

The *Eider* is the quarterly newsletter of the Argyll Bird Club (<http://www.argyllbirdclub.org>)

December 2020
Number 134



The Eider



News broke late on 15th September of a **Yellow-Bellied Flycatcher** (*Empidonax flaviventris*) in a garden at Balephuil, Tiree, found by John Bowler. This is the first record of this American species in the Western Palearctic (see pages 5-6). Photo ©Jim Dickson

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Editorial

It's been a difficult year for everyone. However, without modern communications it would have been much worse. We may curse social media at times, but it has allowed us to keep in contact with each other, and it has led to the rapid development of platforms such as Zoom (<https://zoom.us>) that facilitate online conferencing. So, having had to cancel all our indoor meetings this year we are planning to hold monthly Zoom meetings starting in December through to next March. Details of these are given on the next page. Please let us know what you think of these. If the response is positive, we may well

will try to organise similar evening meetings after March. Field trips have also taken a hit, and it is not clear when these will resume. Optimistically, life should slowly start improve next year as Covid-19 vaccinations are rolled out. With a bit of luck this may allow us to hold our autumn 2021 indoor meeting at the Cairnbaan Hotel on 6 November.

If you have been following the 'recent bird sightings' on the club's website or Facebook page you will be aware that Autumn 2020 has seen a remarkable number of records of Eastern Palearctic *Phylloscopus* warblers in Argyll. Our more familiar Willow Warbler, Wood Warbler and Chiffchaff belong to the same genus. The generic name means 'leaf seeker' from the ancient Greek, which succinctly describes their foraging behaviour for insects. Most autumns see a scattering of records of Yellow-browed Warbler (*P. inornatus*), mainly from the Argyll islands, and particularly Tiree. But, this year over 30 individuals have been recorded, again mostly on Tiree. Its breeding range extends from east of the Ural Mountains to eastern Siberia and northeast China where it can be found in lowland and montane forests. It mainly winters in tropical southeast Asia. However, they have increasingly been reported wintering in Western Europe. These are probably birds that breed just east of the Urals. This may be linked to climate warming, as these new wintering grounds involve a far shorter migration distance than to Asia. Thus, it is a species that is likely to be seen in increasing numbers in Argyll in the future. Since 2017, Yellow-browed Warblers have been colour ringed in increasing numbers on the Quessant Islands off the Brittany coast to learn more about their wintering habits (www.birdguides.com/articles/migration/look-out-for-colour-ringed-yellow-browed-warblers/). So, if you are lucky enough to see a Yellow-browed Warbler, do check for colour rings.

John Bowler has had a remarkable autumn on Tiree, where he has added three new species to the Argyll list. His account of the first record for the Western Palearctic of Yellow-bellied Flycatcher is given on pages 5-6. The other two new species are both *Phylloscopus* warblers, namely Hume's Warbler (*P. humei*) and Dusky Warbler (*P. fuscatus*). The former breeds in mountain forests in central Asia and migrates to India for the winter. Dusky Warblers on the

Acknowledgements

Very many thanks to the following for their contributions to this issue—Annette Anderton, Anne Archer, John Bowler, Neil Brown, Malcolm Chattwood, Jim Dickson, Ewan Edwards, Jo Gouldie, Peter & Dorothy Hogg (including photocopying & dispatching the newsletter), David Jardine, Kelly McIntosh, Eddie Maguire, Linda Petty (proof reading), Margaret Staley (for black & white illustrations).

other hand breed in scrubby vegetation such as taiga and wet meadows, it too breeds in central Asia and migrates to south and southeast Asia for the winter. As well as some vagrants occurring in western Europe, others go in the opposite direction and reach the west coast of North America.

Finally, on behalf of the club, we wish you all a very happy, but rather different, Christmas. Here's hoping we can resume both outdoor and indoor meetings sometime in 2021. Thank you so much for continuing to support the Argyll Bird Club.

Club News

FIELD TRIPS 2020

Covid-19 restrictions continue to disrupt our field trip programme. David Jardine's October trip to Loch Gilp and the Add Estuary was cancelled. Providing government advice allows, David is hoping to organise a trip to the same venue when the guidelines permit groups to meet outside, and he will be contacting those who had reserved a place on the October trip.

In the current climate it is impossible to plan for further outdoor meetings, but do keep looking at the club's website and Facebook page for updates.

INDOOR AND ONLINE MEETINGS 2020-2021

Both the autumn 2020 and spring 2021 meetings have been cancelled due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Instead we are going to try something new—online Zoom meetings. For guidance on how to join a Zoom meeting see:

<https://www.the-soc.org.uk/files/docs/SOCZoomGuideforMembers.pdf>

Additional details of how to join our online meetings (including a weblink) will be sent to members by email just before each meeting

We are proposing four such meetings, all starting at 19.00hrs, as follows:

Thursday 10 December. Talks by Patrick Styles (RSPB Investigations Team), Nigel Scriven (BTO update) and David Jardine (Roosting behaviour of adult Golden Eagles). We expect the meeting to last for around 75-90 minutes.

Thursday 14 January. (programme still to be arranged)

Thursday 18 February (programme still to be arranged)

Friday 5 March. One talk, followed by the

AGM (for members only)

Apart from the AGM, each meeting will comprise 2-3 talks, each of approximately 10-20 minutes duration. If anyone would like to give a talk, please contact David Jardine or Nigel Scriven.

For the AGM meeting (5 March) please have handy, the papers for the AGM (published in the September 2020 *Eider*), and the financial accounts on page 4 in this issue.

We have chosen weekday evenings for these new ventures to avoid disrupting weekends.


Autumn meeting and AGM 2021. Saturday 6 November. Provisionally, this will be held at the Cairnbaan Hotel (www.cairnbaan.com), near Lochgilphead (phone 01546 603668). Lunches will be available in the hotel. The programme will be given in the September 2021 *Eider*. Please see the club website for updates.

MACHRIHANISH SEABIRD OBSERVATORY MONTHLY REPORTS

Eddie Maguire has kindly allowed us to circulate his monthly report to ABC members. You should by now have received the PDF file of the October report (photo below), providing we have your e-mail address. If you have not received the report, please contact Dorothy Hogbin, our Membership Secretary (contact details on the last page). Eddie's reports are packed full of superb photos taken by himself and colleagues at MSBO.

Machrihanish Bird Observatory
A visible migration station
Founded September 1993

October Report 2020
Compiled by Eddie Maguire



Recent improvements: new roof fitted - the original hide is now totally waterproof
Many thanks to Friends of MSBO / Pip Ashley & Toots Maguire

For Updates / Enquiries...
Contact the Observatory

Mobile - 07895 952640

E-mail - msbowarden@gmail.com

Website - machrihanishbirdobservatory.org.uk

'Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted'

ARGYLL BIRD REPORT 31 (2019)

The latest bird report has been produced as a PDF by Jim Dickson (compiler and editor). The e-ABR can be downloaded from the club website (under the 'Recent Reports' and also 'Publications' tabs).

ABC FACEBOOK PAGE

The club's Facebook page is gaining in popularity, so do take a look. It is open to anyone with a Facebook account.

ABC SECRETARY WANTED

Anne Archer has given notice that she wishes to resign as secretary at the next AGM. The club wishes to thank Anne for her dedication to the post over the last few years. If you are interested in taking on the job, please contact Anne. Thank you.

FUNDING FOR BIRD CONSERVATION PROJECTS IN ARGYLL

The ABC is willing to fund or part fund worthwhile bird conservation projects in Argyll. For example, help was given towards the costs of field work for the recent Seabird Monitoring Programme (seabird counts 2015-2019). More recently the club has helped to fund the provision of nest boxes for Grey Wagtails and Dippers in Kintyre. Applications for funding should be submitted to the secretary (contact details on the back page).

MEMBERSHIP AND FINANCE REPORT

The accounts for the year ending 30 September 2020 are given on this page.

The cost of printing and posting the *Eider* to members who receive it in the post has increased significantly over the years. The total cost to print and post four issues is now more than the annual subscription. Reluctantly, the committee has agreed to ask those members who receive the *Eider* by post to contribute £5 in addition to their annual subscription (see last page). A separate letter will be sent to those concerned.

The club will be funding nest boxes for Swifts for the 2021 breeding season. If you have somewhere that you can put up a nest box, don't delay in asking for one as spring will be here before you know it!

We will soon be receiving the 2021 subscriptions by standing order. We

continually update the club's database and need to know if you have changed your home address or your email. If you have moved, but wish to be kept informed of club activities, it is important that you let us know of any changes.

Peter Hogbin (Treasurer), Dorothy Hogbin (Membership Secretary)

Argyll Bird Club		Scottish Charity No: SC008782
Income and Expenditure for the year to 30th September 2020		
2018/2019	INCOME	2019/2020
2564.23	Subscriptions	2724.23
887.50	Bird Report Sales	115.00
1112.00	Raffles & donations	256.00
140.00	Data fees	250.00
415.23	HMRC Gift Aid	230.57
	Bank interest	117.56
5118.96	Total Income	3693.36
	EXPENDITURE	
1886.30	Bird report 2017	0.00
600.00	Bird report 2019	500.00
491.05	Newsletter	437.94
79.20	Leaflets	0.00
294.15	Postage	36.24
310.00	Public meetings	667.00
113.00	Insurance	113.00
0.00	Licences/website	0.00
445.39	Committee expenses	10.00
2330.00	Grants & Donations	550.00
0.00	Club equipment	0.00
6549.09	Total Expenditure	2314.18
-1430.13	SURPLUS/DEFICIT	1379.18
Balance Sheet as at 26 October 2020		
CURRENT ASSETS		
0.00	Cash on hand	0.00
1873.29	Current Account	2021.84
8000.00	HTB 90 day Business account 1.5%	9000.00
0.00	Debtors	230.57
CURRENT LIABILITIES		
0.00	Creditors	0.00
9873.29	TOTAL NET ASSETS	11252.41
REPRESENTED BY		
11303.36	Working Capital at 1st October 2019	9873.23
-1430.13	Surplus/Deficit for year 2019-2020	1379.18
9873.23	TOTAL FUNDS as at 26 October 2020	11252.41
All funds are unrestricted		

Northern Gannets off Machrihanish Seabird Observatory on 4 September ©Eddie Maguire



**Yellow-bellied Flycatcher (*Empidonax flaviventris*)
at Balephuill, Isle of Tiree, Argyll
15-23 September 2020**



Photo ©John Bowler

A fast-moving depression whipped across the North Atlantic and struck the Isle of Tiree early on Sunday 13 September 2020. Conditions looked ideal for bringing a North American bird or two across "the pond". I even fantasized about finding an *Empidonax* flycatcher

However, checks of my local patch at Balephuill later that day produced nothing new other than a Lesser Whitethroat and a small influx of Lesser Black-backed Gulls. A fresh juvenile Common Rosefinch

popped up briefly in our garden the following day, and with the winds slackening in a ridge of high pressure, my bird-finding thoughts switched back towards drift migrants from the east.

First thing on Tuesday morning, I casually opened the curtains of our lounge windows with a cup of tea in hand and was dumbfounded by what I saw! Exactly in the same willow, where the Rosefinch had been the previous day, a boldly-marked flycatcher eyed me from just three metres away. Rich olive-green above, with a complete bold eye-ring, an orange lower mandible, a distinct yellow suffusion on the throat and down the breast, and very striking whitish wing-bars and edgings to the tertials and secondaries (see photo opposite). It was an *Empidonax* flycatcher! I grabbed my camera and took a few record shots to make sure I wasn't dreaming. Identification was fairly straightforward—the shortish tail, large head with a "cute" expression and rather compact structure narrowed it down to being a Least or Yellow-bellied Flycatcher (thus avoiding the far trickier Willow/Alder/Acadian Flycatcher species grouping), whilst the yellow suffusion below and rich green upperparts, plus immaculate condition of its tail and flight feathers quickly pronounced it to be a first-winter Yellow-bellied Flycatcher—the first for the Western Palearctic. It was a species I have seen before wintering in Mexico and Belize.

With the ID sorted, I then simply enjoyed watching this exotic-looking bird foraging happily in the trees that I have planted over the years in our sheltered garden for just



Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Balephuill, Tiree on 17 September ©John Bowler



Twitcher's delight. Note the Yellow-bellied Flycatcher on the gate ©John Bowler

such an occasion. Island-based birders live for moments like this, but this was big news to break to my wife. Together with a few others, we mulled over what to do with the news, particularly in the light of the worsening Covid19 situation on the mainland and the absence of the disease on the island, which has a large vulnerable elderly population. In the end, news of the bird somehow found its own way out, as was perhaps inevitable, and we were faced with a potentially large twitch the following day.

With great help from Hayley Douglas (the Tíree Ranger), my wife Janet and our very accommodating neighbours, we were able to manage a successful socially-distanced twitch following Scottish Covid19 guidelines over the next three days in which some 120 birders got to see the bird in the two neighbouring private gardens. However, with mounting concerns on Tíree's social media channels re. Covid19 and the influx of birders to the island from all over Britain, we were forced to close access to the gardens from midnight on the Friday. A small trickle of birders continued to arrive and try their luck each day until the bird finally left, with most managing to connect with it from the adjacent track. The flycatcher finally departed on the night of 23 September after a nine-day stay, during which it fed voraciously on a wide range of insects including our neighbours' honeybees and showed no concern at all for the close attention it received. All visiting birders were very well behaved and together raised at least £1,900 for the Tíree Community Trust, which was much appreciated and should help to quell any lingering concerns about the twitch on the island. I would also like to take this opportunity

to thank the BirdGuides Team for their very sensitive handling of what was, given the current climate over Covid19, a very difficult situation to deal with.

Lifetime ambition achieved, with that dazzling American flycatcher still fresh in my mind, I'm tempted to hang up my bins now, but I know of course that I won't!

John Bowler



Yellow-bellied Flycatcher at Balephuill, Tíree on 17 September ©John Bowler

The arrival and departure of Swifts during a 'coronavirus lockdown'



A Swift entering a nest box ©Annette Anderton

Arrivals

After a successful year in 2019 with two pairs of Swifts breeding and another pair prospecting for a nesting site, I was looking forward to the return of our Swifts in 2020. The roof was in need of repair and we had arranged for the work to be done in April before the Swifts arrived. At the end of March the scaffolding was erected (photo, bottom of page), Two days later the whole of the country was in 'lockdown' due to coronavirus!

I was horrified! I had read that scaffolding can inhibit Swifts from entering their nesting sites (Concern For Swifts, 2002). Swifts are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981), which makes it illegal to knowingly destroy or disturb the nest site during the nesting season. So, it was with some concern that I waited for the Swifts' arrival.

Luckily, the Swifts had not been told about travel restrictions. On 5 May I spotted my first Swift circling over our house. Then on 7 May, at 7.30am, there was the familiar sound of screaming as two Swifts flew towards and across the front of the house. This continued until about 9.30am, but I was upset to observe that they regularly veered away as soon as they reached the scaffolding. However, at about 9.45am they flew through the scaffolding and started 'banging' one of the boxes. At about 11.45am they entered this box and

spent the whole afternoon flying in and out of it. To my relief they seemed little concerned by the scaffolding.

Their arrival was one day earlier than last year. Dates of arrival in Kilmichael Glassary have ranged from 1 May to 9 May during 2017-2019 (Anderton, 2020). Elsewhere in 2020, Swifts were first observed in Oxford on 27 April (range 4-7 May, 2017-2019) and in Bristol on 23 April (range 20 April-1 May, 2017-2019) (Anderton, 2020).

Interestingly, Lack (2018) mentioned that from 2007-2013 the first Swifts arrived at the Tower in Oxford from 24-29 April, which was an average of nine days earlier than arrival times during 2014-2017 (4-5 May). He suggested that a decline in numbers, due to deteriorating weather conditions, and activities at the Tow-



Scaffolding erected around Swift nest boxes ©Annette Anderton

er may have contributed to the later arrival dates. It will be interesting to see if their earlier arrival (27 April) in 2020 is repeated in 2021.

Our two Swifts arrived two days apart, which supports the observation by Lack (1956) that breeding pairs separate in the autumn and re-join in the spring. In a four-year study, Lack (1956) reported that in over three-quarters of pairs, the two individuals returned on different days (range 1-21 days).

Over the next couple of weeks two Swifts were observed entering and leaving the box, and sometimes 'banging' the box, the house wall and window behind it and parts of the scaffolding. Occasionally, a third Swift would join them.

Then, on 21 May, five Swifts started circling and screaming around the house and two entered the hole under the eaves of the NE gable-end of the house where Swifts had bred successfully in 2019.

Meanwhile, the box on the front of the house, which the non-breeders occupied last year (Anderton 2020), had been taken over by a pair of Great Tits. They built a substantial nest in one day(!) on 26 April, with nestlings starting to hatch on 19 May. We watched this nest with some concern, hoping the tits wouldn't be evicted by the returning Swifts. But, to our delight, the Great Tit nestlings fledged on 8 June. On 22 June a pair of House Sparrows entered this box and started rearranging the nesting material. As there seemed to be no sign of the non-breeders arriving, I assumed that the next family emerging from the box would be sparrows.

However, on 4 July, without any dramatic encounters, a single Swift appeared in this box and on 8 July was joined by a second Swift. This pair made very desultory attempts to add a few bits of grass and feathers to the nesting mate-

rial, but spent most of the time feeding, preening and sleeping. So, this was probably our non-breeding pair back again. Non-breeders are known to return later in the season than breeding Swifts (Lack 1956).

Both breeding pairs of Swifts were successful in raising chicks. Details of this will be reported in the spring edition of *Eider*. However, events at the end of the season proved to be interesting, so I shall discuss these in more detail.

Departures

On 5 August, as the light faded, the older of the two nestlings in the box at the front of the house, spent a lot of time peering out of the entrance (photo below). Then, at 9.38pm it dropped out of the box, allowing me to witness its first flight. The second nestling remained in the box being fed by its parents until 8 August. It had a number of abortive visits to the nest entrance where it tilted forward to look out, but then scrambled back inside, breathing heavily, followed by some wing exercises. Finally, it tipped forward into the nest entrance but, unlike its sibling, it didn't leave immediately, but seemed to hold onto the box as if it had changed its mind. I could see its wing feathers poking up inside through the hole as if it was trying to hang on. But at 9.59pm it disappeared from view. Its exit was similar to one reported by Bromhall (1980) which "left at last ... but not without a final moment of panic ... it tipped forward ... too far to turn back ... with most of its body outside it clung upside down by one foot, a wing tip braced across the entrance ... after a few seconds it let go and plummeted into space."

Our nestlings fledged at dusk whereas Lack (1956) and Bromhall (1980) reported that most nestlings in Oxford fledged early in the morning. Perhaps our nestlings left under the cover of dusk/dark to avoid the attention of a pair of buzzards frequently seen circling over our



Nestling peering out of nest box ©Jim Dickson

house in daylight hours?

Once the nestlings had fledged their parents continued returning to the box each night. Reading reports from Oxford and Bristol I noted that in both it appeared that the statement that "it's all over" may have referred to the departure of the final nestling (O.U.M.N.H 2020, Glanville 2020). In fact, on the 7 August 2020 Glanville stated that "there are still six adults here ... but now that the last chick has just gone I expect them to leave today", but there was no mention as to when these adults actually did leave.

Lack (1956) commented that the parents normally remained after their broods had left. The number of days they stayed was affected by the weather over the summer. Thus, after wet summers, they would stay for 8-11 days (but one pair stayed for 26 days). However, in fine summers the average was 2-3 days after their brood fledged. He suggested they stayed to feed, rest and put on fat for their long journey south. This supports the observations that Swifts leave later after bad summers, when food would have been less plentiful.

In Oxford, Bromhall (1980) suggested food quality decreased towards the end of the season. Meals sampled in July and early August contained very few beetles (Coleoptera) whereas in one sample obtained at the end of August, out of 348 insects, 106 were beetles. Most of the weight of beetles is made up of indigestible chitin. However, in Scotland, and particularly in Argyll, midges are abundant until early autumn, which may provide a more nutritious food. Although midges are normally found close to the ground, they may be swept up on air currents to a height where Swifts are feeding.

By the time the chicks fledged, both parents in the box with the camera looked out of condition. Their feathers lacked the sleekness of earlier in the year. One bird looked particularly slow in its movements around the box. After the second nestling left, both parents spent their days coming in and out of the box. They stayed out for longer when the weather was good, but returned regularly or remained in the box when it was raining (Anderton 2020). In the box, there was a lot of mutual preening and wing exercising. During August there were frequent screaming parties of between 5-12 birds.

On 29th August (high pressure over UK, dry and sunny with NW wind) both adults left at 7.58am, but only one returned that night. Compared to its mate, this bird was still in poor condition. After its mate left, it was very restless for the first two nights and came in and out of the box many times. Similar activity was noted by Lack

(1956).

The weather deteriorated over the next few days and the remaining bird didn't feed so much. In the box, it spent a lot of time preening and wing exercising (photo below). Its presence was now less obvious as it slipped in and out of the box in silence. Without the camera it would be easy to think it had left.

We were in the garden at dusk on the evening of 3 September, not having seen any other Swifts since 29 August, when at least three, and probably five, Swifts circled high over our house. We were finishing laying concrete and I didn't have my binoculars with me, so couldn't be sure of the number! Then, at about 7am on 4 September, I saw two Swifts flying in an easterly direction up the glen. Were these Swifts from further north passing over our house as they migrated south, or were they birds from the local area that had been roosting in nest sites while building up fat reserves prior to migration?

Throughout the next week the weather was largely wet, but there were some spells of warm sunshine, and the single Swift came in and out of the box frequently, and did a lot of wing exercising. Its plumage was now much sleeker and it was moving around the box with as much ease as Swifts ever do.

On 9 September the weather improved, it was lightly overcast with wind from the NW. The Swift left at 8.49am and didn't return, so was hopefully safely on its way to Africa. Lack (1956) observed that, on average, a quarter of Swift pairs left on the same day, half left within one day of each other, but the difference in departure date could be as much as 14 days. For the Kilmichael Glassary pair the difference was eleven days, but it should be noted that the last adult Swift left 32 days after its youngest offspring. In Oxford, most departures occurred in the morning and the date of departure was significantly affected by weather conditions (Lack 1956).

The non-breeders also stopped roosting in their box on separate days. On 7 August at 6.38am both birds left the box, but only one bird returned at night. This bird returned to the box every night until 13 August, when it left the box at 6.41am and didn't return that night. Over this period of time there were regular screaming parties of between 5-12 Swifts, so it was possible that the first non-breeder to leave the box spent the subsequent nights roost-



Adult Swift wing exercising ©Annette Anderton

ing aerially prior to departing for Africa, but this is difficult to prove, and it may have left to fly south immediately.

Non-breeding Swifts are known to roost aerially in breeding areas, it is referred to as the 'vespers flight'. Lack (1956) observed mass ascents of Swifts at twilight and Bromhall (1980) reported that observations by First World War pilots and subsequent radar studies had shown that Swifts can fly up to 2,500m at dusk and descend at dawn. A detailed study of Swifts fitted with micro data loggers by Hedenstrom *et al.* (2016) confirmed this.

The departure of our last Swift on the 9 September may seem late but it should be noted that in 2016 the last Swift left Bristol on the 9 September and in 2019 the last one left the Oxford Tower on 14 September. Single Swifts were observed over Balnahard Bay, Colonsay on the 3 September 2020 (David Jardine, pers. com.) and Machrihanish, Kintyre on 22 October (by Caroline and Bill Anderson, Jim Dickson, pers. com.).

Sadly, on 23 October 2020 a dead first-year Swift was found in a garden in Ardrishaig by Alan Dykes. The bird had been dead for c.2-3 days (Jim Dickson, pers. com.). Possibly, this was a late migrant caught out by one of the bad rainstorms in October. With no food or place to shelter, some late migrants inevitably die of starvation/hypothermia.

In a study of the migratory patterns of Swifts, Akesson *et al.* (2020) found that birds breeding to the south, in Spain and Italy, migrated approximately one month earlier (range 3 July-8 August) than northern populations in Swedish Lapland (range 7 August-9 September). Swifts breeding in southern Europe were able to secure the most favourable wintering areas in the south of Africa, whereas those Swifts from northern Europe wintered further north in Africa. This phenomenon, known as 'chain migration', is rare in migrating birds. The usual pattern being 'leapfrog migration' where northern breeding birds winter furthest to the south. However, if we think our Swifts have a long way to go when they migrate to Africa, an average of 7,800km (Akesson *et al.* 2020), then spare a thought for the *pekinensis* race of the Common Swift which travels more than 13,000km from Beijing to spend the winter in southern Africa (Anon 2015).

Finally, late sightings of Common Swifts should always be treated with caution, as in autumn Pallid Swifts can be driven north to the UK from the southern Europe by strong southerly airflows. For example in early November 2018 the passage of ex-hurricane Oscar resulted in an influx of at least 30 Pallid Swifts, six Common Swifts and one Little Swift to Britain (BTO 2020). Differentiating between Pallid and Common Swifts is dependent on very subtle differences in plumage, not easily observed with a fleeting view of the bird in flight (Jim Dickson, pers. com.).

But, it is also important to stress that in late summer and autumn it is still worth looking out for Common Swifts that may be roosting locally and going out daily to feed to prepare themselves for their long flight to Africa.

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Annette Anderton



The Predatory Bird Monitoring Scheme



Buzzard, a casualty of road collision (August 2016) ©David Jardine

Each year I am usually in the unfortunate position of finding a dead or injured bird of prey. Often these are collision casualties, either with vehicles or buildings. While it is sad to find such birds, I take time to inspect these carcasses carefully.

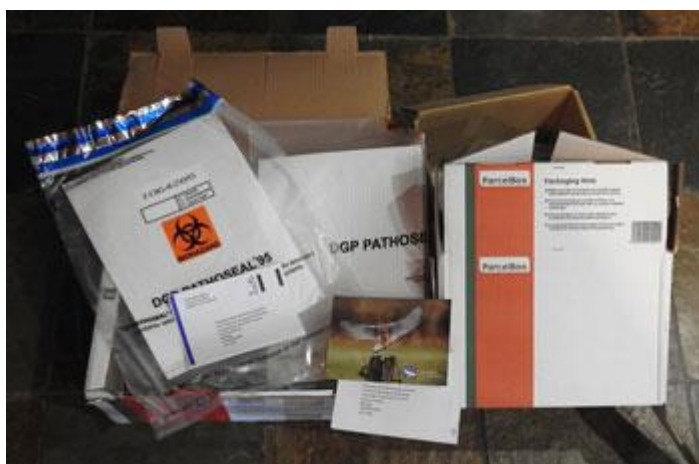
If they are in good condition, I will save them so they can be measured, which allows them to be aged and sexed (where possible). I often find that the casualties are underweight, suggesting they were having difficulty feeding prior to their death. Occasionally, the birds are only stunned and with a bit of TLC can be nursed back to health through the temporary provision of shelter and food in bad weather, or with assistance of the SSPCA.

However, the bodies of those which do not survive can still be helpful for conservation. Predators, being at the top of food chains, accumulate toxins from the environment. Back in the late 1950s and 1960s the population of many birds of prey, particularly Peregrines, crashed as a result of the effects of pesticides such as DDT and Dieldrin. Fortunately, ornithologists and scientists recognised the source of the problem and the use of the most toxic chemicals was banned. At that time a research programme was established using birds of prey as the 'miner's canary' to monitor the level of toxins in the environ-

ment. While the most toxic chemicals are no longer in use, there are other newer chemicals which put our wildlife and environment at risk e.g. flame-retardants, and second-generation rat poisons.

Any fresh casualties that I find are sent to this project—the Predatory Bird Monitoring Scheme (PBMS)—which is operated by the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology. The principal objectives of this scheme are:

- Chemical surveillance and monitoring
- Monitor trends in exposure to priority compounds, some subject to regulatory control



Packs, such as these, are available from the PBMS for sending off raptor bodies for analysis ©David Jardine

- Identify hazards, assess risk, understand environmental drivers, assess success of mitigation
- Assess specific risks to high priority species
- Relate to population trends and evaluate whether chemicals are a likely cause of population change
- Determining the effects of contaminants on predatory birds
- Develop and maintain a tissue and egg archive for monitoring and research

The current species (in an Argyll context) that the PBMS uses are Kestrel, Sparrowhawk and Barn Owl, with Buzzard and Tawny Owl analysed as time and funds allow. Over the years I have submitted eight Sparrowhawks, four Buzzards,

a Kestrel, Barn Owl, Tawny Owl and a Merlin, and while they have not had high levels of pesticides, it is important that we continue to monitor for toxins in the environment through continued checking when we can.

The PBMS makes submission of specimens a relatively straightforward process as they provide packs with plastic bags, boxes and prepaid postage labels (see photo on previous page). So, all that is required is to freeze the specimen and then pack it up and take it to the post on a Monday.

Full details of the scheme are available at <https://pbms.ceh.ac.uk/>

Please feel free to get in touch with me if you have any queries.

David Jardine dcjardine@btinternet.com



Monitoring plastic particles in Fulmars



As part of its work on marine litter, Marine Scotland is supporting the OSPAR (www.ospar.org) coordinated monitoring of plastic particles in Fulmars' stomachs.

Is the bird you have found a Fulmar?

Fulmars look similar to gulls but are slightly larger and have straighter, stiffer wings. Northern Fulmars often have white heads and undersides; grey wings and grey-yellow beaks. The beak is short and stout with nasal tubes on the upper mandible.

If the bird you have found is a Fulmar

Any dead Fulmar found should be collected and kept safe from scavengers.

Unconfirmed bird species or birds which are

decomposing can still be collected. Just be sure to include this information on the Collection Information Note.

Collect the bird using a plastic bag, taking care to handle the bird using the plastic bag and not your bare hands. If possible, collect the bird wearing gloves or clean your hands with antibacterial hand gel after handling.

Knot the bag and immediately note (using pencil) the location where the bird was found, ideally using GPS co-ordinates or if not possible record the location where the Fulmar was found as best as you can. Additional information such as the date, time and finder of the bird should also be noted alongside any supplementary information such as if the bird was entangled in a

net or other indicators for cause of death.

Place the first plastic bag (with the Fulmar) and the Collection information Note into a second plastic bag and securely knot. This will ensure that the collection information is always present with the correct bird. This double bagging procedure prevents fouling or wetting of the Collection Information Note, while also preventing the corpse from drying out in the freezer.

What to do if there is more than one Fulmar

Double bag each Fulmar as above. This will prevent cross contamination if the birds' plumages have been contaminated with oil or other contaminants and ensure that each of the recovered birds has an individual note detailing the Collection Information (location of bird, finder, date, time and any supplementary information).

Returning from the beach

Ideally, immediately place the collected bird/s in a freezer of -16°C or below.

If no freezer is immediately available, keep the collected bird/s as cool and dark as possible until you can freeze them.

Contact either Ewan Edwards
(Ewan.Edwards@gov.scot) or Kelly McIntosh

(Kelly.McIntosh@gov.scot) at the Marine Laboratory, Aberdeen to let them know that you have found some beached Fulmars. If you have a large collection of birds it may be possible to organise a single collection from your location.

Only birds which are completely frozen should be sent to the Marine Laboratory. Please do not send partially frozen or non-frozen birds.

Please package frozen birds in a sturdy box clearly labelled "Biological Specimen" and send to:

Ewan Edwards/Kelly McIntosh
Fulmar Study
Marine Scotland Science
Scottish Government
Marine Laboratory
375 Victoria Road
Aberdeen
AB11 9DB

Please include a note inside the box providing a summary of who the sender is, your contact details, where the birds were found and how many birds are present.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to get in touch with either Ewan or Kelly on either of the email addresses given .

The Screaming Party **by Annette Anderton**



Shadowy specks
Emerging,
Under darkening skies,
Dark slivers that
Fleetingly flicker,
Outrun by their strident cries.

Silhouettes
Of criss-crossing crescents
Pirouette
In the reddening sun's rays.
Streams of sparks fly as
Screams streak and flash
In a dash
Along eaves,
Scimitar wings ablaze.

A cascade of lost souls
Encircle church spires,
Wailing in lamentation,
Never to rest,
Skies echo their sighs
As, in vain,
They cry out for redemption.

Barn Owls in Kintyre

Preserving and expanding their range



Excellent Barn Owl foraging habitat in Kintyre ©Neil Brown

The monitoring of Barn Owls in Kintyre has been continuing on an annual basis for 25 years. It began in 1995 with the launch of Project Barn Owl, a national survey by the British Trust for Ornithology. This project was scheduled to last for three years. The aim was to create a national baseline of population size and breeding range of the Barn Owl in the UK. The results would then be used to address concerns about the drastic decline in the fortunes of this iconic bird.

One outcome of this project highlighted the need for annual monitoring, to establish a clearer picture of fluctuations in Barn Owl populations and productivity. This resulted in a greater monitoring effort across the country by dedicated Barn Owl workers. This included the Barn Owl Monitoring Programme (BOMP) that standardised the recording of several aspects of Barn Owl breeding performance and survival rates by monitoring hundreds of nests nationwide.

Subsequently, locating nesting pairs and recording breeding attempts and success rates has been ongoing in Kintyre. In 2011 the scope and focus of our work changed direction slightly, when it was recognised that work was needed to protect some of the traditional breeding sites and to create new sites where none had formerly existed.

To flourish, Barn owls need three things, a suitable habitat, a plentiful supply of food within these areas, and a secure, dry nest chamber. Fortunately, most of the Kintyre landscape is suitable for these owls, with only the higher altitude areas considered to be inadequate.

In the UK, Barn Owls are at the northern tip of their global range. They evolved in warmer climatic zones, and compared to many of the northern species of owls, they are not so well

feathered. Thus, birds breeding this far north are far less likely to survive in severe winters, particularly if combined with less abundant prey. There is only one site in south Kintyre where successful breeding regularly occurs above 300m.

Prime Barn Owl habitat comprises rough grasslands that are preferably un-grazed. Grasses that grow luxuriantly through the summer months and die back during the winter, to create a deep layer of dead leaves, provide ideal habitat for grass-eating Field Voles. Such habitats not only provide voles with abundant food, but also a protective layer of dead vegetation for their tunnelling system, in which their nests are placed. Kintyre contains large areas of such habitats in unimproved sheep walk, field edges and, especially, in the strips within and around commercial forestry. In 'good vole' years these areas are often teeming with voles, which provide super abundant food for Barn Owls, especially during the breeding season when they have hungry chicks to feed. Field Voles are the preferred Barn Owl prey, most likely because they are more abundant, bigger and slower moving than other small mammal species, such as shrews.

The third requirement, for a dry secure nest chamber, was a factor that we identified as needing some intervention. From the earliest days of our study it was recognised that Barn Owls were benefiting from a good supply of suitable nest sites provided by abandoned farm buildings and cottages located throughout the area. There are many reasons for abandoned buildings, including the enlargement and amalgamation of farms and estates, the remoteness and the need for shepherds and their families to move closer to schools and civilization, and the growth of commercial forestry. All of these reasons led to many buildings being left deserted and for several decades these became ideal

nest sites for Barn Owls, most of them situated amongst perfect habitat.

While the buildings remained intact, most owls nested in the loft areas. We found that many of these spaces were carpeted with the debris of decades of broken down pellets and strewn with the bones of countless voles and other prey items. As roofs gave way and collapsed due to years of winter weather, winds and decay, some birds found further cavities within walls and chimney recesses in which to nest. However, eventually most of these buildings became unsuitable for breeding and no longer provided a secure or dry environment in which to raise young.

Over the years buildings either collapsed completely leaving little more than gable ends, which were sometimes used as roost sites, or on occasion the site would be bought for redevelopment (upper photo opposite). New buildings often failed to incorporate nesting spaces for Barn Owls. Luckily, Barn Owls readily accept nest boxes. So, a programme began of identifying sites most at risk of becoming unsuitable, together with those sites that had already been unused for several seasons due to the decay of buildings. As luck would have it, many sites had a mature tree or two within the boundaries of the property, most likely planted by previous tenants. These trees were ideal for well-designed and sturdy nest boxes, to ensure the continuation of successful breeding (lower photo opposite). Sometimes, due to lack of suitable trees around the property, the box had to be placed further away, but still close enough to remain within the home range of the breeding pair.

This effort has been satisfyingly successful, with seven sites now saved and breeding continuing. A shining example of this initiative is provided by a home range in the north of Kintyre. It had been an established site, monitored since 1995, with breeding attempted every year since then. Last season it was apparent that the nest was placed in the last available chamber within a crumbling building. The chicks were exposed and unsafe, open to predation, and possibly to falling from the nest itself. A decision was made to place a box on the only tree available to try and maintain the site. The box was put in place in September 2019. We were delighted this year to be able to ring a brood of eight chicks. All chicks fledged successfully. This was the first brood of this size I have recorded in Kintyre. Though it must be noted that 2020 was a peak vole



Upper photo. Example of a Barn Owl nest site lost to building collapse.

Lower photo. Barn Owls used to nest in the building until the roof collapsed. They now breed in the nest box placed on the tree.

Both images ©Neil Brown

year, and I did record a second eight chick brood in the south of the peninsula.

Nest site management is now a core activity in Kintyre. Depending on breeding intensity, 3-4 visits are made to most sites throughout the year, often outside the breeding season. The sites are assessed, and where necessary, boxes are cleaned out and new bedding placed inside. If a nest site is in a building that is likely to become unusable, a decision is made as to whether a nest box is needed for the following breeding season. This has occasionally been misjudged, as a single winter gale can turn a useable nest chamber into a completely exposed one overnight. Nest boxes now provide the majority of breeding sites for Barn

Owls in Kintyre, as they do elsewhere in the country. However, several old buildings still remain in our study area, which are still used by Barn Owls. These are closely monitored each year, so that a box can be provided when necessary to avoid the owls becoming homeless.

During our travels through the length and breadth of Kintyre, we became aware of large areas of owl-friendly habitat with no records of breeding pairs. Much of this unoccupied habitat was bordered by known Barn Owl ranges. So, it seemed logical that new sites could be created by simply placing nest boxes in suitable areas, with the hope that these would be eventually be occupied by dispersing young. So, effectively increasing the productivity and numbers of Barn Owls within Kintyre (and perhaps beyond?). Similar projects in other areas of the country have produced marked increases in Barn Owl numbers, just by the simple provision of nest boxes into areas of optimum habitat.

We currently monitor 64 Barn Owl breeding sites within Kintyre. However, that number is increasing on a yearly basis, often with the discovery of a previously unknown but well established site. But, increasingly new sites are being added to the study by the uptake of newly placed nest boxes. Again this is an activity that is very rewarding, when a box is placed simply on an assessment of suitable habitat rather than presence of Barn Owls. Often occupancy occurs immediately following box provision, but sometimes it can take 2-3 years before a pair actually breed. The nest boxes themselves are designed to provide a dry spacious chamber as Barn Owls have one of the most protracted breeding seasons of any British species, lasting into months from pairing until the chicks fledge. The boxes are robustly built and regularly maintained. This ensures that once the box is occupied it remains so from year to year. Even in years when vole numbers crash and no breeding occurs, the owls continue to use the boxes for roosting.

Although there are still two sites in Kintyre with chicks as I write this (November 2020), the breeding season is now more or less over and we are looking forward to next year. We have identified three sites that require nest boxes due to building decay, and we have selected a further four sites for boxes where we hope to encourage new pairs. The nest box building has begun!

Neil Brown



Upper photo. A nest box erected on a tree in suitable habitat lacking a building. A pair bred in the box in 2010

Lower photo. Neil ringing a brood of eight chicks this year.

Both images ©Neil Brown

Necklace Ground Beetle discovered in Kintyre



A particular surprise was a beetle uncovered during mowing my lawn. I grabbed my camera and took several photos before letting it loose again where I had found it. I didn't recognize it, and on looking it up in the guides, I found it was a Necklace Ground Beetle.

I sent my find to iRecord for verification and was informed that this species was outside its recorded boundaries. "Coordinate outside known range for *Carabus (Morphocarabus) monilis*"

The Necklace Ground Beetle is a large, colourful species associated with open landscapes. Both its Latin and common name derives from the sculptured pattern on the wing cases that resembles a beaded necklace. This is a largely predatory and scavenging beetle, the adults forage at ground level while the larvae live on or just under the soil surface.

Habitat

Although it has been recorded from a range of open habitats this beetle is frequently associated with cultivated land and field margins. A variety of crop types are likely to benefit this beetle providing that pesticide use is restricted and winter tilling is avoided. Pesticide restriction is not only important for the beetle itself but also to ensure a viable supply of prey items.

The Necklace Ground Beetle has also been recorded from sandy heaths, willow carr, old wood-

land, thick scrub, secondary woodland, limestone dales, cultivated field margins, hay meadows and river shingle. It is thought to prefer well-drained soils, although it is occasionally found on wetter ground.

Formerly widespread, this is now a very scarce species and is declining faster than any other ground beetle in Britain. Due to this severe decline this beetle has been included in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

Agricultural intensification, particularly the widespread use of pesticides, the loss of hedgerows and other field border refuges, and shifts from spring to autumn cultivation, are the most likely causes of this beetle's decline. The resulting fragmentation and isolation of suitable habitat will have compounded this problem by restricting the recolonisation of lost habitat, particularly as this beetle does not fly and must disperse by walking.

If you should find one of these beetles please inform us at MSBO to allow us to gain a picture of its distribution within Kintyre and elsewhere in Argyll.

Jo Goudie

Editor's note. This article first appeared in Machrihanish Seabird Observatory's July report

Articles for the March *Eider* should be sent to the editor before the 20 February 2021

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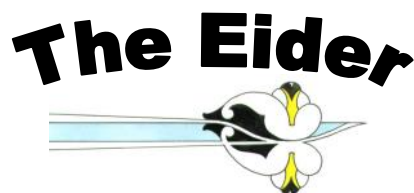
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The *Eider* is the quarterly newsletter of the **Argyll Bird Club**. The editor welcomes articles about birds, wildlife conservation and ecology in Argyll, including articles of a wider natural history interest, notices of forthcoming events, book 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 unedited digital photographs (jpeg files only) 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. Ideally, contributions should be less than 1500 words

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 indoor meetings each year, in spring and autumn. The venue of the spring meeting is rotated between different towns, including Dunoon, Inveraray, Lochgilphead and Oban. The autumn meeting/AGM is held in a convenient central location, usually near Lochgilphead. The club organises field trips for members. Your annual subscription entitles you to one copy of the *Argyll Bird Report* (PDF file), four issues of the *Eider* (PDF files) 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
Age 25 and under	free
Family	£15
Corporate	£25

A surcharge of £5 will be added to the above rates, if printed copies of the *Eider* are requested. 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).