather. In the first hour-and-a-quarter, we logged 20 of these pelagic wanderers. More unusually, no fewer than 56 Red-throated Divers flew south during the same period. Passage of this species is normally light, though I had recorded between 50 and 100 in a day on rare occasions in the past.

The first real excitement came at 7.40am, when a juvenile Sabine's Gull flew through at close range in the company of a juvenile Kittiwake. There wasn't even time to get the telescope onto it, but we all enjoyed reasonable views with binoculars and Gus was highly pleased to have added this attractive Arctic gull to his life list. Although I have seen plenty of Sabine's Gulls at this site and elsewhere over the years, I never tire of watching them and I

never fail to feel a frisson of excitement when I spot one. As well as the obvious plumage features, there are subtle visual cues that make it possible to home in on a Sab's at a distance of a mile or more, even with binoculars, if the light is good.

So far, so good. Looking at my notebook today, I see that the first three pages for September 21st are reasonably legible, being written in ink. Then there's a change to pencil and my handwriting deteriorates into a scribble that none but I could possibly ever read. This coincides with a change in the weather. What happened in fact was that after about two hours the showers became less frequent and less intense, and there followed a bright and breezy period that saw movement of Leach's Petrels come to a complete halt. By this time we had noted reasonable numbers of Golden Plover, together with Brent Geese in flocks of up to 36 birds, but now I began to wonder if it was all over for the day. I should point out that showers are a very significant feature in the seawatcher's perception of the world. When one appears on the horizon, it's possible to see birds veering inshore in an attempt to avoid it. Because of this con-

centrating effect, the number of birds passing by within sight of the shore increases and reaches a peak in the few minutes before the shower hits land, then falls almost to nil in a heavy squall as birds are forced down onto the sea, having nowhere else to go. But the best time of all is immediately after the shower has passed, when there is a flurry of activity before the same birds make their way back to the open sea again.

On rare occasions, a squall seems to kick-start a movement of seabirds that continues for a long time afterwards. So it was this time. After an hour of sunshine, a big squall showed up at around 10.30am and proved to be the first of many. In its wake, Leach's Petrels started to move through again and we had the second juvenile Sabine's Gull of the day as well as the first Grey Phalarope. Passage of Red-throated Divers, Brent Geese and Arctic Terns continued, with more than 300 Brent Geese passing through in the space of 45 minutes, the largest flock containing 110 birds. In the space of just over an hour, we saw four more Sabine's Gulls, including an adult. Interestingly, in strong sunlight the adult stood out much less from surrounding Kittiwakes than the darker juveniles, despite its blackish hood.

At this point I more or less gave up trying to write individual descriptions of each Sabine's Gull, contenting myself instead with a few lines of almost illegible shorthand notes that I hoped could later be expanded into a reasonable account. Columns of Roman numerals wandered all over the page as I struggled to keep track of the huge numbers of migrating Brent Geese, while Clive bravely attempted to make sample counts of commoner species such as Manx Shearwater and Kittiwake.

Fortunately there weren't too many of these—only about 100 Manxies an hour, for example—and provided one was prepared to ignore the numerous Gannets and Fulmars, it was possible to keep on top of things, just about.

The hours went by, the wind strengthened, and seabird movement continued unabated. Every shower was preceded and followed by several flocks of Brent Geese. Red-throated Divers continued to go through in groups of up to 12 birds, with a steady movement of Leach's Petrels as well as small parties of flimsy-looking Arctic Terns from time to time. By early afternoon it was clear that birds were tiring of their battle against the gale and were coming ever closer to the shore. Several Leach's Petrels abandoned the sea completely and flew over the rocks right in front of us, with one individual making a couple of circuits of the ridge where we were sitting, as though inspecting us. Other birds that flew directly over our heads or behind us included several Arctic Terns, a party of three Great Skuas, and a skein of some 150 Brent Geese high up in the sky. Indeed, it is highly likely that we missed quite a lot of birds—Brent Geese in particular—simply because we didn't have eyes in the backs of our heads.

By about 3pm, though, it was obvious that things really had slowed down. Once again the showers retreated, and though the wind remained very strong the passage of everything except Leach's Petrels and Brent Geese came to an almost complete standstill. It would have been good to stay until evening in the hope that movement might pick up again as it sometimes does a couple of hours before sunset, but hunger and fatigue conspired to draw us away. A few minutes before our agreed departure

time, a solitary adult Sabine's Gull flew past at close range, providing excellent views. It was a fitting end to an exhilarating eight-and-a-half hours.

Returning to the car, we attempted to agree on everything we'd seen. Inevitably, there were some discrepancies in our respective counts, but they were minor. The final roll call was: Sabine's Gull 8, Grey Phalarope 3, Leach's Petrel 143, Storm Petrel 16, Pomarine Skua 1, Arctic Skua 2, Great Skua 22, Red-throated Diver 172, Great Northern Diver 1, Arctic Tern 76, Golden Plover 156, Brent Goose 1,247. The totals for Sabine's Gull, Leach's Petrel, Red-throated Diver, Arctic Tern and Brent Goose were all record counts for the site.

Although I had no inkling of it at the time, just five short weeks later I was to leave Islay for a new island. I don't know if I shall ever again go seawatching at Frenchman's Rocks, but the memories will stay with me for the rest of my life. That does not mean I'll be sitting around and harking back to the past, though. Within a few weeks of arriving on Lewis I had tried out one seawatching site and been told of several others. By then it was late in the year, of course, and there was very little to see, but I didn't have too long to wait before my enthusiasm was rekindled in spectacular fashion. During a three-day period at the beginning of August 2005, I and others saw a lingering Wilson's Petrel and several Great and Cory's Shearwaters from the headland at Labost. It was the beginning of yet another autumn filled with exciting birds on both land and sea.

Tristan ap Rheinallt

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Follow that Siskin

The Siskin on your peanuts today could have been in Merseyside two days ago, in a southern county two days before that, and in Belgium a day or two earlier. A few days from now it could be in Skye, the Black Isle or even Norway. Many breed in the Scottish Highlands and spend winter in southern England or in Belgium, while others winter in Britain and breed in Scandinavia. Ringing is the only way to sort out the details...

Paul Daw (*Eider* Dec 2005, page 9) mentions three ringed Siskins wintering in the Merseyside area and recorded in Argyll in spring, and he goes on to wonder where our wintering Siskins come from. Details of some earlier Siskin recoveries were given in the ringing sections of previous *Argyll Bird Reports* (vols 1-7, covering 1980-1990). Since then there have been many more recoveries of Argyll birds. However, few if any of these answer

Paul's question, and this article tries to explain why. The movements of Siskins are complex—see *The BTO's Migration Atlas* 2002, page 651—but take a deep breath first!

A common pattern seems to be as follows. Siskins suddenly appear in large numbers at peanuts in Argyll early in the year, typically in March, April and May, (although this appearance has been getting earlier in recent years). These are local breeders together with passage birds, and many of them have been ringed in English gardens in February-March. Others of the same population are ringed in Argyll in March-May and turn up in English gardens in Feb-March in a subsequent year. Over many years, Rob Lightfoot, Doug Trigg and I ringed several hundred Siskins in the Oban area. Most of our recoveries were from the gardens of other ringers in Surrey (11 birds), Devon (6) and eighteen other counties from Cumbria to Hampshire and

from Norfolk to Gwent, as well as one from Ulster. Sometimes the same gardens feature repeatedly. For example, several Siskins I have handled at Barcaldine had also been in a particular garden in Exeter. However, almost every one of these 47 birds was in England in February and March, a very few in January and April. Where were all these Siskins in October to December?

Probably many were in southern England but not entering gardens as long as natural foods remained available. However, two of our birds were in Belgium in November, and other Argyll Siskins have been recovered in midwinter in Holland (1) and even Malta (1). There have also been six recoveries in Argyll of birds ringed in Belgium in winter or early spring. The *Migration Atlas* confirms that over half of all foreign recoveries of this species have been in Belgium and Holland, the others mostly in France, Iberia and Italy.



Juvenile Siskin
(Steve Petty)

Thus, many Siskins breeding in Argyll and the Highlands spend the winter in Europe, especially in Belgium and Holland, and others may winter in southern England. Early in spring, they move rapidly north to Scotland, and many fly to or through Argyll. The fastest flew from Shropshire to the Scottish Highlands in three days, an average of 189 km/day (Migration Atlas). (For the metrically challenged like me, 189 km is 118 miles, considerably more than straight-line Oban-Edinburgh or Oban-Inverness, and about the same as London-Bristol.) Since recoveries are rarely immediate, this may well be a typical speed!

After they arrive here, Siskins move widely around Scotland in spring. Here are just two examples. One ringed near Kingussie (by a certain Roy Dennis) on 26

March 1990 was controlled (caught and released) by me at Barcaldine three days later (104 km or 35 km/day). Going the other way, one ringed by Doug Trigg at Benderloch on 8 March 1993 was controlled by Andrew Ramsay at Logie Hill, near Tain in Highland Region, three days later (160 km or 53 km/day). Among our recoveries of this sort, four went west to east and five went the other way, so it looks as if Scottish Siskins may move about in a variety of directions before settling to breed. Some may cross the North Sea. One juvenile ringed by Rob Lightfoot at Kilchrenan on 10 July 1998 (possibly on passage?) was recovered at the southernmost tip of Norway on 13 April 1999 (breeding there?).

And now to Paul's question—where do the Siskins that are in Argyll in winter

come from? Local birds leave for the winter (see Argyll Database record of 60 flying south at Machrihanish Observatory on 18 Sep 1998) and, as Paul suggests, it seems likely that they are replaced by others from further north. The Database shows that flocks of ten or more become scarce in October to December in some years, although less so in others. But notably few come into gardens while there are natural foods to be had. There are Database records of Siskins feeding on larch, alder, birch, meadowsweet and seashore plants late in the year and many Argyll bird tables are bereft of Siskins until the influx early in spring. Most ringing of this species takes place in gardens, so this means that few have been ringed here in October-December (I am not aware of any such recoveries).

And here the *Migration Atlas* sheds some light. Figures 4 and 5 on page 652 are maps that illustrate how complex the pattern is. Siskins that arrive in Britain from abroad (Fig. 5) fall into two groups. The larger group (616 records) winter in the Low Countries and elsewhere, and breed in Britain, as above. The smaller group (60 records) breed abroad, mostly in Norway and Sweden, some in Finland, and winter in Britain, mostly in southern England. There have been few winter recoveries in Scotland of these Scandinavian breeders, no more than three or four, and all were in east Scotland. No foreign breeder seems yet to have been found in western Scotland in winter.

Finally, Fig 4 in the Atlas shows locations in winter of Siskins that breed in the British Isles. Although the map is difficult to interpret because of the mass of data, it shows about three such birds in Argyll in winter. Two of these bred in the general area of Inverness and one bred on Skye.

So the very few recoveries all support Paul's suggestion that Siskins in Argyll in midwinter breed further north. These three were all further north in Scotland but, because so few have been ringed here at that time of year, we shouldn't rule out the possibility that some breed in Scandinavia.

Clive Craik

Partial-albino female Eider



Tom Callan took this photograph of a partial-albino female Eider on the 25th September 2005. Tom noted that "the bird has been around since at least 2003 in broadly similar plumage" and during this time "it has been very faithful to the area around the mouth of the Killail Burn, Otter Ferry, which is where this photograph was taken".

Editor

Recent bird reports from Paul Daw: November 2005—January 2006

Bird sightings in Argyll

The latest bird sightings in Argyll are available on the Argyll Bird Club website at:

www.argyllbirdclub.org

See 'Click here for latest bird reports' on the home page.

Observers

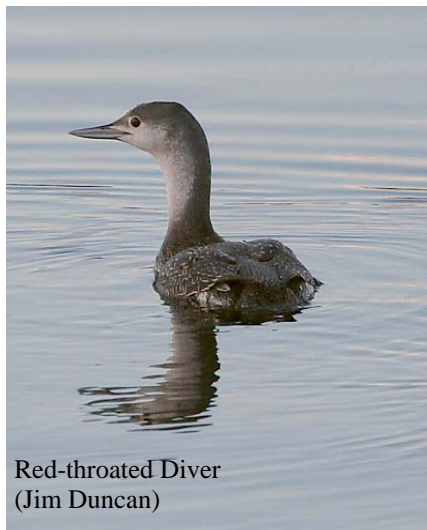
Observers full names in brackets except: SW = Simon Wellock, JB = John Bowler, TC = Tom Callan, PD = Paul Daw, JD = Jim Dickson, JH = John Halliday

Recent Reports

As you will see this report is based on the records submitted, in the main, by a small band of regular contributors. I'm sure there must be other members seeing interesting birds from time to time. So let's hear from you! After the exceptional number of white winged gulls reported last year, so far this winter there have been hardly any. The only record I have is of an Iceland Gull on Tiree in Dec. If anyone has seen Iceland or Glaucous Gulls, please let me know.

Divers to Herons (including sea ducks, skuas, terns and auks seen during sea-watches)

A count of birds seen in the Sound of Gigha from Rhunahaorine Point on 3rd Nov found a minimum of 35 **Black-throated Divers**, many **Great Northern Divers**, 30 or more **Slavonian Grebes** and four **Velvet Scoters** (JD). For comparison, a sea-watch off Aird, Tiree on 12th Nov found 33 **Great Northern Divers**, three **Red-throated Divers**, five **Gannets**, five **Fulmars**, a **Long-tailed Duck**, an **Arctic Skua** and a **Little Auk**, as well as over 2,000 **Kittiwakes** and 600 auks (JB). The following day (13th Nov) a total of 25 **Little Grebes** and three **Black-throated Divers** were found in Loch Sween during the WeBS count there (PD/TC).



Red-throated Diver
(Jim Duncan)

Stop Press

The **Firecrest** first reported at Laganbuidhe Farm, Dalmally, North Argyll on 22nd Dec was seen again at close quarters on 12th Feb. A **Goldcrest** seen shortly afterwards provided a striking contrast (Alan Gray).

A single **Leach's Storm-Petrel** was an unusual sight in Port Ellen Bay, Islay on 13th Nov (Andy Schofield).

Up to three **Red-throated Divers** were seen regularly in the Otter Ferry/West Otter Ferry area of Loch Fyne from 27th Dec-3rd Jan (TC) and one was seen off the Marina at Dunstaffnage on 26th Jan (Robin Harvey). A **Great Crested Grebe** on Loch Tuath, seen from Lagganulva, on 12th Dec was a rare visitor to Mull (Pam & Arthur Brown).

A sea-watch off Hynish, Tiree on 15th Jan produced five **Great Northern Divers**, four **Gannets**, 420 **Fulmars**, 177 auks (mostly **Common Guillemots**) and one **Black Guillemot** as well as 42 **Kittiwakes** all in one hour (JB). Over 1,000 **Fulmars** were already back at their breeding ledges at Ceann a' Mhara, Tiree by 21st Jan (JB).

Wildfowl

An apparent female **Redhead** was first spotted with Pochards on Loch Bhasapol, Tiree on 14th Dec. Always a difficult bird to identify with certainty, partly because the possibility of hybrids has to be eliminated. Fortunately it settled for a prolonged stay. It later gave closer views and John Bowler managed to take many photographs. Other birders have agreed with the identification and it seems likely that it may be the same individual that was seen on Barra in 2003/2004. If accepted this will be yet another Tiree addition to the Argyll list, which currently stands at 328 species. It was still present on 19th Feb 2006 (John Bowler, also see photo on page 7).

A female/juv **Lesser Scaup** seen at Loch Leathan (nr Lochgilphead) and photographed in difficult conditions by Jim Dickson on 18th/19th Dec will, if confirmed, be only the second record of the species for Argyll. It seems there may have been a small influx of this species to Britain at that time.

Whooper Swans continued to be widely reported in Nov and Dec and records included nine flying S over Add Estuary on 1st Nov (JD). On 3rd Nov, six were at Tayinloan, eight at West Coast Salmon (Katie Pendreigh) and 7 on the usually empty Loch Restil, near The Rest and Be Thankful (Sue Furness). On 9th Nov, 213 (incl. 72

juvs) were on Tiree (JB), 3 at Balvicar, Seil Island on 21st Nov (Richard Wesley), 57 during the WeBS count on Loch Sween on 4th Dec (PD/TC) and eight at the head of Loch Creran on 20th Dec (Robin Harvey). On 6th Dec, 146 were still present on Tiree on (JB).

A flock of 310 **Barnacle Geese** were standing on the sand in outer Loch Add with a single female **Pintail** on 7th Nov (Bill Allan), and an influx of **Barnacle Geese** on Coll produced a record count of 1,930 birds at the RSPB reserve on 23rd Nov (SW). A single **Snow Goose** was with flock of 214 **Greylag Geese** on the sea between Craobh Haven and Arduaine on 19th Nov (Bill Allan) and 256 **Greylag Geese** with at least 49 **Greater Canada Geese** were counted in fields near Barsloisnoch Farm (Moine Mhor) on the same day (PD). A flock of 109 **Canada Geese** at Portnacroish, North Argyll on 9th Dec included a largely white partial-albino bird and four **Pink-footed Geese** were with flock of 70 **Greylag Geese** at the mouth of Loch Etive nr Connel on 3rd Jan (Bill Allan).

All island goose counts found a high count of 3,474 **Barnacle Geese** but a low count of only 693 **Greenland White-fronted Geese** on Tiree on 26th Jan as well as a single **Pink-footed Goose**, two **Light-bellied Brent Geese** (JB), 673 **Greenland White-fronted Geese**, 787 **Greylags** and 1,867 **Barnacle Geese**, as well as 34 **Snow Geese** on Coll on 27th Jan (SW).

Totals of 35 **Shelducks**, 109 **Wigeon**, 70 **Teal**, 53 **Common Goldeneyes** and 42 **Red-breasted Mergansers** in Loch Sween during WeBS count on 14th Jan (PD/TC). Other counts of **Wigeon** included 75 at Dunstaffnage on 24th Jan (Robin Harvey) and 67 at the head of Loch Striven on 30th Jan (TC). On 10th Nov the almost expected annual **Green-winged Teal** turned up at Loch Gruinart (Malcolm Ogilvie) and a total of 104 **Eurasian Teal** were counted on Loch Fyne off Balliemore (nr Otter Ferry) with two **Shelduck** on 28th Dec (Tom Callan). Totals of 33 **Shovelers**, 4 **Pintails** and 119 **Whooper Swans** found on freshwater lochs during the WeBS count on Tiree on 11th Jan (JB).

Twelve **Common Pochards** on Loch na Druimnean (nr Kilmelford), incl nine adult males, on 22nd Jan were a good number for Argyll (Bill Allan) and 14 **Common Pochards** were on Loch a' Phuill, Tiree on 3rd Dec (JB). Five **Velvet Scoters**, four **Common Scoters**, two **Long-tailed Ducks** and 30 **Black Guillemots** in winter plumage were off Ronachan Point on 17th Nov (Bill Allan/Jim Dickson). The **Common Goldeneye** flock on Loch Fyne, off Furnace, had built up to 166 birds by 3rd Nov and by the afternoon of 18th Nov had

peaked at 237 (Janet Simpson). The 149 **Goldeneyes** found in Loch Caolisport on 8th Dec had increased to 195 by 15th Jan (JD) and 56 **Goldeneyes** on the sea off the promenade at Dunoon on 2nd Jan was a good count for this area (Andrew Webster).

A female **Greater Scaup** was in with 71 **Tufted Ducks** and a Pochard on Loch Bhasapol, Tiree on 14th Dec (JB) and another female **Greater Scaup** was on Luachrach Loch, Oban with 6 **Tufted Ducks** on 2nd Jan a (Bill Allan). A male **Long-tailed Duck** in winter plumage was at the head of Loch Feochan also on 3rd Nov (Bill Allan) and 12 **Long-tailed Ducks** were in Hough Bay, Tiree on 6th Jan (JB).

Raptors to Gamebirds

Good views were had of a male **Northern Goshawk** nr Loch Coille-Bharr, Knapdale on 8th Jan. If accepted this will be our first definite record for this species since 1993! (Dave & Pat Batty). **White-tailed Eagles** were reported over the Sound of Shuna, North Argyll on 26th Dec (Alan Reid), near Ardbeg, Islay (an untagged bird) on 25th Jan (Andy Schofield) and on Coll a juvenile with a red E wing tag was sighted on 27th Jan (Simon Wellock).

There have been plenty of records of **Hen Harriers** this winter including: a female in the Add Estuary on 1st Nov (JD), males at Loch Crinan on 20th Nov and Degnish Peninsula (Loch Melfort) on 22nd Nov (Bill Allan), female at Tayinloan on 26th Nov (Katie Pendreigh), 2 or 3 on Tiree during wader count on 6th Dec (JB), a ringtail being mobbed by Hooded Crows nr Otter Ferry spit on 21st Dec and another over Tom's garden at Otter Ferry on 10th Jan (TC), male and female hunting close to Katie's garden also on 10th Jan (Katie Pendreigh), male hunting in Glen Euchar (nr Oban) on 22nd Jan (Bill Allan), a ringtail hunting near loch in Glen Lonan (nr Taynuilt) on 25th Jan (PD) and three ringtails on Tiree on 26th Jan (JB).

A **Common Buzzard** found in a week state in a garden at Slockavullin (nr Lochgilphead) on 16th Jan died later, apparently from starvation. It was found to have both a BTO metal ring and a pale green plastic Darvic ringed. It later transpired that the bird had been ringed as a chick close to Aberfoyle village (east of Loch Lomond) on 7th Jun 2005. A **Golden Eagle** was seen soaring over trees to the north of Achahoish, Knapdale on 9th Jan (Rob Baker).

Three **Common Kestrels** were found on Tiree during the goose count on 16th Nov (JB), two were at Loch na Cille (Loch Sween) on 4th Dec (PD/TC). A **Merlin** was seen at Tayinloan on 3rd Nov (Katie Pendreigh), a female hunting along the forest edge in Glen Lonan on 9th Nov was seen again in that area on 7th Jan in freezing conditions (PD), five **Merlins** were found on Tiree during the goose count on 16th Nov (JB) and one was hunting along the shore at Lephinmore (Loch Fyne) Cowal on 12th Jan (TC). A female **Peregrine Falcon** was seen swooping at Buzzard and dislodging a few feathers at Lagannmore (nr. Kilninver), Oban on 9th Nov (Bill Allan).

We normally get very few mainland records of **Water Rails** but two were found in one week in Nov. One brought in dead by a cat at Kilmory, Lochgilphead (Mike & Celia Gregory) and the second, happily, alive and kicking at Otter Ferry on 6th Nov (Tom Callan). Another **Water Rail** was seen in a garden in Tobermory, Mull on 28th Nov (Alan Spellman). **Moorhens** were seen at Bellanoch, Lochan Ceann a' Choin (Loch Awe) and Kilmartin Burn, all Mid-Argyll and all on 16th Jan (Jim Dickson).

Waders

Late and very indirect reports from Gruinart Floods, Islay of a **White-rumped Sandpiper** on 17th Oct and a **Long-billed Dowitcher** on 28th Oct! If anyone has further details of these records please con-

tact Jim Dickson at:

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At least 400 **Oystercatchers** were with 73 **Curlews** at 'Stinky Hole' Campbeltown Loch on 21st Dec (PD). Six **Purple Sandpipers** with 14 **Ringed Plovers** on the shore near Kirm coal pier, Dunoon on 6th Nov. A **very pale (leucistic) Common Redshank** has also been seen in the area in the company of normally plumaged birds. A leucistic individual (possibly the same bird!) has been regularly reported in winter in exactly the same locality since at least 1999 (Frances Lynn).

Waders recorded during WeBS count at Loch Sween on 13th Nov included 21 **Northern Lapwings**, two **European Golden Plovers**, one **Grey Plover**, 41 **Curlews**, 22 **Common Redshanks** and a single **Greenshank** as well as four **Common Snipe** roosting together on the shore of Loch na Cille (PD/TC). Most of the **European Golden Plovers** were on Tiree though, with an estimated 2-3,000 on the island on the same day. By 16th Nov there were an estimated 4,900 on the island, a high number even for Tiree (JB). At least 60 **Northern Lapwings** were in fields near Barsloisnoch Farm (Moine Mhor) on 19th Nov (PD). All island counts on Tiree found 3,740 **European Golden Plovers** and 2,270 **Northern Lapwings** on 6th Dec and 2,815 **Northern Lapwings** and 3,090 **European Golden Plovers** on Tiree on 26th Jan (JB)

A flock of 46 **Dunlin** were in the Add Estuary with 10 or more **Redshank** on 31st Dec (PD). A single **Knot** was in with 198 **Dunlin** and 146 **Ringed Plovers** at Sorobaidh Bay, Tiree on 13th Dec (JB). An impressive count of 132 **Purple Sandpipers** at Hough Bay (but no colour ringed birds) on 3rd Jan as well as 41 **Redshank** (John Bowler).

A count of flushed **Snipe** around the Canal Loch on Coll on 4th Dec came up with 46 **Common Snipe** and 8 **Jack Snipe** (SW). At least six **Woodcock** flushed from a 300m stretch of the Drimvire road across Moine Mhor, Mid-Argyll at dusk on 7th Dec. (JD) and six were flushed from the road between Otter Ferry and Largiemore, Cowal after dark on 12th Jan (TC).

Single wintering **Greenshank** have been reported from Loch Sween on 13th Nov, Traigh Bough, Tiree on 2nd Dec (JB), Loch Don, Mull on 7th Jan (photographed by Alan Spellman) and at the head of Loch Creran on 28th Jan (Robin Harvey).

Two **Grey Plovers** at Loch Gilp on 31st Jan (one has been seen there most of the winter) as well as 13 **Bar-tailed Godwits** and two **Knot** (Jim Dickson). Two **Purple Sandpipers** and 30 **Turnstones** found in Loch Caolisport on 15th Jan (JD). The gathering of **Turnstones** on the spit at Otter Ferry numbered 92 on the morning of 9th Jan (TC). A count of 39 **Turnstones**

Knot and Bar-tailed Godwits (Jim Dickson)



on the shore in Oban harbour on 26th Jan was the highest count at that stage of the winter (Stuart Gibson).

Skuas (see also under Divers to Wildfowl) to Woodpeckers

It has been a good winter for **Common Kingfishers** in Argyll, although the records may only relate to relatively few individuals. There was a late report of one seen at the mouth of Glenlussa Water (nr. Peninver), Kintyre between 1st and 6th Sep. (Steve Walker). Two were reported near the Holy Loch marina on 5th Nov (per Bill Allan) and one was flying over the Crinan Canal north of Oakfield Bridge on the same day (Sheila Finlay per Ron Bowe). Possibly the same bird was seen fishing at the head of Loch Gilp was seen later resting on a Japanese Knotweed branch on the banks of the burn on 23rd Nov (Colin McFarlane). Presumably the same bird was seen again at the head of Loch Gilp on 30th Nov (PD) and 16th Jan (JD). One was seen at Aros Park, Mull on 28th Nov (per Alan Spellman) and another was at Lochdon, Mull on 3rd Dec and was seen there again during Jan (Alan Spellman). Undoubtedly, the most unexpected **Kingfisher** sighting was the bird seen flying along the Alt Mor burn from Broadhills towards Garden House, Coll on 27th Jan. The only previous sighting on Coll or Tiree was a bird shot on Coll on 22nd July 1903!

Apparently there has been something of an influx of North American **Laughing Gulls** into Britain this winter and Argyll has not missed out! An adult gave excellent views at Traigh Bhagh, Tiree on the afternoon of 7th Nov (John Bowler/Roger Broad). This was only the third record for Argyll; the previous examples were on Islay (1974) and Coll (1998).

On the following day (8th Nov) an adult **Laughing Gull** was found at Machair Bay, Islay—together with a **Ring-billed Gull**! (Tom Lowe per Malcolm Ogilvie). The Laughing Gull was seen again at Loch Gorm on 16th Nov and the same or another (both were adults) was at Port Ellen on the same day (Malcolm Ogilvie). Then on 12th Jan yet another adult **Laughing Gull** was photographed on the green (nr the new swimming pool) in Campbeltown. It had been around for a few days and was initially identified as Franklin's Gull (Rab Morton/Jim Dickson). It was present until at least 16th Jan (Jim Dickson).

An adult **Mediterranean Gull** found and photographed at lunch-time at the head of Loch Gilp during very wet weather on 14th Nov is the first record of the species for this area of Argyll (Jim Dickson). On 14th Jan, the 2nd winter **Ring-billed Gull** which had first been reported on 12th September 2005 re-appeared in Oban and was seen



Adult Laughing Gull at Campbeltown
(Jim Dickson)

regularly thereafter during Jan, often at a roost on the George Street foreshore. On 15th Jan it was joined by an adult **Ring-billed Gull** (Stuart Gibson). Both birds have subsequently been seen both in Oban and elsewhere (Jim Dickson/Robin Harvey *et al.*).

Following the gales of 13th/14th Jan a large movement of seabirds flew S out of Loch Fyne on 15th Jan, including 600+ **Kittiwakes** and at least 200 **auks** (mainly **Razorbills**) in ½ hour (JD). A first winter **Iceland Gull** at Aird, Tiree on 10th Dec was the first one reported so far this winter (JB).

A 1st winter **Sandwich Tern** has been seen on several occasions between 6th and 9th Dec landing on a fishing boat in Shuna Sound (nr. Seil Island), Mid-Argyll. This is only our second winter record following the bird seen with the Forster's Tern in Oban harbour in Jan 2003 (Billy McInnes per Richard Wesley).

An unusual gathering of about 380 **Razorbills** in Loch Fyne off Otter Ferry on 31st Dec had all disappeared by the following day (TC). A 'fairly' freshly dead **Little Auk** was found at Sorobaidh Bay, Tiree on 23rd Nov (JB).

A single **Woodpigeon** at Heylipol on 26th of the month was the first ever January record for Tiree (JB). One lucky birder had good views of a **Green Woodpecker** flying up into a tree in Benmore Gardens, Dunoon on 26th Nov (Andrew Webster) and one was heard calling at the same location on 3rd December (Steve Petty). A **Common Swift** watched for half an hour at Colintraive, Cowal on 3rd Nov. *This is the latest ever Swift record for Argyll* (Danielle Clark/Graham Clark).

Passerines

On 4th Nov a very late juv **Barn Swallow** seen during a warm day at Keills (Loch Sween) when a Red Admiral butterfly was also on the wing (Bill Alan). Flighty and

vocal group of 28 **Meadow Pipits** appeared to be new arrivals on Tiree on 25th Jan (normally only seen in ones and twos on the island during winter) (John Bowler).

Two **Waxwings** seen at RSPB Loch Gruinart on 14th Nov were still present on 18th Nov. (Malcolm Ogilvie) and a single **Waxwing** was in a garden at Port Ellen, Islay on 15th Nov (Andy Schofield per Jim Dickson). A single **Waxwing** perched on tree beside the Black Lynn burn in Oban on the afternoon of 1st Dec. It was seen again, off Soroba Road, Oban, on 3rd Dec (Stuart Gibson). Two **Waxwings** present on rose-hips in a garden at Balinakill, Clachan, Kintyre on 7th Dec with three there on 11th Dec (David Griffiths). There have been very few reports of Waxwings this autumn/winter—and mostly in ones and twos.

A male **Northern Wheatear** was in the Machrihanish Dunes on 1st Nov (Blair Urquhart) and another was at Tayinloan on 3rd Nov (Katie Pendreigh). A late **Northern Wheatear** was at Loch an Eilein, Tiree on 5th Nov. (JB) and a **Greenland Wheatear** was at Tayinloan on the same day (Rab Morton).

A **Ring Ouzel** found and photographed at the laboratory at Dunstaffnage (nr Oban) on 25th Nov was probably a 1st winter male. This is the latest autumn record of this species in Argyll (although there was a winter record in 1998/1999) (Robin Harvey).

A minimum of 3,650 **Redwings** around Moine Mhor on 1st Nov included flocks of 1,150, 1,000, 900 and 600 (JD) and 400 Redwings were seen with a few Fieldfares. Flocks of **Fieldfares** passing through Minard early morning (25+ and 50+) and 60+ stopped to feed on cotoneaster berries late afternoon of 4th Nov (PD). Between Drimvore and Dunadd (Moine Mhor) there were 280 **Fieldfares** on 19th Nov—the most reported at one place this

autumn! (JD). Mixed flock off approx. 85 **Fieldfares** and 15 **Redwings** at Kilbride Far, south of Millhouse, Cowal on 13th Dec (TC) and another flock of 50 or more **Redwings**, this time in field near the golf course at Inveraray on 15th Dec. (PD). A mixed thrush flock of 240 birds between Millhouse, Cowal and Kilbride farm on 28th Dec comprised ca 210 **Redwings** and 30 **Fieldfares**, and 104 **Jackdaws** were counted passing through Otter Ferry on the same day (TC). The pattern of appearance of **Redwings** and **Fieldfares** has been unusual this winter. Firstly Redwings have by far outnumbered Fieldfares—whereas the reverse is usually the case. And both species (but especially Redwings) have been regularly reported throughout the winter without the usual gap in mid-winter. Any suggestions as to why this might be would be welcomed. **Blackbirds** have been unusually numerous this autumn/winter and almost ubiquitous, many being present in non-prime habitats. At least 20 seen during WeBS count on Loch Sween on 4th Dec. (PD/TC).

Two 'northern' **Chiffchaffs** were seen at Vaul, Tiree on 23rd Nov, one of which was showing characteristics of the 'Siberian'

race *tristis* (JB). A *tristis* **Chiffchaff** was seen fly catching from silage bales at Hynish, Tiree on 6th Dec (JB). A very green *abietinus* type **Chiffchaff** seen in a garden at Heylipol on 27th Jan was the first ever January record for Tiree (JB). Curiously another *abietinus* type **Chiffchaff** was found at Uig, Coll on the same day (SW).

A **Firecrest** was seen at Laganbuidhe Farm, Dalmally, North Argyll on 22nd Dec. Amazingly another of these rare visitors to Argyll was seen very nearby, on 30th Dec. 1999 (Alan Gray). Approx. 1,000 **Common Starlings** were at Heylipol, Tiree on 31st Dec (JB).

Both a male and a female **Brambling** were seen in a garden in Dunoon on 17th Nov (George Newall). A **Goldfinch** was at Mannal and two **Snow Buntings** on Beinn Hough on 26th Jan (JB). A flock of 14 **Bullfinches** were seen in conifer forestry at an altitude of over 250m near Glendaruel, Cowal on 8th Jan (TC). Three **Mealy (Common) Redpolls** were reported at Totronald, Coll on 27th Nov (SW).

Twelve **Snow Buntings** at Upper Killeyan on Oa, Islay (Andy Schofield per Jim

Dickson) and 5 **Snow Buntings** flying over Ruaig, Tiree (JB) all on 16th Nov. John Bowler came across a **Lapland Bunting** at Salum during the goose count on Tiree on 5th Dec as well as 5 **Snow Buntings** at Ard Ear, 4 **Snow Buntings** at Balephetrish Hill and a **Dunnock** (rare on Tiree) at Kirkapol. A group of three **Snow Buntings** was seen in Glen Lonan (nr Taynuilt) on 6th Dec (PD). Three **Lapland Buntings** and 4 **Snow Buntings** were at Smaull, Islay and 48 **Snow Buntings** were at Upper Killeyan on the Oa on 8th Dec. (Andy Schofield).

A male **Brambling** at Upper Killeyan, Islay and up to 70 **Snow Buntings** on stubbles in this general area on 25th Jan (Andy Schofield). A pair of **Yellowhammers** were unusual visitors to a garden at Tayinloan on 25th Jan (Katie Pendreigh).

Paul Daw

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BTO bird survey techniques workshops—Scotland 2006

Background

The course is designed to help people learn about and develop confidence in the main methods used to survey birds in differing habitats and situations. As well as being very informative, our course is relaxed, enjoyable (we hope) and questions and discussions are encouraged at any point. The course consist of useful and informative indoor sessions alternating with practical outdoor sessions about each technique in turn.

Content

The course start with an introduction to the whole subject of why we survey birds and how surveying can be used to show population levels and trends, to find out about habitat associations and why habitat recording is so important. We also look at some of the main 'rules' to consider when surveying birds. This is followed by our first and most simple method—point counts. We look at how you carry out a point count, but also when they are of use and when they are perhaps not the best method to choose. Our first practical involves having a go at two point counts in two differing habitats.

Back indoors, and we move onto line tran-



sects, and use the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey as our basis for this section. We concentrate on how to record the birds and just as importantly how to record the habitat. Out in the field we practice what we have just learned, and attempt several sections of a transect recording both birds and habitat as we go—this usually creates much discussion!

Finally, we return to the classroom to learn about mapping, first developed for the Common Birds Census, but often used in adapted forms for other surveys. Again, the theory is backed up with a practical,

and we will have a go at mapping an area around the venue.

Other Information

Due to the partially outdoor nature of the course we strongly recommend suitable waterproof clothing, and stout shoes or boots. To get the most from the course, we recommend that you have at least a basic knowledge of most of the common bird species by sight and, preferably, by song as well. The course is not suitable for complete beginners to bird-watching.

If you would like to book a place on either of the two courses in 2006 (Table) please contact me.

Rebecca Cranston (BTO Scotland)

E-mail: rebecca.cranston@bto.org

Scottish training course days in 2006

Location	Venue	Date
Stirling	University of Stirling	Sun 23 April
Inverness	Forestry Commission, Inverness	Sat 6 May

Red Kite population expands across Scotland

Red Kites in Scotland had their best breeding season in 2005 since RSPB Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) reintroduced them back to the wild in a joint programme in 1989.

RSPB Scotland believes that the rise in both the number of productive breeding pairs, together with the total number of young fledged, means that this iconic species is now well on the way to spreading right across the country—eventually linking up all the reintroduction sites to expand fully across their former range.

In general, the Scottish Red Kite population experienced mixed fortunes in the different core population areas.

In the north of Scotland there has been an increase from 35 breeding pairs producing 80 young in 2004 to 39 pairs producing 85 young last year.

The last time there were this number of breeding pairs of Red Kites in Scotland would have probably been in the early 1800s. In central Scotland, the number of breeding pairs increased from 22 to 25 pairs, but the productivity of the birds in this location was down from 32 young fledged in 2004 to 28 last year. Raptor experts at RSPB Scotland believe that the slight drop in the number of young produced was due to the freezing weather experienced in this area in late March and

early April of 2005 combined with low prey availability.

Voies in particular appeared to have been in short supply. It is in March and early April when adult Red Kites begin to come into reproductive condition, and poor external physical factors at this time can influence the season's breeding performance.

However, to the delight of conservationists, a huge advance for the species in Dumfries and Galloway offset the poor success of Red Kites in central Scotland. In 2004, the area hosted just three breeding pairs that fledged three young. Last year the number of breeding pairs had jumped to 12, with 18 young fledged.

Overall, 2005 recorded 76 pairs of Red Kites in Scotland producing 131 young compared to 60 pairs producing 115 young in 2004. The last time there were this number of breeding pairs of Red Kites in Scotland would have probably been in the early 1800s.

Remarkably, 2005 also saw a migratory Black Kite set up home in Scotland on a permanent basis. The species—a close relative of the Red Kite—rarely visits Britain in the summer months as a vagrant, but is generally restricted as a breeding bird to more southerly and eastern areas of Europe. The Black Kite win-

ters mainly in sub-Saharan Africa.

RSPB Scotland staff were astonished to observe this bird pairing up and building a nest with one of the Scottish Red Kites, although they failed to lay eggs and produce any young. Whilst they are two distinct species, it is possible for Red and Black Kites to successfully breed and raise hybrid chicks. It is believed that this is the first time that such an attempt at interbreeding between the two species has been recorded in the UK.

Duncan Orr Ewing, the Head of Land Use Policy at RSPB Scotland said, 'The Scottish Red Kite reintroduction has been very successful and has captured the public's imagination. After several years concern about the impacts of human persecution, it is gratifying to now see species increasing its population at all three Scottish reintroduction sites.'

He added, 'Sixteen years ago, Red Kites were brought back to Scotland and there are now 76 breeding pairs which are gradually managing to expand their range across the country. We look forward to Red Kites continuing to re-colonise all areas of their former territory in the coming years to make the wonderful spectacle of one of our most bewitching birds of prey readily accessible for all the population of Scotland.'

Continued on back page

Programme for the ABC's Spring Meeting—Saturday 11th March 2006 Royal Marine Hotel, Hunter's Quay, Dunoon

0930	Doors open, coffee and tea
1000-1010	Welcome and introduction — <i>David Wood</i>
1010-1020	Recent bird sightings — <i>Paul Daw, Chairman of the Argyll Bird Club</i>
1020-1050	The Birds of Scotland: a new book — <i>Ron Forrester, SOC</i>
1050-1120	Coffee/tea
1120-1200	A wild goose chase to Iceland — <i>Alan Lauder, RSPB</i>
1200-1230	Stranded off Sanda! — <i>David Palmar</i>
1230-1400	Lunch (available in the hotel)
1400-1445	Galapagos — <i>Bob Furness, University of Glasgow</i>
1445-1515	Conserving Argyll's natural and cultural heritage — <i>Marina Smith, Forestry Commission</i>
1515-1545	Coffee/tea
1545-1630	Wrangle Island: gem of the arctic — <i>Brian Little, Northumbrian Ringing Group</i>
1630-1645	Raffle and end of meeting

Articles for the next issue of *The Eider* should with the Editor before the 25th May 2006 (see the box opposite for more information)

Rhys Bullman, Ornithologist at Scottish Natural Heritage said, 'Red Kites used to be so numerous that they once commonly scavenged in the streets of our cities, but after years of persecution this majestic bird was forced to the very edge of extinction. The dedicated re-introduction programme has really changed the fortune of this bird in Scotland and it is excellent news that their population continues to rise and expand throughout the country.'

Source: RSPB Scotland, 24 January 2006



Red Kite at nest (RSPB Images)

Officials and Committee of the Argyll Bird Club (2005/2006)

Chairman: David Wood, Drover's House, Bellanoch, Lochgilphead, Argyll PA31 8SN (phone 01546 830272)

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

Secretary: Katie Pendreigh, The Whins, Ferry Road, Tayinloan, Argyll PA29 6XQ (Tel: 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 (Killearn), Tom Callan (Otter Ferry), Danielle Clark-De Bisschop (Colintraive), Paul Daw (Minard), Mike Gear (Appin), Ian Hopkins (Bute) and Steve Petty (Tighnabruaich)

Editor of the Argyll Bird Report: Simon Wellock, Warden RSPB Coll Reserve, Totronald, Isle of Coll, Argyll PA78 6TB (phone 01879 230301)

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

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

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).