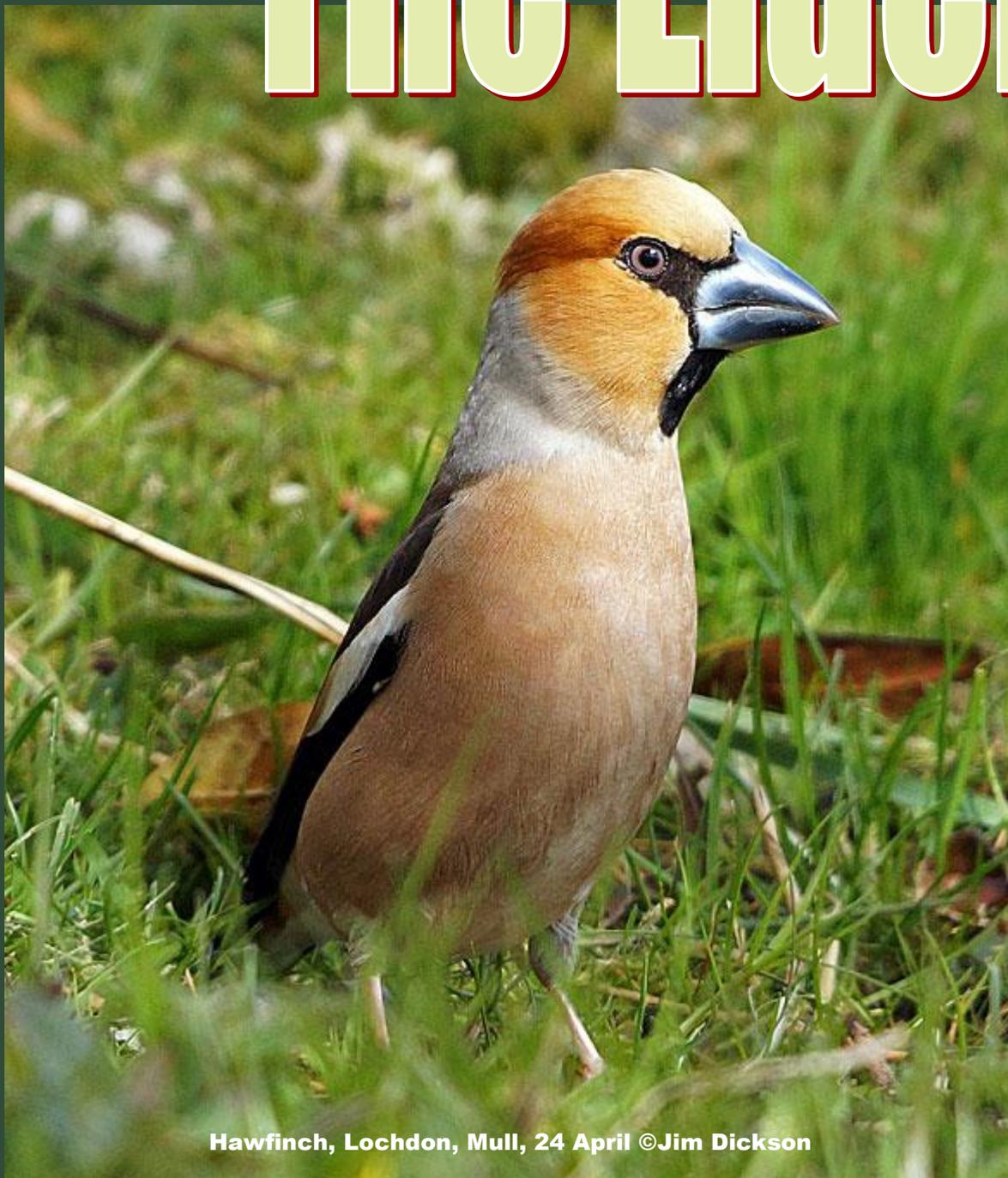


**June 2016**  
**Number 116**

# The Eider



Hawfinch, Lochdon, Mull, 24 April ©Jim Dickson

**Recent bird sightings, pages 14-19**

**Driven grouse shooting conflict, pages 26-27**

**Birding in northern Spain, pages 20-25**

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### Editorial

This issue highlights many of the club's varied activities. Over 30 members made the early morning journey to attend the spring meeting at Seil Island Hall in Ellenabeich. The hall provided an ideal venue for the meeting, with delicious sandwiches and cakes being served at lunch time. And, for once the sun shone for most of the day, although the wind was bitterly cold. Three successful field trip accounts appear here, and below are details of four more trips that we have arranged during the spring/summer. I hope as many of you as possible will make the effort to attend. The visit to the RSPB's Loch Lomond Reserve should prove of particular interest. In addition, Bob Furness has put together a very interesting programme for the autumn meeting at the Cairnbaan Hotel. Finally, I'd be interested to print any comments about Mark Avery's thought-provoking article on the conflict over driven grouse shooting (pages 26-27).

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### Club News

#### FIELD TRIPS 2016

If there is a chance that adverse weather might lead to the cancellation of a fieldtrip, please check the club's website or contact the organiser the night before or prior to setting off.

**Saturday 28 May. Loch Gilp, the Add Estuary and Taynish NNR.** Led by Jim Dickson (Phone 01546 603967. E-mail [meg@jdickson5.plus.com](mailto:meg@jdickson5.plus.com)). Meet at 10.00hrs in Lochgilphead at the Corran Car Park, opposite the caravan park, on the A83, close to the roundabout (A83/A816) at the western end of the town.

**Sunday 26 June. Skipness.** Led by Katie Pendreigh (E-mail: [katiependreigh@aol.com](mailto:katiependreigh@aol.com). Phone: 01583 441359. Meet in the car park beside the entrance gate to the castle at 10.00hrs. The Sea Food Cabin will be open for lunch.

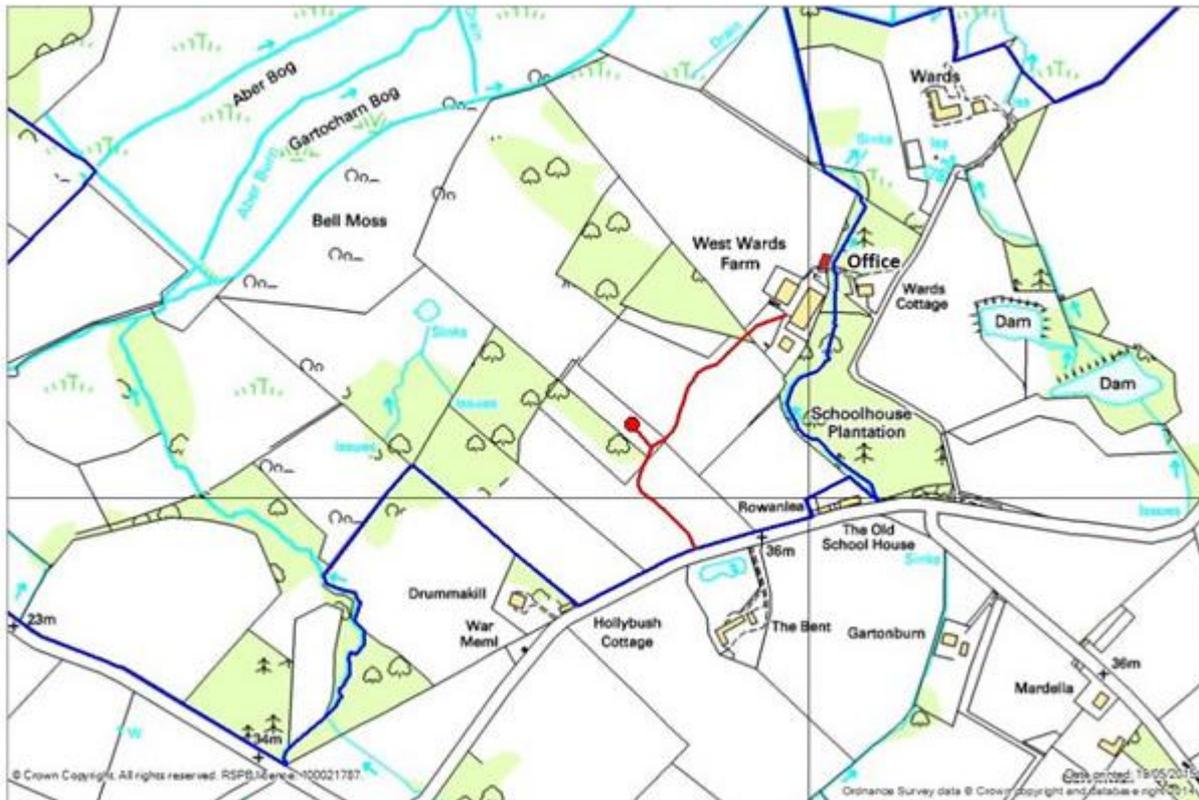
**Saturday 23 July. Loch Lomond RSPB Reserve.** Led by Anne Archer (Phone 01700 811611. E-mail:

[archerspringbank@btinternet.com](mailto:archerspringbank@btinternet.com))

Meet at the visitor hub/car park at the reserve (map and details of how to get there are on the next page). Please let Anne know if you want to take part in this trip by 1st July, as we need to confirm numbers with the RSPB. An RSPB staff member will show us around. Participants should be aware that there are no paths leading from the visitor hub, so most of our walk will be through farm fields (which will contain cattle at this time of year) and other habitats such as woodland, fen and wildflower meadows.

### Acknowledgements

Very many thanks to the following for their contributions to this issue—Mark Avery, Malcolm Chattwood, Jim Dickson, Jim Duncan, Jan Ferguson, Bob Furness (including photocopying & dispatch), Mike Harrison, David Jardine, Eddie Maguire, David Merrie, David Palmar, Katie Pendreigh, Linda Petty (proof reading), Peter Roberts, David Shallcross, Nigel Scriven, Morgan Vaughan and Gordon Yates.



The map above shows the location of the access road and car park at the RSPB Loch Lomond Reserve.

If you are coming from Drymen along the A811, heading for Balloch and Gartocharn, you will pass the Old Schoolhouse B&B on the right hand side. The entrance to RSPB Loch Lomond is the next right hand turn, there is no signage but the entrance to the site has a low stone wall. If you pass a property called Drummakill, then you have gone too far.

If you are coming from Balloch heading along the A811 to Drymen, you will need to drive through Gartocharn. As you leave the village there will be several bends after which you need to look out for the War Memorial and a property called Drummakill, which will be on your left-hand side. The entrance to RSPB Loch Lomond is the next turning on the left, there is no signage but the entrance to the site has a low stone wall. If you pass the Old Schoolhouse B&B, you've gone too far.

Follow the access track down the hill, the visitor car park is on the left hand side. Please note, unfortunately our post-code doesn't work for sat nav.

Wellies may be required, depending on the weather conditions leading up to the visit, and no doubt at this time of year, insect repellent will also be needed. Paula Baker gave a talk about the reserve at last autumn's meeting, an account of which appeared in the December 2015 *Eider*, pages 29-28.

**August 27 August.** Seabirds from the Islay Ferry. Led by Mike Harrison (contact details: Phone 01631 710656. Mobile 07731 197722. E-mail [jmharrison@iee.org](mailto:jmharrison@iee.org)). Meet Mike at the Kenacraig Ferry Terminal at 12.00hrs. The ferry departs to Islay at 13.00hrs, arriving at Port Askaig at 14.55hrs. The return ferry leaves Port Askaig at 15.30hrs and arrives back at Kenacraig at 17.25hrs.

## INDOOR MEETINGS 2016/2017

**Autumn Meeting and AGM. Saturday 12 November 2016** at the Cairnbaan Hotel (<http://www.cairnbaan.com/>), near Lochgilphead (phone: 01546 603668) - see programme on the next page.

**Spring Meeting. Saturday 4 March 2017** at the Royal Marine Hotel (<http://www.royalmarinehotel.co.uk/index.asp>), Dunoon (phone: 01369 705810). The programme will appear in the December *Eider*.

**Raffle prizes.** Donations of raffle prizes for indoor meetings are always welcome.

## ARGYLL BIRD REPORT 26 (2014)

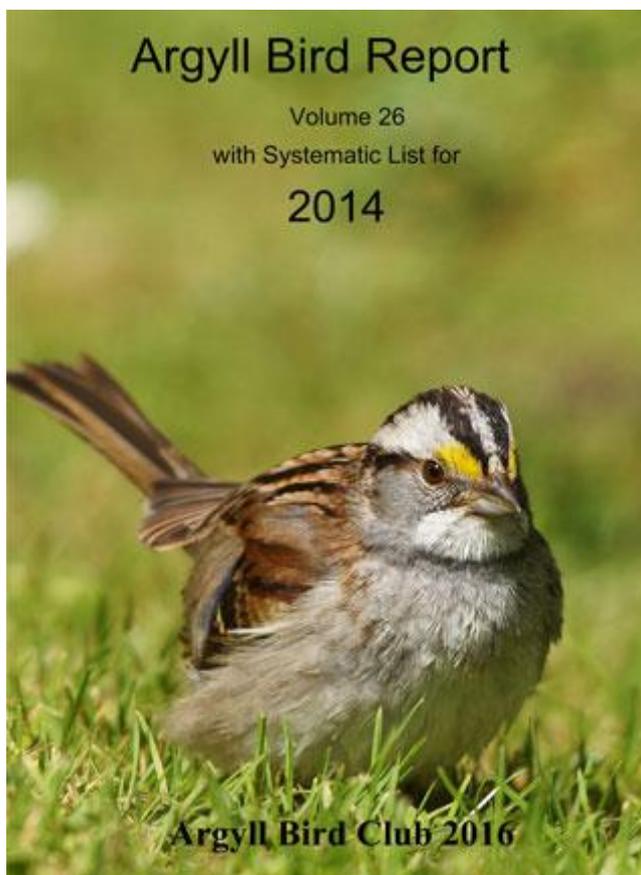
The latest bird report is now available. If any members have not received their copy please

contact Bob Furness (contact details on back page). Additional copies of the report can be purchased from Bob for £10.00 including postage. Cheques should be made payable to the 'Argyll Bird Club'. We would like to sell as many copies as possible before the next report is published, so if you know of any outlets that would be willing to stock it, please let Bob know.

### THE ARGYLL BIRD CLUB'S WEBSITE

([www.argyllbirdclub.org](http://www.argyllbirdclub.org))

Do visit our website to find out about up-to-date arrangements for meetings, recent sightings of birds, including photographs, and lots more.



### Programme for the ABC's Autumn Meeting

Saturday 12 November at the Cairnbaan Hotel, near Lochgilphead, Argyll

Time	Session
<b>0930</b>	<b>Doors open, coffee and tea</b>
0950-1000	Welcome and introduction— <i>Mike Harrison</i> , Chairman of the Argyll Bird Club
1000-1030	Recent bird sightings and photographs— <i>Jim Dickson</i> , Argyll Bird Recorder
1030-1100	Birding in Nepal— <i>Nigel Scriven</i>
<b>1100-1120</b>	<b>Coffee/tea</b>
1120-1200	Highland renewal; improving estates for wildlife— <i>Alan Fielding</i>
1200-1230	Seabirds and offshore windfarms— <i>Julie Miller</i>
<b>1230-1400</b>	<b>Lunch (available in the hotel if required)</b>
1400-1440	AGM
1440-1500	BTO Surveys and updates— <i>Nigel Scriven</i>
1500-1540	Birding in Trinidad and Tobago— <i>Gordon Holm</i>
<b>1540-1600</b>	<b>Tea/coffee</b>
1600-1620	Diver identification and ecology— <i>Bob Furness</i>
1620-1630	<b>Raffle and closing remarks</b>

# Summaries of talks from the Spring meeting

©David Merrie

## Seil Island Hall, Ellenabeich An ideal venue for the meeting

### Introduction

With the morning sun shining on snow-capped peaks, club chairman Mike Harrison welcomed 32 members to the spring meeting in Seil Island Hall, Ellenabeich on Saturday 5 March. County Bird Recorder Jim Dickson had prepared an excellent set of photographs of both common and uncommon species that had been seen recently in Argyll. As Jim was unable to attend the meeting, David Jardine expertly took us through the images, highlighting particular plumage details that can be used to age and sex birds. He also explained some of the techniques that are available in Photoshop and other software packages to draw out plumage details etc., which may be difficult to see on unedited images.

### Blubber and birds - Connor Ryan, Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust (summary by David Jardine)

Next up was Dr Conor Ryan, Science and Policy Officer of the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust who explored the association between seabirds and cetaceans using information from studies by the trust on the west coast of Scotland. He asked the interesting question of who

follows whom? He noted that some of the interactions could be mutual or commensal facilitation, while others may be competitive.

The associations are usually related to food - both birds and cetaceans are searching or feeding. Usually we tend to think of seabirds benefiting from



Connor Ryan ©David Palmar [www.photoscot.co.uk](http://www.photoscot.co.uk)

cetaceans, but in Hebridean waters it may be the other way round. There was little overlap in the distribution of Minke Whales and Manx Shearwaters on the west coast, but similar distributions of Common Dolphins suggesting that competition may be occurring.

It is difficult to know who is following whom and more research is needed to understand how both birds and whales find their prey, which is obscured from sight, patchily distributed and has ephemeral concentrations. One of the key items is the 'smell of the sea' which has been found to be dimethylsulphide, a gas produced by phytoplankton when they die or are eaten. Some seabirds have a good sense of smell, which coupled with dynamic soaring allows them to find food from great distances.

Conor showed some impressive photographs of feeding whales, including one where the whale was swallowing a bird. He and colleagues had found 29 dead seabirds in two days near lunge-feeding Fin Whales in the Celtic Sea and wondered if this was an important source of mortality in seabirds in some places.

In conclusion, he noted that the interaction between birds and cetaceans is a complex interdependency, which was taxon specific and also dependent on scale. He noted that a decline in auks, whose feeding activity is known to shoal fish, may be detrimental to Minke Whales.

### **The use of DNA in raptor studies - Phil Whitfield, Natural Research** (summary by Bob Furness)

DNA can be extracted from the base of feathers. Scottish Raptor Study Groups have been collecting moulted Golden Eagle feathers from home ranges throughout Scotland, and the DNA from these feathers has allowed detailed analysis of the identity and relationships of birds. Individual birds can be identified from their DNA profile (using several microsa-



The same primary feather moulted from a goshawk as a yearling (left) and at age 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 & 7 (right). Apart from the yearling feather, the rest show remarkably little variation in length, colour, and the position and extent of the barring. DNA has now shown that collecting such moulted feathers from around nest sites can be reliably used to identify individual female goshawks.

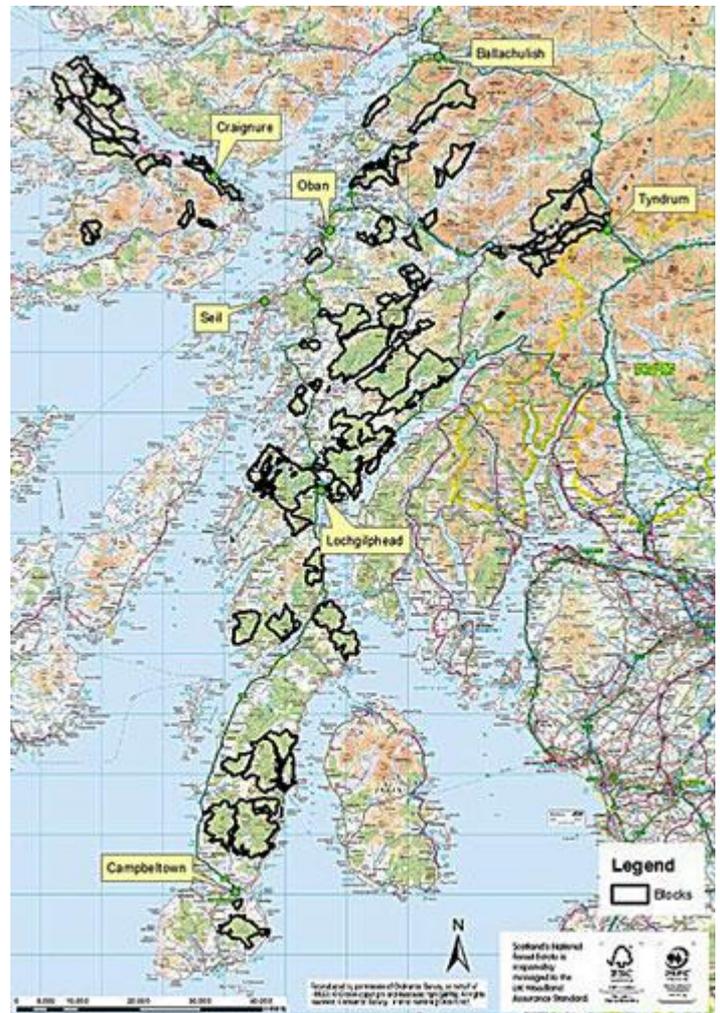
tellite loci) and can be sexed. The main concern in using moulted feathers is to be confident that the collected feathers come from the birds living in the home range rather than from birds that just happen to be flying through the area. Sampling Golden Eagle flight feathers that have been found close to the nest site in each home range rarely identifies birds other than the owners of the home range, so this approach works well with Golden Eagle. As a result, it has been possible to demonstrate that established territory owners very rarely move to another territory. In the few cases where such movements have been detected they are usually of females moving just to the next adjacent territory. More importantly, sampling moulted feathers allows survival rates in different regions of Scotland to be measured. Survival of established adults is very high, generally around 93 to 94% per year. Sampling feathers indicated that a poisoning incident in one home range near Peebles probably involved the killing of three birds rather than just one, as new birds recruited into the vacancy. DNA profiling also allowed comparison of the genetics between populations in different areas. While there is little genetic structure across mainland Scotland, birds in the Outer Hebrides show genetic differences from the mainland population. It seems that young Golden Eagles may move all over mainland Scotland looking for a breeding site, but don't cross the sea to the Hebrides. Golden Eagles from the Hebrides very rarely cross to mainland Scotland. Can similar research be done with other bird of prey species? With White-tailed Eagles the approach is less suitable because this species does not exclude conspecifics from nest sites and indeed communal roosting is often seen, so moulted feathers cannot be attributed to particular breeding pairs even if collected at nest sites. With goshawk, there has long been a belief that individ-

ual birds can be recognised from characteristic features of the colour and patterning of moulted flight feathers, which varies considerably from bird to bird. DNA analysis confirms that this is the case. So, most birds can be identified by collecting moulted feathers, while DNA profiling allows a rigorous check if results are not obvious from a visual inspection of feathers. And, all of this without having to catch, or even disturb the birds.

### Looking after birds in the forests of Argyll – John Taylor, Forest Enterprise Scotland (summary by Mike Harrison)

The West Argyll Forest District covers 92,000ha and includes a range of woodland habitats together with open ground, coastline and freshwater lochs. These lie mainly within the Argyll Bird Club's recording areas of Mull, North Argyll, Mid-Argyll and Kintyre. John is one of four staff in the environment team which is charged with safeguarding the natural environment and archaeological features of the estate. Central to that objective is a database of wildlife sightings and points of interest such as badger setts, rare bird nest sites, etc., which allows all proposed forest operations to be assessed for adverse impact on wildlife. Proposals can then be adjusted or abandoned as appropriate.

Two of Forest Enterprise's six conservation priority species are birds - Black Grouse and Capercaillie. One successful technique for increasing Black Grouse numbers has been the use of cattle grazing to control heather growth to a level which suits the birds. The provision of nest platforms for Ospreys, a project started many years ago by club member David Jardine, has helped the number of nest sites within the forest district to reach double figures, producing 15-20 chicks per year, with a particular stronghold around Loch Awe. The provision of rafts to provide nest sites for divers is another project started many years ago by a club member, David Merrie, which is still continued by Forest Enterprise at many sites. The original raft design of polystyrene sandwiched between plywood sheets has been developed progressively over the years. The latest version uses polythene tanks inside a wooden pallet-like structure with a splash board on the windward side to



Map showing the extent (outlined in black) of Forest Enterprise managed forests in Argyll

prevent the turf being washed off the raft by wave action.

Environmental management of the forest is being facilitated by the use of modern computer modelling technology which allows the visual impact of planting, felling and haulage to be assessed from the desk. Along with field tests to examine the impact of, for example, passing timber lorries on nesting eagles, these tools help to ensure that adverse impacts on the birdlife of the national forest estate in Argyll are avoided.

### Using social media to encourage wildlife recording – Richard Wesley (summary by Malcolm Chattwood)

The Seil Natural History Group was formed in 2007 with the aim of promoting the study and enjoyment of natural history in the area. The name was changed to Lorn Natural History Group (LNHG) to reflect the extension of the area of interest and membership. In addition to a programme of monthly talks and field trips, an online presence was maintained via a website, forum and group email network. An important part of the groups work has been the collection of biological



records and their submission to the National Biodiversity Network database. With the support of SNH, LNHG became the biological recording centre for Mainland Argyll (Vice-county 98).

In an effort to connect with a larger audience in early 2015 a decision was made to establish a LNHG Facebook Group. This would allow access for 1.5 million Facebook members to look at the site's content whilst allowing only LNHG Facebook Group members to contribute comments, other material and photos. Since the Facebook Group was established, LNHG membership has increased by 40%, with 85% of the total now being members of the Facebook Group. Membership of the Facebook Group has reached 341 which has brought benefits of a wider geographical coverage and increased submission of records.

Richard sensed the Argyll Bird Club audience might not feel they were likely candidates to become members of similar groups, such as the one promoted by LNHG and he confessed to originally being a "Facebook luddite". However, he is now a firm convert and has seen at first-hand how interest and participation can be generated amongst a wider membership including young people, which is particularly encouraging.

Richard concluded his talk, well-illustrated with Facebook Group images, with good advice for anyone wishing to take the plunge into the world of Facebook. LNHG's Facebook page can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/LornNaturalHistoryGroup/?fref=ts>

You don't need to be a member to have a look - be brave!

#### **Wildlife and landscape of Namibia - David Merrie (summary by Steve Petty)**

David Merrie enthralled us with a talk about a trip to Namibia that he and his wife Heddy made in 2014. To start their tour they flew from Frankfurt to Windhoek, the capital of Namibia. Namibia lies towards the south-western tip of Africa. It's an arid country, about three-times larger than the UK, yet with a population of only 2.1 million people. The vast Namibian Desert spans the entire Atlantic Coast. The superb light conditions allowed David to take some great photos. They visited many places, of which a few are described here. The dune systems at Sossusvlei were spectacular (photo below), not only for their height, some over 300m, but for their brilliant pink-orange-red colour, due to high levels of iron in the sand. At the base of the dunes were extensive salt and clay pans. Considering the lack of water, a surprising range of wildlife species was seen. These included larger antelopes, such as Oryx (see photo) and Springbok, numerous reptiles, and Ostrich, various bustards and many other birds. Nearby was Deadvlei, or the Dead Forest, which lay in a vast clay pan at the base of dunes. The dead trees were mainly species of Acacia, which had probably died 600-700 years ago due to climate



Sand dunes at Sossusvlei with Oryx beneath the trees ©David Merrie



Pygmy Falcon ©David Merrie

change, and were slowly being swallowed by the encroaching dunes. They have been preserved by the scorching sun and lack of moisture. Further north along the western seaboard lies the 'Skeleton Coast', so called because of the bleached bones of whales and seals that once littered the shore when whaling was at its height. Nowadays, Cape Fur Seals abound and a variety of seabirds were seen, including Damara Terns and White-breasted Cormorants. One of the highlights of the trip was a visit to Etosha National Park. It covers around 22,000 square-km, making it one of the largest national parks in Africa. An enormous salt pan covers just over 20% of the area, which floods occasionally, and then becomes suitable for flamingos and pelicans. The park contains a rich variety of mammals, birds and reptiles, including many threatened and endangered

species and some of the largest mammals to be seen in Africa, including African Bush Elephant, Angolan Giraffe, Lion, Leopard and many more. Lots of birds were seen, including Double-banded Coursers, Blacksmith and Crowned Lapwings, Yellow-billed Hornbill, Namaqua Sandgrouse, Pale Chanting Goshawk, Pygmy Falcon (photo opposite) to name just a few. The trip came to an end with a visit to the AfriCat Foundation at Okonjima, where injured large cats are rehabilitated and released back into the wild. In addition, much work goes into helping local communities develop ways of living with large carnivores. After viewing such wonderful photos, I suspect quite a few of the audience may well be looking to visit Namibia in the not too distant future!

### Conclusion



David Jardine  
©David Palmar [www.photoscot.co.uk](http://www.photoscot.co.uk)

To finish the talks, David Jardine gave a brief roundup of the current BTO surveys. After drawing the raffle and thanking the donors for the prizes, the speakers for their excellent talks and David Jardine for arranging the programme, Mike Harrison closed the meeting with an invitation to the Autumn Meeting and AGM at Cairnbaan on 12 November.

**Mike Harrison**



Club members enjoying the spring sunshine (but cold wind) during the lunch break. Seil Island Hall is in the background.

## ABC field trip to Luing - 27 February 2016



ABC members at Cullipool, looking out to Mull © David Jardine

On the last Saturday of February, five members met to visit a new location for the club - the Island of Luing. They were blessed with a remarkably good day - blue sky, bright sunshine and no wind. It was great to be out on possibly the best day of a pretty miserable winter.

After rendezvousing at Kilbrandon Church on Seil, where they consolidated to one vehicle before heading down to the four-car ferry over the Cuan Sound. The first stop was overlooking Torsa where a few Wigeon were found on the shore. The next stop was down at Blackmill Bay, where a lovely summer-plumaged Red-throated Diver was found offshore along with a Razorbill and Black Guillemot. To the south a pair of Ravens were found on territory and a few Goldfinches feeding at the Gorstan.

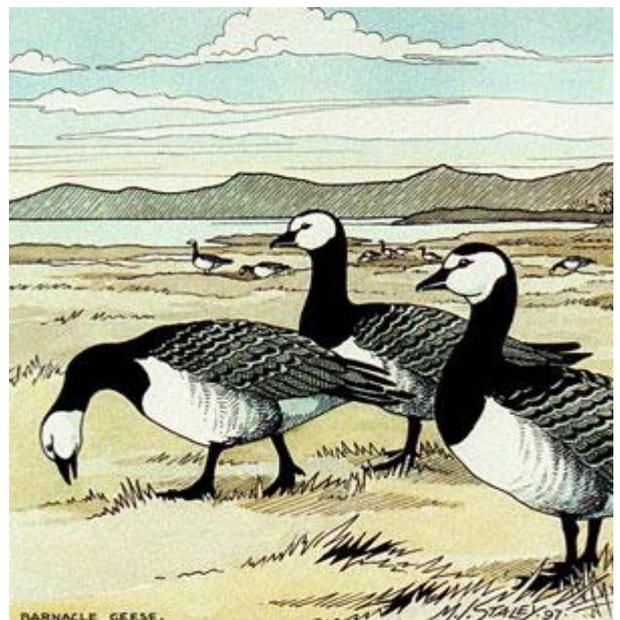
Crossing the island to Toberonochy, the wintering flock of Barnacle Geese were found grazing in the field behind Kilchatton Graveyard; there were around 320 in total, but they soon moved over the skyline to feed out of sight. Down at Toberonochy, another (winter-plumaged) Red-throated Diver was found with a Great Northern Diver in the Sound of Shuna, but there was no sign of otters, which are regularly seen in this area.

While heading up to Cullipool a short stop was made by the marsh/willow carr by the Fire Station, where David Jardine played a short tape of a Water Rail call, which quickly elicited a response from the bird(s) hidden deep within the vegetation. And so on to the Atlantic Islands Centre for a wonderful lunch in this great new facility on Lu-

ing. A short walk to the quarries confirmed that the Raven territory here was also occupied.

After lunch a short visit was made to Ardnamar, before heading up to Cuan for the ferry. It was at Cuan where one of the more remarkable discoveries of the day was made - a tree stump with an impressive array of woodpecker borings was found, which was unusual for an island with relatively little woodland. The tally at the end of the day came to 43 species; respectable for such a pleasant day when we weren't being too energetic - maybe next time we should walk right down to Aird Luing.

**David Jardine**



BARNACLE GEESSE.

## ABC field trip to the Sound of Gigha - 2 April 2016



ABC members looking out over the Sound of Gigha ©Mike Harrison

Conditions at Ronachan Point were ideal for bird-watching as 14 members gathered for the club's annual field trip to the Sound of Gigha. Although cool, the light breeze was from the east resulting in sheltered water on the mainland side of the sound. Several Great Northern Divers were easily seen close to the point but three Black-throated Divers near the mouth of West Loch Tarbert presented more of a challenge. Shag and Red-breasted Merganser were also on the water quite close to the shore while a group of 10 Common Scoter were further out in the sound, as were Slavonian Grebe, Eider and a single Razor-bill. Common and Black-headed Gulls were resting on the nearby islet where they were joined by three Sandwich Terns, our first summer migrants of the day. Meanwhile, on shore, Wren, Robin, Chaffinch and Blackbird could be heard singing and Rock and Meadow Pipits flitted about the shore.

Leaving Ronachan we drove south to the old West Coast Salmon site where good access to the shore is available. The first two members to pull up in the parking area had a rare treat as a male Merlin flew up from the gorse and perched on top of a nearby conifer before flying off. A Song Thrush was singing in the woodland and a Skylark could be heard over the fields. Down at the beach, a pair of Goosander accompanied a small group of Red-breasted Mergansers and a raft of about 30 Black-throated Divers was

spotted out in the sound. Pied Wagtail and Oystercatcher were on the beach to the south of us where we also saw our second summer migrant species of the day - Sand Martins. A Red-throated Diver was seen here, as were some more Common Scoter, Great Northern Divers and Eider. Two species of geese were added to the list, Greenland White-fronts and Greylags, as were three species of corvid, Rook, Hooded Crow and Jackdaw, which were perching on the cliff-top fence between foraging in the fields.

And so to the ferry pier at Tayinloan, passing a flock of 42 Curlew feeding in a field alongside some more Greenland White-fronted Geese. Close scrutiny of the beach to the south of the pier revealed two Bar-tailed Godwits, a Ringed Plover, two Redshank, a Turnstone and an over-flying Lapwing. Finally, as the party set off to board the ferry, a pair of Wheatear appeared on the rocks, our third and, as it turned out, final summer migrants of the day. Good views of some of the many Great Northern Divers in the sound were obtained from the ferry, but the highlight of the crossing was a close encounter with three Long-tailed Ducks.

Mute Swan and Mallard were swimming in Ardminish Bay as the ferry approached the slipway on Gigha and a Grey Heron was fishing on the rocky shore. Our attention then turned to the birds of the island as we walked through the village for lunch at the hotel. A Pied Wagtail flew over and Starling, Song Thrush, Dunnock and

Collared Dove were added to the list. Goldfinch and Coal Tit visited the nearby bushes while we lunched in the hotel garden and several Buzzards soared over the hill. A pair of Wigeon were spotted down in the bay and a Gannet was seen fishing out in the sound. After lunch we walked along to the woods at Achamore House where a Tree-creeper was found on a tree which had a large split in its bark which could well have provided a suitable nest site. Goldcrests were singing in the conifers as we set off back towards the ferry slip.

The return ferry trip found the Gannet resting on the water and provided more good views of the Long-tailed Ducks and Great Northern Divers. A new species was added to the list even at this late stage when we passed a Guillemot; a Razorbill nearby was perhaps the one seen five hours earlier from Ronachan Point.

And so we returned to Tayinloan after an excellent day having seen 63 species; the Sound of Gigha had lived up to its reputation as one of Argyll's bird hotspots.

**Mike Harrison**

**Species List:** Mute Swan, Greenland White-fronted Goose, Greylag Goose, Common Shelduck, Eurasian Wigeon, Mallard, Common Eider, Long-tailed Duck, Common Scoter, Red-breasted Merganser, Goosander, Common Pheasant, Red-throated Diver, Black-throated Diver, Great Northern Diver, Northern Gannet, European Shag, Grey Heron, Slavonian Grebe, Common Buzzard, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Ringed Plover, Northern Lapwing, Bar-tailed Godwit, Ruddy Turnstone, Eurasian Curlew, Common Redshank, Black-headed Gull, Common Gull, Herring Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Sandwich Tern, Common Guillemot, Razorbill, Black Guillemot, Rock Dove, Woodpigeon, Collared Dove, Merlin, Western Jackdaw, Rook, Hooded Crow, Goldcrest, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Coal Tit, Skylark, Sand Martin, Eurasian Treecreeper, Wren, Common Starling, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Robin, Northern Wheatear, Dunnock, House Sparrow, Pied Wagtail, Meadow Pipit, Rock Pipit, Chaffinch, Goldfinch and Bullfinch

### The adaptable birdwatcher

It is often said that some bird species are very adaptable when selecting nest sites. In particular, Robins and Blackbirds often choose places that don't seem entirely natural. When it comes to birdwatching we are all familiar with purpose built hides, constructed to allow us better views of our avian friends. However, sometimes we have to adapt to our surroundings too. Whilst on a recent visit to Prague one of our committee members did just that. He was sheltering from a shower of rain in the only available accommodation. He can be seen, binoculars in hand, looking rather pleased with himself after just



having enjoyed some good views of a Nuthatch. Fortunately, there were no 5-year olds around to express their displeasure at this unusual use of their playground!

## ABC field trip to Tarbet and Ardkinglas - 30 April 2016



Most of the group at Ardkinglas ©Mike Harrison

This field trip combined mist netting garden birds at Tarbet in the morning, lunch at the Fyne Ales brewery, and a walk in the Ardkinglas woodlands in the afternoon. The weather was kind; dry, and not too windy, although spells of bright sunshine reduced the catch rate by making the mist net more visible to birds. Nevertheless, in total, 47 birds were caught, comprising 40 siskins, four chaffinches, and single robin, great tit and goldfinch. Ten bird club members came to see the process, and were joined by a Masters student from Glasgow University who is carrying out a study of the prevalence of *Borrelia*, the bacterium that causes Lyme disease in humans, in ticks that are feeding on birds. Several of the birds caught had ticks attached, mostly around the base of the bill. We also looked at the ways that the age of birds can be determined from the colour of wing covert feathers and from the shape of tail feathers. Red squirrels put in an appearance at the bird feeders, as did great spotted woodpecker, and there were willow warblers and blackcaps singing close by. Although a pair of nuthatches have been ringed and retrapped at Tarbet during the winter,

there was no sign of those birds during the morning. After taking down and packing away the net, we were joined by another three bird club members at the Fyne Ale brewery for lunch, and then enjoyed a walk through Ardkinglas woodlands as far as the water mill. We heard nuthatch calling loudly in the Ardkinglas woodland, though did not manage to see the bird, but saw jays, willow warblers, blackcaps and other common woodland birds. The walk through Ardkinglas was very enjoyable, although the amount of bird song was low (we should probably have been there at 5 a.m.). After returning to the car park, about half the group then went on (unofficially) to the Tree Shop (where we saw



Looking at a siskin in the hand to see the features allowing the bird to be aged and sexed © Mike Harrison

rooks, sparrows and pied wagtails feeding between parked cars and swallows overhead) and enjoyed coffee and some excellent cakes at the Tree Shop café, to round off a very enjoyable day. Meanwhile, following a suggestion that it was a good area to look for golden eagles, another sub-group went off for a walk up Glen Fyne. They soon saw one cruise across the front of a crag and perch on a branch. A few minutes later it took off, then appeared above the crag and performed its display flight of diving down and then up with closed wings, rolling off the top of the climb, and then diving again. It did this several times, gaining height all the time, before cruising off to the north. A superb display.

**Bob Furness**



Great Tit in a mist net ©Bob Furness

## Recent bird sightings - February to April 2016



**Turnstone (2 left) and Sanderling (2 right), Tiree, 12 May ©Jim Dickson**

Presented here are records of rare and unusual species as well as counts and movements of more common species recorded in Argyll during this period. I wish to thank everyone who sent in records and apologies for any errors or omissions. Ideally records should be submitted using the Argyll Bird Recording System or the BTO Bird-Track system. For more information about either scheme please email [abcrecorder@outlook.com](mailto:abcrecorder@outlook.com). A more detailed and up-to-date account of re-

cent sightings in Argyll is available on the Argyll Bird Club website.

*Machrihanish SBO = Machrihanish Seabird Observatory. BBRC = British Birds Records Committee*

### **Swans, ducks, geese & gamebirds**

**LESSER CANADA GOOSE.** One was at Kintra, Islay on 26 Feb (David Wood). This bird and two more were found near Ballygrant on 6 Mar (John



Ring-necked Duck, Loch Finlaggan, Islay, 29 April ©David Shallcross

Nadin, Colin Bushell and Jimmy Steele).

**SHELDUCK.** A peak count of 126 birds was made at Loch Gruinart, Islay on 15 Mar.

**MANDARIN.** A drake seen on the River Sorn at the Woollen Mill (near Bridgend), Islay on 30 Mar was as far as we know a first for the island.

**GADWALL.** Mainland records: a pair at Ardtur, North Argyll on 5 Apr and a pair flew south at Machrihanish SBO, Kintyre on 24 Apr.

**GREEN-WINGED TEAL.** A drake was at Loch a' Phuill, Tiree on 17 Feb (John Bowler).

**SHOVELER.** A high count of 24 was made at Loch Riaghain, Tiree on 11 Feb. Three pairs were at Westport Marsh, Kintyre on 7 Apr.

**POCHARD.** Two were at Ardhavie Loch, Islay on 17 Feb and 15 Mar. A female was at East Loch Fada, Colonsay on 23 Apr.

**RING-NECKED DUCK.** A smart drake was at Loch Finlaggan, Islay from 28 Apr (David Shallcross and Leigh birders).

**GREATER SCAUP.** A peak count of 45 birds was made at Loch Indaal, Islay on 9 Feb.

**COMMON SCOTER.** A peak of 76 was counted in Loch Indaal, Islay on 6 Mar.

**VELVET SCOTER.** One was in West Loch Tarbert, Kintyre on 27 Feb. A male flew past Machrihanish SBO, Kintyre on 24 Mar.

**BUFFLEHEAD.** A drake was seen and photographed in Oban Bay, Mid-Argyll on 15 Apr (Richard Turner per Bryan Rains). This will be the first record for Argyll of this North American duck if accepted by the BBRC. However, this species has a long history of escaping

from wildfowl collections.

## Seabirds (divers, grebes, shearwaters, petrels also egrets & herons)

**GREAT NORTHERN DIVER.** A high count totalling 100 birds was made in Loch na Keal, Mull on 15 Feb, reducing to 71 on 9 Apr.

**MANX SHEARWATER.** An exceptionally early bird was off Aird, Tiree on 2 Feb.

**GREAT CRESTED GREBE.** Outwith the regular site at Loch Long, one was at Airds Bay, Taynuilt on Loch Etive, Mid-Argyll on 13 Mar and one was in Gunna Sound, off Tiree on 20 Mar.

**RED-NECKED GREBE.** One was seen on Loch na Cille at Keills (Loch Sween), Mid-Argyll on 6 Mar in the same spot where it was seen on 17 Jan (Morag and Norman Rea). One was seen off Bowmore, Loch Indaal, Islay on 6 Mar (Colin Bushell *et al.*) and one was off Duntrune Castle, Loch Crinan, Mid-Argyll on 18 Mar (Jim Dickson).

## Raptors to rails

**HONEY BUZZARD.** A dark adult was seen over Eleraig, near Kilmelford, Mid-Argyll on 21 Apr (Bob Grove).

**WHITE-TAILED EAGLE.** High count: ten (two adults and eight immatures.) were counted together at the head of Loch na Keal, Mull on 24 Feb.

**OSPREY.** One was seen flying north over Danna, Loch Sween, Mid-Argyll on 12 Mar, with this or another there later in the day. A more typical arrival date was of one at Loch nan Cadhan, Islay on 28 Mar.

**GOSHAWK.** A report of one from the Glean, near Port Charlotte, Islay on 19 Mar (Richard Belter).

**CORNCRAKE.** The first report was of one at Friesland, Coll on 16 Apr followed by one at Balinoe, Tiree on 19 Apr.

## Waders

**GREY PLOVER.** One was seen at Caoles, Tiree on 3 Mar, one flew north at Machrihanish SBO, Kintyre on 3 Apr and up to eight birds were at Loch Gruinart, Islay in Feb.

**DOTTEREL.** Five were seen on Oronsay, Colon-



say on 30 Apr (Morgan Vaughan).

**BLACK-TAILED GODWIT.** A notable flock of 250-300 birds was on the Lochgilphead High School playing fields, Mid-Argyll on 28 Apr during a snow blizzard.

**WHIMBREL.** Twelve were seen flying north past Machrihanish SBO, Kintyre and three at Milton, Tiree on 17 Apr were the first reports of the year.

**COMMON SANDPIPER.** One, thought to be this species rather than a winter-plumaged Spotted Sandpiper, was reported between Glenforsa and Pennygown, Mull on 12 Feb. The first spring migrant was of one at Otter Ferry, Cowal on 14 Apr.

**GREENSHANK.** High counts: four at Gruinart RSPB Reserve, Islay on 16 Mar, four at Holy Loch, Cowal on 6 Apr and six at the head of Loch Fyne, Mid-Argyll on 29 Apr.

### **Skuas, gulls, terns & auks**

**GREAT SKUA.** The first report was one at Croig, Mull on 6 Apr followed by one at Loch a' Phuill, Tiree on 7 Apr.

**ARCTIC SKUA.** The first report was of a dark-phase bird off Lagavulin, Islay on 26 Apr.

**KITTIWAKE.** High count: 3,650 flying west off Aird, Tiree in one hour on 2 Feb.

**LITTLE GULL.** Two or three adults/near-adults were at Loch Gilp, Mid-Argyll until mid-Feb.

**MEDITERRANEAN GULL.** An adult, coming into summer plumage, was at Loch Gilp, Mid-Argyll on 8 Mar (Jon Close).

**AMERICAN HERRING GULL.** A first-winter 'candidate' was at Crossapol Farm, Tiree on 15 Feb (John Bowler).

**ICELAND GULL.** Birds were noted in all areas apart from Cowal, with up to four each in

**Top photo:** Dotterel, Oronsay, 30 April ©Morgan Vaughan

**Middle photo:** Purple Sandpiper, Machrihanish SBO, 28 March ©Eddie Maguire

**Bottom photo:** Iceland Gull, Machrihanish SBO, 16 March ©Eddie Maguire

Kintyre (including Gigha), Mid-Argyll (including Kerrara) and on Islay and Tiree; two on Mull and one in North Argyll.

**KUMLIEN'S (ICELAND) GULL.** A dark juvenile remained on Tiree from Feb into Apr.

**GLAUCOUS GULL.** At least four were noted on Mull, three on Tiree, two on Islay and in Mid-Argyll and one in Cowal.

**SANDWICH TERN.** One off Bruichladdich, Islay on 30 Mar, followed by one at Machrihanish SBO, Kintyre on 31 Mar were the first reports of the year.

**LITTLE TERN.** The first reports were of five birds at Traigh Baigh and one at Gott Bay, Tiree on 20 Apr.

**ARCTIC TERN.** The first report was of two at Ardbeg, Islay on 17 Apr.

**BLACK GUILLEMOT.** A count of 233 birds was made around Sanda Island, Kintyre on 21 Apr.

## Doves, cuckoos, owls, swift, kingfisher & woodpeckers

**CUCKOO.** First record of the spring was of a bird calling at Kilmartin, Mid-Argyll on 13 Apr followed by one at Duart, Mull on 14 Apr.

**SNOWY OWL.** A male was seen and photographed in the hills above Glen Orchy, North Argyll on 27 Feb (George Allan). If accepted this would be the first in Argyll since two different birds were seen, on Coll and Tiree, in Jan 2005.

**COMMON SWIFT.** The first report of the year was of three birds inspecting nest sites at Kilmichael Glassary, Mid-Argyll on 6 May.

**KINGFISHER.** One was seen at Loch Skerrols, Islay on 15 Feb and one was at Loch Cuin, Dervaig, Mull from 4 Feb and last noted there on 29 Mar.

**WRYNECK.** One was seen near Inveroran, North Argyll on 23-24 Apr (Maurice Cassidy).

## Passerines (larks to buntings)

**JAY.** High counts: four were in a garden at Scammadale, Mid-Argyll into Feb and five



Little Tern, Machrihanish SBO 30 April ©Eddie Maguire

were in the Tullochgorm area of Mid-Argyll on 17 Apr.

**MAGPIE.** Two were in Campbeltown, Kintyre from early Feb. Two were at Kinloch near Benderloch, North Argyll on 10 Feb. A high count of 10 was made in Glen Massan, Cowal on 25 Feb. One was seen on Tiree on 30 Mar then two were seen near Scarinish, Tiree on 2 Apr. The only other Tiree record was one in Jan 1986. One was on the track to Carradale Bay, Kintyre on 7 Apr.

**SAND MARTIN.** First reports were of one at the RSPB Loch Gruinart Reserve, Islay and four at Loch Leathan, Mid-Argyll on 27 Mar.

**HOUSE MARTIN.** The first report was of one at Dail, Glen Etive, North Argyll on 9 Apr, followed by one at Loch Indaal, Islay on 12 Apr. Still very few birds noted before May.

**SWALLOW.** First reports were of one at Gruinart, Islay and one at Balvicar, Seil Island, Mid-Argyll on 28 Mar.

**WOOD WARBLER.** The first bird heard singing was in Kilmichael Glen, Mid-Argyll on 17 Apr, then no other reports until one was heard singing at Taynish, Mid-Argyll on 27 Apr.

**CHIFFCHAFF.** First report was of a migrant at Balephuil, Tiree on 14 Mar and the first singing bird was noted at Minard Castle, Mid-Argyll on 27 Mar followed by one Luing, Mid-Argyll on 28 Mar.

**WILLOW WARBLER.** The first report was of one singing at Barr Glen, Kintyre on 7 Apr followed by one at Ormsary, Mid-Argyll on 9 Apr.

**BLACKCAP.** A migrant was at Balephuil, Tiree on 10 Apr followed by the first singing bird at Arduaine Gardens, Mid-Argyll on 15 Apr.

**GRASSHOPPER WARBLER.** First report was of one near the 'meadows' just north of Lochgilphead, Mid-Argyll on 20 Apr.

**SEDGE WARBLER.** First report was of one at the RSPB Loch Gruinart Reserve, Islay on 13 Apr.

**RING OUZEL.** Only two reports received - a male at Lochan Add (near Loch Leathan), Mid-Argyll on 29 Mar and a male at Cruach Mhor, Mid-Argyll.

**NUTHATCH.** One was at Toward, Cowal on 8 Apr (Jan Ferguson).

**PIED FLYCATCHER.** A report of a male and female at Knock, Mull on 21 Apr.

**SPOTTED FLYCATCHER.** One at Garmony, Mull on 30 Apr was the first report.

**COMMON REDSTART.** The first report of the year was of six males at Taynish NNR, Mid-Argyll on 16 Apr.

**WHINCHAT.** The first report was of a male at the Moine Mhor, Mid-Argyll on 20 Apr.

**WHEATEAR.** One at the Ross of Mull, Mull on 23 Mar was first of the year.

**WHITE WAGTAIL.** One was at the Ma-chrihanish SBO, Kintyre on 15 Mar, then 12 birds (unprecedented for Mar) were there the next day and a maximum of 30+ were there on 30 Apr. A peak count of 35 grounded, at Loch an Eilein, Tiree on 25 Apr.

**WATER PIPIT.** One was reported on the east side of Loch Gruinart, Islay on 11 Apr (Elaine and Eddie Prince). A description has been submitted. This would be the second record for Argyll if accepted.

**TREE PIPIT.** One, singing at Taynish NNR, Mid-Argyll on 16 Apr, was the first report this year.

**TREE SPARROW.** One with House Sparrows at Baugh, Tiree on 28 Apr (Bill Westead).

**CHAFFINCH.** High count: 190 in a garden in Cairnbaan, Mid-Argyll during Feb.

**BRAMBLING.** A male was at Drimvore, Moine Mhor and a female later at Cairnbaan, Mid-Argyll on 18 Feb.

**COMMON REDPOLL.** One was at Balephuill, Tiree on 15 Apr, with another there on 24-



**Upper photo.** Nuthatch, Toward, Cowal, 8 April ©Jan Ferguson

**Lower photo.** Yellowhammer, Lochgilphead, 6 March ©Jim Dickson



30 Apr.

**CROSSBILL.** Seventeen were at Loch Tor, Mull on 2 Feb.

**HAWFINCH.** A male and female were seen at bird feeders in a garden at Loch Uisg, Mull on 23 Apr (Chris and Paul Philo) and another male was seen shortly afterwards again at feeders six miles away in Lochdon, Mull (Vikie Howells and Ian Chaplin) and remained until the next day.

**YELLOWHAMMER.** High counts: thirty-plus were near

Barrahormid (Loch Sween), Mid-Argyll on 14 Feb and 37 were counted near Ballygrant, Islay on 20 Apr.

**SNOW BUNTING.** Three were seen near Uiskentuie, Loch Indaal, Islay on 29 Mar with two there on 7 Apr. One was at Balephetrish

Bay, Tiree on 25 Apr.

**LAPLAND BUNTING.** One was at Hynish, Tiree, in with 70 Meadow Pipits on 15 Apr.

**Jim Dickson**

**Argyll Bird Recorder**

## Stop press

**GARGANEY.** A drake was at Westport Marsh, Kintyre from 2 May (Eddie Maguire *et al.*) and a drake was at RSPB Loch Gruinart Reserve, Islay on 11 May.

**GREEN-WINGED TEAL.** A drake was seen at Loch Bhassapol, Tiree on 1 May (John Bowler).

**LESSER YELLOWLEGS.** One was at Loch Gruinart RSPB Reserve, Islay on 2-4 May (James How *et al.*).

**LITTLE RINGED PLOVER.** One at Loch Kinnabus, Islay on 10 May (David Wood).

**DOTTEREL.** One at Vaul Golf Course on 13

May (Jim Dickson).

**MARSH HARRIER.** One was seen on Jura on 6 May (Louise Muir).

**POMARINE SKUA.** A sub-adult flew past Machrihanish SBO, Kintyre on 3 May (Eddie Maguire, Iomhar McMillan).

**EURASIAN REED WARBLER.** One at Balephuil, Tiree on 11 May (John Bowler).

**SUBALPINE WARBLER.** A male seen well at Kinnabus farmhouse, The Oa, Islay on 16 May (David Wood *et al.*).

**HAWFINCH.** One on feeders at Octofad, Islay on 10 May (Irene and Tony Miller).



Subalpine Warbler, Kinnabus, Islay, 16 May ©Jim Dickson

## Birding in the Spanish Steppes, Pyrenees & Mediterranean Coast April 2016



This tour complemented the trip to Extremadura and the Gredos Mountains made by a group from the Islay Birders and the Argyll Bird Club in 2015 (see report in June Eider 2015, pages 15-19). This year the group comprised the following folks, Roger Broad, Ian & Margaret Brooke, Daphne Campbell, Stuart Crutchfield, Bob Davison, Jim Dickson, David Formby, and Peter and Pia Roberts; with local guidance from Alberto Bueno and Josele Sais.

**Thursday 14th April. Glasgow to Barcelona and on to Alcolea de Cinca.** Everyone met on time and checked in for our flight from Glasgow to Barcelona, which left on time at 07.35hrs. On arrival into Barcelona we retrieved our luggage and found the car hire kiosk, where they had assigned us a couple of suitable vehicles as requested. Our local guide, Carles Oliver, appeared on time at 12.30hrs and guided us out of the airport complex to the nearby Llobregat Delta Reserve in sunny weather. We bought some food for lunch, and set out for a short wander around a fragment of coastal wetland very close to the airport. Carles took us to the best hide and did us proud with a sudden rush of birds that we were unlikely to see elsewhere on our tour. There were plenty of wildfowl including Red-crested Pochard, good numbers of Northern Shoveler, a pair of Garganey and several Teal. Waders were plentiful and varied with migrant Ruff, Green and Wood Sandpiper, Greenshank and Common Snipe plus breeding Little Ringed Plover, Black-winged Stilt and Collared Pratincole. There were plenty of herons and egrets including some very fine Squacco Herons and fly-by Purple Herons. A single Western Swamphen and lone immature Greater Flamingo were unexpected. Smaller species included the inevitable

Zitting Cisticolas, loudly calling Cetti's Warblers, a single male Sardinian Warbler and various hirundines, Alpine Swifts and both species of starling - this being the transition zone between Common and Spotless.

We drove on to a nearby site along a canalised river in the hopes of further gull sightings, but few were seen. Yellow-legged Gulls were common, but we did manage to rustle up a couple Audouin's Gulls.

Eventually our time ran out and we had to leave around 16.00hrs for the 220km mile drive westwards to Alcolea de Cinca, arriving at our hotel in this agricultural town by 18.50hrs. We made a short stop just out of town to look at the impressive cliffs, full of Jackdaws with occasional Red-billed Choughs and Lesser Kestrels.

Later, we met to write up the bird list, sitting outside in the pleasant evening air, a far cry from the cool of Islay! It was a delight to have my good friends Alberto and his wife and daughter Rosa and Sabina, plus another birding colleague Josele Sais join us for supper. There was a lot of animated banter and a very lively evening all round before getting to our beds after 22.00hrs for an early start in the morning.

**Friday 15th April. Birding on the Steppes.** We drove off at 06.15hrs to Alberto and Josele's house in Ontinena. They guided us onto the steppes as dawn broke for the mythical, enigmatic and ultimately challenging Dupont's Lark. Alberto works as a ranger for the Government of Aragon in this area, which he knows extremely well with its patchwork of great birding spots and complex off-road tracks. He took us out to areas off the beaten track where he knows sandgrouse and Dupont's Lark are to be

found. However, Dupont's Lark were being particularly evasive this morning. On arrival there were 2-3 singing their strange ethereal song. We listened and watched intently, but saw absolutely nothing for the entire hour or two that we persevered. There were consolations though. The air was clean and fragrant with herbs, especially artemesia and thyme. The air was redolent with the sound of other, easier larks going about their business - Calandra in abundance, Thekla, Crested, Greater and Lesser Short-toed all present and allowing us to "compare and contrast". We saw a fine trio of Eurasian Thick-knees and various fly-bys of Black-bellied Sandgrouse. Out in the cereal fields, fallow weed-rich patches and natural remnants of steppe we scoped 1-2 acceptable views of calling male Little Bustards. On the tumbled-down, stone-built shepherds' huts we saw the occasional Little Owl sitting on the roof and Red-billed Choughs nesting within. On the way back for a late breakfast at the hotel in Alcolea, Alberto detoured to a Eurasian Eagle Owl's nest on a cliff. Various good sightings were had of Spectacled Warbler, as it responded eagerly to playback. But, we returned for breakfast without seeing Dupont's Lark.

After a speedy meal we set off with a picnic for later in the day. It was clear, sunny and warm, with the middle of the day becoming too hot and unproductive to stay out on the steppes. So we set along a complex network of tracks winding through a patchwork of fields and steppe vegetation. Here we watched another Eurasian Eagle-Owl and a trio of Black Wheatears along with a couple of Red-rumped Swallows, which are quite unusual here. We found a shady picnic site in a conifer plantation. From here we walked through a totally different habitat of riverside poplars and phragmites beds by the Cinca River. We had unexpected sightings of Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and Black-shouldered Kite along with masses of White Storks, nesting on an old factory building, and various warblers. We heard Blackcap, Chiffchaff and Cetti's Warbler first, followed by Common Nightingales and a couple of Eurasian Wrynecks.

We returned to the steppe later as temperatures moderated and birds became more active. We were hoping for Pin-tailed Sandgrouse having heard a couple in the morning. We didn't come across any, and Alberto was frustrated at how

flighty and shy the more common Black-bellied Sandgrouse were. However, we did see quite a few during the afternoon, with some decent scoped views of birds on the ground. We tried again for the Dupont's Lark in the hope of seeing it this afternoon to save us an early morning tomorrow. We did better than this morning, with a brief view, for some, of a bird going up to 6m in the air and doing a short flight song. This was followed by long periods of hearing birds agonisingly close, but out of view. Then Roger spotted a bird perched on a low shrub which I got the scope onto, only for it to scuttle into cover before anyone else had a chance to see it. So we stayed out far too late, until 19.35hrs, in gorgeous evening light and with birds still taunting. We called it quits and returned to the hotel for a 20.30hrs supper, and retired exhausted to bed by 22.00hrs.

**Saturday 16th April. From the steppes to the Pyrenees.** Dupont's Lark dragged most of us from our slumbers early, with a 06.30hrs departure to another site near Ballobar. Alberto showed us the way and was very disheartened when we arrived to find no birds singing. Anyway, we had our early coffees and teas and wandered a little further on to try and locate the other "wanted" species, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, on a stubbly, stony field that Alberto knew to be good for the birds in the early morning. After parking we enjoyed good views of Eurasian Thick-knees and distant Little Bustards, then eagle-eyed Jim picked out two 'moving clods' of earth in a field, which indeed turned out to be the only Pin-tailed Sandgrouse of the trip. Through scopes they were at least acceptable, if not the best views I've had. While here, we had better views of Little Bustard, including some fine, fluttering display flights. Time was running out and Alberto suggested a final attempt for Dupont's Lark along the edge of a small fragment of low, scrubby steppe. Alberto explained that sometimes birds come to the edge of this habitat. And, on a low ridge above us, a Dupont's Lark did just that! No singing, no creeping about, just a fine scoped profile of the bird sitting out in the wonderful warm morning sun. I think Alberto was more elated and relieved than the rest of us. We all returned for a latish breakfast feeling extremely satisfied and pleased with ourselves.

Alberto joined us for breakfast and we went through some ideas for sites to visit in the next stage of our tour in the Pyrenees. He was going

to come out with us until lunch time to show us a few extra birding spots. We were on the road by about 10.15hrs, heading to Sena, a small village alongside riverine habitats. Here Alberto hoped to show us Eurasian Penduline-Tit, which he did so speedily and with great ease, including a bird at a lovely hanging fluff-ball of a nest. Next on the agenda as we headed way northwards was European Roller. This was at a site known to me from previous trips, but Alberto had received a phone call from one of his birding contacts to say that these late migrants had not yet arrived. But, we did manage a brief, distant view of a couple of birds behind the village of Berbital. Job done! Alberto said his farewell, while we headed up around Huesca with plans to call in to Riglos on the way to Siresa.

I had wanted to visit Riglos (photo opposite) this year as Josele had received word that wintering Wallcreepers were still present a few days ago. Riglos was the first place I had ever visited in Spain, and seen Wallcreeper, after hitch-hiking there as a 16-year old way back in spring 1968. I'd not been to this famous village for birders and rock climbers since the late 1980s. Thus the afternoon here was a bit of a sentimental journey; and a successful one. We arrived for a late picnic lunch after 14.00hrs, as rain clouds gathered and temperatures dropped. While eating and admiring the fantastic landscapes a quick fly past of our first Lammergeier took us all by surprise. After eating we walked up to the church at the back of town, against the dramatic towering red conglomerate cliffs of Los Mallos de Riglos. It was windy as well as threatening rain, but some of the more agile amongst us hiked up the steep rubbly tracks to the cliff base, while others watched from the flatter church garden. There were plenty of crazy climbers dangling precariously from ropes as they went up or down these sheer cliffs and we thought at first it might be too disturbed for Wallcreepers. On our way back down the slopes Stuart spotted a bird, while Roger and David tried to find it with him. I nipped down to alert the others and show them where to look. It all fizzled out for a while with no further sightings, but then I saw it or another bird much lower down the cliffs and closer to the folks watching from the church. In the end we all had several



The cliffs at Riglos where the group saw their first Wallcreeper  
©Jim Dickson

scopes set up, and everybody had fairly satisfactory views of this much sought after species. The rain, which had held off until now, suddenly kicked in with a strengthening wind making life unpleasant. It was unpleasant for the Wallcreeper too, causing it to sit still and shelter for long periods, which gave the more fanatical amongst us a chance to get wet while having further excellent views, before a short journey to Siresa.

#### **Sunday 17th April. Birding the Hecho Valley.**

The first of three days in this area was spent locally. After an expansive breakfast, we set off to the Boca del Infierno - just minutes away and a well-known Wallcreeper site; but none were seen. The weather was poor, but as we departed it brightened up, and for the rest of the day the weather was tolerable, with just occasional rain and light hail showers. We drove into a twisting narrow gorge and into the beginnings of the Selva de Osa and finally up to the end of the road at about 1,400m elevation on the edge of the tree-line. But first we paused in a lovely mixture of native coniferous and deciduous woodland, open alpine meadows and spectacular towering cliffs and gorges. The river quickly produced White-throated Dipper and Grey Wagtail, while a short wander around produced Goldcrests, Firecrests, Crested Tit and Short-toed Treecreepers, all seen well by most folks - especially a feisty little Firecrest. Once out in the more open valley of Selva de Osa, David spotted our first distant Lammergeier silhouetted atop a distant crag. It was a bit too cool and damp for much raptor activity, but the very high slopes had plenty of Chamois, with what must have been swirling flocks of Yellow-billed Choughs circling over them. Closer by were Yellowhammers and a range of common British "garden" birds in



Griffon Vulture - one of the most frequently seen raptors during the trip ©Jim Dickson

anything but a garden setting - Eurasian Wren, Dunnock, European Robin, Great, Blue and Coal Tits along with less usual Black Redstarts. We got out and scanned, finding many nearby Chamois - about 60 in all, along with a couple of views of Alpine Marmots. This took up all of the morning and we arrived on time for a sit-down lunch of soup and salad back at the hotel, where we sensibly declined the offer of wine for extra bottles of water.

After lunch we drove up through a pine forest to over 1,400m at Gabardito. Here we had a gentle wander around the open grassy meadows between the beech and pine forest looking for, but not seeing, Citril Finches. We did manage to call in a fine pair of Black Woodpeckers. From here we wandered through the forest trail out to the cliff-face for further chances of finding Wall-creeper, but had no luck. Being out in this spectacular scenery, we did encounter Red-billed Chough, Eurasian Griffons in formation high over the crags, Firecrest, Crested and Coal Tit, Red Crossbill for some and Eurasian Bullfinch for others.

**Monday 18th April. Birding the High Pyrenees.** As predicted, the weather had improved and the morning was bright and clear with barely a cloud in the sky - excellent for going into the higher areas of the Pyrenees. We set off promptly after breakfast and zipped along, up and over two ridges of box and pine-clad hills with their twisty roads, first into the Anso valley then into the Roncal valley. From here it was a straight drive north to the end of the valley where the road climbs steeply up numerous switchback bends on a pass into France at an elevation close to 1,800m. We were up here quite early and came through various early morning swathes of

thick mist, emerging again into sunshine, then finding another layer of mist before emerging higher up. In between were some stunning and spectacular views into the valleys and across many beautiful snow-clad mountains stretching far into the distance. We were soon up to the snow-line where a few people were still skiing. On the way up Jim and Stuart spotted a fine pale-phase Booted Eagle - the first of the trip. A little higher in the open meadows we were seeing plenty of the high altitude birds - Water Pipit, Northern Wheatear and Black Redstart in particular. Various brief halts for views and a bit of birding quickly produced a good number of Ring Ousel, Mistle Thrush, a few Red Crossbill and plenty of Coal Tit in the scattered pines. The birds we were hoping for up here were Alpine Accentor, Citril Finch, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush and Yellow-billed Chough. There were no big flocks of Yellow-billed Chough, but plenty of close views of smaller numbers all the way up to the mist-shrouded tops and into the French side at the St. Martin ski resort. One of these misty, low visibility areas was the highest point we would reach, in the open alpine zone where I hoped to find the Alpine Accentor. Luckily a brief break in the mist and a bit of playback produced a single male that came and sat for ages, providing absolutely superb views (photos next page). The Citril Finch and Rock Thrush did not show - partly due to the thick mist in places, but not for a lack of trying. We had our picnic at a nice sunny area slightly lower down overlooking open meadows with scattered rocks, juniper and pine - ideal for Rock Thrush, but no joy here other than a lone and brief sighting of a Rock Bunting.

We now descended from the heights to try a area new to me at Foz de Lumbier, which was supposed to be good for Iberian Chiffchaff.

Alpine Accentor ©Jim Dickson



This incurred a pleasant and easy enough drive down from Roncal to the main Jaca to Pamplona road, then westwards to Lumbier - a run of about an hour. We did this with stops en route for coffee and purchases of the famous sheep's cheese (though not in Roncal whose shops and bars seemed totally "cerrados"). The weather was warm, dry and sunny and we reached the Foz de Lumbier in good time for a pleasant walk right along a trail that used to be part of an old railway line. There were many Eurasian Griffons and three Egyptian Vultures, Red-billed Choughs, Blackcaps, Common Nightingales and other expected species but none of the hoped for Iberian Chiffchaffs. Rather disconcerting was the presence of many Common Chiffchaffs. We tried hard to turn them into something more special but couldn't. The song was classically "normal" even though the birds in question seemed quite interested in my playback of the oddball Iberian song. We left the area soon after 18.15hrs and sped back to Siresa to enjoy another of Nelly's fine suppers, with plans for a pre-breakfast run up to Gabardito in search of Citril Finches in the morning.

**Tuesday 19th April. Birding the High Pyrenees.** Another fine, dry and mainly sunny day with a 06.45hrs start up to Gabardito. However, we had a small bonus in the form of several Marsh Tits - a localised beech forest bird in Spain, plus family groups of Red Cross-bills, a few Eurasian Jays and a fine pair of Eurasian Bullfinches.

After breakfast we left for Punta de Reina and Arrete to look for Ortolan Buntings, where I have seen them previously. Today they were not playing ball, although Cirl Buntings put in a good showing as did Eurasian Linnet, Common Stonechat and Subalpine Warbler. We gave it a good try here but had to set off for the high Pyrenees on the Somport Pass at Canfranc and Candanchu to look primarily for Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush. This was the third consecutive failure of the morning - not good at all! We spent a lot of time in likely places around the snowline and ski resorts scanning, calling and searching for this and of course the slim chance of White-winged Snowfinch, all to no avail. However, everyone agreed that the visit was worthwhile, for apart from the fine mountain scenery there were some exciting birds that made up for lack of Rock Thrushes. First, there was a pair of Lammergeiers (later joined by another) floating around for much of the time we were at the closed-for-the-season ski resort of Astun. They circled over us, allowing brilliant views of finer details, including their "beards" (photo below). Second, while having our picnic, we saw a perched Short-toed Eagle, with details of its fine breast barring and eye colour easily seen. In addition, we had



Bearded Vulture or Lammergeier ©Jim Dickson

close views of more Chamois, and other alpine species, including Black Redstarts, Water Pipits, Northern Wheatears, Yellowhammers and Eurasian Linnets, along with both species of chough.

We drove down to lower levels by mid-afternoon, to spend time around San Juan de la Pena, as there was a chance to find new species here. With no time to spare we set off along one of the trails that took us into mixed deciduous forest. Here I hoped to find Western Bonelli's Warblers. A single bird responded to the playback, giving some quite good views. We returned towards open grassland around the new monastery and along the way called in a very responsive Black Woodpecker. Once out of the conifers we began circling the edge of the grassy area and much to my relief Stuart spotted the other much wanted bird, a Citril Finch. This was our fourth try in three different locations, so it was a huge relief to have this one sit atop a tree and giving fine views for everyone. A little further around the circuit and we located two more birds, equally obliging. With only a short time left, we headed back towards the vehicles encountering several Red Crossbills, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Eurasian Nuthatch and Short-toed Treecreeper. Now it was time to return to the hotel where we did the usual bird list at 20.00hrs, had supper with plentiful wine at 20.30hrs and discussed tomorrow's return to Barcelona before heading for bed by 22.00hrs.

**Wednesday 20th April. Return to Barcelona.** The overnight rain was beginning to clear as we left the hotel, and made us feel lucky for the previous days of such fine sunshine. The journey back to Barcelona was going to take about 4hrs, and we had decided to get back there with time to look along the shore. We stopped at Arres again just in case Ortolan Buntings were playing ball. They weren't, but we did have superb close views of Western Bonelli's Warbler as compensation. We set off with the intention of reaching Binefar, close to Lerida, in time for a picnic. The attraction at Binefar was an "Alberto special" site for nesting Bonelli's Eagle - always a tricky bird to find. His very sketchy map of how to reach the exact spot amidst some very fine pink conglomerate massifs and lovely scrubby hillsides worked remarkably well. We didn't get lost once and better still, within minutes of getting out of our vehicles in

this remote area we had some splendid views of a pair of Bonelli's Eagles mobbing a Griffon Vulture! Obviously elated with this last bit of success we ate our picnic and saw the pair return again, plus a few stoops of our first Peregrine of the tour.

Happily Pia and David's Sat-Nav systems worked a treat and got us to the hotel by the airport without a glitch at about 16.30hrs. We quickly checked in, and set off using the Sat-Nav again to find our way through the outskirts of Barcelona to the spot that Carles had shown us on our first day where we could access the coast. The walk was rather longer than anticipated and some folks called it quits and returned early to the hotel via a closer hide where they saw some good wildfowl plus Greater Flamingo. Others continued to a windy coast with a badly designed viewpoint, and with planes taking off close by. However, it did produce a final flurry of new birds including various waders - Common Ringed, Kentish and Black-bellied (Grey) Plovers, Little Stint, Dunlin, Sanderling, Curlew Sandpiper, Oystercatcher and offshore some of the hoped-for Audouin's Gulls (photo below) and specks in the waves of apparent Yelkouan and Balearic Shearwaters and even a Northern Gannet or two.

**Thursday 21st April. Return Home.** It was a leisurely start with an 08.00hrs breakfast. We then returned the vehicles and got everyone checked in for the flight home. It was raining heavily, and we realised how lucky we had been to avoid the worst of the weather during our trip.

## Peter Roberts and Jim Dickson



Audouin's Gull ©Jim Dickson

# My grouse with grouse shooting

Dr Mark Avery



Driven grouse shooting is an unsporting and pointless sport that damages the ecology of our hills and depends on illegal killing of protected wildlife.

Some say birdwatching is an odd hobby, but compare it with driven grouse shooting and we all seem completely normal. In driven grouse shooting, a line of people with shotguns wait for a line of people with flags and whistles to drive Red Grouse past them so that they can shoot at them as they fly over. There is no hunting involved in this - it's merely using wildlife as living targets. An individual may pay upwards of £5,000 for a day of such 'sport'.

The record 'bag' for a day of such shooting is 2929 birds, shot by eight guns in the Trough of Bowland in Lancashire on 12 August 1915. That's over 350 birds/gun that day. Modern bags are approaching such levels again.

To generate such high densities of Red Grouse, to justify such high prices; heather moorland is burned into a patchwork of long and short vegetation; Foxes, Stoats, Carrion/Hooded Crows etc are killed in large numbers; Mountain Hares are killed off too (because they carry a tick which can transmit a virus to the grouse); the moorland is drained and medicated grit is provided to kill intestinal worms. Red Grouse are not reared and released (like Pheasants), but driven grouse shooting depends on intensive management of the prey, their predators and their habitat.

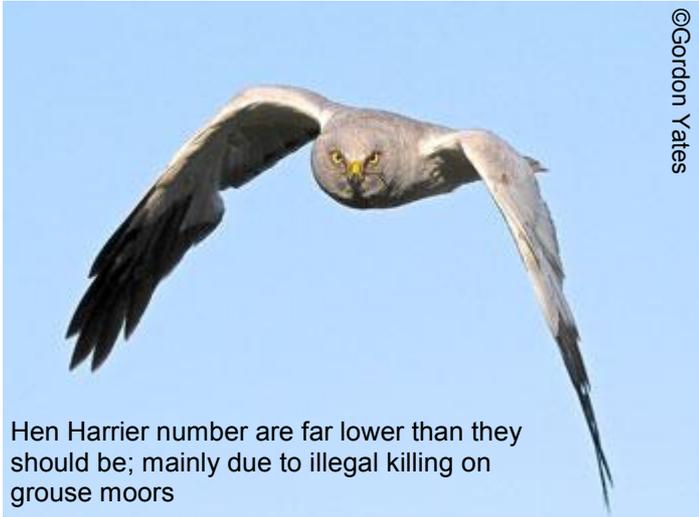
Many raptors are illegally killed because they are unsporting enough to include Red Grouse in their diet, eg Golden Eagle, Goshawk, Peregrine and Hen

Harrier. This year is a survey year for Hen Harrier - the last, in 2010, found c.650 UK pairs whereas the science shows that there should be c.2600 pairs.

A scientific study on a grouse moor in Scotland in the 1990s showed that when birds of prey are properly protected, as the law requires, then their numbers will rise and they can remove much of the 'shootable surplus' of birds on which driven grouse shooting depends. There is a real conflict, you can't have protection of birds of prey and massive grouse bags. You have to choose! What is your choice?

The grouse shooters say that it's only a few bad apples that kill raptors, but they don't deny the massive impacts that bad apples (I believe there are more than a few) have on protected wildlife. So you do have to choose whether you want an unsporting sport to continue or whether you want the legal protection given to birds of prey to be real. I choose legality and birds of prey over criminality and a pointless 'sport'!

Grouse shooters contend that other ground-nesting birds benefit from grouse moor management (some do, it's true, but not all), that the hills would be covered with conifers, sheep and wind-farms if grouse shooting were stopped (they wouldn't - it's environmental legislation that controls these activities not grouse shooters) and that all those people paying for grouse shooting are delivering wealth to the economy (economists



Hen Harrier numbers are far lower than they should be; mainly due to illegal killing on grouse moors

say the figures are greatly inflated and do not take everything into account anyway). You must choose who you believe.

All that intensive management for grouse, the burning and the drainage, have other important ecological impacts. Grouse moors shed water more quickly than moorland not managed for grouse shooting - and this increases flood risks for masses of people downstream, people who never go grouse shooting and have never heard of a Hen Harrier. Greenhouse gas emissions are higher from grouse moors where burning occurs on peatlands; grouse moor management was criticised by the Committee on Climate Change last year. Water companies spend more money on water treatment in catchments dominated by grouse shooting and those costs go to the customer not the grouse shooter. And aquatic biodiversity is lower in watercourses draining managed moorlands too. Intensive grouse moor management imposes big costs on the rest of society. And so, again, you have to choose - grouse shooting or sustainable uplands?

Over the years of wrestling with these issues my views have hardened. I used to think that grouse shooting was a bit odd but if only we could reduce the moderate levels of wildlife crime then it wasn't a high priority. As time has passed I have realised that our uplands are the scenes of unrelenting wildlife crime, and all for a hobby (sport, pastime) that is enjoyed by the few and which imposes costs on the many.

I've made my choice and it is that we should do away with driven grouse shooting which is why I have launched a number of e-petitions to ban this sport. The current e-petition has far surpassed the total signatures of the previous two and runs until 20 September. If it reaches 100,000 signatures by then this whole issue will be debated in the Westminster Parlia-

ment by MPs from across the UK and that will flush out the arguments and put them even more strongly in the public domain. If you are keen on wrecked uplands and wildlife crime then please don't sign my e-petition, but if you choose change in the uplands, even if you don't favour a total ban (and I think you should!) then please sign because this is the strongest way you can make your voice heard. It really is your choice!

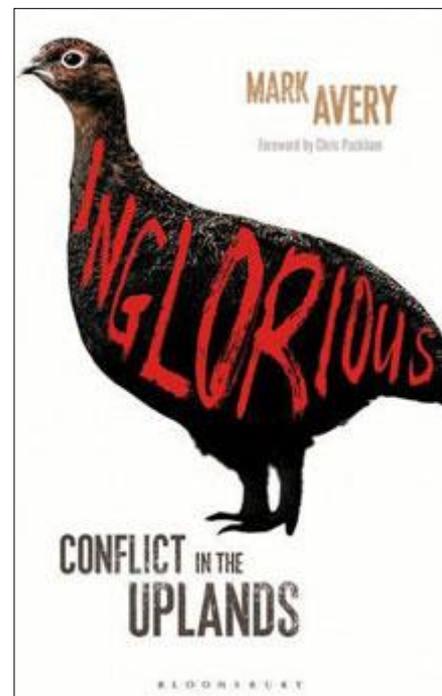
So far, Scotland has supported this e-petition very strongly, and the Westminster constituency of Argyll and Bute is the 10th-highest signing out of 650 Westminster constituencies. So thank you already - but please ask your partner, friends, relatives, workmates to sign too and we can make the men in tweed mend their ways.

Sign the e-petition for a debate in parliament here:

<https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/125003>

For more information then check out my blog at [www.markavery.info/blog/](http://www.markavery.info/blog/) and/or read my book *Inglorious - conflict in the uplands* for the 100,000 word version of the case against driven grouse shooting. But thank you for letting me have c.1000 words here.

**Dr Mark Avery is an author, blogger, birder and campaigner. He worked for the RSPB for 25 years until 2011 and for 13 of them was the RSPB Conservation Director.**



Articles for the September issue of the *Eider* should with the editor before the 20th August 2016

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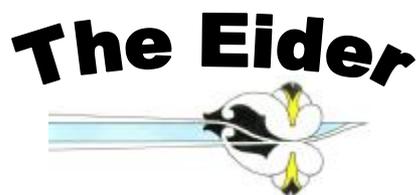
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**T**he *Eider* is the quarterly newsletter of the **Argyll Bird Club**. The editor welcomes articles about birds, wildlife conservation and ecology in Argyll, including articles of a wider natural history interest, notices of forthcoming events, book 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 unedited digital photographs (jpeg files preferred) of birds and their habitats to the editor. Please do not embed digital images in word files. 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 20th 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 and has around 400 members. 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 *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).