

March 2009
Number 88

The Eider

Argyll seabirds in 2008

Winter birding on Tiree
Bird Atlas update



It was a record autumn for Waxwings in Argyll —this photo was taken in the editor's garden in Kames, Cowal on 18 November ©Steve Petty

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

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Inside this issue

Editorial	2
Argyll Bird Report	2
Field trips	3
Indoor meetings	3
Winter birding on Tiree	4-5
Bird Atlas update	6-7
Reporting rare birds	8-9
Help with surveys	10
Garden Oystercatcher	11
Tristan da Cunha	12-15
ABC Questionnaire	15
Argyll seabirds in 2008	16-18
Nest Record Scheme	19-21
Recent reports	22-27
About the ABC	28



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Editorial

There are two important changes that you should be aware of:

The Eider

This is the last issue I will edit and produce. I have thoroughly enjoyed developing the newsletter to its present form, but after seven years, it's time for some new ideas. I would like to thank the many contributors of articles and photographs, who have made the *Eider* the success it is today, and I hope you will continue to support the new editor.

The good news is that we do have a new editor. I've been trying to ease out of the job for the last six months and until now no one had shown any interest in taking over. Fortunately, Mark Williamson from Kilberry has recently agreed to take over editing and producing the *Eider*. Mark has worked as a Librarian and is familiar with the software used to produce the newsletter. So can you please ensure that any contributions for the June issue are sent to Mark before 24th May. His contact details are at the top of this page, and are also on the back page.

The club's website

I hope you have noticed that the club's website has been given a substantial facelift. This is the result of Danielle Clark's hard work over Christmas. We apologise for the website being unavailable for a short period towards the end of 2008. If you want anything included on the website, including photographs in the 'recent photos' section, please contact Danielle (Phone: 01700 841284. E-mail: dany@condorjourneys-adventures.com). The website now includes a forum section where anyone can express their views on a range of topics relevant to the club. You can also get club news (ie when the latest bird report has been updated by Paul, programmes for indoor meetings, news about field trips etc) by rss feed or email. Register online if you want to subscribe, it's very quick!

Argyll Bird Report for 2004-2005

The Argyll Bird Report: Volume 20, with systematic list for the years 2004—2005. Edited by Tom Callan, assisted by Paul Daw. Systematic list by Paul Daw, assisted by Bob Furness (seabirds) and Tom Callan. ISSN 1363-4386. 153 pages, 14 colour photos.

The latest ABR was published towards the end of 2008. All ABC members should now have a copy. Additional reports can be obtained from Bob Furness, The Cnoc, Tarbet, Arrochar, Dumbartonshire G83 7DG. The price is £6 (£5 plus £1 for postage), please make cheques payable to the 'Argyll Bird Club'.

Argyll Bird Report

Volume 20
with Systematic List for the years

2004 - 2005



Field trip in 2009

Further details about both trips below were given in the December 2008 *Eider*.

Isle of Bute—Saturday 7 March

Meet at Colintrave at 09.45hrs to catch the 10.00hrs ferry to Rhubodach. I can hire a 16-seater mini-bus for around £45 plus fuel, to save car/ferry costs of £10.05 (R) + £1.85 (R) for each driver/passenger. However, bring your own transport if preferred. Let me know by 18.00hrs on Friday 6 March at the latest. If the forecast is really bad we may be able to postpone till the following Saturday.

Ian Hopkins

Tel: 01700 504042. Mob: 0770 2123170

E-mail: ian@hopkins0079.freeseve.co.uk

Sound of Gigha—4 April

Meet at the car park at Ronachan Point just off the A83 (grid reference NR741548) at 10.00hrs. We will take the ferry to Gigha and break for lunch there. Snacks can be ordered at the hotel on the island. Will participants please contact me, at the latest on the evening before (Friday 3rd April), so that I can confirm the trip will go ahead and to give me some idea of how many people to expect. If the weather forecast is really atrocious it may be possible to postpone until the following Saturday.

Paul Daw

Tel: 01546 886260. E-mail: monedula@globalnet.co.uk

[Gigha Hotel. Tel: 01583 505254]

ABC indoor meetings 2009

Spring Meeting 2009

Friday 24-Sunday 26th April

A weekend meeting on Islay, based at the Islay Natural History Centre, Port Charlotte (INHC).

<http://www.islaywildlife.freeseve.co.uk/>

Information about this meeting has been given in previous issues of the *Eider*. Participants should arrive on Islay on Friday.

There will be bird watching sessions on Saturday and Sunday mornings (to whet your appetite, see Malcolm Ogilvie's article about Islay on pages 8-10 of the December 2008 *Eider*), with an indoor meeting on Saturday afternoon in the INHC. The programme for the latter is given opposite.

Just over 50 members have shown an interest in this venture, and some plan to make the trip into a longer holiday. A list of accommodation around Port Charlotte (Hotels, Bed and Breakfast, Youth Hostel etc.) is available from me.

Arrangements have been made for a group meal at the Port Charlotte Hotel on the Saturday night. This is now fully booked.

If you would like to go on this trip, please let me know as soon as possible, so that you can be kept up to date with developments, including details about ferry times, field trips etc.

Steve Petty

E-mail: stevepetty@btinternet.com

Phone: 01700 811235

Spring Meeting on Islay Programme for the indoor session on Sat 25th April 2009

Time	Topic
13.10-13.20	Introduction <i>Chairman of the Argyll Bird Club</i>
13.20-13.30	Introduction to the Islay Natural History Trust <i>Malcolm Ogilvie</i>
13.30-13.45	Recent bird sightings <i>Paul Daw, Argyll Bird Recorder</i>
13.45-14.30	Islay wildlife <i>George Jackson</i>
14.30-15.15	RSPB reserves on Islay <i>James Howe</i>
15.15-16.00	Tea/coffee
16.00-16.45	<i>The social life of the Chough</i> <i>Eric Bignal and Maria Bogdonova</i>
16.45-17.30	Geese on Islay <i>Malcolm Ogilvie</i>

Autumn Meeting 2009

Saturday 7th November

Cairnbaan Hotel near Lochgilphead

<http://www.cairnbaan.com/>

We hope to have the programme finalised in time for the June *Eider* in 2009.

Winter birding on Tiree



Balephuill croftlands with Beinn Hough beyond ©John Bowler

The delights of birding on Tiree for its wide selection of breeding birds, including the UK's largest Corncrake population, have long been known, whilst the island is increasingly being recognised as a hotspot for migrant birds in both spring and autumn (e.g. Eider 87:12-13). However, unlike neighbouring Islay, which has built up a solid reputation for the quality of its winter bird-watching (see Eider 87: 8-10), Tiree receives almost no visiting birdwatchers during the winter months.

A seasoned RSPB members group from Worcestershire risked coming out to Tiree for a week in late January 2008 and afterwards described it as the best winter birdwatching they had ever experienced in Britain, so the island is certainly worthy of more scrutiny at such times. The type of weather the group faced during its stay, ranged from sunny calm conditions to gale-force storms, which all apparently added to the experience! Although the flat nature of Tiree can render it very windy at times, the lack of hills means that bad weather tends to pass through rather quickly. The island also has the reputation of being the sunniest place in Scotland, with some glorious still sunny days even in mid-winter, whilst bathed in the warming Gulf Stream, air temperatures rarely drop below freezing. The absence of frost in the grasslands and the lack of ice on the lochs means that large numbers of birds can continue to feed here throughout the winter and it is home to nationally and internationally important wintering numbers of waders and wildfowl.

Bird-wise the thing that struck home most to the visiting group was the sheer abundance of birds. Used to the low bird densities of the intensively managed lowlands, they were taken aback by the flocks of hundreds of **Starlings**, **Lapwings** and **Golden Plovers** that frequent the rich grasslands, as well as the island's unusual inland feeding **Turnstone** flocks. In amongst these groups they found smaller numbers of **Curlew**, **Rock Doves** and **Red-wings**, whilst weedy tracks and field-edges held flighty groups of **Twite** and **Skylark**, plus the odd **Reed Bunting**

and **Stonechat**.

Like Islay, the island provides spectacular goose-watching with up to 3,500 **Greenland Barnacle Geese**, 800 **Greenland White-fronts** and 4,000 **Greylags** and these are always worth checking for other species such as **Pink-footed Goose**, **Canada Goose** and **Pale-bellied Brent** which are all regular in small numbers. The rich machair lochs host up to 150 wintering **Whooper Swans** plus a wide selection of diving and dabbling ducks including small numbers of scarcer species such as **Pintail**, **Shoveler**, **Pochard** and the odd **Scaup**. Each winter brings the occasional rarer species such as **Lesser Scaup** and **American Wigeon**, whilst **Ring-necked Ducks** have wintered in two out of the last three winters. Loch Bhasapol is home to the odd **Little Grebe** and the last regular wintering **Coot** flock in Argyll, whilst the wetter marshes host **Water Rails** and **Jack Snipe**, as well as huge numbers of **Common Snipe** and the odd **Woodcock**.

The mix of sandy and rocky beaches, with abundant banks of storm-driven seaweed, provide perfect wintering grounds for large numbers of shorebirds. Flocks of hundreds of **Sanderling**, **Ringed Plover**, **Turnstone** and **Dunlin** haunt the strands, together with smaller groups of **Purple Sandpiper**, **Redshank**, **Oystercatcher** and **Curlew**. Winter is not the best time to look for scarcer waders but a few **Bar-tailed Godwits**, **Grey Plovers** and **Knot** are present each winter, and oddities such as **Curlew Sandpiper**, **Little Stint**, **Black-tailed Godwit** and **Greenshank** have all occurred in recent winters.

Offshore, there are **Great Northern** and **Red-throated Divers** in all the bays, hundreds of feeding **Shags**, regular **Red-breasted Mergansers** and **Shelduck** and occasional **Black Guillemots**, **Common Scoters**, **Gannets** and **Fulmars**. Hough Bay is home to a wintering flock of **Long-tailed Ducks**, which have been joined by a long-staying **Surf Scoter** for the last two winters. Gulls abound all over the island and provide endless fascination. **Com-**



Top left: Pale-bellied Brent with Barnacle Geese at Ruaig, February 2008.

Top right: First-winter Glaucous Gull at Hough Bay, February 2008

Bottom left: Sanderling at Balephetrish Bay, February 2008.

All photos ©John Bowler

mon and **Herring Gulls** predominate, with **Great Black-backs** more focussed on the Grey Seal nurseries along the west coast. **Glaucous** and **Iceland Gulls** appear every winter, **Ring-billed Gulls** turn up from time to time, whilst winter 2007 saw the first **American Herring Gulls** for Argyll on the island. Large gull flocks are always worth checking if only to spot the odd wintering **Black-headed Gull** or the first returning **Lesser Black-back** of the spring.

Passerines are in shorter supply in winter but still hold much of interest. **Rock Pipits** are numerous along the shore and can be joined by groups of **Snow Bunting** and **Twite**, as well as the odd wintering **Pied Wagtail** and **Meadow Pipit**. The island's gardens host good numbers of wintering **Robins** and **Wrens**, plus smaller numbers of **Greenfinches**, **Goldfinches** and **Chaffinches**, whilst **Blackbirds**, **Redwings**, **Song Thrushes** and the odd **Fieldfares** feed around the crofts. As always on an island however, surprises can occur. The visiting RSPB group located a fine male **Black Redstart** by the pier at Scarinish as they waited for the ferry, whilst **Chiffchaffs** (including *tristis* race birds) and **Blackcaps** turn up most

winters and **Waxwings**, **Common Redpolls** and **Bramblings** often pass though in November.

The uninterrupted horizons provide ideal conditions for raptor watching and the high densities of wintering birds attract good numbers of **Merlin**, **Hen Harrier**, **Sparrowhawk** and **Kestrel**, which join forces with the resident **Buzzards** and **Peregrines**. **White-tailed Eagles** occasionally wander across from Mull on still winter days and a **Gyr Falcon** must surely be on the cards one winter's day for a lucky observer! **Short-eared Owls** are regularly seen towards dusk hunting over the rougher inland "sliabh" areas. **Barn Owls** can also appear at this time, whilst previous winters have seen a **Long-eared Owl** turn up and memorably, in January 2005, a fine white **Snowy Owl** graced the grass strips of Tiree airport.

If you fancy a bird-filled winter birding break with a difference, why not try Tiree? The Tiree web-site www.isleoftiree.com gives some useful hints and lists accommodation available.

John Bowler

Bird Atlas update for the 2009 breeding season in Argyll

Great progress is currently being made to achieve full coverage of Scotland for the Bird Atlas 2007-11. The second year of winter fieldwork has resulted in 65% of the minimum required number of Scottish tetrads being covered, with around 40% in Argyllshire.

Timed Tetrad Visits (TTVs)

The focus now switches to the breeding season. Last summer 23% of the minimum required number of tetrads was covered in Argyllshire (Figure 1). Eight tetrads

need to be surveyed in each 10km square, so there are still many areas requiring assistance.

Taking on a tetrad is not too onerous. It requires two breeding season visits (one April/May, the other June/July) each of one hour (or optionally two hours) duration. You follow a route of your own choosing, covering the main habitats in the tetrad. Experience from last summer suggests that the first visit should be done during late April or May and the second during June or very

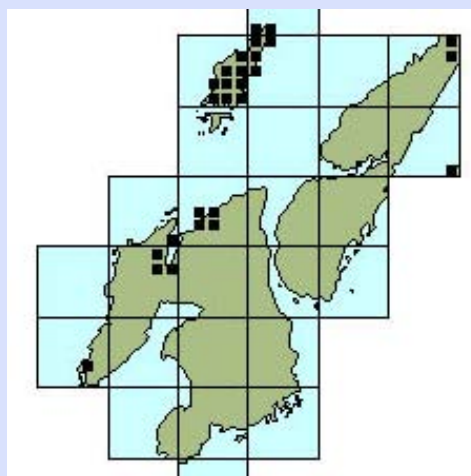
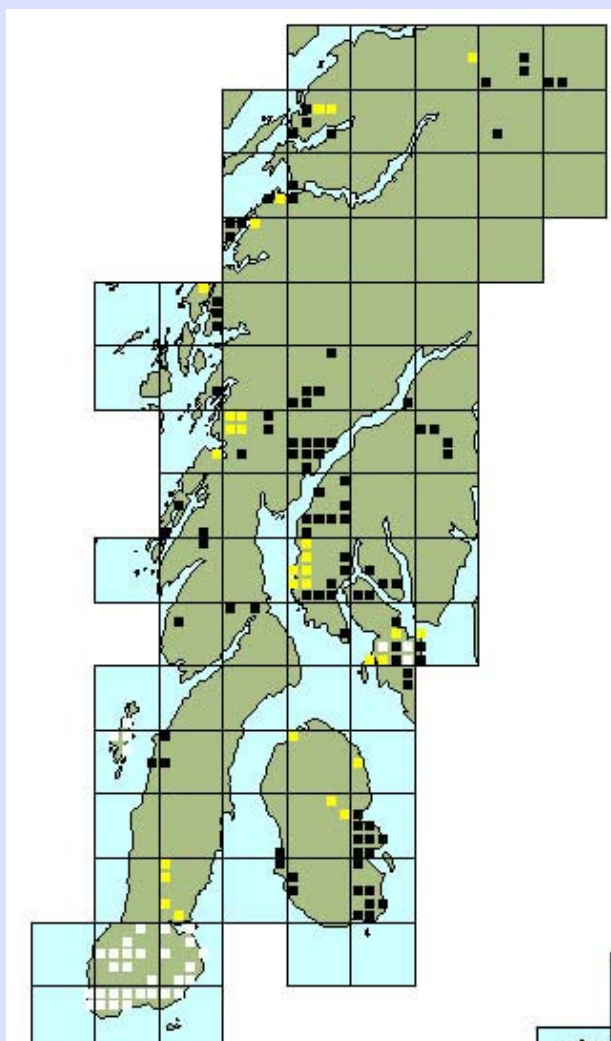
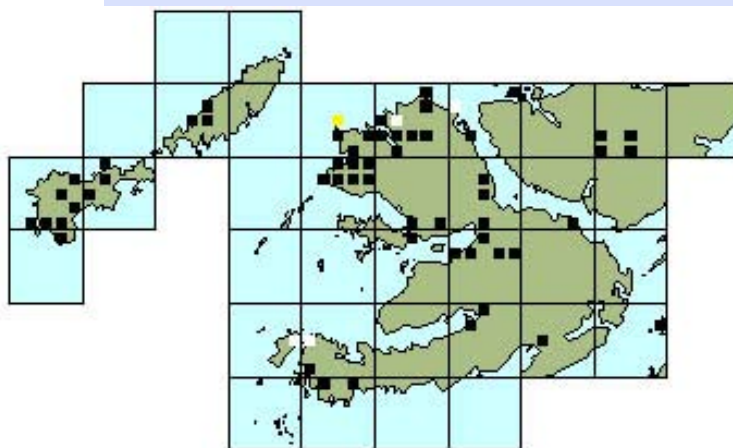


Figure 1. Tetrad coverage in Argyll during the 2008 breeding season. Mainland Argyll left; Islay, Jura & Colonsay top right; Mull, Tiree & Coll bottom.

Yellow = early count only

White = late count only

Black = both early & late counts completed



early in July. As July progresses more and more birds are moving away from their breeding areas, so that late counts greatly underestimate what was present. The TTVs are designed to give information on the relative abundance of each species, but also provide dots for the distribution maps as well as breeding status.

Roving Records

Data can also be provided via Roving Records using the **Submit Roving Records** button on the homepage of the www.birdatlas.net website. For each 10km square a species has only to be reported once to get a dot on the distribution map. Roving Records are important to help plug gaps in the species lists. The species richness maps on the website (found under Latest Results > regional results > Argyll, then click on the Species Richness icons or at <http://blx1.bto.org/atlas-results/allocargs.html#ref> - Figure 2) compare the percentage of species found so far with what was found in each 10km square during the 1988-91 Breeding Atlas. The aim is to get most of Argyll red, or at least brown. As figure 2 shows we still need to record a lot of species throughout Argyll. How do we know which species are missing? We can use the new **Any Square Summary** button on the website homepage which lists all species that have been recorded in a 10km square and at what breeding level category. This will make it easier to help plug gaps by adding in unrecorded species and boosting breeding evidence codes.

Breeding Evidence codes

Species should be recorded at the highest level of

breeding category ie possible, probable or confirmed. Recording possible breeding (H = in suitable nesting habitat, or S = singing bird) is relatively straightforward. With a little extra effort it is possible to show probable breeding by use of codes like P = pair in breeding habitat and T = several (territorial) birds singing against each other, or A = agitated if you have a bird alarm calling at you. To confirm breeding it is not necessary to find a nest with eggs (NE) or young (NY). Adults carrying food or faecal sacs (FF) or recently fledged dependent young (FY) are easy ways to confirm breeding. There are a few species we need to be careful about when using these codes. Herons, gulls and terns away from colonies should probably remain uncoded or use U (=summering). The F (= flying) code also has to be used carefully; it really applies to birds like migrating geese completely overflying a square. Raptors, swifts, swallows and ravens flying over a square are probably using the square as they hunt for food so are maybe better coded as H.

If you are submitting Roving Records or TTVs, adding breeding codes to your records makes them even more valuable. A full list of codes can be found on the website.

So please get involved with this important project. For further details or queries contact your local organisers or bob.swann@bto.org.

Bob Swann

Scottish Organiser Bird Atlas 2007-11.

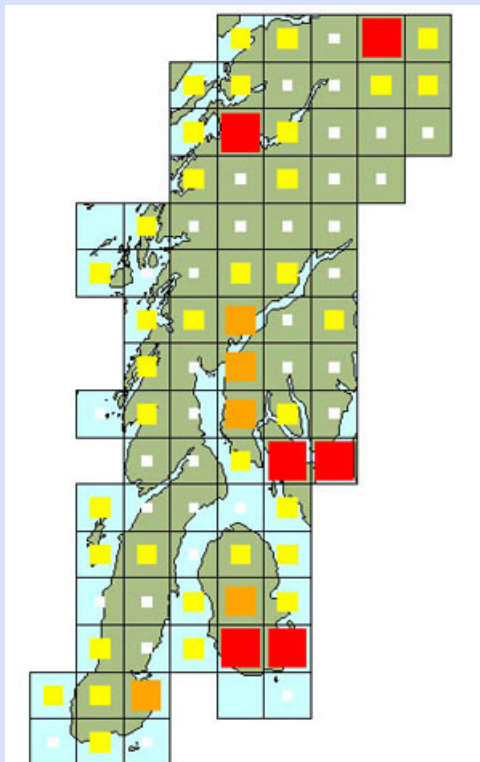


Figure 2. Percentage of species found so far during the breeding season in mainland Argyll.

White = 0-49%; Yellow = 50-74%; Orange = 75-90%; Red = greater than 90%

Photo. Into the mist! Members of the RAFOS team atlasing in Kintyre in summer 2009.



Notes on recording rare birds in Argyll

What should you do if you are fortunate to find a rare or unusual species of bird in Argyll?

Just imagine you have seen something quite rare and exciting but are unsure what to do next. Most people will probably consult a field guide to confirm the bird's identity. For a minority of people the story ends there, preferring to keep the sighting to themselves. More commonly it is natural to want to share your experience with others and often, if unsure about the bird's identity, to ask for help.

In my time with the Argyll Bird Records Committee (ABRC) it has become clear that experienced and inexperienced birdwatchers generally deal with a rare bird sighting in quite different ways. For an experienced birdwatcher, used to finding rare birds, the discovery of such a species usually triggers a response more akin to a forensic detective investigating a crime scene, only a bit more uplifting! Collecting evidence becomes the name of the game where the observer is looking for all sorts of detail and clues to work out the bird's identity, while being intensely aware that the subject could fly off at any moment! Size, shape and 'jizz' are studied. Comparisons are made with nearby species; notes are made on plumage details, specific feathers are studied to try and age or sex the species and calls are described.

With the advent of digiscoping, photographic evidence is frequently obtained, often allowing distant birds to be 'shot for the record'. An experienced birdwatcher will also take good field notes and sketches as well as putting 'the word out' to other birdwatchers, often within minutes of the find, to give them the best chance of sharing and confirming the sighting.

Ideally such an observer will write up the record while it is still fresh in his or her mind and then e-mail the completed rare bird report form along with jpeg photographs and scanned field notes to the rare bird committee.

Understandably, less experienced and non-birdwatchers are more prone to making mistakes with their identification. They are often unaware of the rarity status of a species seen for the first time and unsure whether a description of their observations is required. Often it is days or weeks later before word of the sighting comes to light, by which time the suspected rarity has long gone! Most people in this situation are usually keen to be helpful and submit their record. However, they often struggle to give a detailed enough description as field notes are rarely taken, and as such, the record is often in danger of not being accepted due to lack of evidence.

Nevertheless, in the last few years even inexperienced birdwatchers are sending in photographs that can be very useful where a description is lacking detail. This has worked well recently with species like Rosy Starling, Hawfinch, Crested Tit and Nuthatch where photographs of a known provenance were sent to the ABRC and the records accepted. Photographs are also useful for sorting out mistakes. On occasions the description has been relatively good, but the accompanying photograph tells a different story; Sparrowhawks have been claimed as Goshawks and Lesser-black backed Gulls claimed as Yellow-legged Gulls.

It is a common misconception that a record submitted from a known experienced birdwatcher will be readily accepted on the 'nod'! In my experience, this is not the case, with each record being dealt with on its merits. If anything, a higher standard of submission is expected from a seasoned birder, where the inclusion of field notes is normally expected. Most, if not all, experienced birdwatchers will have had records 'not-accepted' at some point in the past due to lack of detail or supporting evidence. A small minority of people take such a rejection personally and subsequently cease to submit records, which is a pity. Fortunately, the vast majority of people put a rejected record behind them and try to improve their level of record keeping next time. And of

Box 1. Points to remember when recording a rare bird in Argyll

- Have an awareness of which species are rare in Argyll. Species requiring descriptions for the Argyll and Scottish Rare Bird Committees (SRBC) are listed in Box 2.
- Gather as much evidence as possible during the time you had the bird in view, including field notes, sketches, photographs, weather details etc.
- Inform others! This may be a neighbour, but also try to contact someone with experience, and phone Jim Dickson 01546 603967 or Paul Daw 01546 886260.
- Write up your observation. Send the record to Jim Dickson at j.dickson@tiscali.co.uk or 11 Pipers Road, Cairnbaan, Argyll PA31 8UF, ideally within a day or two of the find.
- If you are unsure about anything contact Jim or Paul for advice.

course record committees make mistakes too, though hopefully not very often! At the end of the day what remains with the observer is their own recollection of what 'they' saw.

It should be said that rare bird committees do not reject records lightly, but they do tend to err on the side of caution. Where only one person on the committee is unhappy with the record, it will be re-circulated after asking the observer to clarify certain points. If still no agreement is reached, the record is passed to the Scottish RBC for their decision. In practice, the majority of records are accepted. Where they are found 'not-proven' it is usually due to insufficient detail being proved rather than misidentification.

Occasionally finders of rare birds refuse to submit their records on the basis that they are happy with it and

that's all that counts! Unfortunately in this situation, such records cannot be used in any bird recording database and will not be used in bird reports or books. It is interesting that some such individuals have the most 'incredible' lists of birds! Other birdwatchers have reported what appear to be perfectly good records, but for some reason never get around to writing them up. As time goes on the ability to write up such a record becomes impaired, especially if no field notes were taken at the time. Unless submitted, these rare bird sightings are lost for ever!

Remember, you may be asked to verify someone else's record! Box 1 summarise points to remember when going off to see your neighbours Black and White Warbler!

Jim Dickson

Box 2. Species considered by the ABRC and SBRC (*) from January 2009

Bewick's Swan	Kentish Plover*	Marsh Warbler*
Bean Goose	American Golden Plover*	Reed Warbler
European White-fronted Goose	Temminck's Stint	Icterine Warbler
(race <i>albifrons</i>)	White-rumped Sandpiper*	Melodious Warbler*
American Wigeon	Pectoral Sandpiper	Barred Warbler
Green-winged Teal	Buff-breasted Sandpiper	Lesser Whitethroat
Garganey (lone females/juveniles)	Spotted Redshank	Dartford Warbler*
Red-crested Pochard	Red-necked Phalarope (away from	Subalpine Warbler*
Ring-necked Duck	traditional breeding areas)	Greenish Warbler*
Ferruginous Duck*	Long-tailed Skua (except adult)	Pallas's Leaf Warbler
Surf Scoter (except adult males)	Mediterranean Gull (except adult)	Yellow-browed Warbler
Smew	Sabine's Gull	Radde's Warbler*
Ruddy Duck	Ring-billed Gull*	Dusky Warbler*
Red-necked Grebe	Yellow-legged Gull*	Firecrest
Black-necked Grebe	Roseate Tern	Red-breasted Flycatcher
Cory's Shearwater*	Black Tern	Bearded Tit
Great Shearwater*	White-winged Black Tern*	Marsh Tit
Balearic Shearwater	Little Owl	Willow Tit
Wilson's Storm-petrel*	Alpine Swift*	Crested Tit
Eurasian Bittern (Bittern)	Nightjar	Eurasian Nuthatch
Night Heron*	European Bee-eater	Red-backed Shrike
Little Egret	Wryneck	Great Grey Shrike
Great White Egret*	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker*	Woodchat Shrike*
Purple Heron*	Short-toed Lark*	Rose-coloured Starling
White Stork	Wood Lark*	Tree Sparrow
Eurasian Spoonbill (Spoonbill)	Shore Lark	European Serin*
Honey-buzzard	Red-rumped Swallow*	Common Redpoll (all races)
Black Kite*	Richard's Pipit	Arctic Redpoll*
Montagu's Harrier*	Tawny Pipit*	Scottish Crossbill
Goshawk	Red-throated Pipit*	Common Rosefinch
Rough-legged Buzzard*	Water Pipit*	Hawfinch
Red-footed Falcon*	Rock Pipit (race <i>littoralis</i>)	Cirl Bunting*
Hobby	Yellow Wagtail (all races)	Ortolan Bunting*
Spotted Crake	Common Nightingale*	Little Bunting*
Common Crane	Bluethroat	Rustic Bunting*
Avocet	Cetti's Warbler*	Corn Bunting
Stone Curlew*	Aquatic Warbler*	
Little Ringed Plover		

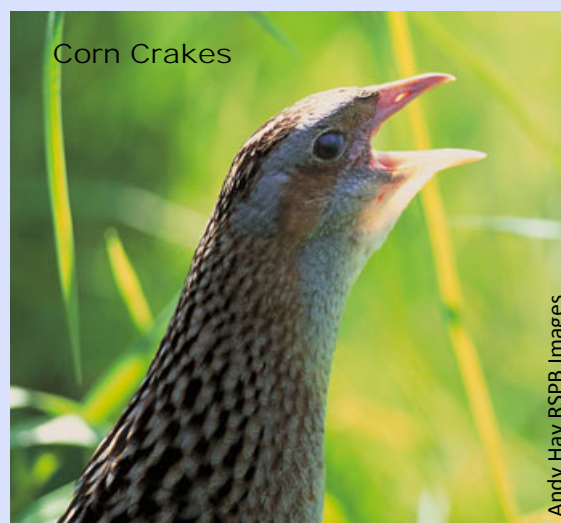
Surveys of two key species in Argyll in 2009

Think back to the December *Eider*—you may recall an update on Corn Crakes in Argyll. Over 700 calling males were recorded in 2008; almost exclusively from the Argyll islands. Argyll is the national stronghold for this species and RSPB are keen to further their conservation, especially by assisting birds to establish a foothold on the mainland.

The most obvious area for colonisation is the coastal fringe of west Argyll. Birds do overshoot during migration and reports of birds from the mainland occur most years. These are widespread from Appin to the Mull of Kintyre with birds noted calling from suitable grassland habitat. Corn Crakes have a reputation of being hard to see, it is their rasping 'crex-crex' call that gives them away, and they are more vocal at night.

Quite often we do not hear of these reports until after the birds have stopped calling, which makes it hard to establish if breeding has occurred and if conservation-based management would be worthwhile. These measures involve talking to the landowner to secure delaying cutting of fields and cropping in a Corn Crane friendly way i.e. from the inside of the field outwards.

To cover such a large area is difficult and we are seeking any volunteers who live close to the coastal fringe of Argyll, who like to be around and about either late evening or early morning. The main survey period is during 20 May-10 July. This year is a SCARABBS (Statutory Conservation



Agencies/RSPB Annual Breeding Bird Scheme) for this species. The main Corn Crane strongholds (Iona, Coll, Tiree, Colonsay/Oronsay and Islay) are surveyed by RSPB staff. However, we would still welcome records/assistance in surveying these islands as well as wider in Argyll. Any records received will assist with this survey as well as promoting the long-term conservation of the species in Argyll.



The Argyll Black Grouse Recovery Project would be keen to hear from volunteers who are willing to help with lek surveys in 2009. There are many known 'lek' sites spread out across Argyll, which

we aim to monitor, to keep track of the local population. Leks are areas where males display; this ritual allows them to show off their credentials to greyhens that visit the lek sites. It is a wonderful and very special experience.

However, the birds do not like to make this easy, as they lek at first light, often in remote locations. If this sounds appealing please get in touch and I will send you further information. The lek survey involves at least two site visits. The first takes place during 1st March-18th April and the second during 19th April-15th May. It's also recommended that you check the site before the actual day, so you can pick a suitable spot to watch from and you know the way there in the half-light. A reasonable level of fitness is required; you must be over the age of 18 and have suitable outdoor clothing.

For more information about either project, please contact:

Andy Robinson Tel: 0141 331 0993 or preferably email: andy.robinson@rspb.org.uk

Garden birds (continued)!!

For anyone who read my article "Garden Birds" in the December 2004 edition of the *Eider* (page 7) this is a continuation of the saga. In 2005 and 2006 the same hollowed out strainer post at the edge of the road was used for nesting by the Oyster Catchers, but with less success. Word had got around locally and the birds were frequently disturbed by enthusiastic photographers and passers by climbing up on the gate to have a quick peek, some even handling the eggs!

When Mr & Mrs OC showed interest again in 2007, I decided to offer them alternative accommodation. After some deliberation I found a flower pot with the same circumference as the original fence strainer post, filled it with earth to allow a similar depth of cup, and nailed it to a post at the back of my cottage. In order to allow my lodgers a choice, I also nailed an old basketwork trug to the remaining strainer at the back of the house, complete with hanging basket liner and earth, to try and provide the perfect OC des.res. On 10 April 2007, after much noisy decision making between sites, the choice was finally made and three eggs were laid in the basket work trug! Frustratingly, I was away from home when the drama of hatching and leaving the nest occurred, but I was assured by a neighbour that he had seen the parent birds with two very young chicks running about the field near by—they had managed without my help!

By 2008, winter winds and rain had rendered the trug beyond repair, so I replaced it with another nailed-down flower pot. By 6 June my OCs were the proud and noisy parents of two fluffy chicks, and one rather squashed one! For two of them, my concerns about them escaping the confines of the steep-sided flower pot (the earth, stones and grass lining having become compressed) were unfounded. However, 'number three' made little struggle in spite of my efforts to build up a ramp to allow him reach the top more easily. Mr & Mrs OC were both in regular attendance shrieking and trying to feed him, but by next morning, although still alive, he was very weak. Once the sun was warm I lifted him to the ground below (just in case). However, in spite of his parents continued attentions this baby OC had clearly died. Two hours later I buried him to allow Mr & Mrs OC "closure"! And, to allow them to get on with the business of looking after the two survivors, who were continuously demanding attention.

Katie Pendreigh

Top photo. The nest site used by the Oyster catchers during 2004-2006 ©Duncan McDougal

Middle photo. The 2007 nest site in a basket fixed to the top of a fence post ©Katie Pendreigh

Bottom photo. The 2008 nest in a flower pot nailed to the top of another fence post ©David Merrie.



Tristan beyond the rainbow! ©John Bowler



Tristan da Cunha—a south Atlantic odyssey

The ocean crossing

After seven years of working for RSPB Scotland on Tiree, my opportunity for a sabbatical came around in 2008. Never keen to leave the island at migration times for fear of missing interesting avian visitors, I was planning a sabbatical involving seabird research in the Caribbean in the January/February when a last-minute opportunity arose to work with albatrosses on Tristan da Cunha in September-October. Autumn is probably the worst time to be away from Tiree in terms of migrants (see *Eider* 87:12-13), but this was the chance of a lifetime to assist with conservation work on this remote UK dependency. Thus, on 2 September I headed south to Capetown in South Africa to board the SA Agulhas for its annual visit to the Tristan Island group. Every austral spring this South African research vessel visits Tristan da Cunha and then travels 250 miles south to Gough Island for the annual restocking and staff changeover of a meteorological station there, before stopping off at Tristan on its route back to Capetown. The boat permits a three-week visit to this otherwise most inaccessible of islands, which lies some 1500 miles due west of Capetown, lacks a landing strip and has only a fair weather harbour.

The SA Agulhas is capable of making the crossing to Tristan in five days but our passage was hampered by engine problems and heavy seas, and instead it took us eight days to reach the island. This certainly puts the four-hour ferry crossing from Oban to Tiree into perspective! The boat trip from Capetown was a fantastic introduction to the South Atlantic and its seabirds and having limited previous experience of southern oceans, I feared that I might be overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of birds and their complex identification problems. However, I needn't have worried as each day of the crossing brought only a subtly different mix of seabird species, with the arrival of new species broadly spaced out along the route.

We left Capetown in the early afternoon with inshore species predominating that day. Large groups of Crowned and Cape Cormorants were easily separated in the harbour with a few larger White-breasted and Bank Cormorants for good measure on the breakwaters. Hartlaub's and Kelp Gulls abounded in Capetown Bay, whilst there were dense flocks of Common Terns with massive-looking Crested Terns nearby and fleeting views of diminutive Little/Damara Terns. More unexpected were Jackass Penguins feeding way out in the bay with Cape Fur Seals. As we entered the choppy waters of the Cape trawling grounds, long flights of Cape Gannets passed overhead, together with the first Shy Albatrosses and White-chinned Petrels. As the sun began to sink towards the horizon, the first Wilson's Storm-petrels began trailing behind the boat, whilst small groups of European Storm-petrels flew alongside.

Dawn the following morning found me up on the Helicopter deck, watching a mixed group of seabirds hanging behind the boat on the look out for scraps. This trailing group was to be a constant feature of the trip, although the precise species composition varied considerably. White-chinned Petrels and Wilson's Storm-petrels were regular members as were pie-bald Pintado Petrels plus shorter visits from Great Shearwaters, Great-winged Petrels, Antarctic Prions, Southern and Northern Giant Petrels and Subantarctic Skuas. However, for me the most exciting element was an ever-changing assortment of albatrosses. Black-browed Albatrosses were the commonest but these were often joined by huge hump-backed Wandering Albatrosses in various plumages, Yellow-nosed Albatrosses of both the Indian Ocean and Atlantic forms, the odd Shy Albatross, occasional Royal Albatrosses and then both Light-mantled and Dark-mantled Sooty Albatrosses as we headed further out into the ocean.



Just two of the many seabird species seen during the voyage to Tristan da Cunha. Upper—Wandering Albatross; right—Cape Petrel ©John Bowler



The sight of the first massive Wandering Albatross appearing out of the dawn mist to hang effortlessly alongside the boat, was awe-inspiring and drummed home the severe threat faced by this and many other seabird species, to the risk of accidental death as by-catch in long-line fisheries. These birds are inexorably drawn to boats by the promise of food. In the case of the Agulhas this was in the form of harmless kitchen scraps but had our boat been a long-liner, this would have been replaced by potentially lethal baited hooks. Albatrosses are very long-lived birds, which are slow to mature, and produce just one egg every one or two years, depending on the species. Current mortality rates due to long-line fishery by-catch are unsustainably high, resulting in sharp population declines and 19 out of the world's 22 albatross species are currently threatened with extinction.

I soon discovered that sea-watching looking forwards from the whale-watching seat at the top of the boat produced a very different selection of birds to those in the trailing mob. Timed counts revealed the most numerous birds to be Soft-plumaged Petrels, which rarely came close to the boat. The curious high-arcing flight of these birds became a familiar sight and I'll certainly recognise one now should it happen to pass by on a Tiree seawatch! Other common birds up front included Great and Sooty Shearwaters and clouds of Antarctic Prions, with occasional Atlantic, Grey and Kerguelen Petrels passing by, odd groups of Arctic Terns plus the curious "bouncing ball" flight of Black-bellied Storm Petrels. As I became more familiar with these birds, it became easier to pick out less common species—Grey-backed Storm-petrel, White-headed Petrel, Blue Petrel and Grey-headed Albatross. Whilst, closer to Tristan the mix changed again, with the first Little Shearwaters, Broad-

billed Prions, Spectacled Petrels, White-bellied Storm-petrels, White-faced Storm-petrels, Antarctic Terns, Common Diving-petrels and Tristan Albatrosses—the latter so similar to Wandering Albatrosses in appearance that I could only identify with certainty one that was carrying a colour-ring from Gough Island where they breed!

The first sight of land after eight days at sea was memorable, particularly as the 6,500 foot volcanic cone of Tristan da Cunha was steeped in its own lenticular clouds dissected by a vast rainbow (photo on page 12). Sea conditions were too rough that day for landing so we spent another day sheltering in the lee of the island watching Northern Rockhopper Penguins at their colonies and myriads of Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatrosses soaring above the massive forested cliffs like clouds of gnats. Eventually the winds abated enough for us to be helicoptered ashore the next day to the island's only settlement, named "Edinburgh of the Seven Seas", and we could finally start the fieldwork.

Albatross tracking project

The key aim of our research project was to relocate 30 Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatrosses that had been fitted with data-loggers at their breeding sites in 2007 in order to retrieve the loggers and find out where the birds had travelled in the interim. Accompanying me was seabird researcher Erica Sommer who had put the loggers on the previous year and knew exactly where to go in order to look for returning birds. September is the start of the austral spring and albatrosses were already returning to their colonies to begin pair-bonding and nest-building. The only problem was that the nesting areas all lie some 2,500 feet up the mountain, necessitating a long steep climb up precipitous cliffs each morning from the settlement.



Top photo. On route to the study area with the settlement below.

Middle upper photo. Ringing an Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross in the Hottentot study area.

Middle lower photo. Pair of Dark-mantled Sooty Albatrosses.

Bottom photo. Tristan Thrush, known locally as the 'Starchy'.

All photos ©John Bowler



All of the birds that had been fitted with data-loggers were from the Hottentot Gulch study area, a discrete area of hill-side, bounded on either side by deep gulches. Our secondary aim was to census the study area, marking and recording all nest attempts and ringing all breeding pairs. The study area was dominated by dense "bog-fern", a type of dwarf tree-fern and proved a difficult place to both walk through and find nesting albatrosses, as they tended to place their nests under the ferns or in low-lying gullies. We found several colour-ringed birds from the study population on our first visit but it was clear that birds were still arriving and there were no data-loggers to be seen. However, this all changed on the next visit when we retrieved no less than five data-loggers. Birds proved easy to approach on the ground and would allow us to lift them up slightly off the nests to check for rings and loggers. Over the coming days and weeks, we continued to come across new birds and nest attempts as more pairs arrived to breed and as incubating birds switched duties with their partners. Care was taken after ringing birds to ensure that they returned to incubate their single egg. The egg-shells are thick so chilling is not a problem. However, three other bird species present in the study area, the Sub-Antarctic Skua, Gough Moorhen and Tristan Thrush, are all potential egg-thieves, so an unguarded egg could soon be lost.

With a very wet and windy climate, many days were unsuitable for fieldwork and I would use these to explore the settlement plain. Birds were extremely scarce, with the only resident passerine, the Tristan Thrush, confined to a few deep gulches at the base of the hill. This is the only place I have visited where there was no dawn chorus of any description and the only real birdwatching to be had was to sit on the harbour wall and look for seabirds. The island can receive migrants from time to time but being so remote from land, these are few and far between. I managed to find just one Cattle Egret and an American Barn Swallow during my entire stay. A visit to neighbouring Nightingale Island produced the endemic Nightingale Bunting and Common Noddy, although the aptly named Inaccessible Island re-

mained just that and its namesake flightless rail remained unseen. Tristan is not the place to visit for long bird-lists! However, the Tristanian people are extremely hospitable and we were made to feel very much at home, being invited to every birthday party, Christening event and homecoming that occurred during our stay, with home-baking skills and traditional dancing to rival the very best that the Hebrides have to offer.

By the end of the study period, we had relocated 23 of the birds fitted with data-loggers in 2007. Three of these had lost their loggers but the remaining 20 loggers were collected and are being analysed along with loggers from other islands in the Tristan group to help gain a picture of where these birds go to at sea. Each logger records GMT and daily sunrise and sunset times, from which it is possible to derive the co-ordinates of latitude and longitude for each day the bird is at sea. Such data are invaluable in pin-pointing key feeding areas and in targeting conservation action by the Albartross Taskforce team in the long-line fisheries. A total of 39 pairs of Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross nested in the study area in 2008 and we managed to fit 57 birds with new darvic leg-rings. Time also permitted a camping expedition to the breeding colonies of the Dark-mantled Sooty Albatross in the south of the island and we retrieved one more data-logger from this species.

Homeward bound

The return boat trip was equally lengthy and produced a nice recap of all the seabirds recorded on the way out.

Being a month later, some differences were noted. There were many more northern seabirds passing through, including familiar species such as Sandwich Tern, Arctic, Pomarine and Long-tailed Skuas, occasional Grey Phalaropes and Cory's Shearwaters, and even a large flock of Sabine's Gulls in Capetown Harbour, whilst Antarctic Prions, so conspicuous on the trip out, were completely absent. Calmer seas permitted some first-class cetacean watching with frequent pods of Dusky and Long-billed Common Dolphins, plus regular sleeping Subantarctic Fur Seals. Surprising numbers of baleen whales included large groups of Fin Whales, smaller groups of Humpbacks and Southern Minke Whales, numerous Southern Right Whales closer to the South African coast and best of all a lone Blue Whale. A subsequent two-week tour of game parks and nature reserves in South Africa's Cape region produced a much larger list of birds and animals seen. However, the southern oceans have a special ambiance all of their own and they would not be the same without those enigmatic albatrosses gliding effortlessly over the swells. We can but hope that continued concerted conservation effort will remove the current threats faced by these spectacular birds in the long-line fisheries and that they will continue to grace the oceans for years to come. For more information have a look at the Save the Albatross campaign on the RSPB web-site or visit www.savethealbatross.net

John Bowler

ABC Questionnaire

We have received back over 130 completed questionnaires—many thanks to everyone for taking the time to fill these out. It has been very helpful to see these responses.

We have converted the responses into an Excel summary spreadsheet for more detailed analysis, but I can report that there is overwhelming support for the club's existing format of indoor meetings, and also strong support for the existing field trips, but some useful suggestions too. The strongest of these is for more emphasis on bird identification skills, and we will aim to follow that up.

It has been very useful to get members' views on the *Argyll Bird Report*, web site and *Eider*. It came as no surprise to find universal support for the *Eider*, but interestingly the support for the *Argyll Bird Report* was also very strong,

which is extremely reassuring for the individuals who put enormous amounts of time into the task of compiling it.

It has also been useful to see that while the numbers of members with computers is increasing, as we might expect, there are many members still having to use dialup, and many without a computer. Those members can be reassured that we will continue to distribute the *Eider* by post!

Bob Furness

Shelducks: painting by Margaret Staley



Tough 2008 for seabirds



Almost six hundred pairs of Common Terns breeding at Glas Eileanan in the Sound of Mull in July 1993. Have sights like this become a thing of the past? ©Clive Craik

In 2008, as usual, much effort was put into keeping the more important breeding sites of terns free of mink. But most of the terns were unable to raise young for a more intractable and insidious reason.

The Mink-Seabird Project has been running in Argyll and part of Lochaber since 1995. Its aims are to safeguard the future of the more important colonies of terns and small gulls by keeping them free of mink. The area involved extends along the mainland coast from Mallaig in the north to West Loch Tarbert in the south, including Loch Fyne, part of the Sound of Mull, and the Kyles of Bute. The colonies are all on small islands close to the mainland and, over the last 15-20 years, many such colonies where there has been no mink control have disappeared after mink predation or, in the case of large colonies of the larger gulls, have decreased considerably in size.

The conservation value of these small islands in sea lochs and sounds is often overlooked. They are the most important breeding sites in Argyll of Common Tern, Common Gull and Eider. They are only slightly less important for breeding Arctic Tern, Black-headed Gull, Black Guillemot, Cormorant and Shag. They hold significant numbers of Mute Swan, Red-breasted Merganser, Oystercatcher and Common Sandpiper, and rapidly increasing numbers of Greylag and Canada Goose.

It is not unusual to find ten or more of these species breeding together at high densities on a small island. The record is held by Eilean Inshaig, which is almost surrounded by yachts at Ardfarn marina in Loch Craignish, measures only ca 150 x 25 m yet has held sixteen species, while Eilean an Ruisg in Loch Feochan (90 x 60 m) has held thirteen. Few of these birds breed on the mainland shore, so small islands like these are irreplaceable reservoirs of biodiversity.

Throughout spring and summer the islands are used in a well-defined sequence by successive groups of bird species. Thus Greylags, Canada Geese and the occasional Mute Swan start to nest as early as late March and take their young off the island early in May, just as gulls and Eiders are beginning to lay. The young of Black-headed and Common Gulls fly in late June, just at the peak laying of Common Terns, which in good years may continue to lay into August and fledge young early in September. So ground-nesting birds may be breeding on the islands for six or seven months of the year.

As a result of successful control of mink over the last fourteen years, several colonies of terns and small gulls still exist that would otherwise have disappeared, while other islands have been recolonised after extinction or near-extinction caused by mink. Two nationally important colonies of Common Terns in Argyll owe their survival to this work: Glas Eileanan in the Sound of Mull (which in some years has been the largest colony of this species in the British Isles with 800 pairs or more—see photo above) and Sgeir na Caillich in Loch Melfort (often with 200-400 pairs, one of the largest colonies of the species in Scotland). There are other protected sites in Loch Etive and Loch Creran (where a raft at a mussel farm has been adapted for nesting terns: Craik 2004—see photo on next page), and in Lochs Feochan, Craignish, Leven, Moidart, Ailort and Teacuis. Work at the Loch Teacuis site was taken over in 2007-2008 by Matt Wilson, organiser of the Sunart Mink Control Scheme.

Mink control has been generally successful in allowing these and other colonies to thrive. However, two problems have arisen recently which pose serious threats to the project. The first is predation by Herring Gulls. This



Left Photo. Common Terns breeding on an adapted mussel raft at South Shian in Loch Creran in July 2004, when 80 pairs nested and fledged 109 young (the highest ever there). Settled birds are large chicks near fledging. Adults are flying in to feed them ©Clive Craik



Right photo. 428 chicks of Common Tern found dead at Glas Eileanan on 22 July 2005. (355 starved large, 41 starved medium and small, 32 killed/eaten by otter; one starved adult) ©Clive Craik

has taken two forms.

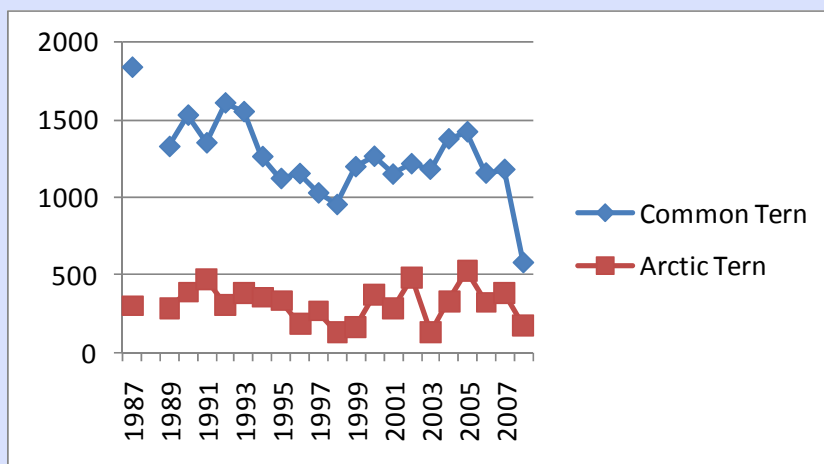
Firstly, individual Herring Gulls that do not themselves breed at a site may specialise in taking the eggs and young of terns and small gulls. This has happened most notably at the mixed tern/small gull/Eider colony at E an Ruisg in Loch Feochan. This was driven to near extinction by mink predation during 1990-1997 but was then successfully kept mink-free in 1998-2005, allowing Common Terns, Common Gulls, Black-headed Gulls and Eiders to breed and build up to pre-mink numbers. In 2006 an adult Herring Gull discovered how it could help itself to their eggs and young. All it had to do was walk into the colony from the water's edge, making use of dense vegetation for cover. In the air, its flight was destabilised by dives from the angry parent terns and small gulls, and it was driven off. On the ground, however, it had only to duck its head to avoid each dive. The adult birds had no way of defending their offspring against this tactic. For the last three summers you could watch this drama from the main road lay-by opposite the island. I often saw the Herring Gull carry chicks to the shore of the island to eat them. If they were too large to swallow whole, it would reshape, flatten and dismember them by beating them against the rocks. It was not pleasant to watch. And it was made worse by seeing expensive BTO rings, that Rob Lightfoot and I had carefully applied to the chicks a few days earlier, glinting in the sunlight as they disappeared into the Herring Gull. The vast amounts of time, money and effort that had been spent keeping the island mink-free..... all wasted! After years of good breeding success, numbers of young fledging were zero or near zero in 2006, 2007 and 2008, and breeding numbers on the island are now in sharp decline. This one Herring Gull has nullified years of work at the site. The obvious solution? Easy to say—but less easy to do!

Secondly, Herring Gulls threaten the project when they start breeding on a small island that has been kept free of

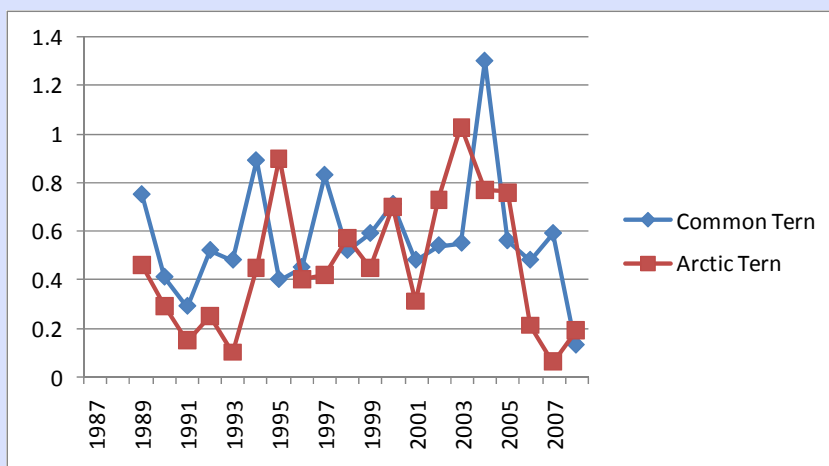
mink to protect terns and small gulls. Herring Gulls are by far the most abundant seabird breeding in this habitat of sea lochs and sounds, outnumbering all the other seabirds combined. Over a large area, many colonies of all these species, including birds as large as Great Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, Cormorant and Shag, have disappeared after mink predation; about half of all former breeding islands have become empty in this way. So large numbers of Herring Gulls, more than any other species, are looking for mink-free breeding sites. Colonisation usually starts with a single Herring Gull pair. If they raise young, they usually return the next year and are soon joined by other pairs. They invariably discover how to prey on eggs and young of smaller species on their doorstep. After one or a few years of complete breeding failure the terns and small gulls abandon the island, which soon becomes almost a pure colony of Herring Gulls. Sadly, this has destroyed years of successful work at several former colonies of terns and/or small gulls that had been kept free of mink—for example, Eilean Choinneich in Loch Leven, Eilean Mor and Eilean Beag at Dunstaffnage near Oban, and Sgeir nan Gobhar in the Sound of Mull are now large or medium-sized colonies of Herring Gulls. If the first pair or first few pairs of Herring Gulls can be deterred by removal of their eggs, others do not nest there and the problem is avoided.

But all such problems may pale into insignificance alongside what happened to the terns here in Argyll in 2008.

Shortages of suitable small fishes have severely reduced seabird breeding success in many parts of the British Isles in recent years. Arctic Terns in Shetland have been affected regularly from as long ago as the mid 1980s. More recently, Puffins on St Kilda and elsewhere have been failing for the same reason, and adult Puffins and Kittiwakes at many sites have tried unsuccessfully to raise their young on the notorious Snake Pipefish. But, except for very occasional years such as 1985, food shortage has never been a noticeable problem for Common and Arctic



Total number of breeding pairs (y-axis) of Common and Arctic Terns in the study area during 1987-2008. No proper counts were made in 1988.



The mean number of young fledged per pair (y-axis) for Common and Arctic Terns in the study area during 1987-2008. No proper counts were made in 1988.

Terns breeding in this study area....until 2005.

In 2005, and again in 2007, there was good evidence of localised food shortages. In 2005, large numbers of tern chicks died at several colonies (Craik 2006). On 22 July at the largest colony, 428 chicks were found freshly dead, mostly large young that had died of starvation—an unprecedented event in Argyll as far as I know (photo on previous page). Many of the dead were huddled pathetically in sibling twos and threes in their nest territories. In July 2007, there were again local shortages. Several people noticed Common Terns breeding on a small island in Loch Etive and making a lengthy flight down the sealoch, over Connel Bridge, around Dunstaffnage Bay and Castle, and along the shore of Loch Linnhe to Oban Harbour. Here they were seen catching young pollack which they carried back to their young, a round trip of 26km for each small fish (since terns carry only one fish at a time)! This seemed to be because the usually ubiquitous sandeels or herring/sprat were both unavailable locally in 2007.

This shortage of fish became much more severe and widespread in 2008. The number of nesting Common Terns in this study area was the lowest ever recorded – 580 pairs or 45% of the 1987-2007 average of 1294 pairs. They laid small clutches, many with just one egg instead of the normal three or two. Most chicks died a day or so after hatching, and the productivity of 0.13 fledged young

per pair was also much lower than in previous years (figure above). No young at all were raised at many colonies, and all colonies were affected in some way, including those where predators were not active. Arctic Terns also bred in smaller numbers than usual and raised few young, but neither their numbers nor their productivity were the lowest on record (figure above).

Why should food shortage have been so severe in 2008, causing Common Terns to have such a poor breeding season? Normally, at least one of the two different fish groups on which they depend (sandeels and clupeids [herring/sprat]) is abundant enough for them to raise young in reasonable numbers. Why should both fish groups have been scarce? Are these the effects of global warming? Or overfishing? There seem to be no definite answers at the moment. What will 2009 and future years have in store?

Clive Craik

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Counting chicks for conservation The Nest Record Scheme in Scotland



Research in Holland suggests that climate-driven advances in caterpillar emergence dates might have serious consequences for Pied Flycatcher populations ©Jez Blackburn

Until a few years ago, an average weekend at the end of February would involve a visit to the coast or to a local gravel pit, mopping up any wintering wildfowl that I hadn't already ticked for my year list and waiting impatiently for the first summer migrants to arrive. My birding life at the close of winter is a bit different now, revolving as it does around the twin staples of Long-tailed Tits and ivy. And if that doesn't sound like a very exciting exchange for a former twitcher, then you'd be surprised, because in the last three years I reckon I've learnt more about birds and their behaviour than I did during my previous twenty.

The nesting season at The Nunnery (BTO HQ) starts in earnest when the Long-tailed Tits begin to disband their winter feeding flocks and settle down on territories. By the time you read this, they will be busy constructing the nest walls from moss, lichen and cobwebs, either in gorse, bramble or exotic evergreen (and invariably spiky) shrubs. They make life very easy for the nest-finder, constantly calling to each other while carrying material and happy to return to the nest site with an observer only a few metres away. While making our rounds of their territories, it's always worth searching any thick patches of ivy covering walls or trees, as there are bound to be a few early thrushes building in them, and it won't be long before the Dunnocks join in. Ivy really is an amazing breeding habitat and cold-searching it throughout the season is surprisingly effective for finding the nests of many other species, including Robin, Wren, Chaffinch, Greenfinch and Spotted Flycatcher.

As the spring progresses and the migrants arrive, so the more challenging task of locating warbler nests begins. In spite of the near-mythical status that most birders seem to attach to the art of nest-finding, as with any birding, it's actually more a case of knowing where and when to look, then being patient. Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff are perhaps the easiest starting point, as the female gives the 'hui' contact call every few seconds on leaving the nest during incubation, stopping only when she returns. The *Sylvia* warblers are trickier, but can be watched back and identifying the preferred nesting habitat in your area is a great help—at The Nunnery, Blackcap and Garden Warbler are generally found in bramble, while White-throat prefer nettle beds growing through dead umbellifer stems, which add a bit of structure. Nestbox checking occupies much of late May and early June, after which the repeat broods of both residents and migrants keep us busy until the season is rounded off with a rush of Wood-pigeon nests in September (no finding tips required for nests of this species, although it seems that many of the birds could use some advice on how to build one!).

This annual nest-finding calendar is far from unique to The Nunnery, and the BTO's Nest Record Scheme (NRS) currently receives records of over 30,000 individual nesting attempts each year from around 500 recorders. Each record consists of a series of dated visits, with the contents of the nest recorded at each, allowing the calculation of breeding parameters such as laying date, clutch size, brood size and failure rate. Annual trends in these parameters are published on-line as part of the Breeding Birds in the Wider Countryside Report (www.bto.org/birdtrends) and the results help us to determine whether changes in productivity or survival, as measured by the

BTO's Ringing Scheme, are responsible for the population declines and expansions identified by the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey. NRS data are also used extensively to investigate the impact of factors such as climate change, changing agricultural practices and nest predation on breeding success.

The Argyll Bird Club has been submitting records to the NRS since 1989 and the current focus is box-nesting passerines, such as Blue Tit, Great Tit and Pied Flycatcher. Collecting data on the latter is particularly important, as it is the model species used by researchers across Europe to examine the impacts of climate change on the breeding success of long-distance migrants. A study by Christian Both and Marcel Visser on Dutch flycatcher populations has suggested that, while birds are laying earlier in response to increasing spring temperatures, in some areas the caterpillars are advancing their emergence still further, thus reducing the amount of food available to the growing chicks. Several research projects using NRS data to test whether this is also the case for the UK population are currently underway at BTO.

As resident birds such as Blue and Great Tit are also dependent on caterpillars to provision their chicks, they too may be affected by increasing asynchrony between offspring demand and prey abundance. This effect is likely to be less pronounced in the north, where the magnitude of the temperature change has been smaller. Such geographic variation in responses to climate change is also the subject of current BTO research. However, to investigate this effectively, we really need your help. The list of species totals from 2007 presented in the table (opposite) indicates that, while there are some great long-term monitoring projects being carried out on some raptor, owl, seabird and Sand Martin populations, the Scottish contribution for the majority of common passerines, both box- and open-nesters, is relatively small. In fact, for species such as Dunnock, Robin, Wren and Chaffinch, the annual total for the whole of Scotland is less than 30 records per annum, and Scottish recorders collect only 4-5% of the UK Blue Tit and Great Tit datasets. No species should therefore be considered too common to monitor for the NRS – even a single Blackbird nesting in your garden will account for more than 1% of the national dataset for an average year!

Another group of species for which more Scottish records would be extremely valuable are the long-distance passerine migrants, many of which are currently experiencing rapid population declines. Data for Willow Warbler are of particular interest, as populations in Scotland appear to be stable while numbers in England, particularly in

Number of nest records submitted in Scotland in 2007 (species for which at least 20 records were received)		
Species	No. records	% UK records
Barn Owl	219	11.5
Sand Martin	210	66.7
Great Tit	200	4.5
Blue Tit	194	4.0
Tree Sparrow	184	8.7
Swallow	168	6.8
Fulmar	162	48.4
Kittiwake	130	17.2
Tawny Owl	126	26.5
Common Buzzard	98	40.2
Blackbird	74	5.8
Common Gull	66	98.5
Shag	63	16.5
Coot	46	9.2
Pied Wagtail	46	21.7
Starling	46	20.4
Oystercatcher	44	12.4
Pied Flycatcher	44	4.5
Song Thrush	39	9.5
Little Tern	34	16.7
Meadow Pipit	32	41.0
Willow Warbler	31	22.0
Dipper	28	11.5
Chaffinch	27	10.0
Stock Dove	27	4.1
Robin	25	5.2
Wheatear	25	46.3
Jackdaw	24	6.8
Linnet	23	14.8
Red-throated Diver	23	100.0
Wren	23	8.2
Dunnock	21	8.5
Spotted Flycatcher	21	17.8
House Sparrow	20	5.3



Photo above. Few Scottish records of open-nesting passerine nests are received, even for common species such as Black-bird ©Dave Leech

Photo right. Long-tailed Tit nests invariably offer the first nest recording opportunities of the season ©Dave Leech



the south, are falling rapidly, prompting the analysis of the NRS, Ringing and BBS datasets as part of a joint project between BTO and the University of East Anglia. Maintaining the quality of the Dipper dataset is also vital, as the laying date trends calculated from NRS information form part of SNH's suite of climate change indicators.

Whatever your level of expertise, you can make a valuable contribution to nest recording in Scotland. Not only that, but it's also a lot of fun and seriously addictive, giving you the opportunity to experience part of a bird's life to which few are privy and of which the vast majority are totally ignorant. It's accessible too—you can nest record almost anywhere, the only requirements being a pair of eyes, a bit of patience and if you're feeling really extravagant, a stick to tap and part the vegetation with. Nest finding literature is pretty thin on the ground these days but, thanks to a generous legacy left to us by Dilys Breese, a long-time BTO supporter and Council member, we're currently in the process of revising the NRS Handbook and website (www.bto.org/goto/nrs.htm) to include more information and we've also set up a NRS email forum to allow recorders to swap hints and tips. Training in the field is also invaluable, and following the inaugural NRS introductory course in 2008, we will be running three more this year, with the hope of establishing a mentoring network by 2010. If you'd like any more information on any of these developments or you have any other questions about the scheme, then please feel free to contact us at the address below.

Contact details

All you have to do to become a nest recorder is drop us a line and we'll send you a Starter Pack. If you've collected records in the past, but haven't submitted them, they're

still just as valuable and can easily be added to the dataset retrospectively, so please do get in touch.

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We are incredibly grateful to the multitude of volunteer nest recorders who, over the years, have contributed their time and efforts so extensively and freely to make the NRS such a valuable part of the UK's natural heritage archive and wildlife monitoring framework, and to Mark Cubitt for developing the Integrated Population Monitoring Reporter (IPMR) inputting and submissions system. The current developments to the scheme would not be possible without the generosity of Dilys Breese, whose legacy has funded much of the work. The Scheme has benefited greatly from the support given under the JNCC/BTO partnership that the JNCC undertakes on behalf of English Nature, Scottish Natural Heritage, Countryside Council for Wales and the Northern Ireland Environment Service.



Recent bird reports from Paul Daw: November-January 2008

This report is a selection from the sightings already published on the club website (see Latest Reports 78-80 on the website for more details).

Request for information on Magpies. I am putting together a short paper on the distribution of Magpies in Argyll and the possible origins of birds seen away from the main breeding area. I would be grateful for any records of Magpies seen in the county, including those seen in and around Dunoon (Paul Daw).

Main ornithological events of this period. These include the large **Waxwing** invasion during November 2008 and the exceptional numbers of **Glaucous Gulls** in January 2009. The latter may have been a result of storms experienced in mid January, although this did not seem to give rise to any other seabirds wrecks. On the whole, the unusually cold weather in December and January seemed to have kept things fairly quiet as far as birds were concerned.

New species for Argyll. The record of a **Blyth's Reed Warbler** at Carnan Mor, Tiree on the evening of 3 June 2008, has recently been accepted by BBRC. This brings the Argyll total to 332 species, with at least three further species currently awaiting decisions by BBRC.

New species for Tiree. A **Common Kingfisher** found on Tiree on 3rd January 2009 was the first record for the island.

Observers. Full names are given in brackets except for BA=Bill Allan, JB=John Bowler, TC=Tom Callan, PD=Paul Daw, JD=Jim Dickson and EJM=Eddie Maguire.

Wildfowl (and Gamebirds)

A total of 126 **Whooper Swans** counted on Tiree on 12/13 January included 26 (20.6%) juveniles. Three colour-ringed birds had wintered on the island in previous years (JB). Other counts of **Whooper Swans** included 20 (including two juveniles) during the WeBS count at Loch Sween, Mid-Argyll on 16 November (PD), four at the second Powder Dam near Millhouse, Cowal also on 16 November (Daphne Campbell), 50 or more flying over Campbelltown calling loudly (Derrick Goode per Eddie Maguire) on 20 November, a single bird flushed from a river backwater at Bridge of Auchy, North Argyll (Roger Broad) on 20 November, a flock of 14 flying towards the River Add at Bellanoch, Mid-Argyll on the morning of 9 December (Lynsey Gibson), four (two adults/two juveniles) flying up Loch Awe on 11 December (Karl Pipes) and five on Lochan Ceann a' Choin, near Ford, Mid-Argyll on 13 January (JD).

Wildfowl at Loch a' Phuill, Tiree on 1 November included 159 **Greenland White-fronted Geese** (JB). Groups of **White-fronted Geese** counted elsewhere included 32 at Fidden, Mull on 12 November (Bryan Rains), 44 at Loch na Cille, Loch Sween on 16 November (PD), 85 at Ardnacloch, Appin, North Argyll on 11 December (T.C. Smout),

Recent Report Updates

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

<http://www.argyllbirdclub.org>

On the home page click the tab for 'Latest Bird Report'. This page is updated every 15-25 days

48 at Loch na Cille on 11 December, 300+ at Tayinloan, Kintyre on 14 December (Katie Pendreigh) and 125 in the Loch Creran area of North Argyll on 2 January (Robin Harvey). The latter included six with neck collars, most of which had been ringed in western Iceland in 2007, but one was from Wexford in 2003. All-island goose count on Tiree on 12/13 January found a total of 690 **Greenland White-fronted Geese** including a neck-collared bird from Islay.

A flock of 70 **Greylag Geese** at Kilfinan Bay, Cowal on 22 November included one with a white face (TC), 106 were seen at Bridgend, Mid-Argyll (Malcolm Chattwood) and 96 were counted in Loch Etive during the WeBS count on 14 December (Mike Harrison). The adult white-morph (un-ringed) **Snow Goose** was back in the Craobh Haven fields in mid November and was reported there again in January (BA/Anne-Lise Dickie).

A Barnacle Goose-sized "*parvipes*-type" **Canada Goose** seen with 1,993 **Barnacle Geese** at Balephetrish, Tiree on 12 January was thought to be a genuine vagrant and five **Pink-footed Geese** were at Heylipol on the same day. The small **Canada Goose** was seen again at Loch Bhasapol on 26 January (JB). At Fidden, Mull on 21 January there were 32 **Greenland White-fronted Geese**, 80 **Barnacle Geese**, two **Canada Geese** and 50 **Greylag Geese** (Bryan Rains).

Approximately 50 **Pale-bellied Brent Geese** flew north past Machrihanish SBO on 16 November (an unusual number for the time of year, Eddie Maguire) and 48 **Pale-bellied Brent Geese** at Rubha Ban, Islay on 9 January included three colour-ringed birds (JD).

A female **Gadwall** was at Loch an Eilein, Tiree on 12 January together with 31 **Whooper Swans** (JB).

Late on 6 January, a first-winter male/female **Canvasback** was found within the **Greater Scaup** flock at the head of Loch Indaal, Islay whilst completing routine survey work. The bird was then lost but re-found late afternoon and the identity agreed by other observers (Andy Schofield *et al.*). It was seen again briefly the following morning but has not been reported since. If a description is supplied and accepted by BBRC this would be a new species for the Argyll list.

A fine drake **Ring-necked Duck** arrived at Loch Bhasapol, Tiree on 14 November. It remained throughout the re-

mainder of the year, usually at Loch Bhasapol but occasionally at Loch an Eilein. Amazingly no less than three **Ring-necked Ducks** were found on Tìree, following a westerly gale, during the goose count on 12 January. The adult drake was again at Loch Bhasapol and two first-winter males were at Loch Riaghain (with six **Pintails** and 18 **Shovelers**). They all remained until at least 19 January, but were not reported thereafter (JB).

At the north end of Loch Awe, Mid-Argyll on 14 December there were nine **Pochards**, five **Tufted Ducks**, six **Common Goldeneyes** and no less than seven **Goosanders**. Three more **Goosanders** were seen on Loch Tulla, North Argyll (BA).

A "classic" female **Lesser Scaup** was found (and photographed) with four **Greater Scaup** and a **Coot** on Loch Skerrols, Islay on 9 January, and 48 **Pale-bellied Brent Geese** at Rubha Ban included three colour-ringed birds (JD). The female **Surf Scoter** that has been present at Hough Bay, Tìree for most of the winter was there with 13 **Long-tailed Ducks** on 14 December and the drake **Ring-necked Duck** was at Loch Bhasapol with 37 **Tufted Ducks** on the same day (JB). An unusually large count of 32 **Long-tailed Ducks** was made in Loch Indaal on 7 January (John Armitage). This may well be an all time record count for Loch Indaal (cf. 20 on 15 April 1997). Four **Common Scoters** and 18 **Red-breasted Mergansers** were seen in Loch Scridain, Mull on 7 January (Bryan Rains).

Three **Ptarmigans** were seen on the slopes of Beinn Odhar, North Argyll on the far eastern boundary of our recording area (Roger Broad) on 20 November and a single **Black Grouse** was spotted at the side of the B8025 road between Bellanoch and the cross roads that lead to Drimvore. It made its way off and into the trees on the left hand side off the road (Lynsey Gibson).

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

Three **Red-throated Divers**, five **Black-throated Divers** and two **Great Northern Divers** plus six unidentified divers were in Kilfinan Bay, Cowal on 5 November (TC/David Warden). During a seawatch on the morning of 11 November, off Aird, Tìree in NW7-8 with heavy rain and intense squalls (07.45-10.15hrs), six **Red-throated Divers**, 12 **Great Northern Divers**, 51 **Fulmars** and 12 **Northern Gannets** were recorded (JB).

Loch Etive in winter is always good for **Little Grebes** and no less than 30 were counted there during the WeBS count on 14 December, together with 27 **Shags** and 25 **Grey Herons** (Mike Harrison).

Little Egret(s) in Mid-Argyll/Cowal. A Little Egret was reported near Innellan Pier, Cowal on 7 December (Donald Shaw per Nigel Scriven) and what was presumably the same bird was seen in the Holy Loch at Sandbank, Cowal on 12 December (Andy Beveridge). As there were no later sightings in the area it is possible that this was the same bird that turned up near Lochgilphead on 1 January 2009.

A Heron was seen flying towards Bridgend from the direction of Moine Mhor at about 15.00hrs on 1 January, but after a fraction of a second the observers realised it wasn't a heron, but an egret. They next saw the bird land in the River Add just upstream of the old bridge. As they approached the bridge the bird flew off upstream but it was possible to see all white plumage, pale feet, and dark bill and legs. Later, as Malcolm walked upriver, the bird flew back over him and in failing light he could make out dark bill and legs with pale, probably yellow, feet. From previous sightings both in this country and abroad he was pretty sure it was a Little Egret but couldn't entirely rule out Snowy Egret! The bird then flew over towards Dunamuck and turned left towards Cairnbaan (Sue & Malcolm Chattwood). From later sightings near Achnabreac Cemetery it appears that this must have been the first sighting of the Little Egret that was seen there for several days. The Little Egret was found in fields on the north side of Lochgilphead (at NR864894) at 13.00hrs on 2 January and was last seen at about 13.15hrs behind Baddens Nursery (JD) and on the morning of 3 January it was putting on a great show by the play-park in Lochgilphead (Rebecca Helliwell). Rebecca first saw it near Lochgilphead cemetery on the Meadows on 1 January, but it was quite a long way off and difficult to be certain of identification. It was re-found at mid-day by BA and Anne-Lise Dickie at Lochgilphead meadows (cemetery road turn off) and it then flew down to Loch Gilp, where the river flows into the loch (per JD). It was still present at 12 noon on 4 January when it was photographed in the drainage ditch just under the little bridge at the main road entrance to Lochgilphead cemetery (Achnabreac) (Morag Rea/Paul Williams). It was there again and flying nearby on the morning of 5 January, and again just before dusk at 16.00hrs (PD/JD/John Halliday). The last sighting in this area was on 7 January (JD), by which time it had been seen by many local people and even featured in the *Argyll Advertiser*. There was a very reliable report of a Little Egret flying south close to the shore in front of the chalets at Ballimore, just south of the spit at Otter Ferry, Cowal on 8 January (TC). It could well have been the same bird as the one that had been in the Lochgilphead area for the previous few days and indeed the individual that was found in the Dunoon area before Christmas 2008. However, there has been at least one other Little Egret in the west of Scotland recently (on the Western Isles) so it is also possible that more than one was present in Argyll at this time.

During a winter Timed Tetrad Visit for the Atlas at Inveraray on the morning of 28 January a **Great Crested Grebe** in winter plumage was seen just off the pier. As usual, by the time I had the tripod out and the 'scope mounted it was too far away to get a decent photo, even at 20X, and helpful tourists kept interrupting to ask what I was looking at (PD)!

At least 430 **Shags** were at the gull roost at Rubha Chraiginis, Tìree late on the afternoon of 31 January (JB).

Raptors, rails etc.

A **Red Kite** flying through Glen More, Mull on 1 November had been spotted earlier on the Ross of Mull and a

Red Kite keeping company with Buzzards and Crows in Glen More on 4 December was possibly the same bird (Alan Spellman).

Two adult **White-tailed Eagles** flew over a club member's house in Appin, North Argyll on 9 November (Mary Gregory) and a juvenile was watched for 30 minutes at Loch Leathan, near Lochgilphead on the afternoon of 13 December (photo on page 26). It finished up flying out to the small island in the middle of the loch (JD). Roger Broad comments: "It all points towards it being a first-year bird with a BTO ring on the right leg (all chicks ringed in 2008 had a BTO ring on the right leg and a colour ring on the left leg), but 'immature, probably first year' is about as much as can be safely claimed. Nice record!" A **White-tailed Eagle** from the East coast introduction (tagged white number 5) was seen at Loch Beg, Mull on 24 January (Bryan Rains).

A **Golden Eagle**, probably a juvenile, was seen on 4 November, perched on a fence strainer near Muasdale, Kintyre for a while before it flew off (Katie Pendreigh) and other sightings included birds seen flying over Achahoish, Knapdale on 28 November (JD), flying north-west over Beinn Capuill, Cowal on 12 January (Graham & Danielle Clark) and flying over Craobh Haven, Mid-Argyll for about 5 minutes on 18 January (BA/Anne-Lise Dickie).

Hen Harriers and **Peregrine Falcons** were widely reported during the winter and a **Merlin** was seen hunting at the head of West Loch Tarbert, Kintyre on 25 January (BA/Anne-Lise Dickie).

A **Water Rail** was heard calling in the old gravel pits behind Tralee Beach, North Argyll on 1 November (Robin Harvey) and three more were at Balephuill, Tiree on 2 November (JB). A single **Moorhen** was on the River Add, near the car park at Dunadd, near Lochgilphead on 12 November (Brian John) and no less than three were seen on Loch Luachracht, above Oban, coming to bread being fed to the ducks on 3 January (BA). Two **Coots** at Loch Bhasapol, Tiree on 14 November were also seen later in the month, but there were no records in December (JB). This species seems to be becoming increasingly scarce in Argyll.

Waders

Details have come through of a colour-ringed **Turnstone** that has been wintering at Milton Harbour, Tiree since 1 October 2008. It was ringed as an adult female (later confirmed by DNA analysis) at Alert, Ellesmere Island, Nunavut, Canada on 25 June 2006. The bird was caught on the nest, and was in fact the only Turnstone that was caught there in 2006. It was nesting just outside Alert, at Lower Dumbell Lake on a small river delta. It weighed 112 g when caught (per JB).

A very strange looking partial albino (more white than black) **Oystercatcher** was seen at Craignish Castle, Ardfern, Mid-Argyll on 30 January. The same bird was present there almost exactly a year ago on 4 February 2008 (BA).

Waders found at Holy Loch during the WeBS count on 15 December included 656 **Oystercatchers**, 19 **Ringed Plov-**

ers, one **Northern Lapwing**, four **Red Knot** (an unusual species here), 101 **Eurasian Curlews**, 18 **Common Redshanks** and 15 **Turnstones** (George Newall). Totals of 99 **European Golden Plovers** and 1,170 **Northern Lapwings** were found near Langa Quarry, Kintyre on 15 November (Eddie Maguire). Large numbers of **European Golden Plovers** remained on Tiree on 28 January including 1,720 at The Reef. The island total on 12/13 January was 3,120, when 2,980 **Northern Lapwings** were also counted (JB).

Waders found during the Goose and WeBS count on Tiree on 16 December included a first-winter **Little Stint** at Gott Bay with 130 **Ringed Plovers** and 30 **Dunlin**, a leg-flagged **Sanderling** at Balephetrish Bay (in a flock of 90), together with 180 **Ringed Plovers** and 46 **Turnstones** (including a leg-flagged bird) at Milton (JB). Tiree is a Site of National Importance for **Purple Sandpipers** and 60 were found at Hough Bay on 4 January, 55 at Balephetrish Bay on 12 January and 15 at Hynish on 25 January with smaller numbers elsewhere during the month. A flock of 43 **Purple Sandpipers** near the crazy golf course at Dunoon on 29 December was one of the largest on record for the mainland (George Newall), only exceeded by 44 at Southend, Kintyre on 11 March 1973!

Three **Common Snipe** were feeding amongst seaweed at low tide at Taynuilt, Mid-Argyll on 12 December at the end of a long cold spell (BA) and three more were seen in the late evening of 27 January at Rhugarbh Croft, Appin, North Argyll (Mary Gregory). A minimum of ten **Woodcock** were at Carnan Mor, Tiree on 2 November (JB) and five were flushed from the roadside between Otter Ferry and Glendaruel at dusk on 13 January (TC).

On 13 January, 13 **Bar-tailed Godwits** were in Loch Crinan and 32 **Common Redshanks** were found in the Add Estuary (JD). A single **Greenshank** was at Kennacraig, Kintyre on 11 December. At least one seems to winter in West Loch Tarbert (BA). A minimum of 130 **Turnstones** was found around the Otter Ferry, Cowal area on 11 January, but sadly no colour leg rings (TC)!

Two **Grey Phalaropes** were seen in Gunna Sound, Tiree on 14 November (Andy Robinson) and a record count of 14 was made during a seawatch off Aird, Tiree in NW7-8 with heavy rain and intense squalls on the morning of 11 November (07.45-10.15hrs) (JB).

Skuas (see also 'seabirds'), gulls, terns and auks

A seawatch off Aird, Tiree in NW7-8 with heavy rain and intense squalls on the morning of 11 November found three first-winter **Little Gulls**, 1,150 **Kittiwakes**, a very late **Arctic Tern**, 148 large auks (mostly **Razorbills**), two **Puffins**, a **Black Guillemot** and a **Little Auk**. Another **Little Auk** was seen there on 15 November (JB).

Thousands of gulls were seen coming into Loch Fyne in the last two weeks of November, including 1500+ **Black-headed** and 100's of **Kittiwakes** (JD). Well over 1,000 gulls were feeding to the north of the Otter Ferry spit on 28 November (for the second day running) including at

least 250 **Black-headed Gulls** (TC).

Mediterranean Gulls have again been seen regularly in Loch Fyne/Loch Gilp. An adult in Loch Gilp, Mid-Argyll on the afternoon of 14 November was the first there since 22 August (JD). Two more, an adult and a first-winter bird, were seen preening at Inverneill, Mid-Argyll on 19 November together with about 600 **Black-headed Gulls** (BA). On 5 December there were three **Mediterranean Gulls** in Loch Gilp (two adults and a first-winter bird) (JD), on 2 January the first-winter bird was still at Loch Gilp and on 6 January an adult (the same or another) had re-appeared at the head of Loch Gilp with c.1200 **Black-headed Gulls** (JD),

An adult **Ring-billed Gull** on the foreshore at Oban at 15.30hrs on 21 November was almost certainly the annually returning bird from previous years (BA). It was seen there regularly through December and January and on 4 January was also seen in the inner bay, Dunstaffnage, Mid-Argyll (BA/Anne-Lise Dickie, Stuart Gibson etc).

Relatively few **Iceland Gulls** have been reported so far this winter. First-winter birds were at the Add Estuary on 20 November, at The Reef, Tiree on 21 December, at Ormsary, Knapdale on 21 December, in Campbeltown harbour on 14 January, (two) at the 'squinty bridge' (5km north of Tarbert) on the A83 and a very pale first-winter at Ardrishaig on 18 January, in Oban Harbour on 20 January and at the fish farm in Loch Fyne just north of Minard, Mid-Argyll (Andy Robinson), and flying over Dubh Loch just north of Inveraray on 29 January. A second-winter bird was in Asknish Bay, near Craobh Haven, Mid-Argyll on 2 January (JD, JB, BA/Anne-Lise Dickie, Rab Morton, Andy Robinson, Roger Broad).

Usually in Argyll, **Iceland Gulls** in winter outnumber **Glaucous Gulls**, but this winter the reverse has been true. A first-winter **Glaucous Gull** at Sorobaidh Bay, Tiree on 1 November was the first of many sightings and was followed by an adult off Aird, Tiree on 15 November (JB). There was then quite a gap until two first-winter birds were seen from the Tarbert-Portavadie ferry on 23 December (Steve Petty) followed by a 'sub-adult' at Black-rock (Loch Indaal), Islay on 29 December. A second-winter bird appeared at Rubha Chraiginis, Tiree on 4 January and a first-winter bird was feeding on a seal carcass at Balephetrish Bay, Tiree on 5 January. On Islay, a second-winter bird was present in Loch Indaal on 6 January and a first-winter was at Rubha Ban on 9 January.

A first-winter **Glaucous Gull** was at the south end of Asknish Bay (Craobh Haven), Mid-Argyll on 17 January and the following day first-winter birds were seen at the fish cages at Inverneill, Mid-Argyll and at the old pier West Loch Tarbert, Kintyre. On 21 January, a "new" second-winter bird was at the 'squinty bridge' (5km north of Tarbert) and a very confiding second-winter bird seen at Kilfinan Bay, Cowal during the WeBS count could have been the same bird, although given the numbers that have been seen recently it could just as well have been a different individual. A second-winter bird had a lucky escape from the clutches of local **White-tailed Eagles** at

Knock, Loch na Keal, Mull on 26 January.

Meanwhile on Tiree numbers had really been building up, and on 28 January a minimum of 12 (plus one dead bird) were around the west of the island at lunch time—making the most of seal carcasses. These included five together at Balephetrish Bay (one adult, two second-winter and two first-winter), four at Traigh Hough (one adult, two second-winter and one first-winter) and three at Traigh Ghrianal/Thodhrasdail (two adults and one second-winter) as well as one dead first-winter bird. On 31 January a minimum of 14 (three adults, six second-winter and five first-winter) were found at the gull roost at Rubha Chraiginis. Also at the roost were 1700 **Common Gulls**, 430 **Herring Gulls**, 240 **Great Black-backed Gulls** and a single adult **Black-headed Gull** (JB, Steve Petty, Fiona Barclay, John Armitage, JD, BA/Anne-Lise Dickie/TC/ Bryan Rains). Their abundance may have been partly to do with the severe storms at sea around this time, but why were other species apparently not affected? It seems to have been a rather local phenomenon. I checked with George Gordon of the Northern Ireland Birdwatchers Association and he tells me that only four **Glaucous Gulls** were reported in the whole of the province during January!

Following the storm on the night of 17/18 January TC went down to the shore at Otter Ferry in late morning to see what had turned up. As on the previous day, there were hundreds of gulls around the area of the spit and further up the loch. What was new was the large numbers of auks (mainly if not all **Razorbills**). After watching for only about 10-15 minutes he saw at least 100 passing down the loch with smaller numbers going up while others were fishing. There could easily have been much higher numbers but as this is fairly unusual at this time of year it would be interesting if there were any other in-shore reports (TC).

Doves, owls, woodpeckers etc.

A single **Stock Dove** was seen flying into Benmore Gardens, Cowal from adjacent fields on 23 December. This is a very unusual record for this location (Steve Petty).

A **Barn Owl** was seen at Heanish, Tiree on 5 November, an unusual record for the island (JB/Andy Robinson). Four more were found in Glen More, Mull on 8 January and another was at Loch Beg (Bryan Rains). Two were seen near Cairnbaan, Mid-Argyll on several evenings in early January (JD). A **Short-eared Owl** was seen near Heylipol Church, Tiree on 5 December (JB) and a **Long-eared Owl** was recorded at Loch Beg, Mull on 5 January (Bryan Rains).

A single **Common Kingfisher** was seen in flight from under the bridge at Corran Roundabout, Lochgilphead heading downstream towards Loch Gilp on 16 December (Dave Payne). So far there have been fewer reports on the mainland than in recent winters. However, another was feeding along a deep ditch between Milton and Port Ban at the east tip of Tiree on 3 January. It was first found on 1 January by a visiting birdwatcher and is the first re-



Top: Juvenile White-tailed Eagle at Loch Leathan, near Lochgilphead on 13 December © Jim Dickson

Middle. Little Egret near Lochgilphead on 2 January ©Jim Dickson

Bottom. Great Grey Shrike at Cornaigbeg, Tiree on 12 November ©John Bowler

cord for Tiree (JB)!

Passerines

Coal Tits. Exceptional numbers in gardens in Argyll continued right through the winter, but numbers start to fall off in late January, as birds returned to the woods to take up territories.

Waxwings. A major influx into Scotland took place in early November, with flocks of over 100 being seen as far west as Stornoway, Western Isles. The invasion continued unabated into mid and late November and the flock of over 200 in Lochgilphead is the largest ever recorded in the county.

Early November Waxwing records. A group of 12 was reported at Craignure, Mull on 1 November, two were with a Common Chiffchaff at Carnan Mor, Tiree on 2 November, two were seen at The Lodge, Arinagour, Coll on 3 November with a **Lesser Whitethroat**, three **Siskins** and a **Eurasian Treecreeper** (Simon Wellock), two were in Rowans near to the nursery within Ardkinglas Estate, Mid-Argyll at 08.20hrs (Glyn Toplis) and two were at Kilkenneth Tiree on 5 November (JB). A flock of 40 was reported at a roundabout in the centre of Oban on 6 November (Shaun McCullough per JD), six were seen at Eredine, Loch Awe on 7 November and thrushes there included c.50 **Fieldfares**, 15 **Redwings**, eight **Mistle Thrushes** and five **Blackbirds** (Karl Pipes). A total of 105 **Waxwings** were found in Connel village on 9 November (Mike Harrison) and a flock of approximately 40 ("it may have been more, I just couldn't count them quick enough!") were eating Rowan berries on the trees in the car park of the Operational Services Offices of the Argyll & Bute Council in Manse Brae, Lochgilphead on 10 November (Lynsey Gibson). Numbers at Eredine, Loch Awe had increased to 27 by 11 November (Karl Pipes), six were feeding at Ardfern on the berries of a species of mountain ash covered in pink berries (Gillie Hind) and a flock of 18 was in the garden at Kilmory Guest House, Lochgilphead (Rob Baker). The invasion continued unabated into mid and late November and the flock of over 200 in Lochgilphead is the largest ever recorded in the county.

Records from club members included the following. Numbers at Connel were down from 105 on 9th November to 5 by 13th November (Mike Harrison) A flock of 17 were in a garden at Kames, Cowal on 17 November, feeding on pink *Sorbus* berries until first-year **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** made an unsuccessful attack. Numbers there fell as the supply of berries depleted and by 24 November only five remained—and no berries (Steve Petty)! A group of 30 were feeding at Glenbranter, Cowal on 18 November (Peter Woods). On 19th November and there were at least 200 (possibly 230) at the westernmost end of the green at Lochgilphead in Sycamore and Hawthorn opposite the caravan park (BA/Anne-Lise

Dickie). This is the largest single flock ever reported in Argyll; most seemed to have moved on by the following day. A single bird was seen at Port Ellen, Islay on 21 November (George Newall) and five were seen on the north shore road of Loch Etive, North Argyll on 25 November (BA/Anne-Lise Dickie). After this numbers declined and a small flock of five or so at Glenbranter, Cowal on 5 December (Peter Woods) and a late single Waxwing at Eredine (Loch Awe), Mid-Argyll on 27 December (Karl Pipes) were the last reports during the period.

The following reports came from members of the public as a result of a piece about the **Waxwing** invasion that Jim Dickson had published in the *Argyll Advertiser*. Two were on a tree at the bottom of a garden in Meadows Road Lochgilphead on 9 November (Alison Guy). On November 19th the Japanese Rowan at a house on the shore road, Strachur, Cowal was first visited by three and then on the 20th by a flock of 30 or 40, which moved away too quickly for them to be counted accurately (David Campbell). At least 10 were in a garden at Torinturk, Mid-Argyll, on the Kilberry Road (8km from Tarbert) surrounded by forestry. They were mostly congregated in a poplar tree, with a couple sitting on the telephone line into the house (Hilary Farrar).

Other species records. A very late **Barn Swallow** was at Loch Beg, Mull from early on the morning of 9 November until 11.45hrs (Bryan Rains). Two **Dippers** were seen in Kilfinan Bay, Cowal on 23 November. One was seen to catch a flat fish of about 25mm from head to tail. After flogging, like a Kingfisher, it appeared to swallow or at least take the fish fully into its mouth only to spit it out again for more flogging. This was repeated at least twenty times before it flew off carrying the fish (TC).

A flock of 16 **Fieldfares** was in a field at Ardentraive (Colintraive), Cowal on 9 December with **Curlews** and **Oystercatchers** (Graham & Danielle Clark). More **Fieldfares** were reported than usual during January including a flock of 29 near Clachan of Glendaruel, Cowal on 8 January (TC), a flock of 105 at Stroneskar (near Ford), Mid-Argyll on 13 January (JD), and two at Kilmoluaig, Tiree on 19 January (JB). Approximately 30 **Blackbirds** were seen in a field beside Holy Loch, Cowal with **Curlews** and **Common Gulls** on 20 January (Graham & Danielle Clark).

Records of late warblers included a **Lesser Whitethroat**, a female **Blackcap** and a pale **Common Chiffchaff** at Balephuil, Tiree on 2 November (JB). A male and two female **Blackcaps** were in a garden at Peninver, Kintyre on 13 November and one or more of them was feeding quite competently from nut-feeder (Steve & Sue Walker). Like many people they also remarked on the unusual numbers of **Coal Tits** that had been in the garden. A very brown **Chiffchaff** at Acha, Coll on 28 November looked quite good for the Siberian race (Simon Wellock) and a male **Blackcap** was at Balephuil, Tiree on 3 December (JB). On the morning of 8 December, around 11.00hrs, a **Blackcap** was found in a willow in the back of the garden at Colintraive together with some **House Sparrows** and **Common Chaffinches**. As usual by the time the camera had been

located, the critter was gone! (Danielle Clark De Bisschop).

A **Great Grey Shrike** was seen at Cornaigbeg on 12 November—the first recorded for Tiree and the first in Argyll since 2003 (see photo on page 26). These are rare birds in the county nowadays.

A loose flock of at least eleven **Eurasian Jays** were at Dunmore, West Loch Tarbert, Kintyre on 11 December (BA) and one was seen at Ardnacloch, Appin, North Argyll (T. C. Smout). A **Magpie** was seen at Campbeltown Loch on 5 November (Rab Morton) and one was seen in a garden by the shore at Ardentinny, Cowal on 21 November (Steve Petty).

A flock of 300 **Common Chaffinches** was at the Craobh Haven, Mid-Argyll turn-off from the A816 on 3 January and a flock of 12 **Goldfinches** was feeding under a mature Alder tree in the inner bay Dunstaffnage, Mid-Argyll at noon on 4 January (BA). An impressive total of 13 **Goldfinches** was noted at garden bird feeders in the garden at Colintraive on 13 January (Graham & Danielle Clark).

Five **Bullfinches** (four males and a female) were seen in a garden at Eredine (Loch Awe), Mid-Argyll on 6 December (Karl Pipes) and five were seen at Loch Melldalloch, Cowal on 8 December (TC). A cracking **Hawfinch** was reported at The Lodge, Arinagour on the afternoon of 22 November. This is Coll's second, the first being in spring 1988 (Simon Wellock).

Apart from single **Snow Buntings** at A' Chroic and Clabach, Coll on 28 November all the remaining records were on Tiree, including 14 at Traigh nan Gilean on 1 November and three at Gott Bay Tiree on 18 November (JB). An impressive total of nine **Yellowhammers** were at bird feeders in a garden in Fernoch Drive, Lochgilphead on 9 December as well as eight **Coal Tits** (Lynsey Gibson) and a group of 17 **Reed Buntings** were feeding on the ground around silage bales at Otter House, Kilfinan, Cowal on 21 January (TC).

Other sightings

A late **Peacock** butterfly was flying around the boathouse at Kilfinan Bay, Cowal on 2 November (TC).

There was quite a sight at dusk on 30 November in Oban Bay, as an **Otter** swam right up to the shore and sent the Ring-billed Gull and a few other gulls up (BA). Two **Otters** were seen close up in Loch Craiglin during the Loch Sween WeBS count on 21 January. They were splashing about close to the shore apparently digging in the mud at the bottom of the loch (PD).

Two **Sika Deer** stags were seen between Ardpatrik and Ormsary, Knapdale on 25 January (BA/Anne-Lise Dickie). An **Atlantic (Grey) Seal** was an unusual visitor to the Kyles of Bute at Colintraive on 25 December. Most observations here are of **Common Seals**. A young **Common Seal** was seen there on 27 and 29 December (Danielle & Graham Clark).

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Articles for the June issue of the *Eider* should with the Editor before the 24th May 2009

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The *Eider* is the quarterly newsletter of the **Argyll Bird Club**. The editor welcomes articles about birds, wildlife conservation and ecology in Argyll, including articles of a wider natural history interest, notices of forthcoming events, book reviews, press releases and letters. 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 of March, June, September and December. Articles for each issue must be with the editor before the 24th 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 necessarily those of 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 human 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 indoor 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).