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

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The Eider

Nuthatch, Cowal, 28 December 2020 ©Andrew McFarlane

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Inside this issue

Editorial

Covid-19 restrictions seem to go on and on! Thank goodness we have our birds to keep us sane. Needless to say, club activities have been hit hard. It's been particularly disappointing that we had to cancel the indoor meetings last autumn and this spring.

However, Zoom came to the rescue! We've now had three Zoom meetings and the comments we've had back from members have been encouraging. In fact the meetings have been very well attended with between 40 and 50 locations logging on for each meeting. One big advantage of online meetings is that it allow members on the islands to participate, and also those that live far away.

So, we need to consider if we really do need our two traditional indoor meetings. One possibility would be to have the regular autumn meeting and AGM indoors at the Cairnbaan Hotel, followed by a series of online meetings over winter. Please let us know what your preferences are

We really are hoping that we will be able to resume field trips before too much longer. At the time of writing this it is still not clear when this will happen. But, do keep looking at the club's website for updates.

The deadline for articles for the June *Eider* is **10 May**. So, please consider writing something. The strength of the Eider lies in that virtually all of the content is written by club members, rather than just recycling information from other conservation sources. But, it would be excellent to have articles from new contributors within the club. I'm happy to acccept any article with a wildlife interest, it doesn't have to be about birds. So, please give it some thought. Covid-19 restrictions provide you with the ideal opportunity to put pen to paper!

After such a cold and wet winter I cannot wait for spring to arrive. There are already some signs. Snowdrops are out around Ardentinny, but everything else seems later than last year.

Please remember to log onto the Zoom meeting and AGM on Friday 5 March. This is your opportunity to influence how the club operates.

Acknowledgements

Very many thanks to the following for their contributions to this issue: Annette Anderton, Malcolm Chattwood, Jim Dickson, Bob Furness, Mike Gregory, Neil Hammatt, Peter & Dorothy Hogbin (photocopying & dispatching the newsletter), Gordon Holm, David Jardine, Mary Matthews, David Merrie, Andrew McFarlane, Alistair McGregor, Linda Petty (proof reading) and Nigel Scriven.

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Club News

FIELD TRIPS 2021

Unfortunately, covid-19 restrictions continue to disrupt our field trip programme. In the current climate it is impossible to plan future outdoor meetings, but do keep looking at the club's website and Facebook page for updates.

ONLINE AND INDOOR MEETINGS 2021

The club held two online (Zoom) meetings over the winter, one in December and another in January. Both were well attended. Summaries of talks from these meeting are given on pages 5-7. Another Zoom meeting was held on 18 February. Summaries of talks from this meeting will appear in the June issue of the *Eider*.

Friday 5 March. Zoom meeting starting at 19.00hrs. One talk (Peter Robert on New Zealand's Birds-Extinctions and Salvation), followed by the AGM (for members only). This is the delayed AGM from 2020. For those attending the AGM, please have handy the papers for the AGM (published in the September 2020 *Eider*) and the financial accounts published in the December 2020 *Eider*.

We are hoping to hold a further two Zoom meetings, on Thursday 15 April and Thusday 20 May. If you would like to give a talk at either of these meetings please contact David Jardine. Please see the club's website and Facebook page for updates.

We have chosen weekday evenings for Zoom meetings to avoid disrupting weekends. Apart from the AGM, each meeting will comprise 2-3 talks, each of approximately 10-20 minutes duration. Details (including a weblink) will be sent to members by email just before each meeting.

For general guidance on how to join a Zoom meeting see:

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

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's monthly reports are packed full of superb photos taken by himself and colleagues at MSBO. You can download PDFs of his reports at:
http://www.machrihanishbirdobservatory.org.uk/reports.htm

ARGYLL BIRD REPORT 32 (2020)

Work has started on the next ABR and Jim Dickson (compiler and editor) aims to have this completed before June. By the end of January, Jim had received 28,100 records and many more are expected in the coming weeks. Suitable photographs provided to the ABC's Facebook group will be used wherever possible. Previous years' reports in PDF format can be downloaded from the club's website (under the 'Publications' tab).

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, and nest boxes for Swifts. Applications for funding should be submitted to the secretary (contact details on the back page).

ABC COMMITTEE VACANCY

We are looking for one person to join the club's committee. If you are interested, please contact our secretary to find out more about the post.

BTO update—February 2021

Virtual Scottish Birdwatchers' Conference

In lieu of the usual BTO/SOC spring conference, we'd be delighted if you'd join us for this virtual equivalent. We've got some great talks lined up, with speakers including our new CEO Prof. Juliet Vickery, Prof. Rhys Green, Dr Chris Hewson and patch birder Mark Lewis. The full programme will be confirmed soon.

The conference will run over two sessions, Saturday 27 March and Saturday 3 April, both during 15.00-17.00hrs. There will also be an optional mid-week evening quiz. The cost to join both sessions is just £5. For details see:

https://www.bto.org/community/events

Virtual training courses for supporters in Scotland

Last year's spring training was a huge success. So, the BTO are running it again! The course

consists of three weekly sessions, each 1.5-2.0 hrs, complemented by self-study exercises. The sessions cover:

Session 1: Bird ID, with an emphasis on songs and calls. An overview followed by an entertaining interactive workshop to help you recognise the songs and calls of commoner breeding birds found in our gardens and woodlands

Session 2: Further bird identification. After a recap, this interactive session will introduce some scarcer species. Both visual and auditory ID skills will be further honed

Session 3: How to improve as a birdwatcher. After a recap, we'll highlight some resources and activities to help you improve, building on what you have learned during the course

The small group format makes for a friendly atmosphere and allows us to better meet participants' needs. Cost £30.

We have both daytime and evening sessions on offer, so hopefully there is something for everyone. Book now to secure your place!

Monday evenings from 7pm starting 8th March

Tuesday evenings from 7pm starting 9th March

Wednesday mornings from 10am starting 10th March

Thursday mornings from 10am starting 11th March

Note: Further courses on upland birds and more advanced bird ID will be advertised in the coming weeks—watch this space:

https://www.bto.org/community/events

BTO Surveys in Argyll

While there are still restrictions on travelling under Covid-19 regulations, it is still possible for volunteer surveys to take place.

BTO Scotland has been informed (12 February) that BTO volunteer surveys are now considered to qualify as 'voluntary and charitable services', enabling monitoring activities to continue. However, volunteers are advised to assess the risks of disease transmission and application of sanctions and look to minimise risks, through working alone or in pairs wherever possible.

The Heronries Census is their longest running citizen science project, and work can begin at the end of February to monitor breeding herons, egrets and cormorants (if present) by counting "apparently occupied nests."

These are very under-recorded in Argyll, and many heronries on the database have been abandoned, with new ones being missed, and existing ones not being counted. Visits take 10mins to an hour, excluding travelling time.

To find more information and find vacant sites not being counted there is an available sites map:

https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/heronries-census

Contact njscriven@gmail.com if you wish to participate.

Your garden nest boxes

Now is a great time of year to clean out your garden nest boxes, ready for the forthcoming breeding season. Steve Willis says:

"I made this box a few years ago and it's been used twice by Blue Tits. It was in dire need of some repairs as the lid was letting in water. Last week I cleaned out the old nest material and made a new lid, covering it with leftover roof felt that I found. I added a hinge using an old bike inner tube to make it easier to inspect for BTO's *Nesting Neighbours* scheme. Fingers crossed the birds like my DIY! If you need an old inner tube then ask your local bike shop—they always have masses lying around."

Abstracts from two winter ABC Zoom meetings (December 2020 and January 2021)

Covid-19 resulted in all field trips and indoor meeting being cancelled in the latter half of 2020. In an attempt to keep in touch with members, the committee decided to try evening Zoom meetings.

The first Zoom meeting took place on 10 December. Forty-four locations logged into the meeting and the feedback from members was positive. Summaries of the three presentations are given below.

On a wing and a prayer, the work of an Investigations Officer—Patrick Styles, RSPB Investigations Team (summary by Alistair McGregor)

Patrick Styles has been a keen birder and nature lover all his life. In his spare time he enjoys kayaking and climbing. Patrick currently works for the RSPB's investigation team where he has gained knowledge on how to detect and investigate bird crime. Prior to this post he worked on several RSPB reserves as a ranger where he completed his master's degree. Patrick's talk comprised:

Bird law. Patrick explained the Wildlife and countryside (Scotland) ACT 1981, and showed a number of slides of bird crime. He told us about the use of a banned pesticide called carbofuran that is used to poison birds of prey and the illegal use of traps including spring traps and crow cage traps, all of which can be used legally if Scottish Government guidelines are followed. He showed how the use of traps could breach the guidelines, thus breaking the law. The illegal shooting of birds of prey is widely practised, and the evidence can be quickly disposed of. The destruction of raptor nests is another illegal activity.

Raptor persecution. Patrick showed a map highlighting the persecution hotspots in Scotland, which are predominantly areas of heather moorland. In 2019 there were 85 cases, which resulted in just one prosecution! We were then shown a couple of cases. A satellite-tagged White-tailed Eagle stopped moving. The body was located on a shooting estate in Donside in Aberdeenshire, and removed (see photo below). Tests showed the bird was poisoned with an illegal pesticide. In 2016 a Golden Eagle's satellite tag disappeared on moorland in Perthshire. A search of the area failed to locate the bird, but in May 2020 a hillwalker found a lump of lead in a small river a short distance from the bird's last known location. The lead sheet had been wrapped around the satellite tag from this eagle and dumped in the river. People committing such acts will go to almost any length to conceal their crime, making detection all the harder.

Poisoned White-tailed Eagle ©RSPB

Raising awareness. The RSPB investigation teams are intelligence led. They follow up on information received, collect evidence, and pass it on to Police Scotland. They raise awareness of wildlife crime in the Scottish countryside. All statistics are used to help improve the detection of crime, and hopefully the prosecution of those who continue to commit such acts.

Licensing of grouse moors. Following on from the Werrity Report, licensing is to be introduced to shooting estates with grouse moors in a bid to make them more accountable for practices such as raptor persecution. Self-regulation of grouse moors is not enough to end the illegal persecution of raptors.

BTO Update—Nigel Scriven, BTO Regional Representative for Argyll mainland (see pages 3-4)

New insights into adult Golden Eagle roosting behaviour—David Jardine, Argyll Bird Club (summary by David Jardine)

The talk was about a recently published study* by David and his and his co-authors, Andrew Ford and John Taylor. This project was a by-product of a larger satellite-tracking investigation into the use of mature conifer forests by adult Golden Eagles and their interactions with windfarms carried out by Natural Research with funding from Forest Enterprise Scotland. Golden Eagles were thought to have 3-4 regularly used roost sites close to nest sites. There is a potential offence of 'reckless' or 'intentional reckless' disturbance under the Wildlife & Countryside Act if Golden Eagles are repeatedly disturbed at their roost. Therefore, understanding more about their roosting behaviour will help those working in the uplands.

Some field-based studies suggested that eagles may have more roosts, but the difficulty of working in remote areas after dark had limited our understanding of their night-time behaviour. Using the satellite data the position of two adult male Golden Eagles was explored between two hours after sunset and two hours before sunrise . They were found to have many more roosts than previously thought. Around 70% of their roosting locations were only used on one night (single use roosts), other 'occasional roosts' were used on 2-10 nights per year and a relatively small

Golden Eagle ©David Jardine

number of 'multi-use' roosts were used on around 50-60% of evenings. For the two eagles studied, half the roosts were on open ground while the others were split between forest-edge sites and in-forest sites.

By using details of wind speeds and direction at the local windfarm (around sunset) it was found that the single-use roosts tended to be used when wind speeds were lower and the multi-use roosts were used more when wind speeds were higher. Based on wind direction, there was some evidence that shelter was sought on nights when wind speeds were high, but it could be that it was easier to fly to these roosts on windy nights.

*For more details see: Ford, A., Taylor, J. & Jardine, D.C. (2019). Observations on the roosting behaviour of adult male Golden Eagles from satellite telemetry. *Ringing & Migration* **34**: 38-44

The second Zoom meeting was held on Thursday 14 January and comprised three talks with 42 locations logged into the session. Summaries of the three presentations are given below.

Colour-ringing seabirds; you can never have too many Shags—Mark Newell, Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (CEH) (summary by David Jardine)

Adult Shag ©David Jardine

The Isle of May has internationally important numbers of breeding seabirds, which have been studied by CEH since 1972. Their programme of work on Fulmar, Shag, Kittiwake, Guillemot, Razorbill and Puffin provides helpful information on the health of the marine ecosystem and how it is affected by environmental and human pressures.

In this talk Mark described the CEH work on Shags, an inshore seabird, which is easier to follow than other seabirds during the winter months, as it has to return to the coast regularly to dry out its non-waterproof plumage. In the mid-1980s there were around 2000 breeding pairs of Shag on the Isle of May, but following a population crash in the early 1990s the population has now risen to around 500 pairs. Interestingly, the breeding productivity of Shags rose following the crash, suggesting that density dependence was influencing breeding performance at the earlier higher population level.

Since 1996, almost 30,000 Shags have been colour-ringed on the Isle of May. There are hundreds of thousands of re-sightings of these birds. During the 2020-21 winter a team of observers on the east coast of Scotland and Northumberland (where most of the birds winter) recorded a total of 17,000 re-sightings of around 3,500 individual birds (despite covid restrictions). Others, mainly young birds, had been seen inland in England and in France, with a small number of sightings coming from the continental coast of the North Sea. Most birds return to the same site winter after winter. Colour-ringed birds wintering in Fraserburgh Harbour are found within one metre of where they roosted in previous years!

As the birds are individually marked the relationship between their breeding performance and where they winter can be explored. Shags are partial migrants with some birds wintering around the Firth of Forth. However, others migrate (mainly in a northerly direction) to winter in North-east Scotland and the Moray Firth.

Shags are vulnerable in stormy conditions as they live on an energetic knife-edge, not carrying any fat, and have to feed every day. They are much more vulnerable on the east coast of Scotland (as there is little shelter during easterly gales), than on the west coast of Scotland where shelter can be gained behind headlands and islands during stormy conditions. This vulnerability can result in many birds dying during 'wrecks' caused by prolonged storms (e.g. 731 ringed birds found dead in 2012/13).

In conclusion Mark drew attention to the potential impacts of a changing climate and an increasing number of storms. The study found there were significant differences between birds which wintered in the Firth of Forth and those which migrated north. The migrants, while having lower breeding success and greater energetic needs for migration, also had higher survival during severe weather. A fascinating talk that demonstrated what can be learnt once the behaviour of individuals within a population can be tracked.

Penguins in the Sub-Antarctic—Gordon Holm, Argyll Bird Club (summary by Gordon Holm)

Gordon Holm gave a talk about penguins, which was beautifully illustrated, with pictures from a recent trip to the Antarctic Peninsula. Penguins can trace their ancestry back to shortly after the demise of the Dinosaurs. There is evidence of a wide variety in the fossil record. Currently there are 18 species, with the Emperor the largest and the Fairy Penguin the smallest. The Antarctic Peninsula is home to three smaller penguins, the Adele, Gentoo and Chinstrap. Kings are present on Falklands and South Georgia.

Breeding Habits. The smaller penguins have similar breeding habits, laying two eggs each year. They all lay on stones as the eggs would freeze if laid on snow. Stones are arranged to make the nest and stone stealing from neighbours happens frequently. The earliest arrivals take the higher ground. This is advantageous because the higher ground is the first to be free of snow. Thus, despite the fact that they often have a long climb, this is out-weighed by the possibility of earlier breeding, which gives their chicks the best chance of fledging before winter sets in. After the young have fledged, the adults moult. This takes two weeks and during this time they cannot go to sea.

The Magellanic and Rockhopper Penguins nest on the Falklands. The Magellanic breed in ground holes whilst Rockhopper are found in colonies that often include albatrosses. King Penguins have one chick, which takes 14 months to mature. The female lays one egg that it is immediately transferred to the male. He has a brood patch above his feet where he can keep the egg and chick warm (see photo opposite). As chicks take so long to becoming independent, only one chick is reared every two years.

Emperor Penguin with small chick ©Gordon Holm

Predators. Penguins have numerous predators and are at their most vulnerable as they leave the colony. It is not uncommon for Leopard Seals to be hiding behind icebergs waiting to attack. Sealions will also take some of the smaller penguins if they get an opportunity. Orcas (Killer Whales) actively hunt them too.

This was an amazing trip and he felt very lucky to have seen these beautiful creatures in their natural environment.

Bird feeders of Latin America: a feast of colour from Mexico to Colombia—Neil Hammatt, Argyll Bird Club (summary by Neil Hammatt)

Neil described visits to bird feeders in two countries in Central America to look at groups of birds such as hummingbirds, motmots and tanagers, never found on British bird tables, and some, such as woodpeckers and doves, that were. The first visit was to Stella's Bakery in Monteverde, Costa Rica. The bakery provided excellent food for both the human and avian visitors. Many colourful birds of the surrounding forest fed on natural fruits, and were easily attracted to sites when bananas were provided. March was a good time to visit this area, as in addition to resident species, many birds that breed in North America and winter in South/ Central America were also present. The second visit was to bird feeders in Tatamá National Park, Montezuma, Colombia, surrounded by cloud forest. Here sugar-water was the main food provided for birds, which of course attracted nectar-feeding species, including numerous species of hummingbirds (photo below). Many other species were also noted in the area, including Laughing Falcons, which undertook the same role as Sparrowhawks at feeders in Britain, and on nearby grassland areas, Southern Lapwings were frequently seen. Neil noted that many good birding spots in Columbia are now safe to visit.

Three species of hummingbird on a sugar feeder ©Neil Hammatt

The status of the European Nuthatch (*Sitta europaea*) in Argyll

Female Nuthatch ©Andrew McFarlane

Introduction

Argyll Bird Club members will be aware that Nuthatches are being seen more frequently in many parts of Argyll. This article aims to answer four questions: how many Nuthatches are there in the county, where are they, when did they arrive and where were the source populations? This year has been chosen by the club to carry out a survey across Argyll, using data from gardens and suitable woodland habitat, to gain a more accurate picture of its status. Details of this survey, which just has started, can be found on page 13.

Background

First some background on the Nuthatch for anyone not familiar with it. Not so many years ago they were often referred to as the 'English' Nuthatch as their range in the British Isles was restricted to the southern half of England. Prior to this, the name goes back to 'Middle' English with mention of the "nuthack" meaning "nut hacker" derived from the bird's habit of wedging a nut or seed into tree bark or a crevice and hacking it with their stout bill to get at the kernel inside. They have the ability to hang and move upside down on tree trunks and branches, and on bird feeders, using their strong legs and clasping claws (Photo 1). Unlike woodpeckers and treecreepers they do not have stiffened tail feathers to use as a support when climbing vertical objects. They are attractive and striking birds to look at, being around the size of a Great Tit, and coloured blue-grey above and rusty buff

Photo 1. Male Nuthatch ©Jim Dickson

to chestnut underneath, with a bold black eye stripe, strong pointed bill and a distinctive short-necked appearance. The sexes are similar in plumage, but females have less intensely coloured underparts.

Voice

This species is fiercely territorial, both in winter and during the breeding season. Their calls are often loud and prolonged, particularly when they are alarmed, or in competition with others. They have many types of call, from shrill alarm calls to a slow whistled *pee-pee-pee…* and faster versions of the same call. Being familiar with their varied calls can help greatly in locating the species. Nuthatch song and calls can be heard at:

British Garden Birds - Nuthatch (garden-birds.co.uk)

Habitat and food

It is very much a species associated with old trees. They occur in both deciduous and mixed woodlands, especially where there is plenty of rotten timber containing a variety of insect larvae. During autumn, seed and nut-bearing trees such as Hazel, Oak, Beech and Sweet Chestnut provide a good source of food. They will also eat seeds extracted from conifer cones, and readily visit gardens with bird feeders when these are close to suitable wooded habitat. They can be very aggressive towards other bird species, chasing them away or even attacking them. During autumn they will cache food, often under loose bark, in holes or under moss or lichen. These food stores help them to survive during hard times.

Breeding cycle and movements

Nuthatches are monogamous and territories are held throughout the year, which range from 2-10ha in optimal habitat, but can be much larger in the conifer forests of northern Europe. Singing becomes more frequent from mid-February, when both sexes call, chase and display. The breeding season is during April to June. Nests are often in old woodpecker holes or natural cavities, typically 2-20m above the ground. The female lines the nest with wood chips or bark and usually reduces the size of the entrance hole with mud for protection from starlings, squirrels, martens etc. Nest boxes are occasionally used. The female usually lays 5-9 eggs and incubates them for 13-18 days. Both sexes feed the young until fledging, with the juveniles becoming independent after 8-14 days.

From ringing studies, adults generally do not move far and remain in their territories. Young birds undergo a post-breeding dispersal in late summer and autumn and generally move only a few kilometres. However, during periods of high productivity and population expansion, dispersal distances can be as much as 250km, as demonstrated by birds turning up in the northern parts of mainland Scotland, well away from known strongholds.

Climate change, population growth and threats

The annual survival rate is around 50% for adults and 25% for juveniles/first-winter birds. A typical lifespan is about two years, but occasionally up to nine years, which is generally much longer than most similarly-sized passerines. Adults benefit from knowing their territory well, and where food is cached, giving them an advantage over less experienced youngsters. Differences in survival rates between years will depend on factors such as weather, and perhaps more critically for this hardy species, food availability. Seeds and fruit crops from different species of trees vary greatly from year to year, and will directly affect both productivity and survival. In recently occupied regions, it has been found that numbers can double every 2-3 years. When breeding productivity is high this will lead to increased juvenile dispersal and colonisation of new areas, as we have witnessed across Scotland, including Argyll, in recent years.

When populations show a marked increase or decrease, we often assume that climate change is the cause. This may or may not be the case. However, identifying the actual factors linked to Nuthatch expansion can be more difficult. These could include warmer summers that give rise to more invertebrate food for youngsters, better seed crops in autumn, and milder winters. Another factor is the rapid increase in the provision of bird feeders in gardens, which may lead to increased survival, though this is difficult to quantify. A factor preventing the spread of Nuthatches, over the past century at least, was the removal and fragmentation of significant areas of mature woodland during two World Wars. In part of Argyll, Common Starlings may compete for nest holes, and in parts of England, Ring-necked Parakeets are a problem. The Sparrowhawk is the most likely Nuthatch predator.

Population changes in Scotland

There were some isolated records of Nuthatches from across Scotland in the 1800s and the early 1900s, but nothing more until a slight rise in reports of four in the 1960s and 15 in the 1970s, which remarkably included reports from Dalmally and Lochgilphead in 1975 and 1976. This 'mini' Scottish expansion was short lived and had apparently ceased by 1981. An upturn in the population in northern England in the late 1970s eventually gave rise to birds colonising the Borders, with confirmed breeding in 1989 and up to 220 pairs by 2004. Birds quickly spread into Dumfries and Galloway where 40 pairs were noted in 2004 and then into regions to the north.

For the bird recording regions surrounding Argyll the first reports occurred in; Ayrshire in 1998, Clyde Islands (Arran) in 2001, Clyde in 2005 and Highland in 2008.

Argyll reports

Nuthatch sightings reported to the Argyll Bird Club have been added to the Argyll Bird Database, which now total some 308 reports over the last 22 years . (Fig. 1)

The first bird noted in Argyll during this expansion

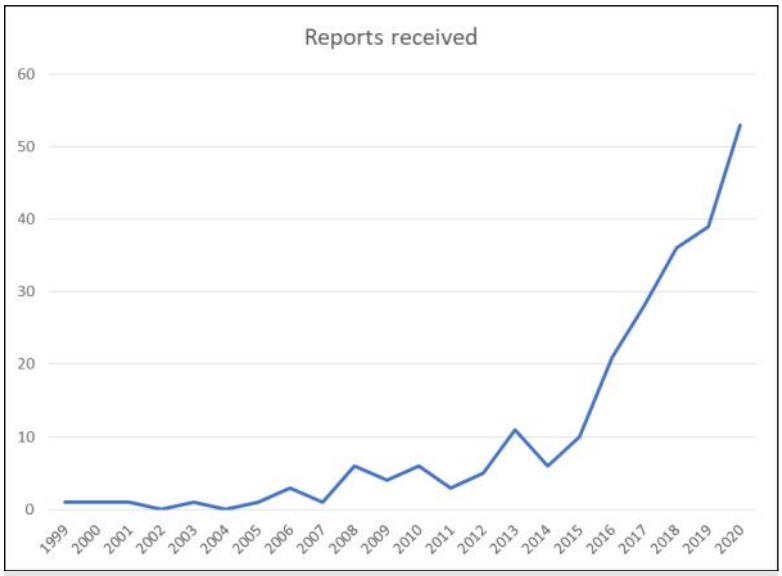

Figure 1. Nuthatch reports received over the past 22 years

was in 1999 at Glenbranter in Cowal, followed by a trickle of reports thereafter. It is likely that a few pairs may have started breeding in Argyll around this time. However, the first nest was not confirmed until 2011 at Ardkinglas Woodland in Cowal. (Photo 2.) Expansion in Argyll, as indicated by an increase in reports, appeared to have been more rapid around 2008. However, it levelled off a bit between 2009 and 2012, which may have been linked to the severe winters

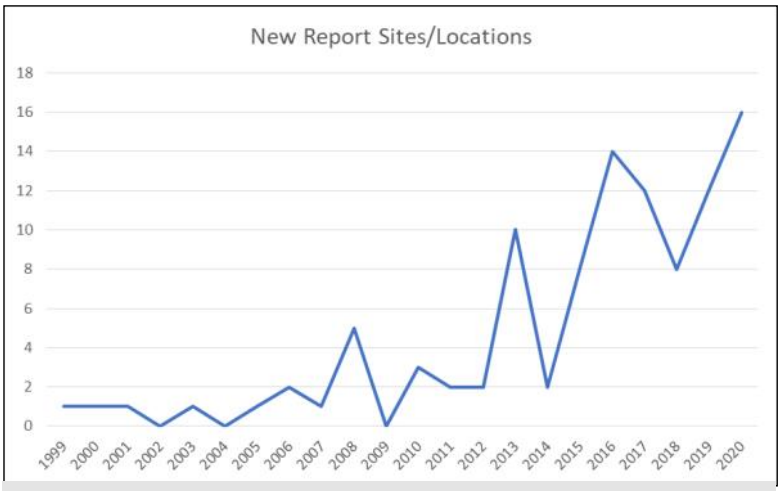

Figure 2. New Nuthatch sites/locations per year across Argyll

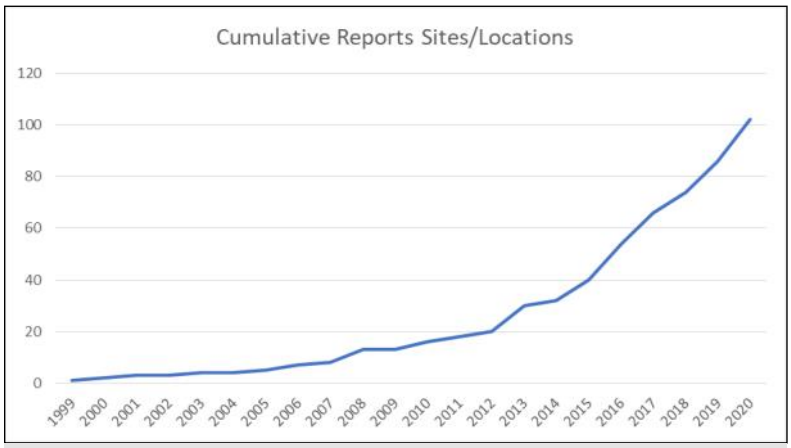

Figure 3. Cumulative Nuthatch new sites/locations across Argyll

of 2009/10 and 2010/11. From 2013, the number of birds being reported picked up strongly with some 30 sightings from ten new locations. Reports continued to increase through to the end of 2020, with more than 50 sightings from 16 new locations.

It cannot be emphasised enough that Nuthatch reports received from a large region with few people, such as Argyll, will leave large gaps in coverage. Further, people living close to suitable woodland habitat will have the most encounters. In addition, it appears that most reports of this species are from observers watching bird feeders rather than in suitable woodlands away from habitation. Fortunately, the species is distinctive enough to be easily recognised, even by most 'non birdwatchers' and as such will lead to good numbers of reports, as opposed to reporting less distinctive species. Hence, this is an excellent species for the bird club to survey.

As birds are often reported numerous times from the same localities a better understanding of expansion over time is found by looking at the increase in new reported locations (Fig. 2). It should be noted that although many locations may be close to potential breeding sites, other reports will be of dispersing juveniles in autumn or of non-territorial adults. Using these data we can derive the cumulative known locations over time, which provides a better indication of the number of breeding sites and population expansion (Fig. 3) Again, it needs to be noted that this is not the actual Argyll population, but an indicator of the 'trend' over time from limited observations.

Nuthatches are highly territorial, so it is likely that most observations will be of birds at feeders near to potential breeding areas. As such, of the 102 reported locations since 1999 many will be close to known breeding sites. However, some will have been associated with dispersing juveniles. Sightings come from just a small group of reporters, so this will underestimate the actual birds present. Thus, one could reasonably argue that the Argyll population at the end of 2020 is likely to be at least 100 pairs.

Looking at the seasonal spread of sightings, from when a bird is first noted at a location (Fig. 4), gives an indication of the best time to see birds. The peak months are April and May, when the birds have nests. Observations decline as young start to fledge in June. There is a further in-

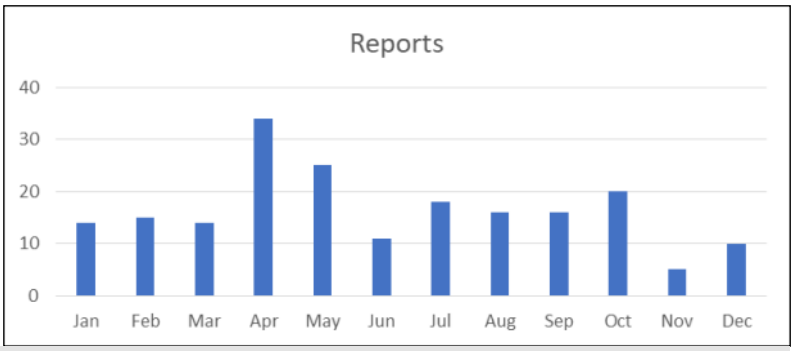

Figure 4. Nuthatch reports by month (from when first noted at a location)

crease in records through the autumn, when juveniles are perhaps moving around more and possibly turning up in new areas. An apparent reduction of reports during November and December is interesting, as this is a period when it might be expected that birds would be more obvious at garden feeders, when other food sources start to decline.

Argyll regions—reports and future colonisation?

For bird recording purposes, Argyll is divided in to ten sub-regions. Nuthatches have now been recorded in all mainland regions as well as on the larger islands of Islay, Jura and Mull (Fig. 5).

Coll. No records. There is a potential for dispersing birds to be recorded, but perhaps not enough suitable habitat to sustain a viable population.

Colonsay. No records. There is a potential for birds to occur, perhaps around Colonsay House woodlands.

Cowal. A good number and spread of reports, as expected, as it lies closest to the main strongholds elsewhere in Scotland. The first confirmed breeding for Argyll was in 2011 at Ardkinglas woodland (Photo 2, next page) However, Nuthatches probably became established from as early as 2008.

Islay. There was only one report of a bird at feeders in Bunnahabhainn in June 2020. Perhaps the forerunner of colonisation to come? Excellent habitat exists along the south-east coast, particularly around Kildalton House woodlands.

Jura. Only one report, of a bird calling at Jura House woodlands in December 2008. There is a possibility of colonisation, but suitable habitat is limited.

Kintyre. Only two confirmed reports. Singles at Glenbarr in

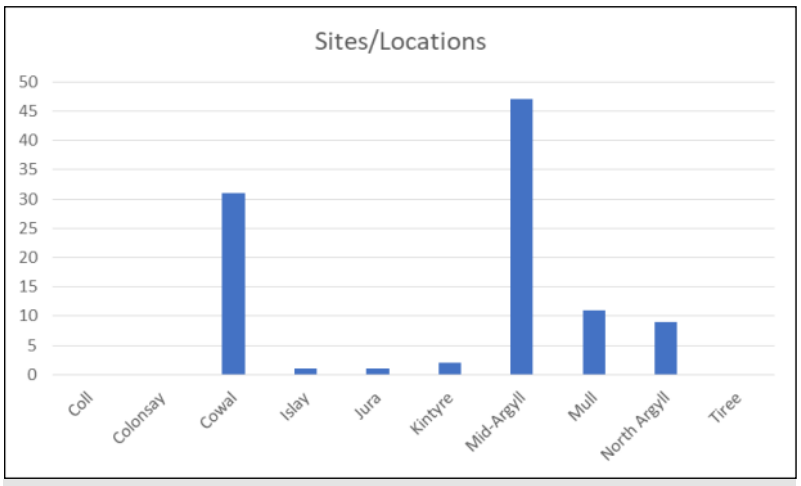

Figure 5. Nuthatch sites/locations from each Argyll region (22 years of data)

April 2012 and in Campbeltown in September 2013. With birds reported on the border with Mid-Argyll, to the north, it seems possible that colonisation will occur along the south side of West Loch Tarbert, and perhaps across to the Skipness and Claonaig areas. Birds have been reported from Arran, so the adjacent coast of Kintyre, particularly around Carradale and Torrisdale to Saddell must surely be an attractive next stop. There is the possibility that birds could arrive directly from Ayrshire, perhaps to the southern tip of Kintyre where there is suitable habitat.

Mid-Argyll. Perhaps the main stronghold in Argyll. However, this may reflect the greater number of bird-watchers in the area. Apart from a few records in the mid-1970s, the first record in the recent colonisation was in 2000 near Minard. However, reports did not increase until 2006, and then more dramatically from 2013. Birds now have a stronghold in the areas around Slockavullin, Tayvallich, Lochgilphead to Inveraray, Loch Awe, the wider Oban area, and Taynuilt to Dalmally. Birds can turn up just about anywhere with suitable habitat in this region. Areas with suitable habitat, which lack reports so far include; Achahoish, Achnamara, Castleton, Kilberry, Dalavich to Kilchrenan (west Loch Awe), Glen Shira, Upper Glen Arary and Glen Fyne.

Mull. There was one unconfirmed report in 2001, followed by an influx of reports from 2008 onwards, with a small scattering of records spread far and wide over the next ten years. Main centres of reports being in the Craignure to Lochdon and the Dervaig areas. As yet, no reports have been received from suitable areas such as Salen, Killiechronan and Knock.

North Argyll. There was only one report in 2005, prior to frequent reports from 2013 onwards, including juveniles noted around the Barcaldine area. There were more casual reports from Bonawe, Fasnacloich, Glen Creran and our most northerly report at Kinlochlaich in Strath Appin. As yet there are no reports from suitable areas around Benderloch, parts of north Loch Etive, around Ardchattan and also at North Shian.

Tiree. No reports and no suitable breeding habitat.

Conclusions

It now seems that Nuthatches have gained much more than just a toe-hold in Argyll, and are well on their way to becoming widespread in suitable habi-

tat, particularly on the mainland. With birds having been noted from over 100 locations by the end of 2020 it could well be that this 'snapshot' from relatively few observers in Argyll could represent perhaps 100-200 or more breeding pairs. We can only guess at the actual total, but nonetheless the colonisation and expansion in Argyll in just 20 years has been nothing short of spectacular. With a potential to double in numbers every 2-3 years and with vast tracks of apparently un-occupied and suitable woodland, it will be interesting to see how this species fares during the next 10-20 years. As such the Argyll Bird Club's planned survey for this year will hopefully expand on the data above, giving a solid baseline on which to assess and monitor changes in future.

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For useful Nuthatch facts see:

BTO BirdFacts | Nuthatch

Jim Dickson

Photo 2. Male Nuthatch at the first confirmed nest site (Ardkinglas, Cowal) in Argyll, April 2011 *Photo Jim Dickson*


Nuthatch ©Gordon Holm

The 2021 Argyll Bird Club Nuthatch Survey

Following the success of the 2020 Swift Survey, the club has decided to survey a species that is increasing its range into Argyll—the Nuthatch (see the previous article by Jim Dickson in this issue of *Eider*). The survey sets out to achieve the following:

- Confirm the current distribution of the Nuthatch in Argyll during the breeding season
- Confirm the breeding status in as many locations as possible
- Estimate the breeding population of Nuthatch in Argyll

There are a number of ways you can help.

Records of Nuthatches

Please report every sighting you have of a Nuthatch from now until 30 June. The following information is required:

- Location (including wherever possible the grid reference eg NR859850)
- Number of birds (and if you are confident, the sex too)
- What the birds were doing (feeding, singing, defending a territory, at a nest etc.)

Please report this information in whatever format you find the most convenient—Argyll Bird Club records spreadsheet, Birdtrack, by email (nuthatchsurvey@argyllbirdclub.org) or on the ABC Facebook pages.

Looking for Nuthatch nests

Try looking to see if you can find a Nuthatch nest in your local area (covid restrictions permitting). If you are successful, please send in the information as above.

Surveying Nuthatch breeding density

The club also hopes to carry out a few intensive searches to try to locate every breeding pair of Nuthatches in a few sample areas, to get a better understanding of their breeding density (covid restrictions permitting). If you are interested in helping with a sample area, please contact this link for further information:
nuthatchsurvey@argyllbirdclub.org

Assisting with collating records from various sources

If you would like to help monitor various social media channels to collate Nuthatch records, please let us know.

If you're going to take part it is worth getting to know their calls (see link in Jim Dickson's article). Thanking everyone in advance for your assistance with this year's survey.

David Jardine and Jim Dickson

Swifts at home

Adult Swift in front and two nestlings behind ©Annette Anderton

Arrival and settling in

In 2020, we saw our first Swift on 5 May, then on 7 May two were seen screaming and flying towards the house. Having successfully negotiated the scaffolding erected just prior to the Coronavirus lockdown in 2020 (Anderton, 2020b) these two entered the box used by our breeding Swifts in 2019. Once inside they seemed wary; constantly moving around, peering out of the entrance and shuffling around the old nest, as if checking that it was still alright. Bromhall (1980) commented that 'to birds that have enjoyed the infinite expanse and freedom of the skies for the previous nine months, the confines of the box must seem very small indeed'.

They spent the afternoon flying in and out of the box and doing circuits inside the box. At 20.50hrs both entered the box and were very restless until about 21.30hrs when they settled down in the nesting corner for the night, reminding me of the deep sleep after returning home from a long journey!

I was concerned when the pair spent only one night in the box, and for the next 13 days only a single bird was seen entering, leaving and sleeping in the box. During this time, two Swifts (sometimes three) were regularly over the house. In fact, two seemed to be flying together, racing up and down the glen, circling the house and then banging the box, scaffolding and window, but only one would regularly enter and spend significant amounts of time in the box, including overnight.

Then on the 21 May an interesting incident occurred. In the early morning a single Swift was still sleeping in the box. At 06.00hrs there were five Swifts screaming and circling around the house while the single Swift was peering out of the box. At 07.22hrs a second Swift entered the box and the resident Swift lunged at it aggressively, apparently screaming and with its wings raised (Photo 1). The subsequent stand-off lasted for about 3mins, during which time the 'intruder' stood quietly by the entrance whilst the resident Swift alternately retreated to its nest and approached the 'intruder' in a less and less aggressive manner. At 07.25hrs the 'intruder' ap-

Photo 1. Aggression towards an intruder ©Annette Anderton

proached the resident bird and both lifted their heads to expose their throats, and then started preening each other. Lack (1956) reported that when Swifts re-unite on return to the UK, there is occasionally some friction with the first bird to enter the box greeting the second with a threat display. He also observed that the intruder gradually advanced with its head up, exposing its white throat. The original bird then exposed its throat and touched the newcomer's throat with its bill, following which the birds settled into the box together. This made me think that this 'intruder' may be the resident bird's returning mate and the bird seen at the beginning of May might have been the actual intruder.

The first egg

For the next couple of hours the two birds spent their time in the nest corner, during which time the intruder was trying to push its way down into the nest, while the resident bird appeared to be trying to prevent this. Then, at 09.36hrs there was a flurry of activity and one of the birds (the legitimate mate?) emerged from the nest with an egg in its beak (Photo 2), headed purposefully towards the box entrance, dropped it out and then peered out as if it was checking that it had gone! Later I found the broken egg below the box.

In 2019 Glanville reported 'There is a broken egg under nb3 north….I think the old mate has just returned and kicked out the intruder and the egg. He'll throw the rest of her clutch out as she lays them over the next couple of days. This will be the fifth year in a row he's done this.'

It seems that some of the single birds that arrive early pair up with other single birds rather than waiting for their mates to return. When the legitimate mate arrives later, any eggs laid are ejected.

Luckily, once the 'illegitimate' egg had been so brutally removed our pair of Swifts started to preen each other. According to Lack (1956) mutual preening is the main courtship action. I find it difficult not to anthropomorphise when I watch how gently they preen each other's throats and heads and 'cuddle' down into the nest. David Lack commented that mutual preening is less excited towards the end of the breeding season "in the same way that the delighted greetings of the newly-weds gives place to the casual 'hullo' of later more contented years."

During 29-31 May, in the early morning and evening I observed a number of instances of possible coition. Although there are reports of this occurring on the wing, Lack (1956) and Bromhall (1980) observed that in Oxford coition took place in the box usually during 06.30-07.30hrs or during 16.30-18.30hrs (Lack and Lack 1952).

Photo 2. An egg being thrown out ©Annette Anderton

In the tower in Oxford, the first eggs are usually laid from mid-May to the beginning of June, which is about two weeks after the second bird had arrived. In Bristol in 2020 the first egg of the season was laid on the 13 May, which was only seven days after the pair had re-united. Usually this period is about ten days (Glanville, 2020). According to Lack (1956), the start of laying is much influenced by weather. The first egg is often laid five days after the first warm, sunny day after the pair have settled. He suggested this was because eggs weigh about 3.5g, which is 1/12th of the bird's weight, and if food is scarce, as will happen during bad weather, the bird may lack enough energy to produce eggs, the process for each taking about five days. The second egg is laid 1-3 days after the first egg, independent of weather (Lack 1956, Glanville 2020).

In 2020, there was a spell of hot and sunny weather during 29 May-1 June. This I hoped would provide the female with ample food, which would trigger eggs being laid during the first week in June.

Due to the positioning of the camera, it was not possible to record the exact date when eggs were laid. However, on 4 June I noticed the bird on the nest had its head down and was moving something with its beak. I wondered if it was turning a recently laid egg as described by Lack (1956). I observed similar activity each day subsequent and hoped that eggs had been laid.

Over the next three weeks, one bird was on the nest most of the time, suggesting eggs were being incubated. Both birds share the job of incubation, which is a tedious task. Like Bromhall (1980), I found "the bird whose turn it is to incubate occupies itself in a manner which in humans would be interpreted as an expression of boredom—dozing, preening, fidgeting, yawning and perfunctory nest building".

Times between changeovers normally varied between one and two hours, but sometimes they were as little as 3 minutes and occasionally up to 4.5 hours, a similar range of times to those recorded by Lack and Lack (1952). The incubating bird usually departed as soon as its partner returned. However, when its

partner was away for a long time, usually in cold, wet weather when food was difficult to find, the sitting bird sometimes left the box (probably because it was hungry) and the eggs were left uncovered. With some birds this would be a problem but Swift embryos, like those of Manx Shearwaters, are resistant to cooling, an adaptation that allows Swifts to breed successfully in a cool climate (Lack 1956).

During incubation in mid-June there were screaming parties of up to eight Swifts in the vicinity. The immature, non-breeding Swifts had arrived, which led to an increase "banging" behaviour. Parents often banged the box before they entered, while non-breeders banged the box in an apparently random manner. The reasons for this behaviour are still not fully understood (Lack 2018, Anderton 2020a). However, when the box was banged, one or both of the parents would frequently rush towards the entrance hole in a somewhat aggressive manner and often scream at passing Swifts.

Hatching time

On the 23 June, one of the Swifts was constantly looking down into the depths of the nest whilst its partner circled around the inside of the box, occasionally going outside for brief periods. I couldn't help likening him to an expectant father pacing up and down prior to the delivery of his child. Then at 08.39hrs a piece of broken eggshell was visible alongside the nest. Little sleep was had overnight (by either me or the Swifts!) and at 06.03hrs I was thrilled to see the first chick being fed. At 09.37hrs new pieces of broken eggshell appeared. Then two chicks were visible at 10.49hrs.

Because of the camera position I could only make out the new-born chicks as vague shapes. They were not the prettiest of chicks, being blind, pink and naked, with huge stomachs and large, strong feet. They had massive gapes to help them take large amounts of food quickly from their parents.

"They are hideous" says Lack (1956) and then he observes that human babies, also pre-occupied with eating and growing, are born naked, have large heads, a sucking mouth, disproportionately short, weak legs but strong hands for grasping, yet are considered adorable by their mothers!

Life for the parent Swifts was now frenetic as the chicks' appetites seemed insatiable. Growth of Swift chicks is rapid. Bromhall (1980) stated that in good weather a chick's weight can increase from 2.75g at hatching to over 20g after six days. The chicks are fed on food balls of up to 1000 insects and spiders held together by saliva, and carried in a pouch at the back of the adult's throat. To pass the bolus, the parent reaches deep into the chick's throat, closing its own eyes for protection (Bromhall 1980).


Photo 3. Nestlings at the back of the box ©Annette Anderton

The chicks started begging for food as soon as they heard an adult land at the box entrance. However, any unexpected noise, such as a car door banging, would also trigger begging. If no adult appeared, they would sometimes beg from each other. This was also described by Lack (1956).

In fact, following a very loud gust of wind, I was horrified to see the larger chick take the head of its sibling into its mouth, luckily releasing it almost immediately. I assume it had mistaken it for its parent's head and was expecting to receive a bolus of food, but soon realised its mistake!

For the first week after hatching there was always one parent brooding the chicks, but after that both parents would often leave the chicks. Swift chicks can survive without heat or food if left for an extended period, as they can enter a state of torpor. This helps the parents survive during bad weather, as they can go further afield to both feed themselves and collect food for their chicks (Lack 1956).

Ten days after hatching the nestlings pecked at


Photo 4. Nestlings attempting press-ups ©Annette Anderton

their parents' heads when they came to feed them and were able to swallow a whole bolus of food rather than sharing it. By now they had acquired some rudimentary feathers (Lack 1956), and looked a bit more 'bird like' (Photo 3).

For most of June and July the weather was quite good. The nestlings grew rapidly, as on most days their parents brought food at 30-45min intervals. Both parents often arrived at the same time, so the nestlings were fed together.

By the 20 July (about one month old) the nestlings were actively moving around the box, attempting 'press-ups', doing wing exercises and peering out of the entrance (Photo 4) (Lack, 1956). Their begging for food was even more demanding, and they appeared to attack their parents and chase them around the box when they returned.

The nestlings looked quite plump by the 28 July (approximately five-weeks old). They were left for hours and sometimes a day at a time between feeds. According to Overall (2015), the nestlings would have reached their maximum weight of 50-60g over the past week. Soon their wing and tail feathers would be fully grown and their weight would need to reduce to the optimum for fledging, at 40-45g. They were now spending a significant proportion of their time doing wing exercises, 'press-ups' and peering out of the box entrance. The adults were spending more time away from the box, probably replenishing their energy reserves prior to their departure to Africa.

Similar activities continued over the next week as the young Swifts started to look slimmer, with longer wing and tail feathers and they spent more and more time peering out of the entrance. On the 5-8 August the nestlings fledged as described by Anderton (2020b).

Unlike songbirds, when young Swifts fledge they have to switch suddenly and completely from a sedentary life to one of continuous flight with no parental care (Lack 1956). So, it is important they do not fledge prematurely.

According to Martins (1997) 'press-ups' may play an important role in conditioning the chicks prior to fledging. Press-ups involve partially extending their wings, pressing them down on the floor so taking their weight, while raising the body until both it and their feet leave the floor. At first they cannot sustain the position for long, but over time they are able to hold their body clear of the ground for a second or two. Just prior to fledging this increases to ten seconds or more.

Vigorous wing flapping exercises help to train and strengthen their wing muscles. Martins (1997) suggested that 'press-ups' have the important function of helping the nestlings assess their wing to body mass ratio (which affects flight efficiency), and so determine the best time to fledge.

Summary

Over the past year I have become even more aware of what amazing birds Swifts are. Not only do they spend nine months every year on the wing over Africa, but then shortly after having flown over 5000km back to Britain, females expend considerable energy producing eggs. The pair then take turns to incubate these eggs, a time during which they seem to be particularly restless even when sitting on the nest. Once the nestlings hatch the adults have absolutely no rest. During the day the demands of the nestlings for food is unrelenting, but their demand for attention does not stop as night draws in, and the adults spend most of the night fidgeting and 're-arranging' boisterous youngsters. After this the exhausted adults have to get themselves fit enough to fly back to Africa. Thus, it is not surprising that both parents had to stay until 29 August, and one until September 9th, to regain condition before flying south (Anderton 2020b), even though both nestlings had fledged by the 8 August.

Swifts are truly remarkable birds.

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Annette Anderton

Razorbill on nest ledge. Note ring on right leg ©David Jardine

Recent recoveries of birds ringed or found in Argyll

Part 1

With the move to promptly publish the *Argyll Bird Report* (ABR) as a PDF file, articles that used to be published in the old printed version of the ABR could no longer be included, as the information was not readily available. This included reports on Bird Ringing.

This is the first of two notes which will provide details of the more interesting recoveries of ringed birds in 2019. These have been extracted from the BTO's online ringing report (Robinson *et al*. 2020) which covers the whole of Britain, but it is possible to filter for different years, species and specifically for Argyll.

Argyll is important for seabirds and seabird ringing with a number of important long-running projects. Listed below are some of the key recoveries from these projects, and of other ringed seabirds found in Argyll.

Storm Petrel

2448881—Adult ringed on Sanda on 25 July 1997, recaught on Lunga, Treshnish Isles on 28 June 2019. (NNW, 144km, 21 years 11 months 3 days).

Fulmar

FV02579—Adult ringed on Canna, Highland on 9 July 1977, recaught on Sanda on 26 June 2019. (SSE, 206km, 41 years 11 months 17 days).

Manx Shearwater

EW29636—Young bird ringed in Mallaig, Highland on 17 September 2007 found long dead at Gott Bay, Tiree on 27 July 2019. (SW, 82km, 11 years 10 months 10 days).

Gannet

1307125—Nestling ringed on Ailsa Craig, Clyde Islands on 27 June 1991 found dead at Port Ellen, Islay on 26 June 2019. (WNW, 77km, 27 years 11 months 30 days).

Shag

1366980—Nestling male ringed at Lunga, Treshnish Isles on 21 June 1999, resighted (colour ring) there on 24 June 2019. (0km, 20 years 3 days)

Cormorant

5213103—nestling ringed at Eilean Dubh, Lynn of Lorn on 9 June 2007, found long dead at Dunach, Oban on 27 August 2019. (S, 18km, 2 years 2 months and 18 days).

Kittiwake

EW18054—Adult ringed on Lunga, Treshnish Isles on 30 June 2006, recaught there on 25 June 2019. (0km, 12 years 11 months 26 days).

Black-headed Gull

EW39319—Nestling ringed on Black Rock, Crinan on 13 June 2009, ring number read in the field at Antrim, Co Antrim. (SSW, 158km, 10 years 5 months 12 days).

Common Gull

ET69342—Nestling ringed at Airds Islet, Loch Etive on 17 June 1999, found freshly dead at Londonderry. N Ireland (SW, 206km, 19 years 8

months 13 days).

Great Black-backed Gull

HT80395—Nestling ringed on Lunga, Treshnish Isles on 20 June 2004 found dead on the Treshnish Isles on 27 June 2019. (2km, 15 years 7 days).

Herring Gull

GC28506—Nestling ringed on Sanda, Kintyre on 4 July 2006, ring read in the field at Dunaverty Bay, Kintyre on 9 May 2019. (5km, 12 years 10 months 5 days).

Sandwich Tern

DE35948—Adult ringed at the Ythan Estuary, Aberdeenshire on 25 August 2010, colour rings read at Dunaverty Bay, Kintyre in 9 May 2019. (SW, 318km, 8 years 8 months 14 days). This bird had also been seen at Belfast Lough on 4 August 2018.

Common Tern

SV37956—Nestling ringed at Loch Melford on 17 July 2000, rings read on 5 and 10 October 2019 at sea off the coast of The Gambia (13°34'N 16°51'W) (SSW, 4847km, 19 years 2 months 23 days).

Guillemot

T82402 & T82496—two adults ringed at Port Ban, Colonsay, these were both refound there on 21 June 2019 (one resighted, the other re-captured). (0km, 27 years 11 months 26 days).

Razorbill

M77258—Nestling ringed on Canna, Highland on 20 June 1996, recaptured on Lunga, Treshnish Isles on 25 June 2019. (S, 64km, 22 years 11 month 26 days).

Puffin

EG61390—Adult ringed on Lunga, Treshnish Isles on 27 June 2002, recaptured there on 28 June 2019. (0km, 17 years 1 day).

It is an excellent set of records which demonstrates the longevity of some of our seabird species, often measured in decades rather than years, and also contains a wonderful record of a movement of almost 5000km of a Common Tern to its wintering grounds off the coast of Africa. Something this bird had done (twice) over 19 years—a distance close to 180,000 km (taking a straight-line route)!

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David Jardine

Ringed Puffin carrying nesting material, Treshnish Islands ©Steve Petty

Sandy Gordon CBE 1931-2020

Sandy Gordon, who played an important role in monitoring Golden Eagles in Argyll in the latter half of the 20th century died shortly before Christmas. He was more widely known as a self-confessed 'maverick whisky maker' who played an important role in the development of the world market for single malts and the famous Glenfiddich brand in its distinctive triangular bottle. However, he was as comfortable in an anorak on the Scottish hills as in a blazer in the boardroom. Whenever he could, he would be birdwatching. And like all true outdoorsmen he treated all men as equals. Out every weekend when he could, one week in his Rover, the next in a friend's Mini.

While at Ardvreck School he could provide a detailed description of every bird he had seen and his letters home invariably mentioned birds 'On Friday, we had a very good lecture by Captain Knight who had brought Mr Bamshaw, his Golden Eagle, with him and it flew round the Crabbie Hill'. These early experiences clearly had a lasting influence.

While at Rugby, his next school, he was described as 'a boy of quite exceptionally high intelligence with special ability in mathematics'. It was therefore not surprising that he graduated with a double first in maths and law at Queens College, Cambridge. His national service was spent in the Royal Artillery and he was swithering between aircraft engineering design and law when his father was diagnosed with inoperable bowel cancer. This led to him becoming heavily involved in the growth of the family whisky firm, William Grant & Sons, where he rose to become Chairman. The work of Sandy and his brother, Charles, led to Glenfiddich becoming the world's biggest selling malt and Grants the fifth largest blended whisky, which allowed the company and Sandy personally to become philanthropists.

His work allowed him to watch birds throughout the world and in retirement he had trips to Macquarie island, Ethiopia, India and the Faroe Islands. Latterly he regretted that he was having to wind down his birding trips abroad, and as he was no longer seeing nearly as many of the smaller birds he would now concentrate on seeing all the world's raptors!

David Merrie recalls meeting Sandy for the first time on the foreshore at Cardross, seeing this man in shabby mackintosh, flat cap and wellington boots. Binoculars provided the introduction. The Gordon's house was well chosen next to Cardross Station from where he caught the train to Glasgow for work and could birdwatch after work. They struck up an instant birdwatching partnership looking for geese in winter and eagles in summer. At the end of a day's outing, dry or soaked, they would return to a good dram of Glenfiddich followed by a delicious meal cooked by his wife Linda. Cognisant of the fact that his father's early demise was probably a side-effect of his profession, after he and Linda got jaundice he never drank alcohol again.

David and he took over the work initiated by Charlie Palmar of monitoring Golden Eagles in mainland Argyll, south of Loch Etive. Latterly they were joined by Mike Gregory who accompanied Sandy for many decades. At the time, this huge area had over 30 home ranges spread from the Mull of Kintyre to Oban and Glen Falloch. Sandy continued to monitor this last site into the 1990s and was one of the founding members of the Argyll Raptor Study Group. Their pioneering work noted the decline in eagles in Kintyre following blanket afforestation in the 1960s (this population decline has subsequently been reversed) and also re-found nesting Chough on the Mull of Kintyre in 1963. His pursuit of Golden Eagles led to the ascent of all the Scottish Munros. Sandy believed birdwatchers only really wanted to see birds of prey, waterfowl and waders. So he devised a points system awarding points to species in order of interest; for example a Golden Eagle was ten, a Hen Harrier six and on down to Mallard at one. Fifty points was a good day!

Sandy, along with his wife Linda sang with the Greenock Philharmonic Society and he had keen interest in piping (establishing the Glenfiddich Piping Championship), the Gordon Highlanders' Museum in Aberdeen and the Museum of Flight in East Lothian. As a Trustee of the National Museum for Scotland, he was assigned to the Natural Sciences department, something which gave him great joy. In 1999 a spectacular skeleton of a fossil sabretooth, *Hoplophoneus primaevus*, came up at auction in San Francisco and the museum's purchase grant was running a bit low. Without his help in providing a bridging loan at short notice the museum would never have acquired this wonderful specimen.

Linda pre-deceased him in late 2019. The condolences of the club are extended to his four children: Maggie, Bill, Peter and Sally and his nine grandchildren.

David Merrie, Mike Gregory, David Jardine & others

Raise a glass to the Ramsar Convention

February 2nd is World Wetlands Day. Here's why:

The North Americans in the 1930s were the first to try to persuade the public that wetlands were not wastelands, and they made great progress. In the 1960s the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided to tell "all thinking people" what they had achieved. They published the 770 page *Waterfowl Tomorrow*, which, among many topics, demonstrated that man could be extremely destructive, but could also act positively by setting aside and managing habitats. Europe was slower to act, but in 1960 the International Union for the Conservation of Nature approved a proposal from Dr Luc Hoffman for an international programme for the conservation and management of marshes. In 1962, Luc became Director of the International Wildfowl Research Bureau (IWRB) with its headquarters in the Camargue, and the important MAR conference that year called for an international Convention on Wetlands. It took eight years to develop the convention text, as detailed below, but then a country was needed to host the required conference.

In 1969, Professor Geoffrey Matthews (an ABC member from 2004 to his death in 2013) took over from Luc Hoffmann as Director of IWRB, and the organisation moved to The Wildfowl Trust at Slimbridge, where Geoffrey was Research and Deputy Director. In June of that year, he took the visiting Minister of the Environment of Iran, Eskandar Firouz, around the Trust. When the problem of finding a host country was raised, Eskandar said he would arrange for an invitation to Iran. There followed much planning, numerous meetings, draft texts, problems (eg. the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 had resulted in a truncated meeting in Leningrad, some countries staying away in protest) and tight negotiations (think Brexit!). Eventually the conference took place in the town of Ramsar on the Caspian Sea in 1971, and on 2nd February, the convention was agreed. Thus, for a very good reason, 2nd February is World Wetlands Day, and this year is the 50th anniversary!

On Geoffrey's retirement, IWRB moved its headquarters to the Netherlands, where it is now called Wetlands International.

The Ramsar Convention was not only vital for the conservation of wetlands, but it was also ground breaking as the first global conservation treaty. Initially it was agreed by representatives of 18 nations, including the U.K. Each country listed the wetlands they committed to conserve. Now 171 contracting parties protect 1,414 wetland sites of international importance, covering 254,543,972 hectares. The UK has 175 Ramsar sites with a total area of 1,283,040

The Indian delegate was one of the first to sign in 1971, Eskandar Firouz is on the left, Geoffrey is on the right.

hectares. Argyll has seven sites, including the Kintyre Goose Roosts, to help protect the endangered Greenland White-fronted Goose.

Last December, India designated its 42nd wetland of international importance, the Tso Kar wetland complex, 4,500m above sea level, near Ladakh, So on its 50th anniversary this year, the Ramsar Convention is needed more than ever. Luc Hoffmann, Eskandar Firouz and Geoffrey Matthews are considered to be its Founding Fathers.

Footnote

In his retirement, Geoffrey came frequently to the family's little home in Skipness. There, in 2007, he followed with great interest the application (for the second time) and objections for seven wind turbines at Largie on the west of Kintyre. They were to be sited perilously close to the Kintyre goose roosts, and were opposed by both SNH and the RSPB. Ramsar was by now incorporated into European law, and the council's solicitors advised the council that to allow the application would contravene this law. This was one of the first applications to be turned down because it would break European wildlife laws, and Geoffrey was thrilled to see, as he did in Tarbert on 8 March 2007, Ramsar in action!

Mary Matthews

Geoffrey left, and Professor Vladimir Flint of Russia, on a visit to Slimbridge *c.*1991, raising a glass of vodka to increased cooperation and to the swan both countries share, the Bewick's Swan.

The Chinese Thuja is on the left-hand side of the photo ©Steve Petty

It has always intrigued me why some species of tit store food for future use while other species don't. It seems to be linked to the unpredictability of food supplies. Tits that inhabit northern coniferous forests are noted for their food storage behaviour. This includes Coal, Crested, Willow, Marsh and Siberian Tits. All of these species eat conifer seed, and will store food, particularly when it is abundant, such as in years of bumper cone crops. They will also store invertebrates, such as the larvae of many conifer-feeding moths.

In contrast, Blue and Great Tits, which are predominantly birds of temperate deciduous forest, do not store food. Is this possibly because food supplies further south are more predictable and show less variation in abundance compared to boreal forest?

Thus, the question I've often asked myself is—do species that store food in northern forests do the same in the southern part of their range, where they inhabit deciduous forests? An opportunity to examine this occurred recently in the garden of our house in northern Spain, where we have a bushy Chinese Thuya (*Playcladus orientalis*). This tree produces a varying amount of cones each year. These are quite small and, unlike many other conifer species, the cones contain wingless seeds. Recently, this tree produced a vast amount of cones, which

A Marsh Tit with at least three Chinese Thuja seeds in its beak ©Steve Petty

ripened in October. In a warm spell of weather the cones began to open. Each morning I was sweeping up many seeds with fallen leaves and needles from the path under the tree. I stopped doing this when I noticed the local House Sparrows were making a feast of the seeds. They only collected fallen seeds from the ground, never attempting to take seeds from the cones.

One afternoon, after returning from taking our dog for a walk, my wife told me that there was a lot of bird actively in the conifer in the front patio. It soon became clear that three species of tit were foraging in the tree's foliage. Marsh Tits were the most numerous, with up to six at a time in the tree, followed by Blue and then Great Tits. From the bedroom window I had an excellent view into the tree, and saw that all three species were removing seeds directly from the open cones. Blue and Great Tits were either eating the seeds in the tree or taking them, one at a time, to nearby railings and eating them there. In contrast, the Marsh Tits were removing seeds by the beak full and disappearing into a neighbour's garden, where I saw at least some being deposited in the ground vegetation. After caching the seeds they flew straight back into the tree for more seeds, and repeated the operation. Some birds had up to four seed in each beak full, but most had three (photos above). It reminded me of Coal Tit's behaviour back in Argyll, where birds would take sunflower seeds from the bird feeder, fly off, cache them in a suitable ground site nearby and then fly back for more, and continue doing the same for ages. Thus, even as far south as northern Spain, Marsh Tits were still behaving like their northern relatives.

Steve Petty

Articles for the June *Eider* should be sent to the editor before the 10 May 2021

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The Eider

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