

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

**June 2020  
Number 132**



# The Eider

An evocative photo of a Willow Warbler in full song on 11 April, Kintyre ©David Millward



**Analysing owl pellets from Colonsay, pages 10-11**

**Living with Swifts, pages 14-17**

**Thank goodness for Singapore, pages 18-19**

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

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**Chairman's chat—May 2020**

Looking back at the club's spring meeting in Dunoon, it seems astonishing how much life has changed subsequently. On reflection, we were incredibly fortunate to have been able to hold the meeting. We had been watching the situation daily to assess the risks and to follow advice. To my knowledge, there have been no reports of anyone becoming ill as a consequence of being at the meeting. Had it been the following Saturday, in the rapidly changing circumstances, we would have had to call it off.

A big thank you to the speakers who did not let us down. Ben Darvill had travelled over from Stirling, with his son, and understandably, elected to go back straight after his talk. Also, another thank you to all of you who came to the Burgh Hall. It was great to see new faces (and some older ones), to meet new people and sign up some new members. The hall seemed to work well as a venue, although the catering might have been better.

Since then we have all been adapting to life under the Covid-19 shut-down. Spending a lot of time in the garden is just one of the compensations, especially in the glorious weather (not too often we can say that). To refocus BTO volunteers from not being able to get out to BBS squares and WeBS counts, the BTO have made participation in their Garden Birdwatch Survey free for this year. Normally participants pay an annual subscription to cover the cost of running the scheme. The BTO have also started a new lock-down survey "Nesting Neighbours" for you to submit information on nests in your garden. The BTO are duty bound to promote the stay at home message since some of their survey funding comes from government, so they cannot afford to be seen to be going against that advice or even vaguely suggesting going against it.

I'm sure we are still going on our local walks during our daily permitted exercise, and birding our local patch, only a bit more locally than in the past. It's a good time to get to grips with the BTO's BirdTrack, if you're not a current user of this bird logging application. Since our county bird recorder, Jim Dickson, has access to the records, it's another route to making your birding useful.

Posts on the club's FaceBook page show spring is in full motion, with some high quality photographs, and cryptic shots to challenge identification skills. The lucky ones amongst you who see Swifts at home, have the opportunity to participate in the club's Swift Survey being organised by David Jardine. They should be arriving with you as I write this.

In pondering how birders cope with lockdown, I

**Acknowledgements**

Very many thanks to the following for their contributions to this issue—Annette Anderton, Anne Archer, Malcolm Chattwood, Roger Broad, BTO, Jim Dickson, Neil Hammatt, Peter & Dorothy Hogbin (photocopying & dispatching the newsletter), David Jardine, David Millward, Eddie Maguire, Linda Petty (proof reading), Charlie Robertson, RSPB, SOC, Nigel Scriven, Margaret Staley (for black & white illustrations), Norman Tait, Morgan Vaughan.



am reminded of WW2 prisoners of war whose enterprise was documented in the book *Birds in a Cage*, by Derek Niemann. The four men concerned had to overcome hunger, hardship, fear and boredom, and to a large part survived it through their love of birds and birdwatching. George Waterston, Peter Conder, John Buxton and John Barret later went on to become pillars of post-war conservation in Britain, and very well known to us older ones. I am reading it again. I can't think of a better time.

Our monthly field trips have been a casualty of the lockdown, and have had to be suspended for the foreseeable future. Behind the scenes the committee are still engaged in steering the club's affairs, and have had their first committee meeting online using Zoom. We will be looking at the resumption of club meetings, as and when circumstances allow. In all likelihood, it will be field trips that may be allowed first, possibly with a limited number of participants, who will have to book their slot in advance. Members will receive an update by email or post once these have been arranged.

At present, we are still hoping that the Autumn meeting and AGM will go ahead on 7 November at the Cairnbaan Hotel. Given current progress, it is not impossible to imagine a scenario in which such meetings might not be allowed, or that the venue might have been forced out of business. It could be that in order to hold an AGM, it might have to be done on-line, just so that the business can be concluded. Not ideal, but it could be done.

This uncertainty does not help much in assembling a programme for the autumn meeting. My current thinking is that we should stick to home-grown and local speakers, so if cancelled, it's not too much of a

calamity. So I'm looking for offers of appropriate talks of varying lengths (10-40 minutes). The 10 slides in 10 minutes format is good for shorter talks. Please contact me if you would like to discuss further.

All I can be confident of is that we will meet again. In the meantime, keep well, stay safe, and keep birding.



**Birds in a Cage.** Published by Short Books Ltd., 2013. ISBN 10:1780721366

## Club News

### FIELD TRIPS 2020

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, field trips are cancelled until further notice. Please see the club's website for future updates.

### INDOOR MEETINGS 2020-2021

**Autumn meeting and AGM.** Saturday 7 November 2020. We are still hoping to hold the meeting at the Cairnbaan Hotel ([www.cairnbaan.com](http://www.cairnbaan.com)), near Lochgilphead (phone 01546 603668). Lunches will be available in the hotel. The programme will be in the September edition of the *Eider*. Updates will be given in the September *Eider* and on the club's website.

**Spring meeting.** Saturday 6 March 2021. The venue has not yet been decided. Updates will be given in the September *Eider* and on the club's website.

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

### HAVE YOU SEEN A SWIFT THIS YEAR?

Last year the Argyll Bird Club decided to hold a survey of breeding Swifts in Argyll during 2020. While most bird survey work is currently on hold throughout the UK, the ABC committee has considered the government guidance and believe that the Swift Survey could go ahead, provided all members abide within the current rules of social isolation. We are not asking anybody to leave their homes to contribute to this survey, purely to observe Swifts from their homes and to provide any other incidental sightings of Swifts seen e.g. during their daily exercise.

Details of the survey and how to contribute to it are provided on the club's website at <http://argyllbirdclub.org/argyll-surveys/>. We look forward to receiving your sightings.

### ARGYLL BIRD REPORT 31 (2019)

The latest bird report has been produced as a PDF (same as the e-Eider) by Jim Dickson (compiler and editor). This should be available by

the time you get this *Eider* around the first week of June. The e-ABR PDF can then be downloaded from the club's website (under the 'Recent Reports and also 'Publications' tabs). There is a photo of the report opposite.

### 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.

### PRINTED COPIES OF THE EIDER

If you still receive printed copies of the *Eider*, please consider changing to the electronic version (PDF). It now costs more than the annual subscription to produce and dispatch the four printed copies each year. So, the committee is considering making a surcharge to the annual subscription to those members who still want the printed version. If you want to switch to the e-Eider, please inform our membership secretary. Thank you.

### COASTAL COMMUNITIES NETWORK (CCN)

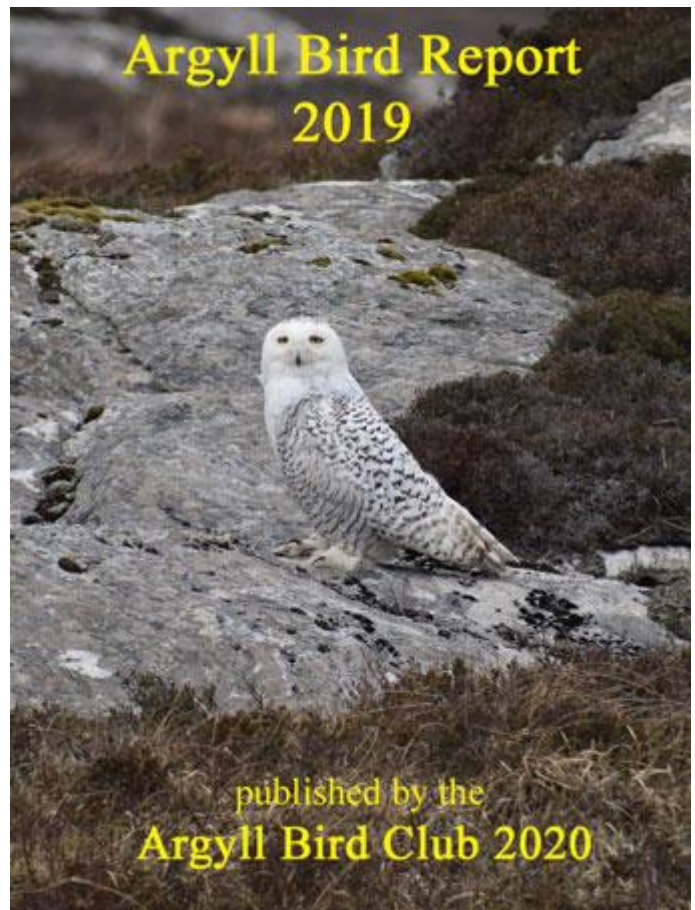
The club is now an associate member of the CCN (<https://www.communitiesforseas.scot/>). We hope that our knowledge about birds in Argyll will be of use to communities belonging to the network.

### 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).

### ABC WEBSITE—SPRING MIGRANTS

If you've not already seen it, it's worth looking at the 'Spring Migrants 2020' table on the club's website. It can be found under the 'Recent Reports' tab for 2020.

## BTO and Covid-19 (this statement was updated on 17 April 2020)

The spread of COVID-19 (coronavirus) is having a significant impact on our lives and is likely to continue to do so over the coming months. BTO is taking this threat seriously, with utmost concern for the health and wellbeing of our staff, volunteers and members, and those communities with which we interact.

It is vital that our staff, volunteers and members follow the latest government advice in order to prevent the spread and transmission of infection. The monitoring work undertaken by BTO staff and volunteers makes a valuable contribution to society, but



these are exceptional times and the government advice is clear that we should remain at home as much as possible.

BTO's senior leadership team has reviewed the government advice, and has been in discussion with the partners and funders with whom we work on our core surveys. The government restrictions seek to minimise social contact and the indirect spread of the virus by requiring that we do not leave our homes, except for a small number of designated activities. Because of this we are asking our networks of volunteers to follow the advice and re-



main at home. Do not visit survey squares or fieldwork sites to participate in BTO surveys and monitoring while the current restrictions are in place.

We will continue to monitor the government advice, including the review planned for 7 May, and will update our statement accordingly. We will continue to provide updates to our survey volunteers on anything that relates to specific surveys and projects—please look to the survey webpages for this information.

The health of our volunteers is very important to us, as are our relationships with the landowners who so generously allow us onto their land. It is likely that survey coverage will be much reduced this year (as it was during the Foot & Mouth outbreak of 2001), but monitoring is very much a long-term project which will not suffer unduly from the occasional short-term crisis.

### Join Garden BirdWatch for free

We are currently unable to mail out our normal free book, welcome pack or magazines. The free offer will include access to our online recording system, and our regular e-newsletter with information on recording and identifying garden wildlife. The free membership will be valid for one year, after which it will expire as normal. Contribute to our understanding of Britain's birds and get more pleasure from your garden today.

<https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/gbw/join-gbw>

### Nesting Neighbours (a new survey for the Covid lockdown year)

Do you think you might have birds nesting in your garden? Could you take a closer look and find out? By monitoring nests through the breeding season you could gather hugely valuable information.

It starts with watching the behaviour of birds in your garden and local area; have you seen a Robin carrying moss, a Blackbird with worms or Blue Tits investigating a nest box? Next you need to locate the nest. Whether it's a Blue Tit in a box, Blackbird in a shrub or House Martin under the eaves, all you need to do is check the nest at regular intervals and then record what you see online. By following the code of conduct it is possible to enjoy a privileged and intimate insight into the lives of birds without impacting the nesting attempt.

- The information collected through Nesting Neighbours helps BTO scientists to build up a detailed picture of bird breeding success and what may be affecting it, so participation in Nesting Neighbours is both enjoyable and very rewarding.
- Birds' nests are often unsuccessful, but it's essential we know about these ones too, so please follow the breeding attempts through the season and let us know what happens, whatever the outcome. You can also record when a nest box hasn't been used.
- Try to keep an eye out until at least August.

Nest boxes are sometimes used more than once and birds like Robin, Blackbird and Collared Dove will often have two or even three nests over the spring and summer.

<https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/nesting-neighbours>

### 2019 BBS Report

This makes fascinating reading and can be downloaded from here:

<https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/bbs/bbs-publications/bbs-reports>

This is the twenty-fifth annual report of the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey (BBS), documenting the population trends of widespread UK breeding bird species during the period 1994-2019.

The BBS is the main scheme for monitoring the population changes of the UK's common breeding birds, providing an important indicator of the health of the countryside. BBS trends are produced each year for more than 115 species, and the results are used widely to set priorities and inform conservation action.

In 2017, the Breeding Bird Survey Partnership adopted the Waterways Breeding Bird Survey, previously funded by BTO with financial support from the Environment Agency, and this report now incorporates news, trends and research from this waterways-specific monitoring scheme.



## Editorial

I expect many of you are taking more notice of wildlife in and around your gardens than in previous years. The fantastic spring weather has helped too. Linda and I have been enjoying having breakfasts and lunches outside on our patio, probably more so than I can recollect in previous springs. I'm sure the midges will soon put paid to that, but it has been delightful while it lasted! The sunshine has encouraged us to linger over one coffee, and then another, and just take note of our surroundings, rather than being in a rush to get off somewhere.

In particular, a Magpie pair has kept us amused. Going back to the 1980s and 1990s, we didn't have Magpies in Ardentenny, but they have slowly extended their range beyond their stronghold around Dunoon, and we now have a number of pairs breeding in the village.

Magpies are often much maligned due to their predation on songbirds and their nests. However, they don't always have it all their own way, as was ably described by Margaret and Peter Staley in an article in the *Eider* a few years ago (December 2006, page 9). In this instance, they witnessed a long drawn out battle between a juvenile female Sparrowhawk and a Magpie (see photo opposite).

Over the years I've watched skirmishes between our local Magpie pair and their Carrion Crow neighbours. The Magpies have attempted to build nests in a variety of nearby trees, but the crows have eventually had the last word, by removing sticks from the Magpies nest for their own nest, almost as quickly as the Magpies could build it. The Magpies would often try to build in another tree, and the crows just would repeat their antics.

However, this year the Magpies wisely chose an 8m high densely-foliaged Holly in which to build their nest. This prevented the crows from carrying out their usual stick-thieving, and they eventually gave up trying to gain access to the nest. On 5 May, I found two halves of newly-hatched Magpies eggs on our drive, indicating the presence of chicks. Over the next few days this was confirmed by a frenzy of feeding activity, with one or other parent returning to the nest every 3-6 minutes. This went on virtually all day. They seemed to acquire most of the grub for the kids from nearby gardens.\*

But, there was one downside. I've found Magpies really like moths! I run a moth trap 2-3 nights a week, and usually get up at sunrise to count and record species present. My moth trap is placed on the patio, against the wall of our house. While many of the moths actually enter the trap, quite a few just cling to the wall or sit on the patio—much too

tempting for Magpies with hungry offspring! So, I now have to rise from my bed around 45 minutes before sunrise, to sit around in the dark and act as bird scarcer, until its light enough for me to collect and identify the moths that aren't in the trap. It's a small price to pay for the entertainment these hard-working parents have provided us with this spring.



A juvenile female Sparrowhawk attacking a Magpie ©Peter & Margaret Staley.

Lockdown has encouraged a number of folk (including myself) to put pen to paper for this issue. Perhaps, I can encourage more of you to do the same, as subsequent newsletters, at least for this year, are going to be lacking regular items, such as reports of field trips and indoor meetings.

In the March 2020 *Eider*, I included a 'mystery photo' (below) on page 9, with a prize of a bottle of wine for the first person to correctly identify it. Two folk e-mailed me with the correct answer within a few hours of the newsletter being posted. The winner was Jimmy Maxwell. If you're still puzzling over its identification, see pages 8-9.



Mystery bird. Photo taken in June in northern Spain © Steve Petty

\*The Magpie chicks (3+) fledged successfully on 24 May.





## Otters at MSBO

A dry male displaying its true colours, MSBO, 19 July 2019

©Eddie Maguire

Otters are seen frequently from Macrihanish Seabird Observatory (MSBO) and around the shoreline at Uisaed Point, Kintyre. Here, their foraging behaviour is restricted to the lower shore and the marine environment. These observations are supported by historical data accrued at MSBO over the last 25 years.

Sightings of Otters at Uisaed Point are normally of foraging activity in the sea by a single animal. When ashore, they are rarely more than 10m from the tideline and frequently appear during the flood stage of the tide. There are no inland records of Otters on Uisaed Point.

Large prey items are always brought ashore, while small prey are routinely eaten on the surface of the sea and are not usually identifiable.

Species that have been caught and eaten by Otters at MSBO during 1993-2019 are:

- Gurnard *Eutrigla gurnardus*
- Pipefish Syngathidae
- Sand-eels Ammodytidae

- Flatfish Pleuronectidae
- Rockling *Crenilabrus* sp.
- Wrasse *Crenilabrus* sp.
- Grey Mullet *Chelon labrosus*
- Butterfish *Pholis gunnellus*
- Pipefish Syngathidae
- Gobies Gobiidae
- Conger *Conger conger*
- Shore Crab *Carcinus maenas*
- Common Lobster *Homarus vulgaris* (one record)
- Common Sea-urchin *Echinus esculentus*.

Although an Otter will obviously be influenced by what is most readily available, historical information from MSBO reveals that the Otter is a very opportunistic hunter.

**Eddie Maguire**

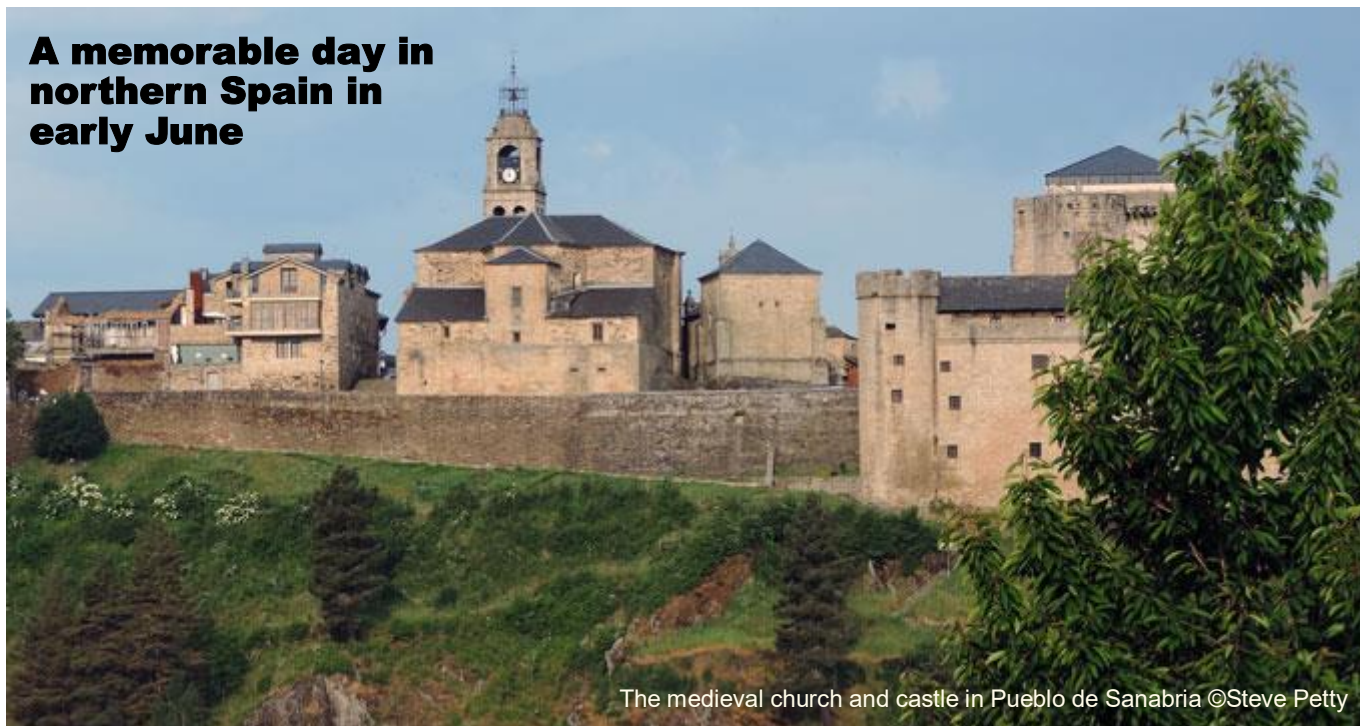
This inquisitive stare was in response to a whistle by the warden! MSBO 23 July 2019

©Eddie Maguire





## **A memorable day in northern Spain in early June**



The medieval church and castle in Pueblo de Sanabria ©Steve Petty

During our springtime trips to northern Spain, we try to visit a new area each year from our base in the Picos de Europa. We hadn't been to the north western part of Spain for a while, so we booked a few nights in Puebla de Sanabria, a small town that was new to us (photo above).

Sanabria is close to the northern border of Portugal, and lies in the Spanish province of Zamora. It's an attractive medieval town, just over 900m above sea level (asl). The town has been declared an historic site by the Spanish government due to its wonderful buildings, such as the 15th century castle. This incredible building features a

large keep and is one of the best preserved castles in the province of Zamora, dominating the Tera river valley.

The surrounding area is fantastic for wildlife, with plenty of hills and lakes. Lake Sanabria, the largest glacial lake in Spain, is surrounded by beautiful valleys and rolling hillsides which make up the Lake Sanabria Nature Reserve, home to over 1500 plants and 142 species of bird.

There are dozens of smaller lagoons, all of glacial origin, distributed throughout this moun-



Laguna de los Peces ©Steve Petty



tainous region. Many have evocative names. We decided to spend a day exploring one of these called the Laguna de los Peces (fish lake, see photo on previous page). This lies at 1707m asl and is frozen over most winters. For comparison, Ben Nevis is only 1345m asl. We drove to it along a very twisting road with fabulous views.

It was a beautiful spring day when we arrived at the car park near the laguna, where there were only a couple of cars. The heathlands were a blaze of colour (red, pink, yellow and white). Numerous species of heather, broom and rock roses were in full bloom, and the air was full of the scent from their flowers.

Around the car park, where the vegetation was shorter, we soon located the odd Wheatear, and then realised Black-eared Wheatears were probably more abundant. Small parties of Linnets seemed to be continuously in the air, while both Stonechat and Winchat were seen perched on some of the taller scrubs. We soon spotted a distant pair of Montague's Harrier displaying and the occasional Short-toed Eagle spent time hovering over the heather in search of reptilian prey.

It was only a short distance from the car park to a track, which we soon realised allowed us to circumnavigate the laguna. Dunnocks are a feature of most high heathland in northern Spain, and so it was here. It always seems strange to me that this skulking little bird, so much a feature of our gardens back in Scotland, are almost unknown at low altitudes in northern Spain. After we'd passed through a couple of Dunnock territories, we began to pick up a song that I didn't immediately recognise.

Surprise soon turned to excitement as we picked out our first male Bluethroat, in full song, on top of some tall heather about 30m away from us. This was a white-spotted form (photo opposite). Over the course of the next couple of hours or so, we managed to locate at least five different Bluethroat territories. Interestingly, males from two territories had white-spotted throats while three males had plain blue throats (photo opposite). We spent quite a lot of time admiring these perky little birds, who didn't seem to be particularly alarmed by our presence. One thing I hadn't realised before was just how long their legs were (middle photo opposite).

Overall, it was a truly memorable day. The Bluethroats were a totally unexpected find. Although, we did discover later that they were known to breed in this area. But, it wasn't just this remarkable little passerine, it was the whole day, with glorious warm spring sunshine, the multitude of other birds and butterflies, and the staggering combination of colours from the flowering heathland plants. We will return!

**Steve and Linda Petty**



**Top photo.** Male Bluethroat, white-spotted form

**Middle photo.** Male Bluethroat, lacking a white throat spot

**Lower photo.** *Erica umbellata*, the most abundant and colourful heathland plant

All photos ©Steve Petty





## Lockdown pursuit owl pellets

A ground nest of a Long-eared Owl with chicks, Loch Turraman, Colonsay, June 2013  
©David Jardine

While tidying at home (I guess we all did a bit of that during the lockdown) I found an old takeaway meal box with Long-eared Owl pellets found on Colonsay in May 2008. Rather than ditch these, and having time on my hands, I decided to dissect them out to see what they contained. As these pellets had been 'forgotten' and were in poor condition this was a 'look-see' examination rather than a more detailed study of Long-eared diet on Colonsay, such as that using 147 pellets found during 2001-2007 (Jardine *et al.* 2009).

The Long-eared Owl is a scarce breeder on Colonsay, with an estimated population of 3-5 pairs which nest in old Sparrowhawk nests or on the ground on scrubby hillsides (photo above). There

are reported to be no voles on Colonsay, but the arrival of the Hen Harrier as a breeding species on the island since the turn of the century led to speculation that voles might have been inadvertently introduced. This more recent sample of pellets allowed another opportunity to establish whether this might be the case.

The investigation had three stages; soaking, separating and sifting, then identification of the principal remains (see photo with trays in each stag of the process). Identification was assisted using the Mammal Society's excellent publication (Valden & Morris, no date).

Around 30 pellets were checked. A few had



Long-eared Owl pellets during investigation: (left to right) dried pellets from storage, re-soaking pellets to allow dissection, and principal remains for identification. ©David Jardine



broken so the exact number cannot be given precisely. These contained a total of 33 identifiable prey items. Most of these were from mammals; 27 were Wood Mice (81.8% of items) and three were Brown Rat (9.1%). The remaining three were birds (9.1%); one was a Skylark, another a thrush, and the last was thought to be a Linnet, or another small finch.

This investigation, like the earlier study (Jardine *et al.* 2009), failed to find evidence of voles on Colonsay. The prey remains were similar to the previous study with Wood Mouse (47.8%), birds (23.2%) and Brown Rat (17.9%) making up the bulk of the prey recorded. It was notable that Pigmy Shrew, which comprised 7.7% of the prey remains found in the earlier study, was not found in this sample of pellets. The previous study recorded a Song Thrush as a prey item, but Skylark and Linnet were new prey for Colonsay, but both have been recorded elsewhere.

While tidying up, I also found some Barn Owl pellets from Seil, which contained skulls of Short-tailed Vole and a single Bank Vole skull, and an owl pellet (species not known) from Scarba which had a single Short-tailed vole skull.

Jardine, D.C., McNab, E.M., Davison, M. & Holliday, S. (2009) Long-eared Owls on Colonsay, Argyll. *Scottish Birds* 29: 16-21

Yalden, D.W. & Morris, P.A. (no date) *The Analysis of Owl Pellets*. Mammal Society Occasional Publication 13. The Mammal Society, Bristol.

**David Jardine**



**Upper photo.** Bird remains from Long-eared Owl pellets, Colonsay: Thrush foot (left), Skylark (upper right), Linnet (probable) (lower right). ©David Jardine



**Lower photo.** Mammalian remains from Long-eared Owl pellets, Colonsay: Brown Rat (left) and Wood Mouse (right). ©David Jardine



Colonsay ©Steve Petty



## MSBO Northern Gannet overland project 2017—2019

Northern Gannets off  
Machrihanish  
September 2019  
©Eddie Maguire

During March to October 2017-2019, a total of 4,744 adult Northern Gannets *Morus bassanus* flew overland from Campbeltown Loch (Clyde Waters) to Machrihanish Bay (Atlantic), a distance of 8km.

In all years the number of adults crossing overland diminished rapidly during early October. This fits well with the known fact that young Gannets on Ailsa Craig fledge mainly during mid-late September (Bernie Zonfrillo *pers. comm.*), and supports our contention that birds crossing over south Kintyre from Clyde to the Atlantic are breeding adults on foraging trips.

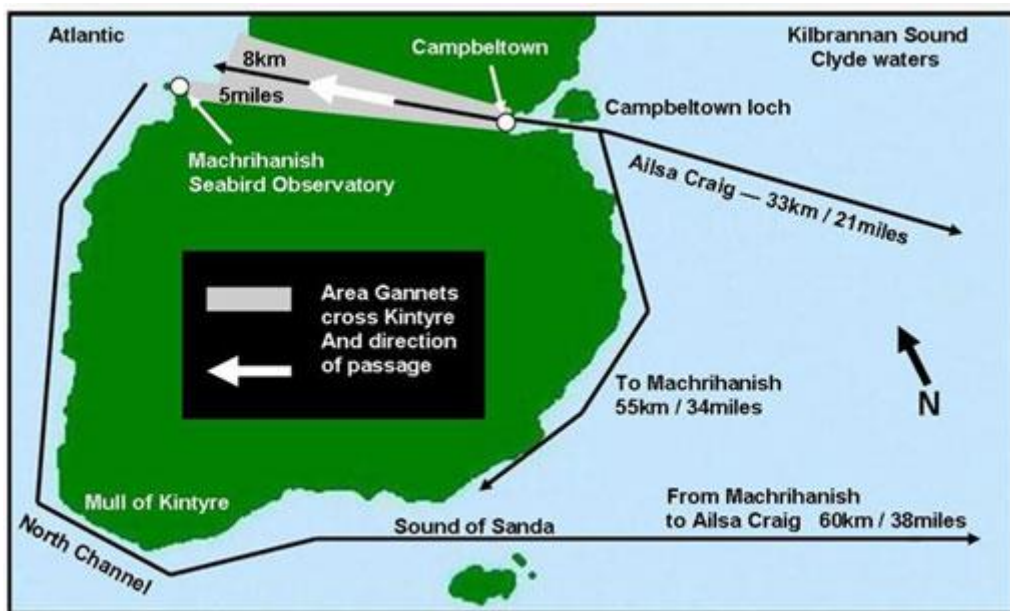
### Timing the 8km overland flight of Gannets

The 8km overland flight time to Machrihanish Bay from Campbeltown Harbour has been firmly established for several years.

The following is an example of how flight times were determined. At 13:28hrs on 1 July 2019, Charlie Robertson (MSBO Northern Gannet Project Coordinator) contacted the MSBO by mobile phone to report that a squadron of seven adults had just flown over Campbeltown Harbour and departed high over the town for the west.

At Machrihanish, the flock was located by observers on the MSBO viewing platform at 13:36hrs as they came into view over The Laggan to the east, still flying west, still overland and still high as they approached the western edge of Machrihanish Airbase. About a minute later they were over the golf course then the dune slacks, and finally over Machrihanish Bay (Eddie Maguire/Dee Brodie).

The 8km overland flight time from Campbel-



South Kintyre, Argyll & Bute showing the westerly overland route (8 km in 9 minutes) taken by adult Northern Gannets from Campbeltown Loch (Clyde waters) to Machrihanish Bay (Atlantic). Direct marine routes with approximate distance from Campbeltown Loch to Machrihanish and to the Ailsa Craig colony are shown.  
©Eddie Maguire



town Harbour had taken 9mins. Many more were timed during July and all completed the crossing in 9mins.

### Factfile

- South Kintyre is the only accredited location in the UK where Gannets routinely fly 8km overland during the breeding season, often in significant numbers, presumably to gain rapid access to foraging grounds.
- Only adults have used overland route from Campbeltown to Machrihanish Bay, and always from east to west. The largest number in a single day was 79 on 5 September 2019.
- Gannets employ powered flight during the 9 mins overland crossing, flying at around 56km per hour
- After foraging successfully, Gannets are visibly bloated with fish and appear unwilling to make the overland crossing in reverse.
- The return journey to the Ailsa colony is strictly a marine route via the Mull of Kintyre, where they rely on powered flight in conjunction with dynamic soaring (wave power).
- There is a substantial increase in the number of adult Gannets using the crossing in August and September. This timing coincides with the

latter stages of the breeding season when food demands of chicks peak.

- Wind direction appears to have little or no influence on the numbers that embark on this overland shortcut to the Atlantic. Wind strength does not dissuade crossings either. For example, 50 birds were observed on 19 August 2017 in a WNW wind force 6.
- The number of adults crossing overland diminished rapidly during early October. Gannet chicks on Ailsa Craig fledge mainly during mid-late September. Therefore, very few adults are feeding chicks at this time and the overland shortcut is finally abandoned.
- Gannets have never been observed using the overland crossing during the main winter period (November-February).

A paper by Eddie Maguire & Charlie Robertson about the overland passage of this species during 2017 entitled 'Northern Gannets crossing overland in South Kintyre, Argyll' was published in the *Seabird Group Newsletter* (Number 137, February 2018) and in Argyll Birds Club's Quarterly Newsletter *The Eider* (Number 123, March 2018).

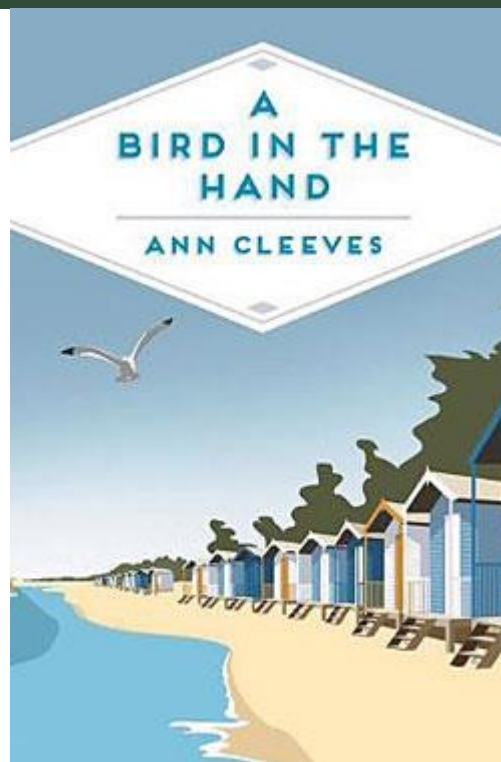
**Eddie Maguire & Charlie Robertson**

### Book review

**A Bird in the Hand** by Ann Cleeves. Published by PanMacmillan. ISBN 9781509856237. Paperback £8.99. eBook £3.99

Many of you will have heard of Ann Cleeves as the crime writer and author of the "Shetland" and "Vera" detective series. How many of you know that her first book was a birding mystery? She spent time at Fair Isle Bird Observatory as assistant cook, where she met future husband, ornithologist Tim Cleeves, taking her into the world of birding, ringing and twitching. She started writing while they wardened on Hilbre Island off the Wirral, and it was natural enough that it produced a birding novel. "A Bird in the Hand" concerns the death of a promising young birder in marshes near the village of Rushy on the north Norfolk coast. If you have ever visited Cley, you will be able to imagine the landscape. A retired civil servant, and twitcher, George Palmer-Jones and wife Molly, find themselves involved in investigating the murder.

A complicated love life, jealous rivals in love, and in twitching all contribute motives and possible suspects. The story leads from Norfolk to Scilly, to Scotland, and back, with twists and turns and gradual revelations, with the focus moving from one suspect to another. While Palmer-Jones, Home Office past gives him privileged access to information, which stretched my belief, his knowledge of birding and twitchers helps him succeed where



the police fail miserably. The unexpected conclusion comes right at the end. An excellent lockdown read and recommended.

**Nigel Scriven**

## Living with Swifts

Common Swift ©Jim Dickson



### Introduction

Having previously managed to attract Robins, Spotted Flycatchers, Tawny Owls, Blue and Great Tits to nest boxes in our garden, in 2008 we put up two Starling and two House Sparrow boxes under the eaves of our house, as we wanted to help the local population of these birds. We also saw Swifts entering and leaving a hole in the eaves! This excited my interest in these fascinating birds and led me to make observations of their behaviour.

### Background

What comes as a surprise to many people is that Swifts are more closely related to hummingbirds than they are to swallows or martins (Fig. below). Common Swifts are migratory (Fig. below). In a

BTO study, geolocators were used to investigate migration routes and wintering areas of Swifts (Appleton 2012). It was found they migrated by a variety of routes, ending up in equatorial and sub-equatorial Africa. One individual ranged across the whole Congo basin and areas to the east. It then spent ten days in Liberia before returning to the UK, indicating that this might be an important refueling area. Amazingly, it only took five days to travel the 5000km from Liberia to Fowlmere in the UK.

### Swift Breeding Cycle

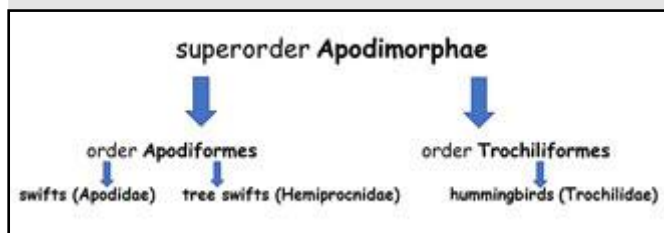
Lack (1956) observed that adults return to the UK in late April/early May. Males usually arrive first and take possession of nest sites. Females lay a clutch of 2-3 white eggs in May or June. Both parents incubate the eggs for 19-21 days, which usually hatch in mid-June. The chicks fledge in late July-early August after 35-45 days, although it can take as long as 56 days.

### Feeding

According to information at the Natural History Museum in Oxford, adults feed mostly at a height of 50-100m and prefer the largest insects they can swallow. The nestlings are fed on a bolus of insects and spiders held together by saliva, and carried back to the nest in a pouch at the back of the adult's throat. Up to 1000 insects per trip can be carried by a single Swift. Over 500 species of insects and spiders have been found in bolus samples. It appears Swifts are able to avoid stinging insects.

### Swifts in Kilmichael

Sadly, having been delighted to find Swifts were nesting in our eaves in 2008, in 2009 we found a dead Swift trapped in the nest entrance. This prompted us to put up two RSPB Swift boxes under the eaves. They were immediately occupied by Starlings! (photo, page 15).



**Left figure.** Taxonomy of swifts and hummingbirds

**Right figure.** Breeding (red) and wintering (blue) ranges of the Common Swift





Young Starlings about to fledge from a Swift box  
© Annette Anderton



In 2011 we noticed that Swifts were going in and out of the RSPB Swift boxes, but after the Starlings second brood had fledged in July. So, in 2012 we put up a home-made box that we hoped was Starling proof.

In 2015 and 2016, Swifts still appeared to be nesting in one of the RSPB Swift boxes after the first brood of Starlings had fledged, but they were continually harassed and attacked by Starlings. We also noticed Swifts entering and leaving a hole in the east gable.

In 2017, a pair of Swifts bred successfully in the home-made box, but were still attacked by Starlings. So, in 2018 we removed the two Starling boxes and replaced them with two new home-made Swift boxes, in which we had installed cameras. This caused much consternation amongst the Starlings, who spent lots of time peering at the new boxes. We provided alternative accommodation in the garden for the Starlings.

In late July in 2017, we observed a Swift that seemed to be prospecting for a possible nest site for the following year. It entered an unoccupied starling box, then seemed to have great difficulty leaving. Its head kept appearing at the entrance, before it finally 'climbed' out of the box, not the usual rapid exit. We concluded that this design of box was hazardous for Swifts.

In 2018 and 2019, Swifts nested in the original home-made box. Unfortunately, this was the only one without a camera. They bred successfully. Adults were seen entering and leaving the box during May and June, and two nestlings were observed peering out of the box in late July and early August. Swifts did not use the other two home-made boxes in 2018.

When we first turned on the cameras in 2019, on the evening of 19 July (late in the year due to technical problems) we observed two apparent, full-grown nestlings sleeping in the box. The next morning it appeared there was only one present, which kept peering out of the box. It had the white face indicative of a mature nestling about to leave. It then tipped forward and

put its head right into the entrance, but rapidly retreated back into the box, as if it had changed its mind at the last minute.

To our surprise, we found two 'nestlings' in this box the following morning! Was it possible that one might have been hidden from view underneath the camera at the end of the box on the previous day? Glanville (2019) reported this happening in one of his Swift boxes in Bristol.

Behavioural observations of our apparent 'nestlings' matched those reported in a seminal study at the Natural History Museum in Oxford (Lack & Lack, 1952). They observed, "nestlings take exercise by flapping violently with the wings" with their "body pressed against the vertical side of the box with tail spread and pressed against the floor" (for Kilmichael, see photo below), and "the older young spend much of the day peering out of the nest hole". They also observed nestlings doing a form of 'press-ups', with the wings partly extended and pressed down on the floor, taking the weight, while the body is raised until both it and the feet leave the floor", but our 'nestlings' did not do this.

A few days later there was an unexpected surprise when a Swift entered the box. It appeared that it might be an adult coming to feed the 'nestlings' but they did not seem to be in the box when the 'new' Swift arrived. Also, no adults had been observed entering this box to feed the 'nestlings'. This was not considered unusual, as the adults can be away gathering food for a number of days, and do not feed the older nestlings every day. Having decided it was not a returning adult, but one of our 'nestlings', I then consulted Lack (1956) for information on what might be happening, as newly fledged Swifts are not supposed to return to the nest. Interestingly, he reported a pair of yearlings selecting a site in their first summer, building a nest, but not laying eggs. They returned to the same site the following year (as two-year old birds) to breed.

The reported age of first successful breeding in Swifts, ranged from two years (Lack, 1956) to



Swifts exercising ©Annette Anderton

four years (Perrins, 1971; Bromhall, 1980). More recently (Lack, 2018) stated that "they must be at least three years old to breed successfully" It had previously been noted that when a pair of non-breeders finds an unoccupied nest-site, they will spend time inside preening and sleeping. They may also bring in pieces of airborne debris and attempt to start nest building (Lack, 1956).

So, in spite of their white faces, the Swifts in our box were most probably non-breeders and not fully-grown nestlings. Observations over the next few weeks supported this. The Swifts preened themselves and each other for extended periods of time. They slept in the box every night and frequently during the day. This was contrary to the commonly held belief that Swifts spend all their time on the wing, except when breeding. However, they did start building a nest by bringing in grass and other airborne debris.

### Banging

What is 'banging'? According to Lack (1956) it is when "a solitary Swift flies up to nest hole and bangs it with its wings. So, what are the reasons for banging? Lack (1956) suggested that banging birds were prospecting for unoccupied nest holes, because when there was a pair present, they would look out and start screaming.

At Kilmichael, there were two peaks in banging. The first was when the Swifts arrived back in May, and the second when young were in the nest. Mostly, one bird would enter and then the second bird would bang the box before entering. Banging

is still not fully understood, but it seems that it may have more than one purpose in different situations.

### Screaming

A familiar sight and sound early on summer mornings or around dusk is of excited screaming parties, comprising groups of two or more birds careering at high speed around buildings where Swifts are nesting. Our Swifts usually start this at about 05.00hrs!

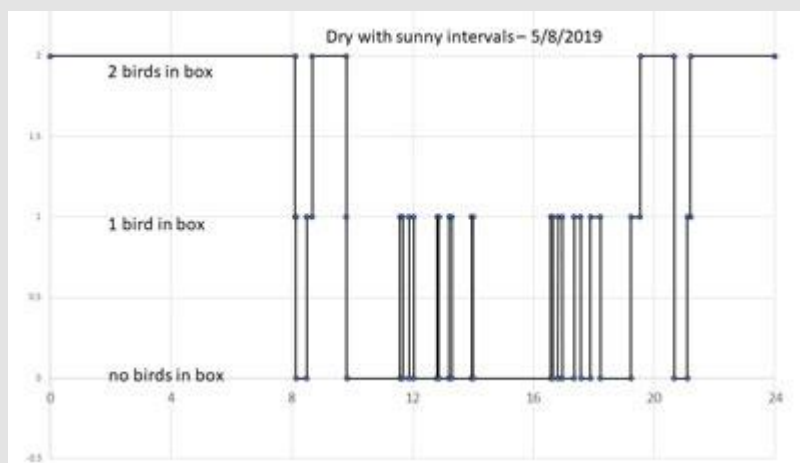
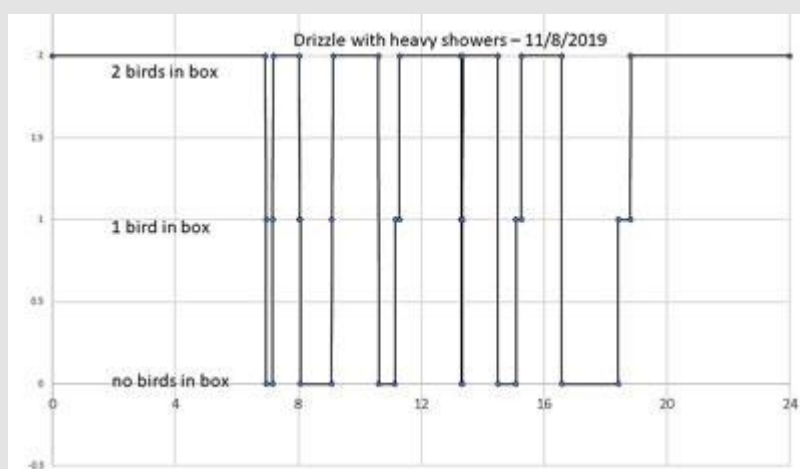
According to Lack (1956), it seems to be a non-aggressive form of behaviour, as when a screaming party flew past an occupied nest, the occupants often came out and joined in, particularly in the evening. He thought screaming parties helped to unify the group. He also reported an increase in frequency just prior to migration.

At Kilmichael, the early morning screaming parties seemed to prompt the non-breeders to leave the box and join in, whereas the evening screaming parties took place before the non-breeders returned to their box for the night. They returned silently just before it got dark. There was also an increase in the frequency and size of screaming parties just prior to migration.

### Effects of weather

Interestingly, at Kilmichael, non-breeder Swifts not only slept in the box every night, but also sheltered in the box when it was raining.

Lack (1956) also commented that when it rained suddenly, several Swifts would return immediately to their nests to shelter, and would stay there until the rain stopped.



Effects of weather on the amount of time spent in a nestbox by a pair of Swifts. The top figure shows activity on a day with drizzle and heavy showers, and the bottom figure shows activity on a dry day with sunny intervals



Figures on page 16 show examples of the activity of the non-breeders at Kilmichael on wet and dry days. On wet/drizzly days they spent a significant amount of time in the box, usually preening and sleeping. They would venture out when there was just drizzle, but both returned very quickly as soon as heavy rain started. Conversely, on dry days they would spend most of the day outside the box. Individuals returning for brief visits, sometimes brought back airborne debris for nest building.

Although our observations relate to non-breeders, Lack and Lack (1951) showed that the growth and feeding rates of nestlings were affected by weather conditions. Nestling deaths increased in wet weather. In a long-term study of the effects of weather on Swifts in Scotland, Thomson *et al.* (1996) analysed data collected from 1954-1993 and reported that the survival of nestlings correlated with the weather in June. Also, poor weather in July led to fewer adults surviving through to the following year.

These results are supported by recent studies from the tower of the Natural History Museum in Oxford (O.U.N.M.H. 2020). For example, 112 chicks fledged in 2008, whereas in the following year only 68 fledged. In 2009, most pairs only raised one chick due to the cold wet weather in June and July. In 2012 only 14 chicks fledged following the wettest June on record. The number of adults returning may also have been affected by Sparrowhawk attacks in 2010.

#### Arrival and departure times

Table 1 (below) compares arrival and departure times in different parts of the UK. It is interesting to note that over the period 2016-2019, Swifts at Kilmichael normally arrived later and left earlier than those in Oxford or Bristol, but not always, e.g. 2017.

#### Summary of Swifts in Kilmichael Glassary

Adult swifts bred successfully in one of the home-made boxes, raising young in 2017, 2018 and 2019. Swifts may also be establishing nests in the east

and west eaves of our house. Hopefully, the pair of non-breeders studied in 2019 will return and raise young in 2020.

The maximum number of Swifts seen in Kilmichael has increased annually with, 10 in 2016, 11 in 2017 and 2018, and 12 in 2019.

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Annette Anderton

**Table 1 - Comparison of Arrival/Departure Dates in Bristol, Oxford and Kilmichael Glassary**

	2016		2017		2018		2019	
	Arrive	Leave	Arrive	Leave	Arrive	Leave	Arrive	Leave
Bristol	26-Apr	09-Sep	01-May	22-Aug	20-Apr	28-Aug	30-Apr	27-Aug
Oxford	04-May	29-Aug	05-May	04-Sep	07-May	06-Aug	06-May	14-Sep
Kilmichael Glassary	06-May	24-Aug	01-May	23-Aug	11-May	05-Aug	09-May	25-Aug

(Glanville 2019/O.U.M.N.H. 2020)



Singapore street scene ©Steve Petty

Singapore is a densely populated, wealthy island nation, but is still green, with lush street planting in many areas. In the middle, a chunk of secondary rainforest remains as Singapore's main water catchment area. Next to it is Bukit Timah Nature Reserve with massive standard dipterocarp trees and other plants you'd expect to find in a tropical rainforest perfected by evolution to ensure that more than 95% of the sun's energy is used for photosynthesis. On a recent trip, I made a visit to Dairy Farm Nature Park, a patch of secondary forest attached to Bukit Timah.

Two species in Singapore demonstrate the perilous state of birdlife in next door Indonesia, where trapping for the songbird trade is rampant. Everywhere you go in Singapore you come across Javan Mynas having a great time. They were even helping themselves to scraps from the trolley of the man clearing tables in the HSBC outside restaurant. They get especially excited when it's raining and put on a great show of sheer exhilaration. Just fun to watch. Sadly, they are getting difficult to find in Java, the island after which they are named, due to the songbird trading issue. Conversely, Singapore has so many Javan Mynas, they are one of only six species not legally protected in the island state, but this may need to change in future.

Something extraordinary happened later that day at the Dairy Farm. I had seen a lot of species that I had hoped to see and then out popped some Straw-headed Bulbuls (photo opposite), now possibly extinct in the Indonesian wild, and which I hadn't thought I'd be lucky enough to encounter. Amazingly, this globally, critically endangered songbird may now only exist in Singapore where it has maximum legal protection. Its main strongholds are offshore

islands with no access, but also some survive on the main island alongside the skyscrapers. These birds were calmly getting on with feeding on berries while all excited, I couldn't believe I was watching one of the World's most endangered birds. Because of its critical situation, reports of Straw-headed Bulbul are not public on *ebird* or anywhere else. So, it's difficult to find out how rare my find was.

On my last day on the island, I decided on hard-core birding. Primary, tropical forest is very tall, heavily foliated, usually rainy, hot and humid, and dark. On top of this, Bukit means hill and the road up Bukit Timah was steep. It took me about ten minutes to dry out at the top. But the rewards of rainforest birding can be unsurpassed. My top target for the whole trip had been any green leafbird. These are very difficult to find in the canopy foliage. So, you can add neck pain to the list of issues involved in rainforest birding. But after an hour of looking up-



Straw-headed Bulbul ©Neil Hammatt

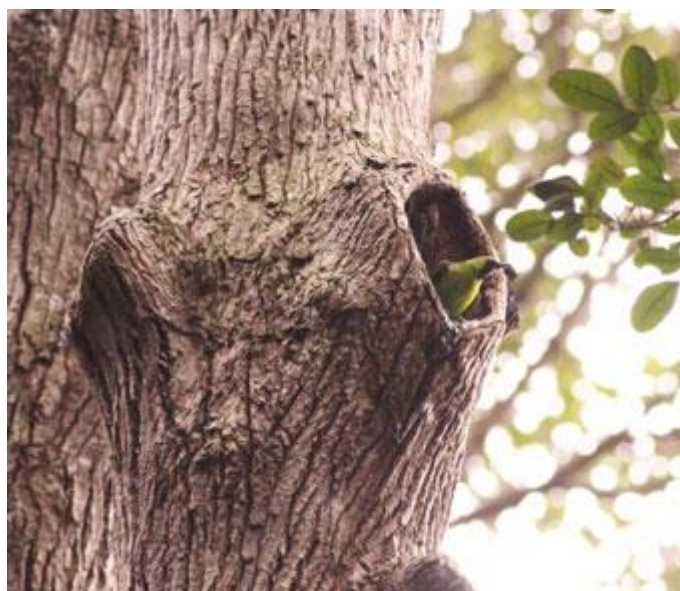


wards, I found my first visible bird, an Asian Fairy Bluebird above my head. All around there was tweeting and song but very little else showing.

When it started raining, I headed for the flooded quarry and sat out the weather under a canopy, watching Lineated Barbets and two Stork-billed Kingfishers. I eventually caught the bus back to the bottom of Bukit Timah where I spent two hours listening to silence and watching lots of squirrels. A monkey dropped by to introduce baby and then disappeared. Then the faintest peep out of an Arctic Warbler led me to my first and only feeding flock. I looked up as a flash of red led me to a Banded Kingfisher and then an Eastern Crowned Warbler flew by. I then picked up a flash of emerald green. In the darkness (I needed the camera on maximum everything to photograph it), a female Lesser Green Leafbird was devouring a grub. And then suddenly they were all gone. But, I followed the road around to where they'd moved to, and was suddenly showered with debris from above. I walked back and there 30m up, a pair of Greater Green Leafbirds were digging a tree hole. And, to my amazement, in the canopy 60m up, was the distinctive tail of the elusive Crow-billed Drongo. What a finale!

The success of green leafbirds in Indonesian songbird competitions means that it is now open season for trappers. In the most recent update, Greater Green Leafbird (GGLB) is on the IUCN red list for the first time. Fortunately, they are a protected species in Singapore, and song bird competitions are dying out there.

I cannot believe how different two countries can be. Indonesia with widespread, wanton desecration of pristine wilderness on a climate-changing scale, and Singapore greening



Greater Green Leafbird emerging from a tree hole ©Neil Hammatt

up more and more every day at the same time as having to cram more and more people into the same space. It has a lot of small, unvisited, forested islands which, in 2020, were about to be surveyed for the first time in twenty years. I can't wait to hear what they find once completed.

After I returned home, I looked up research on green leafbirds, but found very little. I emailed the Singapore Bird Park where the first and only captive GGLB had been bred. The researcher said that excavating a tree cavity had never been observed in this species; so my little observation was new to science. It is thought GGLBs only build nests on branches in the wild. I provided him with the location so he could include that pair in his research. It may be they were simply excavating for food, but they may have been nest-building. I must follow up and find out what happened next.

**Neil Hammatt**

## The Eider Duck

As our logo is the Eider, I thought members might be interested in this, which appeared in the SOC's newsletter *The Hoot*, (Spring 2020, issue 13). The SOC Archives contain much of scientific interest and ornithological importance, and also a few more unusual or unexpected items like ornithological verses by the late Chris Mylne. This extract from his poem 'The Eider Duck' perfectly captures the essence of the bird:

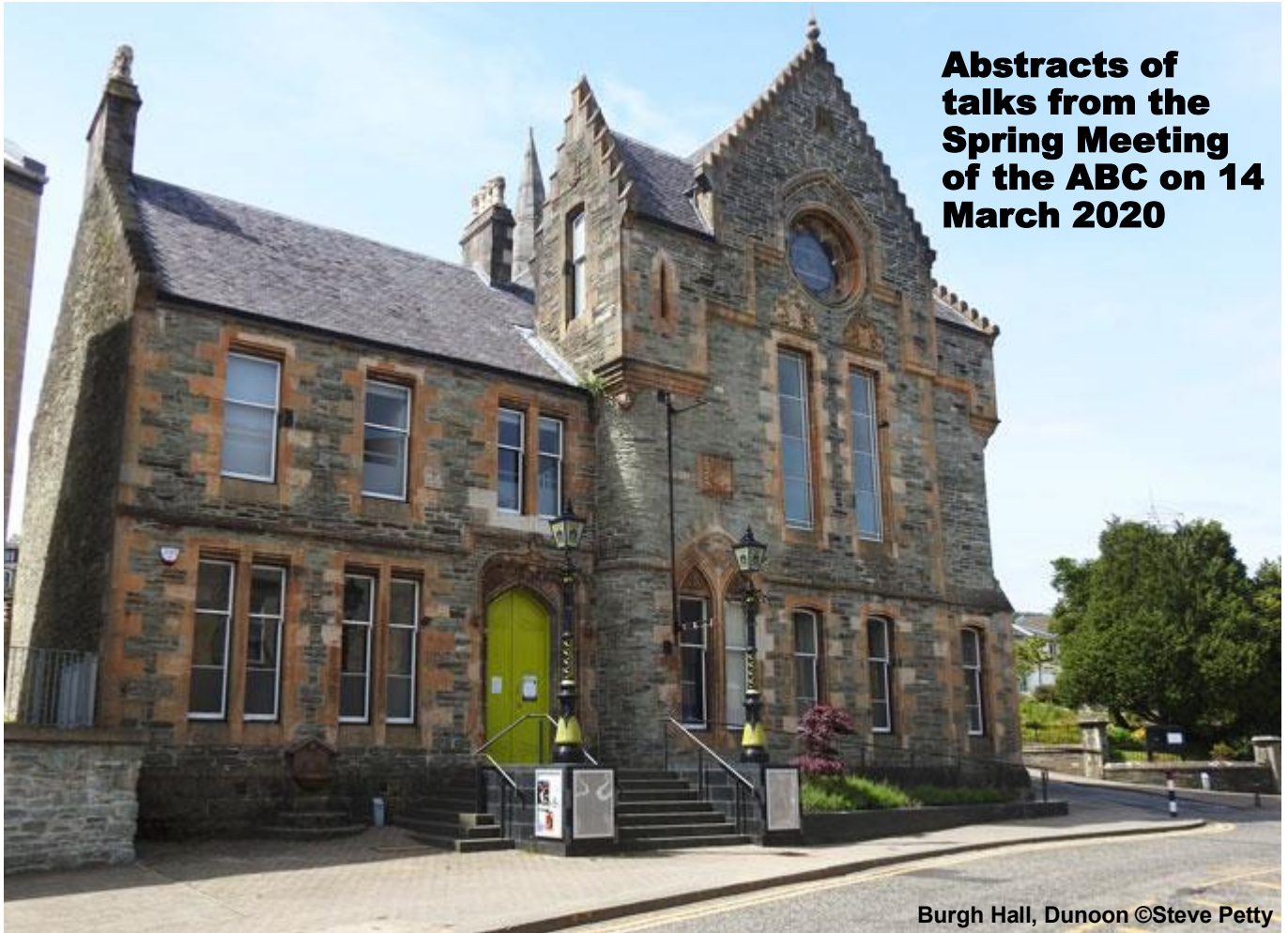
The eider is an ugly duck.  
She dives; and with a little luck  
will catch some snails or have a stab  
at mollusc, fish or scuttling crab.  
As everybody surely knows,  
she has broad webs between her toes  
and something of a Roman nose,  
is brown and drab and comatose.  
In autumn gales and winter snows

and whether the gusty west wind blows  
or sunshine on the sand-dunes glows,  
when neap tide ebbs and spring tide flows,  
the eider ducks just sit in rows  
far out upon the sea - and doze.

How different are the eider drakes!  
What show of gallantry they make  
with glossy black and gleaming white,  
their head plumes green in April light  
as each in spring a-courting goes  
and croons and whistles all he knows,  
and tilts his head and upward throws  
his beak - an act which clearly shows  
his nuptial charms. His plumage glows  
and if another drake comes close,  
he can become quite bellicose  
and fight him off with vicious blows.



**Abstracts of  
talks from the  
Spring Meeting  
of the ABC on 14  
March 2020**



Burgh Hall, Dunoon ©Steve Petty

## Introduction

It had been touch and go as to whether the meeting would take place due to the rapidly developing coronavirus outbreak. With only a few cases being reported in Argyll and the surrounding regions, it was decided to proceed with the meeting, and we were pleasantly surprised by the response of members. Nigel Scriven (Chairman) welcomed 35 folk to the meeting. He then gave a summary, with photos, of some notable birds seen in Argyll since the autumn meeting. Nigel also gave a brief account of the work undertaken by the club's committee and an update of current BTO surveys. He mentioned a new book called Red Sixty Seven, which is a collaboration between 67 authors and 67 artists with a single goal to raise funds to support conservation work aiming to reverse the declines of our most at-risk birds. Further information is available using the link below (it's worth downloading the pdf to look at some of the artwork in the book): <https://www.bto.org/sites/default/files/red-67-sample-artworks.pdf>

## Beavers and biodiversity—Pete Creech (summary by Steve Petty)

Pete from the Argyll Beaver Centre ([www.argyllbeavercentre.co.uk](http://www.argyllbeavercentre.co.uk)) gave a fascinating talk on the re-establishment of a population of European Beavers in Knapdale Forest, Argyll. Beavers had been absent from Scotland for around 400 years after being hunted to extinc-

tion. Elsewhere in Europe, re-establishment projects had been successful in about 20 countries, where their value as keystone ecosystem engineers was realised. Initially, 16 beavers were re-



Beaver dam, Knapdale  
©Pete Creech





leased in Knapdale during 2009-2014 as part of a joint project between the Scottish Wildlife Trust, Royal Zoological Society of Scotland and Forestry Commission Scotland. Their impact on the vegetation and habitat structure was independently monitored by Scottish Natural Heritage. A report of this work was presented to the Scottish Government so it could make an informed decision on the future of this population. In 2016 it was announced that beavers would be allowed to stay in Scotland and they were given legal protection. Subsequently, it was decided to reinforce this population with additional beavers to ensure their long-term future. At the culmination of this second stage of the project, 28 beavers will have been released in Knapdale. Young beavers (kits) are being successfully reared in the study area. To gain additional information about the beavers, 12 camera traps have been installed in the area. These have provided some remarkable photographs both of beaver behaviour and other biodiversity benefits of habitat modification by beavers. Video footage of beavers repairing dams was most interesting. Not only were branches added to the dams, but large sods of earth and rushes were also used to minimise leaks. Most of the repairs to the dam structure occurred in the autumn. Photos from around dams and new, higher water levels,

showed an amazing variety of wildlife using these new habitats, these included Badgers, Pine Martens, amphibians, and numerous birds such as Mallard, Teal, Moorhen, Woodcock and Grey Wagtail. Redwings were also recorded turning over wood chips from the beavers' felling activities in search of invertebrates. Overall, beavers were creating a wetland mosaic in Knapdale, which has helped to slow water flow through the area. This was an important aspect of this project, with applications elsewhere to mitigate flooding. Hopefully, Pete's thought-provoking talk will encourage ABC members to visit Knapdale to experience beaver activity first hand.

### RSPB conservation in Argyll—Ally Lemon (summary by Anne Archer)

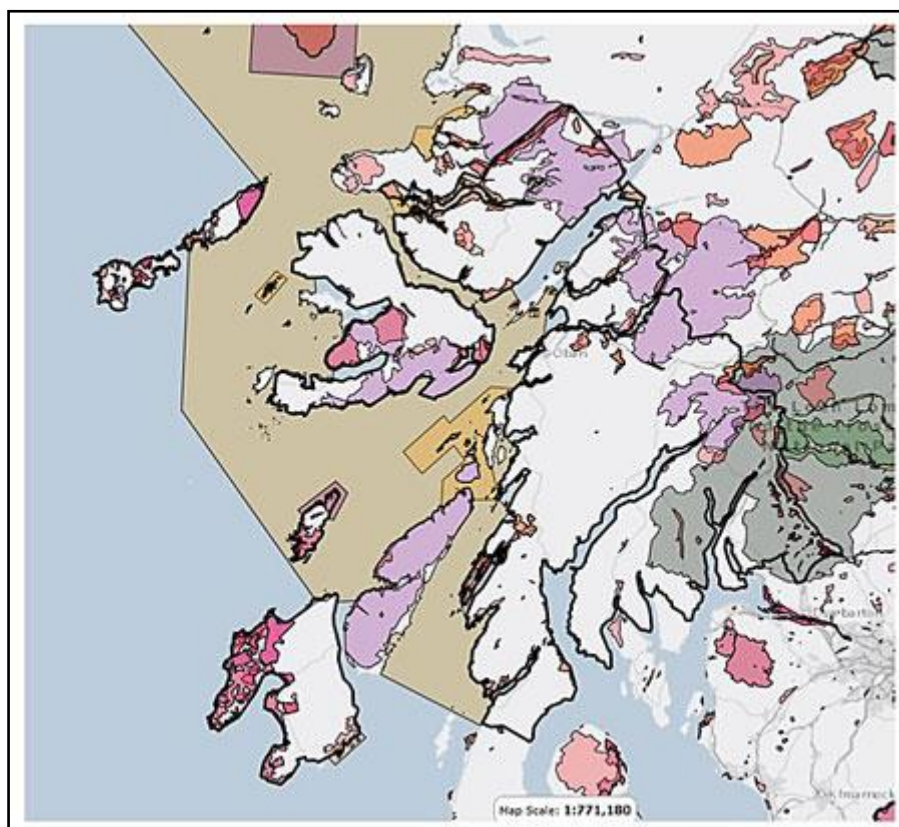
Ally introduced himself as a newly appointed conservation officer for our area. This is the result of a restructuring of RSPB's Scotland map into five areas, with Argyll expanded to include Arran and Ardnamurchan. Ally has arrived with us after childhood holidays in Knapdale, research on sea urchins, snails and lacewings and RSPB work in Fife. He is happy to be back in an area which he knows well.

He gave us a swift update of what has been happening in his new patch, including: the discovery of the Northern Sallow Mining Bee on Islay and the problem of grazing the fields during the poor summer weather of 2019 ready for the geese; fewer Corncrake but a record number of geese on Oronsay; 3,000 calling male Corncrakes on Tiree (do holiday visitors know that they shouldn't go there if they want to catch up on sleep?); a land purchase on Coll,

#### Protected areas in Argyll include:

45 SSSIs  
6 RAMSAR Sites  
15 SPAs  
12 SACs  
89 Features  
3 Marine SACs

Source RSPB







Atlantic oakwood at Glenan, Cowal ©Steve Petty

which has increased the reserve size; the RSPB's pair of White-tailed Eagles that can be viewed on Mull, Scalla and Anna, rearing their first chick and tree-planting in Glen Rosa on newly-assimilated Arran.

He then moved on to look at where RSPB will be focusing in the future, a difficult choice when there are 170 protected areas in Argyll, Arran and Ardnachurchan. He produced a fascinating map showing where the various different areas were, but it was gone in a flash and is reproduced on the last page to be pondered at leisure. RSPB's three focuses will be: Priority Landscapes, Corncrakes Calling and Species on the Edge.

Priority Landscapes includes farming strategy on island grazing and protection of the Western Atlantic Rainforest. There are a lot of small areas of the latter throughout Ally's patch and one small focus will be within the 'new' area of Morvern. They are hoping to reconnect small fragments of Western Atlantic Rainforest, which are home to migratory birds, lichens, bryophytes and a variety of unusual plants unique to this habitat. An audience comment at the end referred to the presence of lots of these areas in Cowal (photo above) and the concerning absence of regeneration because of over-grazing.



Corncrake a priority species. Photo taken on Oronsay ©Morgan Vaughan

Corncrakes Calling is a project resulting from a review of the status of Corncrakes (photo below). The Lottery and RSPB have put together funding for a plan which will concentrate on land management and public engagement. Species on the Edge is a Scottish Natural Heritage project concentrating on three areas of concern: waders, the Great Yellow Bumblebee and terns.

Ally also mentioned the difficulty of attracting big funders. This will surely be a huge and on-going problem after coronavirus. This severely limits what RSPB Scotland can achieve and means they can only work with limited budgets. Within these constraints they were working to develop: a farming strategy; a partnership with the whisky industry; more involvement with tourism. I wonder how much of this they can save in our post-coronavirus world. They are also aware of the big problems throughout the area which are forestry, rhododendrons and over-grazing by deer and feral goats.

There was a lot to take in and there are so many concerns, but Ally certainly has plenty of enthusiasm for what seems to be a daunting and overwhelming task and we wish him luck as he gets stuck in.

### **A snapshot of wildlife in Madagascar—Roger Broad** (summary by David Jardine)

The talk was about Roger's visit to Madagascar for three weeks in October 2018. He had wanted to visit this island, which has incredible biodiversity, since he was a child. It has over 300 species of birds, of which 220 breed on the island. There is a high degree of endemism. It is the fourth largest island in the world, being around 1,500km long and situated 480km from Africa. Madagascar separated from Africa early in geological history, which explains why its biodiversity is distinct from the adjoining continent. It has over 100 species of lemurs, over 350 amphibians (with a further 100+ undescribed) and 250 reptiles (50+ undescribed), all a result of the very varied habitats and isolation from the African mainland. The prevailing winds (from the east) bring rain to the steep mountainous east coast (which rises to 2,000m) while the south west of the island (in the rain shadow) is more arid.

The human population in 1950 was around 4 million. By 2020 it had grown to around 27 million! The talk highlighted the pressures this increasing population were placing on natural habitats and species. He captured the excitement that one has when exploring a completely new country, right from the moment of going into a car-park on the first morning, where he saw a brightly coloured Red Fody. This helped to emphasise just how different the avifauna of the island was compared to just about anywhere else.

The tour was organized by Naturetrek, in-





**Upper photo.** Sickie-billed Vanga



**Middle photo.** Schlegel's Asity



**Lower photo.** Juvenile Madagascar Fish Eagle

cluding a local guide, and visited a wide range of habitats around the island. The tour started in the spiny bush around Tana (the shortened name for the capital Antananarivo), where Roger was struck by just how little space was left for wildlife amongst the terraced paddyfields, where 2-3 crops a year were grown. In the same area they visited a lemur park where they had an interesting introduction to animals being rehabilitated in captivity. They also had many opportunities to photograph other species such as chameleons, tortoises and plants (80% of the flora is endemic including some wonderful orchids, and the cactus-like Octopus Tree).

The group then travelled to the south east coast, where Roger saw a familiar species wintering on the island, a Grey Plover. Human pressures here were great, with a 50ha reserve at Renala, protected by an electric fence. This small oasis of natural habitat had a feast of endemic species including Madagascar Magpie Robin, Long-tailed Ground Roller and the jay-sized Sickie-billed Vanga (photo opposite). A short trip to an offshore island, along the coast, gave views of Red-billed Tropicbird.

Further visits to the west coast allowed them to explore more habitats and to see additional species. They then travelled back via Tana by air because land-based travel can be very slow and unpredictable, particularly through villages thronging with people. Towards the end of the tour they visited the small private reserve at Berenty. Here they saw more lemurs and flying foxes, and had the unusual experience of walking through an intensively managed sisal farm adjacent to the reserve to search for Madagascar Sandgrouse. The finale of the trip was to Ankarafantsika National Park where they saw the endangered Madagascar Fish Eagle (only 150 pairs remain), and were privileged to see a newly fledged youngster (photo opposite). The remarkable Schlegel's Asity (photo opposite), Roger's favourite bird of the trip, with its green and blue fleshy caruncles, was found on the nearby limestone plateau. The talk certainly fitted the theme of the meeting, and



you were left with no doubt that Madagascar has unique biodiversity.

Reflecting on this talk, two weeks afterwards and after the coronavirus lockdown, I realised that we are part of a privileged generation. We are able to explore so much of the globe at a reasonable financial cost (not necessarily a carbon cost) and to gain such a wider understanding of foreign habitats and species. Starved of tourist income, but perhaps more mindful of the impacts of trafficking wild animals, it remains to be seen how man's impact on biodiversity develops in the coming months and years, and also whether we, as individuals, will be able to travel to see it in the same manner.

### Where have the Arctic Skuas gone— Ben Darvill, BTO (summary by Nigel Scriven)

Ben's talk was about a BTO project looking at the Arctic Skua which has the unenviable position of being the UK's most rapidly declining seabird. Monitoring data between 1986 and 2015 has re-

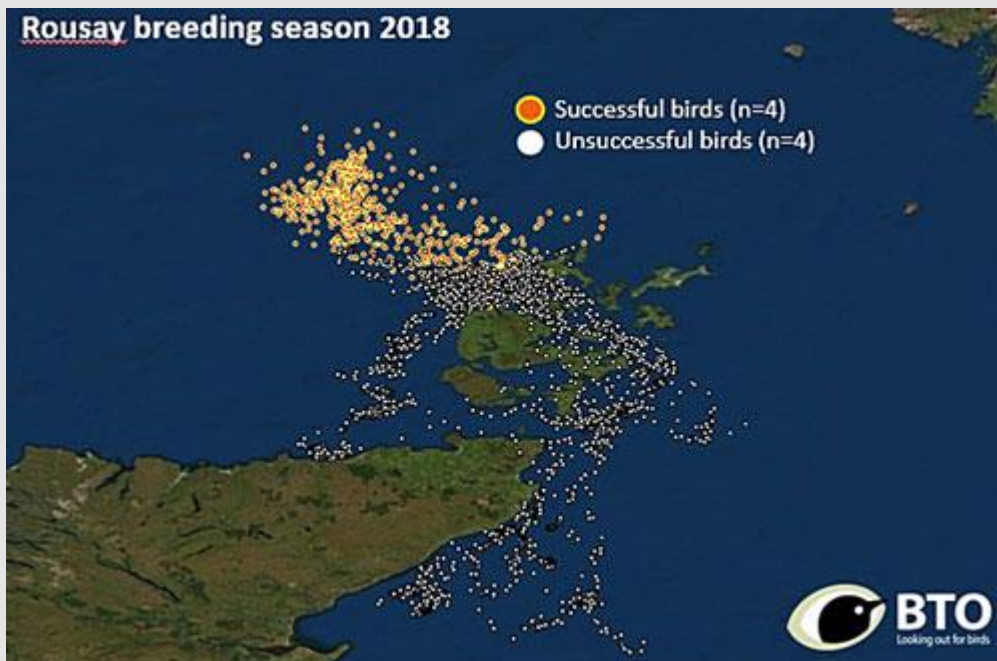
vealed an alarming decline of around 80%. Skuas are on the edge of their range in the UK, and the bulk of the population is further north. Long-running studies have shown that breeding success can be very variable, but has declined in the UK to a point that has led to a shrinking population.

Using study sites on Fair Isle (since 2010) and Rousay (in Orkney, since 2014), the team monitored the number of territories, and nests, and chicks per breeding attempt. They studied movements during the breeding season by catching and tagging the adults with VHF tags that could be downloaded by VHF base stations in the breeding area. The tags, which were glued to the bird's back, fall off after the breeding season. It was found that the birds foraged over a very large area, often down to the Moray Firth, but as soon as the chicks hatched, the area reduced markedly, as you might expect with frequent return trips to provision the chicks.

Interestingly, results from Rousay showed that successful pairs foraged to the west, whereas the unsuccessful pairs foraged more to the south and east (map below). The good areas seemed to be the MPA areas, which were sandeel hatcheries.

By using the geolocators, and catching the birds in the next year, the movements outside the breeding season can be revealed. The birds migrate south in autumn down the Atlantic coasts of Europe and West Africa, before spreading out in the south Atlantic, spending the winter either east of Patagonia or south-west of Africa. Individuals seem to go back to the same area each year.

The project is still in progress, with much still to be learned. Future new work will include increasing sample sizes (number of birds), using



**Upper Photo.**  
Pale-phase Arctic Skua at a nest on Jura ©Norman Tait

**Lower Photo.**  
Foraging distributions of successful and unsuccessful Arctic Skuas in 2018 ©BTO



better tags and comparing the diets of successful and unsuccessful pairs. There are also gaps in knowledge of the current distribution in Scotland, especially on Scotland's west coast, Caithness and Sutherland.

### **An Australian avian odyssey—Neil Hammatt** (summary by Neil Hammatt)

Around 80 million years ago, Australia broke away from the land mass known as Gondwana, and began its journey across the Earth's surface to where it is today. After 10 million years, or so, the hitherto dominant dinosaurs suddenly became extinct as the Earth rapidly cooled, it is thought, following an asteroid collision. Feathered, warm-blooded, primitive birds (and mammals with fur) then seized the opportunity to evolve to replace the dinosaurs in a range of niches, as the Earth slowly warmed up again. Of the current 850 recorded Australian bird species, around 45 per cent are endemic, with four endemic genera.



**Upper photo.** Western Whistler ©Neil Hammatt

**Lower photo.** Magpie Geese ©Neil Hammatt

Within Australia, I firstly visited Western Australia around Perth and Albany. The area is almost cut off from the rest of Australia by the great Outback desert thus forming a separate "island" of biodiversity. Consequently, there are distinct "western" species that have evolved from birds found elsewhere in Australia, and research is ongoing to measure if genetic distinctiveness is sufficiently great to justify elevation to species level in other western bird taxa. Just before my visit, the population of Golden Whistler had been deemed to be sufficiently geographically and genetically distinct to be raised to species level as Western Whistler (photo opposite). I hadn't realized this until a couple of more informed American lady birders corrected me! I managed to see most of the western endemics. south-western Australia is predominantly Mediterranean in vegetation type, and it was a pleasure to be there as it was well in flower in late Spring.

Afterwards, I took a four hour flight to Australia's tropical north around Darwin. There are fewer endemics here due to it being closer to New Guinea. Birds thus inclined, can easily fly backwards and forwards across the Torres Strait, immediately rendering them non-endemic. But notably, the Magpie Goose (photo opposite), a monotypic genus does not fly this relatively short distance, making it a local endemic. These birds get everywhere in this area of Australia in large numbers, reminding me of Canada Geese back home—in gardens, pools, parks, farms etc.

Where Old World families did not arrive from Asia, whole new, unrelated bird species evolved in situ in Australia that look similar and behave similarly to our equivalent species, a process referred to as convergent evolution. An example of this is the Australian Magpie, which looks similar to our equivalents but it is not in the family Corvidae; instead, they evolved in the family Artamidae. Similarly, butcherbirds which look and behave like our shrikes, having a hooked upper mandible and impaling their prey on thorns, but are not in the Old World shrike family Laniidae.

In total, I saw around 225 new species on my trip. Australia is expensive to visit on a guided tour, but easy to do it yourself with a smartphone, driving licence and credit card. My 21 day trip cost about 45% of the cost of travelling with Naturetrek for a similar length of time.

### **Georgia on my mind—Nigel Scriven**

#### **Conclusion**

After drawing the raffle and thanking donors for the prizes and the speakers for their excellent talks, the chairman closed the meeting with an invitation to the autumn meeting at the Cairnbaan Hotel on 7 November 2020, Covid-19 willing!

Articles for the September *Eider* should be sent to the editor before the 20 August 2020

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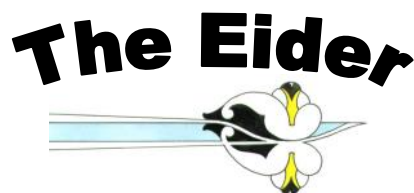
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**T**he *Eider* is the quarterly newsletter of the **Argyll Bird Club**. The editor welcomes articles about birds, wildlife conservation and ecology in Argyll, including articles of a wider natural history interest, notices of forthcoming events, book 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 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. 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
Age 25 and under	free
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).