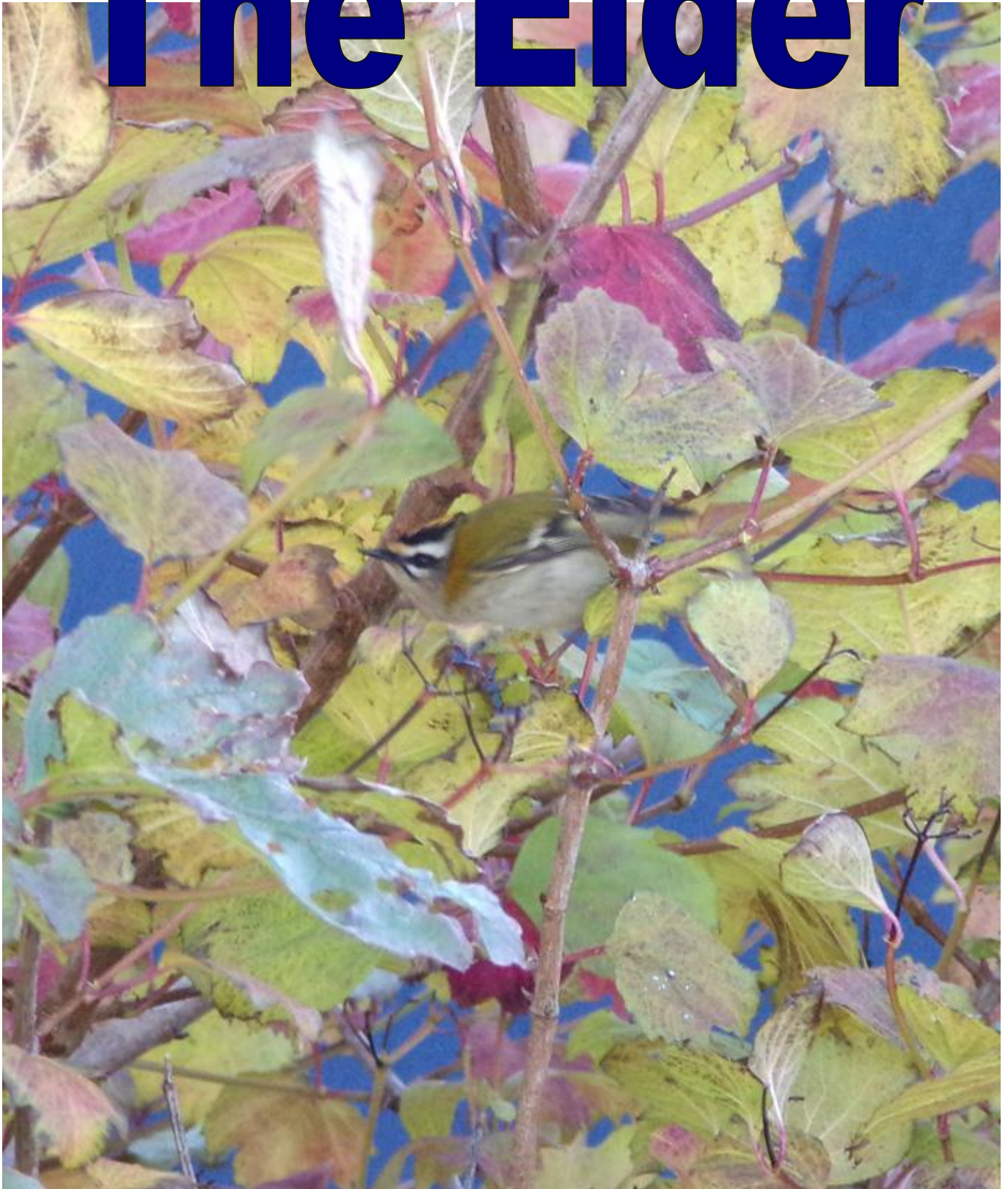


The *Eider* is the quarterly newsletter of the Argyll Bird Club (<http://www.argyllbirdclub.org>)

December 2023
Number 146



The Eider



A Firecrest surrounded by glorious autumn colours, photographed by John Bowler in his garden at Balephuill on Tiree on 25 October ©John Bowler

Contents	Page
Editorial	2
Club news	3-5
Report of an ABC field trip to Iona on 1-3 September <i>David Jardine</i>	6-7
Report of an ABC field trip to Islay on 26 August <i>David Jardine</i>	8-9
Report of an ABC field trip to Ardentinny, Cowal on 30 September <i>Alistair McGregor</i>	9-10
Report of an ABC field trip to Gigha on 28 October <i>David Jardine</i>	11-12
Unexpected neighbours <i>Neil Hammatt</i>	12-14
Obituary—Paul Daw <i>Jim Dickson</i>	14-15
Birds of Westray, Orkney <i>Sandy Young</i>	16-18
BTO update <i>Nigel Scriven</i>	19-20
Abstracts of talks from the ABC's Autumn Meeting on 4 November 2023	20-25
Information about the Argyll Bird Club	back page

Editorial

It is very sad to report that a stalwart of the club, Paul Daw, died recently. Paul did so much for the club over many years. Jim Dickson has written a fitting tribute to Paul on pages 14-15.

The Autumn Meeting at the Cairnbaan Hotel was a great success, although fewer folk attended compared to previous meetings. The road closure to the north may have contributed to this. The Spring Meeting in Dunoon is at a new venue. Nigel is currently putting together a programme for the meeting, which will be e-mailed to members prior to the meeting.

I must say that I don't relish autumn and the onset of winter. I much prefer warmer periods. However, this time of the year does have its bonuses, as birds from northern Europe stream into Scotland to avoid the freezing conditions further north. So far, it seems to have been a good autumn for winter thrushes, as many Fieldfares and Redwings are still with us, instead of just passing through. The lack of frosts have allowed thrushes to feed on earthworms and other pasture invertebrates, as well as berries. There have also been good numbers of Bramblings that have sought out the treats on many members' bird tables. Waxwings too have been more abundant than in some previous years. These exotic-looking birds are often oblivious to people as they gorge themselves on a multitude of colourful berries. Yew berries have been particularly abundant this autumn and are often a magnet for Waxwings. In addition we have numerous species of wildfowl and waders taking advantage of food availability in our relatively mild west coast habitat. Lots to see!!!

This is quite a large issue of the *Eider*, and I thank all the contributors. The deadline for the March issue is 20 February, so please consider sending me something.

Finally, on behalf of the Argyll Bird Club, we wish you a very merry Christmas and a great birding New Year. Thanks for continuing to support the Argyll Bird Club.

Acknowledgements

Very many thanks to the following folk for their contributions to this issue—David Anderson, Alun ap Rhisiart, John Bowler, Malcolm Chattwood, Clive Craik, Philip Croft, Jim Dickson, Neil Hammatt, Peter & Dorothy Hogbin (photocopying & dispatching the newsletter), David Jardine, Alistair McGregor, David Palmar, Linda Petty (proof reading), Nigel Scriven, the late Margaret Staley and Sandy Young.



Club News

FIELD TRIPS 2023/24

Attendance on field trips is limited to a maximum of 15 members. Therefore, it is essential that you contact the leader of a trip beforehand to make sure a place is available, and to receive up-to-date rendezvous details.

If there is a chance that adverse weather might lead to the cancellation of a field trip, please check the club's website or contact the organiser the night before or prior to setting off. Please wear suitable footwear and bring waterproof clothing if rain is forecast.

There will be a risk assessment and safety briefing at the start of each field trip. Trip leaders will keep a record of folk attending each trip.

Saturday 25 November 2023. Loch Gilp and the Add Estuary. 10.00hrs start at NR852857 Please meet Jim Dickson at the Ardrishaig Car Park (first car park with toilets coming from Lochgilphead direction). A short walk from there to look over Loch Fyne. A drive to the Islandadd Bridge at the Add Estuary and a short walk to the bird hide. A drive round to Crinan Ferry Car Park for lunch then drive round Barsloisnoch area to the Tile Walk Car Park at NR825958 to look for woodland birds then head back to a final look at Loch Gilp and finish trip. Please contact Jim if you would like to go on this trip (phone 01546 603967. e-mail Argyllbirder@outlook.com).

Saturday 27 January 2024. Lismore. Led by David Jardine (dcjardine@btinternet.com). A walk from the Port Appin foot ferry to Port Ramsay and Fennacrochan (8-9km). Please contact David if you wish to attend.

Saturday 24 February 2024. Holy Loch (Cowal). Led by Alistair McGregor (e-mail alistaircmcgregor16@outlook.com, mobile phone 07754524240). Meet at 10.00hrs at the Broxwood Car Park, Sandbank. Visit the two hides on either side of Holy Loch (one in the Holy Loch Nature Reserve), and possibly a visit to Benmore Gardens if time allows. Please contact Alistair if you wish to go on this trip.

Saturday 30 March 2024. Carskey Bay and South End (Kintyre). Led by David Jardine (dcjardine@btinternet.com). An outing to a new venue for the club, to almost the most southerly part of Argyll. It will involve a series of short (up to 2km) walks. Please contact David if you wish to attend.

INDOOR MEETINGS 2024

Spring Meeting 2024. Saturday 9 March. The meeting will be held at St Mun's Church Hall, Dunoon (see map on next page). There are numerous cafes in Dunoon for lunch,

all within a short walk/drive from the church hall. There is the possibility of soup and sandwiches being available at the venue if enough folk are interested. If you would like this option please let Alistair know before 12 February. The full programme will be e-mailed to members prior to the meeting

Autumn Meeting & AGM 2024. Saturday 2 November. The meeting will be held at the Cairnbaan Hotel (www.cairnbaan.com), near Lochgilphead (phone 01546 603668). Lunches will be available in the hotel. A program will be provided in the September 2024 *Eider*.

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

ARGYLL BIRD REPORT 35 (2023)

Work has already commenced on the next bird report (ABR 35), Please ensure that you submit any outstanding records for 2023 as soon as possible. Thank you.

A PDF of ABR 34 was sent to members by email on 21 March 2023. If you did not receive your copy, please contact our Membership Secretary (contact details on back page). Copies of previous reports can be downloaded from the club's website.

ARGYLL BIRD RECORDER

We are still looking for someone to fill the above post. Further details of the post were given in the December *Eider* 2021 (pages 3-4). Please contact Jim Dickson if the post appeals to you.

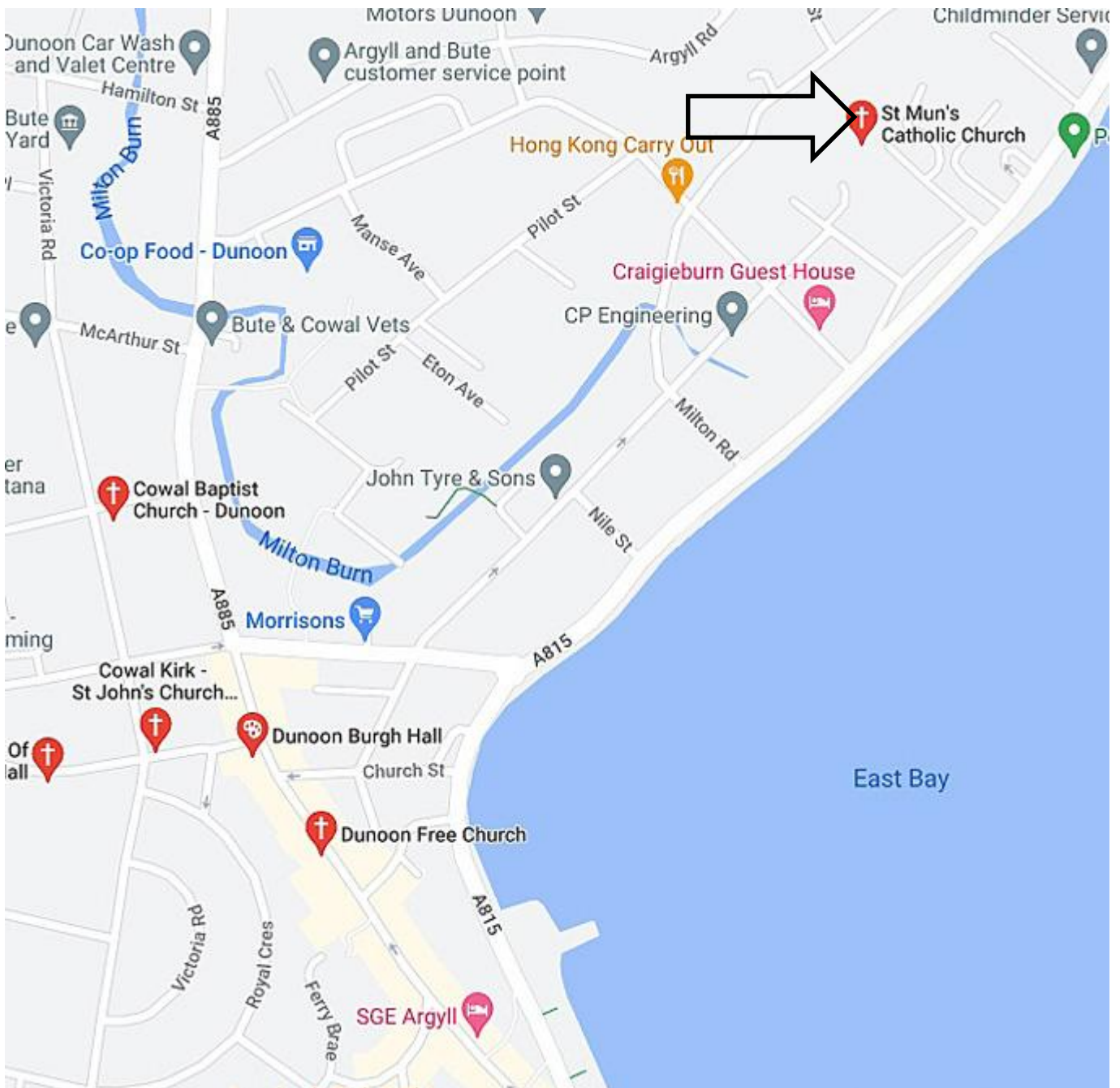
FUNDING FOR BIRD CONSERVATION PROJECTS IN ARGYLL

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). The club has also helped to fund the provision of nest boxes for Grey Wagtails and Dippers in Kintyre (see article in the June 2021 *Eider*, page 12).

More recently, the club has bought ten Swift nest boxes, all of which have now been given a home. We can have more boxes made if anyone has a site in mind. If you know of a suitable building, please contact David Jardine (contact details on back page). Applications for funding other projects should be submitted to the secretary (contact details on the back page).

CORRECTION

Eider, September 2023, page 18. The picture and linked text of Green-winged Orchids, were in fact Early Purple Orchids.



The location (arrow) of St Mun's Church Hall in Dunoon, the venue for the Spring Meeting of the Argyll Bird Club



Eiders ©Margaret Staley

FINANCIAL REPORT

The accounts (below) show that the club is in a good position to look at how it can support bird conservation projects in Argyll, and there will be more news on how that is to be progressed by the time of the Spring Meeting. Having a healthy balance sheet means that we can continue to provide the various benefits for club members without having to increase subscriptions for the foreseeable future. **Peter Hogbin, Treasurer**



Argyll Bird Club

Scottish Charity No: SC050823

Income and Expenditure for the year to 30th September 2023

2021-2022	INCOME	2022-2023
2879.23	Subscriptions	2564.23
25.00	Donations	10.00
213.00	Raffles	285.00
1205.00	Data fees	275.00
231.64	HMRC Gift Aid	192.50
111.44	Bank interest	384.68
<hr/>		<hr/>
4665.31	Total Income	3711.41
	EXPENDITURE	
500.00	Bird report	500.00
291.83	Print costs less printing for other charities	-2.57
27.98	Postage	62.20
555.88	Public meetings	863.88
182.20	Insurance	191.50
46.28	Committee expenses	0.00
0.00	Bird boxes	0.00
600.00	Grants & Donations	328.17
	Bank charges	42.57
<hr/>		<hr/>
2204.17	Total Expenditure	1985.75
2461.14	SURPLUS/DEFICIT	1725.66
	Balance Sheet as at 30 September 2023	
	CURRENT ASSETS	
0.00	Cash on hand	0.00
3133.31	Bank of Scotland Current Account	14.09
	Bank of Scotland Deposit Account easy access 0.90%	1150.00
12500.00	UTB 1 year fixed term @ 2.9% matured 7th September 2023	0.00
	UTB 6 month fixed term @ 4.06% matures March 2024	16502.38
0.00	Debtors	192.50
	CURRENT LIABILITIES	
0.00	Creditors	-500.00
15633.31	TOTAL NET ASSETS	17358.97

All funds are unrestricted

Peter Hogbin
Treasurer

ABC field trip to Iona on 1-3
September 2023



Members of Argyll Bird Club at the Iona Association bench overlooking Baile Mor ©David Jardine

A small group of four met in Oban for the first ABC weekend outing since Covid. We travelled across to Mull in bright conditions, with a few Manx Shearwaters and around a thousand Kittiwakes at the Lady's Rock being the highlights. Driving across Mull a Golden Eagle was glimpsed in Glen More, but we were keen to get to Fionnphort and over onto Iona, where the group were soon settled in at Iona Pods. This was a new accommodation experience for everyone, which proved comfortable in the warm dry weather.

Being such a small group an informal approach was taken over the weekend, and before enjoying an evening meal in the St Columba Hotel Alun and Helen explored the Abbey and village, while Neil and David took a stroll over to the Bay at the Back of the Ocean. There they found two late Whimbrel and a group of 20 Turnstones. On their return a Sparrowhawk was chasing a group of around 50 young Swallows and perhaps most surprising, a late Swift flew over.

A beautiful day dawned on Saturday, so Helen and Alun decided to take a boat trip over to Staffa, seeing Storm Petrels on their journey. Neil and David took a wander up to the north end of the island and saw five Red-throated Divers off Eilean Annraidh. Through the scope they watched around 20 Storm Petrels offshore and found a White-tailed Eagle out on Reidh Eilean. Tracing their steps back

they noted two Kestrels over Dun-I and through the village they found a Treecreeper in the Sycamores and three Greenfinch in the hotel garden, but there were few migrants.

Over at the Bay at the Back of the Ocean the Whimbrel were still present, along with six Bar-tailed Godwits and four Curlew. There were also plenty of small waders—22 Sanderling, 25 Ringed Plover, four Dunlin, and one Turnstone. David re-found a colour-ringed Oystercatcher, which he had seen there in February 2022 (photo below). It was a bird ringed in Iceland in summer 2021, which appears to have chosen Iona as it's wintering grounds. Also present were two Shelduck, lingering before their moult migration and around 40 'alba' wagtails, including at least 12 White Wagtails. Nearby at the northern end of the golf course a group of 38 Twite were feeding around the



An Icelandic colour-ringed Oystercatcher ©David Jardine

farm.

Before joining up in the evening for a meal at the Argyll Hotel, Neil and David were down by Sligneach when David saw a late Corncrake dash between the rows of cut silage waiting to be baled. During our stay on the island many of the silage fields were cut. It was good to see this late cutting date being applied, thus helping the survival of late broods of this fragile and elusive species.

On the Sunday morning a short visit was made to the Bay at the Back of the Ocean where a young Knot was 'new in' and two lingering juvenile Lesser Black-backed Gulls were seen. However, as the weather was poor and declining, the group left for Mull in the mid-morning allowing some time for birding on the way back. A stop at Loch Poit na h-I added Little Grebe to the list, and at Kinloch there were eleven Golden Plover, five Lapwing, three Greenshank, five Redshank, six Knot, nine Dunlin, four Turnstone and House Martins feeding their young in a late nest on the old post office. The early departure allowed a stand-by crossing to be made to the mainland ensuring everyone got home before it was too late, after an enjoyable weekend's birding.

Species list Those in italics were seen en route to/from Iona from Oban. Greylag, *Canada Goose*, Shellduck, Mallard, Eider, Red-throated Diver, *Little Grebe*, Fulmar, Manx Shearwater, Storm Petrel, Gannet, Cormorant, Shag, Heron, White-tailed Eagle, Sparrowhawk, Buzzard, *Golden Eagle*, Kestrel, Corncrake, Oystercatcher, Ringed Plover, *Golden Plover*, *Lapwing*, Knot, Sanderling, Dunlin, Bar-tailed Godwit, Curlew, Redshank, *Greenshank*, Turnstone, Common Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Kittiwake, *Guillemot*, *Razorbill*, Black Guillemot, Rock Dove, Collared Dove, Swift, Skylark, Sand Martin, Swallow, *House Martin*, Meadow Pipit, Rock Pipit, Pied Wagtail, Wren, Dunnock, Robin, Stonechat, Wheatear, Blackbird, Song Thrush, *Long-tailed Tit*, Blue Tit, Coal Tit, Treecreeper, Jackdaw, Rook, Hooded Crow, Raven, Starling, House Sparrow, *Chaffinch*, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Linnet, Twite, Redpoll, Reed Bunting (75 species).

David Jardine



A selection of birds seen on Iona during the visit; Sanderling (top), Bar-tailed Godwit (centre) and Twite (bottom).

All photos ©David Jardine



Some of the participants aboard the ferry ©David Jardine

Following the excellent outing to Islay and Jura on the same weekend in 2022, when thousands of Manx Shearwaters were seen, expectations were high for another good trip, as 12 members gathered at Kennacraig. Unfortunately the MV Isle of Arran, which provides excellent viewing out front, was running around 30 minutes late, but this allowed for some birdwatching around the ferry terminal. Those arriving earliest had enjoyed views of an Osprey flying over and one of the Little Egrets, which now regularly winter in West Loch Tarbert, flew into the bay to feed alongside some Redshanks and a couple of Greenshanks.

However, with the crew working on a quick turnaround, the group were soon sailing down a flat calm West Loch Tarbert. Jim Dickson picked out two Sandwich Terns resting on a rock next to some roosting Oystercatchers and near the mouth of the loch a Red-throated Diver took to the air after being disturbed by the ferry. Eiders and roosting Shags were on the rocks by Eilean Traighe alongside the loafing Common (Harbour) Seals.

The comparative (bird) riches of West Loch Tarbert were replaced by a very quiet sea to the west. So, many of the group had a snack or enjoyed a Calmac coffee and bacon roll. As we passed Gigha, Jim picked out a group of around 50 Kittiwakes roosting on the rocks at the north end of the island; by far the largest group of seabirds seen to date. But unlike the previous year's trip, the seas west of Gigha remained quiet and only very small numbers of auks (mainly Guillemots) were seen for the next half hour.

A few Gannets and Kittiwakes had started to

appear when Frank Cavanagh shouted out 'Storm Petrel', which he had picked out with his sharp young eyes. Only a few people managed to 'get on to' this diminutive seabird (about the size of a Greenfinch) which comes to Scottish waters to breed, but winters in the southern Atlantic. As they are so small and have an erratic flight as they dance over the waves, it can be incredibly difficult to find them in a wide seascape, even with the best of directions to their location. Fortunately another four were seen on the crossing, including one which flew just in front of the bow of the ship, allowing a good number of the party to get a view of this amazing and long-lived seabird. Their average lifespan is 11 years (much longer than a Greenfinch—average two years) and have been recorded up to an age of 38 years.

Unlike the previous two field visits, when the group crossed over to Jura for a walk in fine sunshine, the leader, David Jardine, had a hunch that his luck with the weather would run out eventually and so opted for a shorter excursion, with a walk to Loch Allan on Islay. This proved to be a fortunate decision as the rain started on the group's arrival on Islay. So, after eating lunch under cover at Port Askaig Pier, the party sought out the comparative shelter of the woodlands on Dunlossit Estate as they walked to Loch Allan and the Lilly Loch.

Here a few common woodland birds were found along with increasing numbers of Woodpigeons, but other than a Heron and a few Mallard, no water birds were found. On the return walk Malcolm found a Pheasant and Andrew, Frank and Patrick, who had stopped to pick some brambles, enjoyed views of a ringtail Hen Harrier as it

flew over. The weather had started to ease as the party waited in Port Askaig for the incoming MV Finlaggan (a much poorer vessel for watching for seabirds). However, with a touch of *déjà vu*, a migrating wader was heard passing over; this year a Whimbrel, last year Redshanks and Bar-tailed Godwits.

With slightly more breeze on the return crossing a few more seabirds were seen. It is said that many seabirds are like sailors/yachtsmen as they rely on the wind to assist their passage. With the light wind it was good to see 4-5 Manx Shearwater and a Fulmar as we headed back to the mainland. Jim Dickson also picked out a distant juvenile Arctic Skua and David Jardine found another Storm Petrel close to Gigha.

A female Common Scoter flew alongside the ferry as it entered West Loch Tarbert, but with clearing clouds and a strengthening wind it was 'eyes to the skies' as many raptors took to the air to the south. Five or six Buzzards were noted and a single Sparrowhawk dived down to the ground from its high soaring position. Above them all, at a great height, a White-tailed Eagle

held its position, apparently motionless in the sky—a fitting end to the trip and once again restoring an eagle to the trip list after their absence last year.

Species list. Species seen on, or around I slay are shown in italics. *Pheasant*, Greylag, *Mute Swan*, *Mallard*, Eider, Common Scoter, Red-breasted Merganser, Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon, *Wood Pigeon*, Little Grebe, Oystercatcher, *Whimbrel*, Curlew, Turnstone, Redshank, Green-shank, *Kittiwake*, Black-headed Gull, *Common Gull*, *Great Black-backed Gull*, *Herring Gull*, Sandwich Tern, *Arctic Skua*, *Guillemot*, *Razor-bill*, Black Guillemot, Red-throated Diver, *Storm Petrel*, *Fulmar*, *Manx Shearwater*, *Gannet*, *Cor-morant*, *Shag*, *Grey Heron*, Little Egret, Osprey, Sparrowhawk, *Hen Harrier*, White-tailed Eagle, Buzzard, Jackdaw, Rook, *Hooded Crow*, Raven, *Coal Tit*, *Blue Tit*, *Great Tit*, *Swallow*, *Goldcrest*, *Wren*, *Treecreeper*, *Blackbird*, *Song Thrush*, *Robin*, *Pied Wagtail*, *Chaffinch*, *Bullfinch*, *Lesser Redpoll*, *Goldfinch*, *Siskin* (60 species).

David Jardine

ABC field trip to Ardentinny on 30 September 2023



Lunch stop at the beach at Ardentinny ©Alistair McGregor

As with all field trips that I lead, the preparation starts well in advance. I am constantly looking at new areas to visit, taking into consideration the ground to be covered, such as footpaths, main roads to cross and shelter from the wind and rain (well we do live in Argyll!).

After finding a suitable walk, I look at the food that is available for birds, in autumn this can include grass seed, thistles and many other plants, and also trees and bushes with berries. And of course praying for good weather on the day.

I had considered the Ardentinny walk earlier in the year, but I had only seen about 25 different birds. I thought an autumn walk could produce many more species.

Anyway, on the 30 September 2023 we met at the car park near the toilets at Ardentinny. There were nine of us including some experienced birders. The weather was mild with some low cloud, the forecast had said that rain was likely by 14.00hrs

After a short safety briefing we headed out along a footpath that has Loch Long on one side and woodland, bushes and fields on the other. We were greeted by a friendly Robin that seemed to follow us most of the day. As we neared the scrub, Dunnock, Chaffinch, Goldfinch and a Wren were observed, and on the loch side Oyster Catchers were seen and heard along with Curlew and Redshank. On the water were numerous Eiders in various states of their

moult. Shags were fishing out on the still water along with Cormorants, Common Guillemots, Gannets, and a surprise fly past by some Canada Geese.

The scrub woodland and wild flowers along the shore path provided plenty of food for birds, with many darting about the low tree canopy and ground vegetation. These included Coal Tits, Blue Tits, Long-tailed Tits and even more Goldfinches. Greenfinches were spotted feeding on seed heads of various plants, then flying off to trees near the houses.

Further along the shore path there was a line of Sea Buckthorns laden with their orange berries, while numerous cotoneasters were covered in their red berries. A couple of Blackbirds were noted here, but no other thrushes. Perhaps the fruits were not ripe enough for the birds to show an interest.

As we all neared the end of this footpath close to the Glen Finnart Burn bridge there was a large area of bramble where we saw over a dozen Blackbirds and thrushes, a couple of Great Tits were calling in the trees overhead and a Wren was alarm calling, the culprit was never seen, but possibly a domestic cat or Tawny Owl sulking nearby.

From here we headed towards the Ardentiny beach car park. We had a quick lunch here as we watched a good selection of gulls on a gravel spit exposed by the low tide. There was a Grey Heron waiting patiently for its lunch.

The lunch-time chatter was as good as always. I find these occasions a great way to build friendships with like-minded people and share birding experiences with one another. Having Neil Hammett and Steve Petty with us helped as they were more than happy to answer any queries, not only on birds but also on plants and insects.

After our short lunch we headed up the burn and past the Walled Garden, which is surrounded by an old Yew hedge. A Tree Creeper was heard then spotted, and tits were seen moving about feeding. From here we took a forest road that heads across a field and into the forest of mixed conifers. Crows and Rooks were feeding in the fields and Ravens were seen and heard as we neared the forest.

The weather had an air of change now and we had about an hour left of the walk. We pressed on into the forest where we spotted a Goldcrest, its high-pitched calls being heard by some of the party. There were plenty of woodland plants to talk about. Including an invasive plant imported from New Zealand called the Piri-piri-burr. The seed heads have little hooks that stick to anything, great for seed dispersal, but not so good if you have a dog as it's quiet difficult to comb the seeds out of their hair.

As we neared the cars the first spots of rain were felt. For once the weather prediction was right, everyone had safely returned and at



Numerous Curlews we seen along the shore ©Alistair McGregor

a short debrief it was noted that we had recorded 41 species of bird, numerous small insects and even more plants, shrubs and trees.

A great day was enjoyed by all and I would like to thank Steve Petty and Neil Hammett for their help and support.

Species list. Canada Goose, Mallard, Eider, Goosander, Oystercatcher, Redshank, Curlew, Common Gull, Black-headed Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, Wood Pigeon, Guillemot, Gannet, Cormorant, Shag, Heron, Rook, Carrion Crow, Hooded Crow, Raven, Magpie, Jay, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Coal Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Goldcrest, Tree Creeper, Chiffchaff, Nuthatch, Wren, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Robin, Dunnock, Pied Wagtail, Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Goldfinch (Total 41 species)

Alistair McGregor



The track leading down to the car park ©Alistair McGregor

ABC field trip to Gigha on 28 October 2023



ABC members inspecting details of the new path network on Gigha ©David Jardine

A group of eight members met at Tayinloan and after a brief safety chat made their way down the pier to board the MV Loch Ranza. It was a dry morning with a strong east wind and drier than the forecast earlier in the week. Before boarding a group of ten waders flew overhead on their way south—after a bit of head scratching it was realised they were Knot, an unexpected migratory group. Also, while at the pier the first Great Northern Diver of the outing was sighted; one still in full summer plumage (photo below). More were seen on the crossing in various stages of moult into their wintering garb.

The seas were relatively quiet on the way over to Gigha with small numbers of Eider and Black Guillemots in their smart (white) winter plumage. Two Greenland White-fronted Geese were seen flying to the mainland, a single Goldeneye flew north up the coast and Frank picked out a lone Long-tailed Duck.

The walk south through the village allowed a few species to be added to the list, with impressive numbers of Starlings and House Sparrows (over 40 of the latter) feeding in well-stocked gardens. Later, in the woods, the group strained their necks to look through a flock of tits (with four species being recorded) with several Goldcrests and Siskins.

Surprisingly, given the numbers noted elsewhere on migration, no thrushes had been seen, but this was soon rectified when a flock was found feeding in the fields and hawthorns by North Druimachro. Working through them, the regular

five species were chalked up, but no Ring Ouzels or Waxwings were present. A couple of Bullfinches were in their usual spot in the birches on the way down to Gallochoille.

There was a good variety of waders down on the shore of Ardminish Bay with a flock of 65 Ringed Plover, 19 Dunlin and two Turnstone. Further away the telescope was used to allow views of five Redshank and Bar-tailed Godwit, but the Greenshank, which was present on arrival remained hidden. Elsewhere in the bay were 25 Wigeon, a few Red-breasted Merganser, and a single Mute Swan and cygnet swam into view.

After taking their packed lunch in Achamore Gardens, where Goldfinch and Treecreeper were added to the trip list, the group walked down to the pier at the south end of the island, noting more



Great Northern Diver ©David Jardine

Stonechats and eventually seeing some Greylag Geese on their walk back to the jetty. The reduction in the number of gulls around the old pier was noticeable; a consequence of the loss of their food-supply at the outfall of the Gigha Halibut Fish Farm which ceased production earlier in the year. Around 100 Shags roosted on the rocks around Gialum and the other adult Mute Swan was found feeding in the bay.

The weather was beginning to turn, with a touch of rain in the air, so the party returned to the jetty via the new path to the Boathouse to catch the next ferry. A small group of Redpolls flew in and landed in some Alders by the shore. Conditions were not pleasant on the return crossing although around ten Common Scoters were found close to the Tayinloan shore.

Species list. Greylag, White-fronted Goose, Mute Swan, Wigeon, Mallard, Eider, Common Scoter, Long-tailed Duck, Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser, Collared Dove, Ringed Plover, Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwit, Turnstone, Knot, Dunlin, Redshank, Greenshank, Black-headed Gull, Common Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull, Black Guillemot, Great Northern Diver, Cormorant, Shag, Heron, Buzzard, Hooded Crow, Raven, Coal Tit, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Goldcrest, Wren, Treecreeper, Starling, Blackbird, Fieldfare, Redwing, Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Robin, Stonechat, House Sparrow, Dunnock, Pied Wagtail, Meadow Pipit, Rock Pipit, Chaffinch, Bullfinch, Greenfinch, Redpoll, Goldfinch, Siskin (total 57 species)

David Jardine

Unexpected neighbours

Clachaig is 60m above sea level in a valley in Cowal where the weather can feel unforgiving at times. Last winter seemed to drag on longer than previous ones, not helped by my six-week chest infection. I really needed something extra exciting to look forward to. During winter some of us add interest to life by spending time on the hills watching what the local eagles are up to, trying to work out who's who. In the village at night, in addition to photographing the occasional appearance of the Northern Lights, I like to listen to our owls—two pairs of Tawny Owls and one pair of Barn Owls.

The long, hoped-for excitement happened in early March, when Alistair McGregor came around one evening and we did a wee tour of the garden at dusk. The regular owls were clearly agitated by a new kid on the block, a male Long-eared Owl wooing away in the garden, duetting with a female next door. We had previously suspected that this highly secretive owl lived in our glen. One was found dead on the road a few years back, and is now stuffed in the living room of Arthur French, who co-ordinates the local raptor study group. Then in winter 2021/22, a motorist spotted one on a fence post by the roadside and reported it to Jim Dickson. I had often gone out at night listening, but to no avail. But one's never disappointed as you can often hear the mournful call of Red-throated Divers on our local loch, or the call of Tawny or Barn Owls in the Sitka Spruce plantations. So, to have Long-eared Owls in the garden was just exceptional, beyond my wildest dream! That began a privileged view into the world of this most secretive of British owls.

Detection is the biggest challenge with this species. Noisy Tawny Owls are very obvious, and like Barn Owls, they do sometimes fly and call during the day, and they obligingly use nest boxes. A few hours before dusk, Short-eared Owls can often be seen displaying on the hill, often in competition with Hen Harriers. But, Long-eared Owls do not

come out until it's getting very dark. So unless you're in the right place at the right time, you can easily miss them. But in the twilight, I could stand on my deck with the male circling overhead, wing-clapping as he went. Then the pair would duet together, the female having a slightly higher call than the male.

For many years, a pair of crows nested in a clump of tall, spindly conifers next door. This odd couple comprised a male Hooded Crow and a female Hoodie/Carrion hybrid. They fledge two young most years, and we all put out food scraps to help out. But this year, they were clearly unsettled, and it eventually became clear that the female Long-eared Owl had selected one of their old nests for her eggs. The crows regularly circled the outside of the tree to try to intimidate the owl off its nest, but this lady was not for moving! This confrontation went on well into April, but eventually the crows settled down, and refurbished one of their other nests in a nearby tree. Meanwhile, the male Long-eared Owl displayed and called less and less as the female's incubation progressed.

For weeks it was impossible to see anything other than the female sitting tightly on her nest, but my suspicions of young being present grew when white egg shells landed on the lawn. The female was sitting higher and higher on the nest as time went by. At dusk, the male still flew in from his daytime roost, just as the Woodcocks left their daytime roosts, and he could easily be seen flying as a silhouette against the sky, but no longer wing-clapping. One Monday morning in mid-April at around 01.00hrs I watched a powerful, purple aurora overhead, which also coincided with a meteor shower, while three owl species flew overhead. This was the stuff of dreams!

As time went by, the local Ospreys moved their nest into a hard-to-view location, and we car-

ried on watching the various raptor species for signs of breeding. In late April, a rare visit by a Red Kite to Cowal encouraged some of our local photographers out onto the hills. I had also started to invite local birders to view the owl's nest, allowing several of them to tick a lifer. Fortunately, the nest was visible by scope from quite a distance. It was only really possible to see the female's ear tufts or look into her dark orange eyes when she turned her head towards us.

The Argyll Raptor Study Group decided that the young could be ringed by folk at the local office of Forestry and Land Scotland. But no one, not even myself, had seen an owlet until a group of visiting Swarovski's plus owners (Ian

Hopkins, Graham Clark and John Williams) provided sharp views of a well-grown chick over the coronation weekend. It was decided to ring the owlet in the nest the following weekend, as it was close to fledging.

So, one evening in mid-May, the village turned into a car park as tree climbers, members of the Raptor Study Group, friends, photographers, villagers and dogs on leads, assembled on my neighbours' lawn. The nest tree was very spindly, and used to sway about precariously in the wind anyway. But, it swayed even more precariously as a human ascended with tree climbing boots, ring, rope and bag. The female left the nest to a cacophony of alarm calls by finches, hirundines and thrushes, and the owlet de-



Neil with the Long-eared Owl chick ©Neil Hammatt

ceded to climb higher. Then it headed out to the edge of the tree and jumped. It is normal for them to leave the nest before they can properly fly, but still my heart missed several beats as it bounced through an ash tree to the ground. It was then captured, photographed and ringed. To have a Long-eared owl in my hands was just awesome, the event of the decade (so far). Those extraordinary piercing orange eyes were electric. The owl put on an incredible act, holding its wings out and hissing, and calling mum with its squeaky contact call. But very quickly it was heading back up to the nest from where it climbed higher. We tidied the garden, collected pellets for dissection, and left the owls to themselves. Maybe this owl will one day provide some new insight into the secret lives of Long-eared Owls? The assembled throng gradually dissipated and our highland village returned to its typical peaceful state.

A sudden eruption of alarm calls an hour later told me that mum had headed back to the nest, but next morning it was empty. Owlets of many species leave the nest as early as possible and disperse into their surroundings for safety. So, I hoped "my" owl was safe, having fledged naturally rather than in response to a human approaching its nest. At dusk, I waited for the male to

come in, but this time both adults were flying overhead. I slept in my loft room with the skylight slightly open that night, waking at 02.00hrs to hear the usual Tawnies calling, their young also having fledged. I stuck my head out of the skylight and could hear the Pine Martins shuffling about in the garden. But, I also heard the unmistakable, squeaky call of a Long-eared Owl fledgling in one of my rhododendrons, well hidden but communicating with mum and dad, who were again duetting in the trees.

And people ask me if it's lonely living in these hills? When am I ever alone? The number of fledglings was growing rapidly. The finches were eating me out of house and home, the first Willow Warbler fledglings were in the garden, and my Long-eared Owl had safely fledged, destined for a secret life beyond human detection. That is unless one day its ring is read by someone somewhere and reported.

The owl continued to squeak to its parents well into mid-July, becoming ever more adventurous in its wanderings until one day it disappeared into the undetectable, secretive life of Long-eared Owls. In the meantime, the crows raised two young as usual.

Neil Hammatt

Obituary—Paul Daw

Paul was from Yorkshire and moved to live at Tullochgorm in Argyll with his wife Margaret in 1997. He quickly became a very popular and well-liked person in the Argyll Bird Club. My wife always referred to him as 'that lovely man'. Many people commented to me on his calm, gentle and understanding manner. He was authoritative, but never rude, and he had a notable soothing voice.

As a librarian (retired) by profession he quickly modernised the bird recording system in Argyll, and along with his new friend Tom Callan from the opposite side of Loch Fyne and also Danielle de Clark-Bischoff, they set up the Argyll Bird Recording Data Sheet for club members, which is still in use today. His organisation was meticulous and he kept computer and printed copies of all communications in those early days.

He took over the post of Argyll Bird Recorder from Tristan ap Rheinallt in 1997. He was a major contributor to the *Argyll Bird Report* during 1997-2011 while under the editorships first of Clive Craik and then Tom Callan.

Paul held the post of recorder for 16 years until 2013. The composition of an annual bird report requires an enormous amount of work throughout the year. Clive Craik remarked that Paul's attention to detail in this task was exemplary: his drafts never contained ambiguities or errors that needed later clarification or correction. Paul had initially planned to relinquish the post in 2003. However, after many discussions and meetings it

emerged that, although Paul was not uninterested in the recording of rarities, he felt he could continue as recorder if Jim Dickson (JD) took over that aspect of the work. Over the years Paul became JD's mentor regarding various aspects of the recorder's post, which JD found invaluable. As such Paul continued for another nine years until JD and Malcolm Chattwood joined forces to completely relieve him from the ever increasing burden of the recordership, as well as the now considerable work of producing the annual *Argyll Bird Report*.

Paul was a key figure involved in producing the highly successful book on the *Birds of Argyll* (ap Rheinallt et al. 2007). He not only wrote 37 of the species accounts, but also provided data summaries to authors of most of the other 291 species. He also made significant contributions to the BTO Breeding Bird and Waterbird Surveys, and to fieldwork for the various bird atlases.

Paul's round-up of recent bird sightings at the club's indoor meetings were always popular. He contributed greatly to leading club field trips—the Sound of Gigha being one of his favourite venues. Interestingly, Malcolm Chattwood and Paul shared an interest in steam locomotives and Malcolm recalls a unique field trip when they chased a steam-hauled train around parts of Argyll! Malcolm commented that 'for once birds were definitely of secondary interest, and it was a grand day out in good company'.



A momentous day! Paul Daw (centre) helping to pack up copies of the recently published *Birds of Argyll* in 2007. Clive Craik (left) and Tom Callan between Clive and Paul with Steve Petty to the right of Paul ©Steve Petty

Although he had little interest in rarities, Paul recalled finding a Penduline Tit at Spurn and was fortunate enough to have had sightings of both Crane and Red Kite flying over his house, and latterly was “choughed” to have a Nuthatch visit his garden, a foretaste of the continuing northward range expansion of this species. He tended not to make any visits away from mainland Argyll to the ‘island regions’ as he did not want to leave his wife Margaret and cats—neither being keen travellers.

Paul and Margaret moved back to England in 2016 to live in the Blackpool area. He will be sadly missed.

References

ap Rheinallt T., Craik J.C.A., Daw P.C., Furness R.W., Petty S.J. & Wood D. 2007. *Birds of Argyll*, pp. 424. Argyll Bird Club, Lochgilphead.

Jim Dickson (and others)



Wheatear ©Margaret Staley

Birds of Westray



Western Cliffs, Westray ©Sandy Young

Introduction

My name is Sandy Young and I'm an enthusiastic hobbyist bird photographer. I met Steve earlier this year, thanks to a mutual friend, and I was pleasantly surprised when Steve invited me to submit, if I wished, an article for your club's quarterly newsletter. I spent five weeks on the island of Westray, Orkney during June/July of this year and this article is a brief account of the main birds that I photographed during that period. I have been going to Westray, apart from during Covid restrictions, for the last seven years, so am beginning to get to know the area and its wildlife.

I live on the Black Isle, just north of Inverness, and have been photographing wildlife and birds for 12 years or so. Time flies when you are enjoying yourself! I started photographing birds as a means of improving my identification skills and getting to appreciate and understand the behaviour of birds as individuals. I do not chase birds, I let the birds come to me; I do not disturb birds and will always back off if the bird is uncomfortable with my presence. The welfare of the bird is more important to me than obtaining an acceptable image! I am also aware of, and mindful of, species on Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Over the last few years I have been concentrating on capturing birds in flight, as I feel this is their main element, and also due to the speed of their flight we often miss aspects of behaviour during flight. Still images allow our eye to pick up these nuances, which I find very interesting.

Westray

The island of Westray is called "The Queen of the Isles" and although only 13km long by 5km at

its widest it has approximately 80km of very varied coastline. There are tall imposing cliffs, long crescent shaped sandy beaches, sloping slabs, broken rock and shingle beaches. Inland there are four shallow lochs, fringed with reeds, Yellow Irises, Meadowsweet and rough pasture. The island produces mainly beef cattle so there are lots of areas of farmed grassland and also rough upland type pasture. It's ideal for cliff-nesting birds, waders, etc.

I saw and identified 57 species of birds on Westray this year, which for a non-birder is pretty good, so I am sure that there were many more species that I saw but was unable to positively identify. I am not very good at "little brown jobs"! There were some migrants starting to move through even at the beginning of July, such as Whooper Swan, Bar-tailed Godwit and Golden Plover.

Speaking with the Papa Westray RSPB warden who was over on Westray doing a Guillemot count, he said that birds on the island were generally doing all right apart from Great Skuas and Great Black-backed Gulls. Numbers of these species were well down on previous years. This was undoubtedly due to Avian Flu.

Specific birds

I especially wanted to photograph Puffins, Black Guillemots and Arctic/Common Terns this year, particularly trying to capture them with food in their bills mid-flight. Not an easy task, but one that I wished to explore and hopefully achieve.

Black Guillemots

I spent time along the cliff area known as the "Scaun", west of the airport, where I had seen Black Guillemots in previous years. The cliffs

here are inset with geos and undercut cliffs with caves and cracks/crevices, an ideal area for nesting Black Guillemots. I found a suitable ledge, well above high water mark on the edge of a geo, and over three days allowed the birds to become accustomed to my presence. Black Guillemots are pretty "laid back" and accepting of human presence. I made sure that my position was not on the direct route to their nests but on the side of their flight path. Their preferred food appeared to be the yellowish butterfish and this was the only fish that I saw being carried in their bills. I noticed that the birds here would fly into the opening of the geo, land on the water, and make sure that there were no predators about before they made a very fast run into the nest site. Strangely, while sitting on the sea they frequently dipped the butterfish into the water. All birds seen with food, carried out this action, and I wonder why this was done? I also saw the same actions carried out by Black Guillemots on Hoy. Is it to keep the fish soft and pliable, or even alive? My impression this year was that there were more Black Guillemots on Westray than I had seen in previous years but this could be because I spent more time looking for them.

Arctic/Common Terns

I was keen to try and photograph terns as they entered the water to capture their prey and also to watch how they fed their young.

There were quite a few tern colonies around the island, and although one or two had re-located from where they were previously, the numbers of birds appeared to be in keeping with previous years.

I found a small colony of Arctic Terns, based between a small road and the sea, and right beside a floating jetty that a creel fisherman used to access his boat out in the bay. I spoke with the fisherman, who said that after an initial bombardment by the terns when they returned, they very quickly accepted his presence and him going about his business and coming back and forth on the jetty. This proved to be an ideal spot, and I quickly established a sitting area off the road and above the colony. The birds were not in the least bothered by my presence. However, they were very quick to see off any other birds flying near to or over the

colony. Some birds were sitting on eggs while others were feeding youngsters. I noticed that in all the tern colonies I visited, there was at least one Ringed Plover nest near to or within the colony. No doubt the plovers were making good use of the aerial protection system courtesy of their neighbours!

The terns were mainly bringing back Sand Eels for their young, and there appeared to be a plentiful supply. I never saw the birds passing the Sand Eels from bill to bill. They either attempted to drop the fish into the youngster's gape or dropped the fish on the ground and made the youngster come and pick it up. The activity was pretty hectic and non-stop. Some adults were fishing just off shore next to the colony and adjacent to the floating jetty, so I was able to observe how they caught the Sand Eels. I had assumed that they would dive in like a Gannet does, although not from such a



Arctic Terns catching Sand Eels, without getting wet!
©Sandy Young

great height, but was surprised to see that, although they did dive, they never seemed to fully enter the water (photos on previous page). They did not appear to want to completely submerge themselves, and kept their wings, or the greater part of their wings, out of the water. Was this due to the fact that their main prey is a surface feeder or that if they fully submerged themselves they would be unable to get airborne again? Aspects to find out and to look into next year.

I also found the terns fishing in the main harbour on the island when it was very windy. They would fish in the lee side of the harbour walls. I assume that this was due to the fact that if the water was rough it would be harder for them to spot their prey and the calmer waters in the harbour made it easier for them. Whatever, the harbour became a regular spot for my attempts to capture terns fishing!

Puffins

Well, what can I say about Puffins, one of my favourite birds. This year I hoped to photograph them coming back to the nest with food. Previous years' visits to Westray had been too early to observe this behaviour. The main area for Puffins on Westray is Castle O'Burrian, a sea stack only about 6m off the coast. This year I saw many Puffins nesting along the cliff edge on the way to the stack, and also at Noup Head cliffs among the Gannets, Kittiwakes, Guillemots and Razorbills, so they appeared to be doing well.

I spent many hours photographing these little birds flying into their nest burrows or rock crevices, at speed, with sheer determination to get back without being predated. Their stare is totally focused on getting into their nest and although, at times it looks as if they are looking at you, they are not, they are looking through you to their nest site above you on the cliff. Great for photographers but not easy to capture in flight in any meaningful way.

General

I learn about birds through the medium of photography, so I take pictures, I observe, I study behaviour, I make assumptions, I read, but most importantly, I learn from those who are more experienced, so please let me benefit from your knowledge. All comments are welcome, I learn from being wrong and being corrected.

Westray is a great little island and I will be back again next year to pursue part of my aim to photograph all species of birds that can be regularly seen in Scotland.

Many thanks for allowing me to participate in your wonderful magazine.

Sandy Young



Top photo. Ringed Plovers often nest within tern colonies

Centre photo. Puffin

Lower photo. Swallow

All photos ©Sandy Young



BTO WinGS—Winter Gull Survey 2024-2025

The first Winter Gull Survey was conducted in 1953, and has continued at roughly 10-year intervals, except for the last one, which was 2003-06, leaving a 20-year gap and these questions:

- ◆ 1. How wintering populations have changed over the last 20 years?
- ◆ 2. What are the key autumn and wintering sites for these species?
- ◆ 3. How have gulls been impacted by HPAI ?
- ◆ 4. Where are 1% thresholds now reached for site designations?

The current survey targets >300 key UK sites known to support substantial winter roosts. In Argyll mainland there are three key coastal sites, 45 coastal sample sites and 18 inland sample sites. The priority winter dates are 21 January 2024 and 19 January 2025, and counts should be carried out as close to these dates as possible. Autumn counts can take place any time between August and October.

Equipment. Binoculars (typically 8x or 10x magnification). Telescope (ideally 30x magnification) and tripod; a wide-angle lens may be an advantage. Tally counter (optional); may be useful for Key Sites. Dictaphone (optional). 1:25,000 map showing boundary of the area to be covered. Notebook (for use in the field). Two pencils.

Method. Arrive two hours before dark to vantage point. Count and identify any gulls already roosting on the water. Count and identify all gulls arriving along flight lines. Remove from count those gulls that leave the roost before dark. If there are any other gulls roosting away from the water, these are not to be included in the survey data. You can still report them on Birdtrack for the local recorder to pick up.

Signing Up. If you already participate in BTO surveys, you will already have a BTO username and password. If not, you will have to register and set one up.

Even if you already have a password, you may find that unless it has a combination of upper and lower case letters, with a numeral, it won't be recognised by WinGS and you will need to change your password (the new one will work for other surveys too).

The sites. All the sites are shown on the vacant sites map at (and map below):

<https://app.bto.org/wings/public/vacant.jsp>

Key sites may be large enough to need a team of co-ordinated counters with a good level of identification and counting skills. Coastal sample sites cover a 2km stretch of coast, and will have fewer gulls and will be generally easier. The inland sample sites will be 2km x 2km squares with some water bodies, and will also be easier. You are encouraged to cover sites that have a nil return to help the statistical validity of the survey protocol.

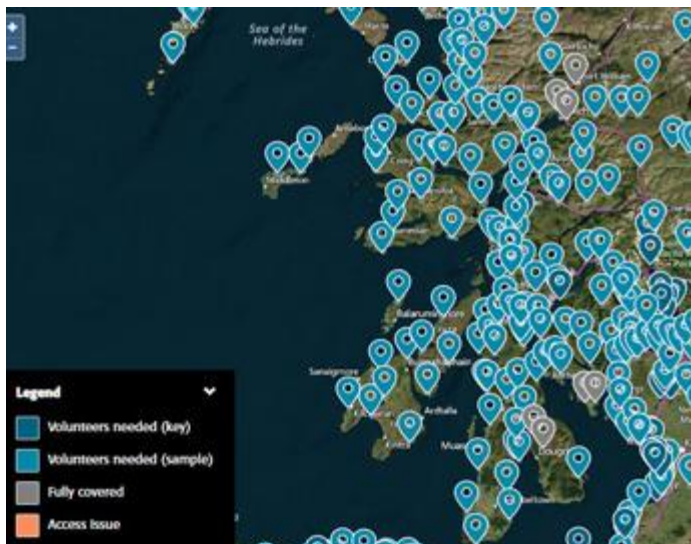
Health and Safety. Before taking part in this survey, please assess any site-specific risks you may encounter. Risks are likely to relate to cold weather and conditions of low light. If weather conditions are adverse or access to your site becomes dangerous in snowy or icy conditions please postpone any survey efforts. Your safety is more important.

Site Locations. A comment about the site locations by the local organiser. Some of these sites are near public roads and are easily accessible, such as Loch Gilp. It would be good to get as many of these sites covered as possible. Being Argyll, a good number of sites are not near public roads, and some are even remote and in difficult terrain, e.g. half way up Ben Cruachan. Leaving such sites in the dark, and alone could be hazardous, especially in poor January weather conditions. This could require a high level of personal survival skills and navigation ability, which is beyond that to be expected of many fieldworkers. Given that there are likely to be many more sites than willing volunteers, it would be reasonable to say these are of lower priority.

Identification. Volunteers need to be confident that they can: Count large numbers of birds accurately; roosts can number in the thousands. Identify all gull species in flight as birds come to roost, potentially in low light conditions. In particular, volunteers need to be confident in identifying the six most abundant UK gull species, which are, Black-headed Gull, Common Gull, Mediterranean Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Herring Gull and Great Black-backed Gull

Timing of survey

Priority Winter Dates: 21 January 2024 and 19



January 2025

Autumn 2024 Dates: Between August to October (dates to be confirmed)

Local BTO Organisers for Argyll. Contact details on the back page of this issue.

As with all BTO surveys, contributing to this citizen science project, supported and ana-

lysed by professional ornithologists, has the collective power to make a real difference in bird conservation.

For more information see:

<https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/winter-gull-survey>

Nigel Scriven

Abstracts of talks from the Autumn Meeting of the ABC on 4 November 2023



The Cairnbaan Hotel ©Steve Petty

For once the drive to the Cairnbaan Hotel was a pleasure (it's quite often raining!) with a spectacular display of autumn colours en route. There was even some sunshine! Thirty-three members attended the meeting. David Jardine had kindly agreed to take over the chair for the day as Nigel was just recovering from a severe bout of Covid, and his voice was far from its usual strength. David welcomed everyone to the meeting and gave a brief introduction to the day's events. He then proceeded to summarise some recent bird sightings, which included the following.

Little Egrets seem to be doing particularly well with 30 plus in Argyll at present. Numbers usually build up at this time of the year. Hopefully, it's only a matter of time before they start breeding in Argyll. There have been quite a few Red Kite sightings over the last few weeks, which is becoming usual at this time of the year. Winter thrush numbers have been good this year, and the birds appear to be staying rather

than just moving through. There have been sightings of a few Ring Ouzels too, so keep your eyes open! It's been a good autumn for American waders (including Pectoral Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper and American Golden Plover) and passerines (American Yellow Warbler and Red-eyed Vireo), on Tiree in particular. These birds having been swept across the Atlantic on the



Nigel and David welcoming members to the autumn meeting ©David Palmar www.photoscot.co.uk

numerous storms in September/October. Mid to late October saw the arrival of Waxwings, and good numbers of Bramblings are now appearing at garden bird feeders. David asked that any outstanding bird records for 2023 should be submitted as soon as possible to enable progress to be made on the next *Argyll Bird Report*, due to be published in spring 2024.

Then onto the talks for the day!

Pelagic seabirds in Argyll by David Jardine (summary David Jardine)

Earlier in 2023 a number of club members tried to organise a seabird pelagic to the 'Argyll waters' off Coll and Tiree in search of some of the rarer deep-water seabirds which are known to occur there. It was hoped that chum (a smelly concoction of fish oil, remains and crushed popcorn which is spread on the sea to attract petrels and shearwaters) could be used. So this talk was supposed to be titled 'Seabird Pelagics in Argyll' and recount what was found, but unfortunately strong winds and a large swell meant that the trips had to be cancelled.

Instead, David gave a review of the occurrence of eight of the rarer seabirds found in Argyll based on analysis of *Argyll Bird Reports* (1980-2022). We are indebted to a small number of dedicated land-based seawatchers (John Bowler, Eddie Maguire and Tristan ap Rheinallt) who have provided the vast majority of records of this group of birds. While their efforts have provided a very good understanding of the timing of their occurrence, it does mean that there is bias in our understanding of their distribution with most sightings coming from Machrihanish Seabird Observatory (Kintyre), Frenchman's Rocks (Islay) and Hynish and Aird (Tiree). It remains to be seen whether suitable effort at sites on Coll, Colonsay, Mull and the mainland might find similar numbers.

Most of the species investigated occur in the late summer and early autumn, with smaller numbers found in spring (with exception of Long-tailed Skuas when the majority were found in late May). What is clear, is that weather conditions are critical to these species being seen from the shore, with some very large numbers observed during particularly bad weather. The largest numbers were found when wind direction of gales turned from SW to NW. For example, a record 466 Leach's Petrels were seen off Machrihanish on 15 September 1992.

In the 43 years analysed, Sooty Shearwater occurred every year and Leach's Petrel in 41 years. Balearic Shearwaters were not recorded until 1992, but since then have occurred in all but six years. Sabine's Gull has occurred in 33 years and Long-tailed Skua in



Great Shearwater—one of the scarcer seabirds in Argyll
©David Jardine

26 years. Of the rarer seabirds, Great Shearwater (photo above) has been seen in 13 of the 43 years and Cory's/Scopoli's Shearwater in eight years. Prior to 2022 only one Wilson's Petrel had been seen in Argyll, but one was photographed at sea in 'Argyll waters' that July. This is a species that is very difficult to identify from the shore because of its small size. However, trips offshore from the Isles of Scilly and more recently from Shetland have found that it occurs regularly, as do the larger shearwaters. The seabird pelagics planned for this year had hoped to establish whether it is more regular than we currently understand.

Not disheartened by the difficulties in 2023 plans are already being made to conduct seabird pelagics in Argyll in 2024. So, if you are interested, please keep Friday 26 July and Saturday 17 August free in your diary.

Identifying gulls by Jim Dickson (summary by Steve Petty)



Jim Dickson ©David Palmar www.photoscot.co.uk



Juvenile Herring Gull ©Jim Dickson



Anthony Wetherhill ©David Palmar www.photoscot.co.uk

One reason for giving this talk was to encourage folk to participate in the forthcoming Winter Gull Survey (see pages 19-20), and to demonstrate that the identification of gulls was easier than most people think. Eighteen species of gull have been recorded in Argyll, but this talk concentrated on identifying the most abundant species. Although gulls often have a bad press they have many positive attributes—they are long-lived, intelligent, opportunistic, have a good sense of smell, a good memory, they have strong pair bonds and they are excellent parents. They are also large, approachable and easy to study.

Gulls can be split into three size categories—small (e.g. Little Gull, Black-headed Gull), medium (e.g. Kittiwake, Common Gull) and large (e.g. Herring Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Great Black-backed Gull). Adults gulls are easier to identify than immatures, and immatures of the smaller gulls are more straightforward to identify than immatures of the larger gulls (photo above). This is because immatures of the larger gulls go through more moults before attaining adult plumage, which can take five years or more. Trying to understand moult sequences is key to improving your identification skills.

Jim went on to give some tips to aid identification. Try to become familiar with the commonest gulls first, and ideally spend time with an experienced birder. Choose good viewing positions, ideally with the light behind you. Use a telescope if possible. Try to place your gulls into the three size categories (above). Apart from plumage and moult, use other clues to aid identification, such as head pattern, bill size, colour and shape and leg colour. Try picking out less common gulls that are often hidden within the flocks you

are looking at.

Finally, Jim summarised the occurrences of some of the less common and rare gull species that have been recorded in Argyll. This was an excellent talk that will hopefully encourage members to become more interested in gull identification, and to take part in the forthcoming Winter Gull Survey.

Small migrant tracking—recent results by Anthony Wetherhill & Mark Wilson, BTO Scotland (summary by Alun ap Risiart)

BTO Scotland has for the last three years had a migrant-tracking project for six species across Scotland to see where they go once they leave Scotland. Why do birds migrate? It makes sense for birds to migrate to more temperate climates to avoid our winters when food is depleted. The species studied here migrate to central and western Africa. Some species can stay around, but species that feed almost entirely on insects need to move. Their African quarters are very dry in summer, but green in winter, so they take advantage of seasonal food abundance in both areas, but we also have longer daylight in summer, giving more time to feed their chicks. The study focusses on six species that are mostly in decline, but a couple are doing a little better. Most of those that have declined spend winter in the humid tropics, whereas those doing better winter in north Africa or the Sahel. The six species are: Spotted Flycatcher, Tree Pipit, Whinchat, Garden Warbler, Wood Warbler, and Willow Warbler. These have been studied in southern England, and we want to know if there are differences in migration strategies of Scottish birds.

Whinchat and Wood Warbler are in decline across the UK. Spotted Flycatcher and Garden Warbler are in decline generally, but doing better in Scotland than in England. In contrast, Willow Warbler and Tree Pipit are declining in England but increasing in Scotland. The BTO use geolocator tags attached with a leg-loop harness, which record ambient light



Spotted Flycatcher ©Philip Croft

level, date, and time every few minutes. Day length gives latitude, solar midday gives longitude. The tags weigh 0.35-0.50g, and they have a recording life of up to 13 months. The tags have to be retrieved the following year to download the data. The tagged birds and a control group are fitted with colour rings to determine if the tags are impacting survival. Most birds were caught using mist nets + taped playback for territorial males. Spotted Flycatchers don't respond to playback, so these were caught with perch traps near the nest.

There have been two seasons for tag retrieval. Results were as follows:

Willow Warbler: 23 tags and eight controls were deployed in 2021, four tags retrieved in 2022, none in 2023. This was a good baseline.

Tree Pipit: 12 tags and no controls were deployed in 2021, no tags were retrieved in 2022, one tagged bird spotted but not caught. 12 tags and ten controls deployed in 2022. Two tags retrieved in 2023, and one other tagged bird spotted.

Spotted Flycatcher: 13 tags and seven controls deployed in 2021, none retrieved in 2022. One tagged bird and two controls spotted. 12 tags and ten controls deployed in 2022. One tag retrieved in 2023, one control spotted.

Garden Warbler: nine tags and two controls deployed in 2021, two retrieved in 2022, 12 tags and nine controls deployed in 2022. Two tags retrieved in 2023.

Whinchat: 17 tags and four controls deployed in 2021, one retrieved in 2022, and two tagged birds spotted. Ten tags and nine controls de-

ployed in 2022. Two tags retrieved in 2023, one control spotted.

Wood Warbler: 15 tags and nine controls deployed in 2021, no tags retrieved and no controls in 2022. Eight tags deployed in 2022, none retrieved in 2023. Three tags deployed in 2023. Low return rates are a known problem for Wood Warblers as they don't have a great site fidelity.

The study aims to show where Scottish birds go in the winter? Unfortunately we don't know yet! Downloading and analysing data from the retrieved tags is complicated, and will take time. One encouraging aspect of the study is that tags seem to have little detrimental impact on survival. From a study in England, we know that Tree Pipits travel through Spain and Gibraltar to west Africa. Scottish Willow Warblers seem to do a circular migration, down through Italy, to Central Africa, across to west Africa, and back via Gibraltar.

Recent research on Scottish Golden Eagles by David Anderson (summary Alistair McGregor)

Dave Anderson has lived in Argyll, where he worked for the Forestry Commission, for forty years. Prior to this he lived in Northumberland, and more recently he has worked in the Outer Hebrides and Ireland. He now works as an independent consultant on research and conservation of birds of prey, not only in the UK but overseas too.

Dave's pioneering research and fieldwork includes live-trapping adult Golden Eagles, fitting satellite tags to eagles and using trail cameras. He was used as a consultant on the BBC's Spring, Summer and Autumn Watch programs. One pro-



David Anderson ©David Palmar www.photoscot.co.uk

gram included a nestling Golden Eagle named Freya, which was first shown on the BBC in 2016. Dave had placed a camera on the nest, and monitored it from afar. When the chick hatched, he returned to the nest with other fieldworkers and the BBC Spring Watch team, including Chris Packham. The nestling was measured and weighed. These data confirmed it was a female. It was then ringed and fitted with a satellite tag. The nest camera showed that food brought in by the adults increased in size as the nestling grew. Initially, many small mammals and small birds were brought to the nest, but later on the larger prey included Fox and Badger. Freya fledged successfully and settled on a territory, and in 2023 hatched her first chick.

Dave talked about his current work on catching and satellite-tagging Golden Eagles. He puts out deer carcasses for the eagles and uses trail cameras to record visits to the sites. He has recorded some amazing footage of not only eagles feeding at the sites, but also other species such as corvids, Buzzard, Foxes and Badgers. The feeding sites are high up in remote locations where the availability of carrion for other predators is scarce, and conflicts can arise among species. Dave has witnessed eagle on eagle fights, which is probably the main cause of mortality in adult Golden Eagles. He noted that Golden Eagles will stand their ground against the larger White-tailed Eagle.

Once the eagles start feeding at the carcass sites, a bow net is used to catch them. The nets are made of a soft material that doesn't harm the eagles. Dave explained that the first traps he used had to be manually triggered, which involved sitting in a hide close by, in freezing wet conditions, and waiting for long periods until the target was on the bait. Over the year he has refined his trapping method by trial, error and observations, and now uses a remote-triggered trap. After set-

ting the trap he can sit back in a vehicle, which can be parked up to 1.5km away, but with good line of sight of the trap. When the bird is at the bait, the trap can be sprung from the vehicle. Once sprung, it can take up to 15 minutes to get to the trap. The eagle is carefully removed from the netting and a hood is put over its head, which quiets it down. Eagles are then weighed and measured. Weights range from 3.5kg to 7.5kg. Sexing is by measuring foot span, females being much larger than males. Eye colour gives a rough estimation of age. Adults have light brown, hazel eyes with occasional golden flecks, whereas juveniles have dark eyes. All eagles are fitted with BTO rings and many with satellite tags. Birds that have been recaptured show no signs of injury due to the tags. Satellite tags have a life of approximately six years and cost around £3000 each.

Since 2004 over 170 Golden Eagles have been satellite tagged in Scotland, which has created over 8 million records, most of these birds were tagged as eaglets. However, 21 territorial eagles have been trapped and tagged, with the data being used to investigate how territories are distributed in upland landscapes. Territories rarely overlap, but one area is routinely used by three different pairs of eagles at different times. Dave stated that previous notions on how territories were distributed across the landscape are often wrong, which has been shown repeatedly from tag data. He also explained that away from areas associated with driven grouse shooting, where eagles often met an untimely death, the main source of natural mortality seems to be eagle on eagle events associated with aggressive territorial behaviour.

Dave spoke about the South of Scotland Golden Eagle Project. The project started in 2018 and aims to boost the dwindling population of Golden Eagles, which was down to three pairs in southern



Golden Eagle at a deer carcass ©David Anderson

Scotland. A licence was granted to take both young eagles from the nest and catch and relocate adult eagles from the west of Scotland to southern Scotland. All eagles were satellite tagged and fitted with BTO rings. The data from the satellite tags has provided a great amount of information, and shows that ten new territories have been established so far in southern Scotland. One pair attempted to breed this year, but failed. It is not unusual for the early nesting attempts to be unsuccessful.

Many thanks to Dave for such a compelling and informative talk, and I for one, look forward to hearing him speak again.

Holy Loch Nature Reserve joins the Darwin Tree of Life project by Neil Hammatt (summary Neil Hammatt)

Over the last two seasons, I have been attempting to monitor all species that live on the reserve, both in the carr woodland and out on the coastal marsh and vegetated gravels. At the time of writing, I have identified and recorded over 1400 species, around 100 of which are birds. As I mentioned in a previous article, it is very difficult to identify large numbers of species of beetles, flies, sawflies, wasps etc. as there simply are not enough resources available (experts, published papers, digital information etc.).

One of the most alarming aspects of the oncoming biodiversity crisis, is the catastrophic global decline of insects. So, we should worry about the future of birds that are reliant on insects for the rapid growth of nestlings, everyday feeding, and fuel for their long migration flights. The thought of our fledglings doing well here, and then succumbing to hunger somewhere between here and their wintering grounds fills me with great sadness, but we need to face the realities that climate change is upon us. It is important to ensure that birds setting off on migration have been well fed on the reserve. And, to ensure lots of food is available for new arrivals, some of which have

flown thousands of miles to breed or overwinter on the reserve (still blows my mind!). Every year until now, good numbers of birds (migrants and residents) have returned to the Holy Loch, and all species that nested there in 2023 fledged young.

Climate change is a major looming threat to biodiversity, even in Argyll, so I am shifting the emphasis of work at the reserve towards long-term monitoring, although adding new species to the reserve list will still be important. Without wide-scale quality data on how thousands of species are doing, conservation efforts are severely hampered, and species risk becoming extinct before they've even been noticed. So, as it takes so long to identify individual insects trapped via traditional methods, I have enrolled the reserve onto the Bioscan project led by the Wellcome Sanger Institute as a partner from the west of Scotland in the Darwin Tree of Life initiative. Incredibly, insects placed into tiny containers are fed into a machine, their DNA is extracted and analysed, and the identity of the individual appears on a computer screen. Such automation represents a quantum leap in data generation from around the UK to inform policy and conservation practice. Once our samples have been processed, they will be sent to the National Museums of Scotland for curation and use in research. The project aims, eventually, to be able to identify 80,000 species using this technology. As time goes by, species that could not be identified the first time, will be identified by experts using traditional methods, and their DNA barcode determined and added to the database.

Additionally, I will continue to trap moths in various habitats on the reserve, but following this year's wet weather, with permanent shelters for the moth traps. I also hope to start monitoring the breeding productivity of birds using nest cams to identify parental feeding behaviour. My aim has always been to understand how food availability determines what birds do on the reserve, and these new developments should bring this aim a big step closer.

Winter Gull Survey 2024-25 by Nigel Scriven

See pages 19-20

Summary

Thanks are due to Nigel Scriven and David Jardine for putting together a really excellent meeting, and to the speakers for some very interesting presentations. Also, thanks are due to all of our members who attended the meeting, quite a commitment considering the glorious weather outside! The Cairnbaan proved to be as good a venue as always with everyone enjoying their lunches, and with the opportunity to chat with friends. Lunch was followed by the AGM which was completed promptly. The existing officials and committee of the club were re-elected en bloc for another year. We look forward to seeing you at the spring meeting in Du-noon!



Neil Hammatt ©David Palmar www.photoscot.co.uk

Contributions for the March *Eider* should be sent to the editor before the 20 February 2024

Officials and Committee of the Argyll Bird Club (2023-2024)

Chairman: Nigel Scriven, 14 Taylor Avenue, Kilbarchan, Johnstone PA10 2LS
e-mail chairman@argyllbirdclub.org

Vice Chairman: David Jardine, Hazel Cottage, 7 Barrmor View, Kilmartin, Lochgilphead, Argyll PA31 8UN
E-mail vicechair@argyllbirdclub.org

Secretary: Alun ap Rhisiart, Braeside, Clynder, Argyll G84 0QL
e-mail secretary@argyllbirdclub.org

Treasurer: Peter Hogbin, South Craleckan, Furnace, Inveraray, Argyll PA32 8XN
e-mail treasurer@argyllbirdclub.org

Membership Secretary: Dorothy Hogbin, South Craleckan, Furnace, Inveraray, Argyll PA32 8XN
e-mail membership@argyllbirdclub.org

ABC Committee: Malcolm Chattwood (Lochgilphead), Gordon Holm (Strone), Lynsey Gibson (Ardrishaig), Alistair McGregor (Dunoon), Steve Petty (Ardentinny), Andy Robinson (Stirling), Frauke Thornton (Dunoon).

Editor of the *Argyll Bird Report*: David Jardine, Hazel Cottage, 7 Barrmor View, Kilmartin, Lochgilphead, Argyll PA31 8UN. E-mail vicechair@argyllbirdclub.org

Editor of the *Eider*: Steve Petty, Cluaran Cottage, Ardentinny, Dunoon, Argyll PA23 8TR
e-mail neider@argyllbirdclub.org

ABC Website: <http://www.argyllbirdclub.org>

Argyll Bird Records Committee

Jim Dickson (Secretary, contact details below), John Bowler, Theo de Clermont, David Jardine, Malcolm Ogilvie & Andy Robinson

Argyll Bird Recorder

Jim Dickson, 11 Pipers Road, Cairnbaan, Lochgilphead, Argyll PA31 8UF.
e-mail argyllbirder@outlook.com

Assistant Bird Recorder

Malcolm Chattwood, 1 The Stances, Kilmichael Glassary, Lochgilphead, Argyll PA31 8QA
e-mail abcrecorder@outlook.com

BTO Regional Representatives in Argyll

Argyll Mainland, Bute & Gigha: Nigel Scriven
phone 01505 706652 mobile 07901 636353
e-mail njscriven@gmail.com

Argyll North (Mull, Coll, Tiree & Morvern): Ewan Miles
e-mail emb.gww@gmail.com

Islay, Jura & Colonsay: David Wood. Phone 01496 300118
e-mail david.wood@rspb.org.uk

WeBs Count Organiser, Mainland Argyll & Mull

Nigel Scriven, 14 Taylor Avenue, Kilbarchan, Johnstone PA10 2LS (phone numbers and e-mail above)



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 currently has 313 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, standing order or direct debit. 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).