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# Scottish Birds

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Waterston House, Aberlady,  
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Email: [mail@the-soc.org.uk](mailto:mail@the-soc.org.uk)  
Phone: 01875 871330  
[www.the-soc.org.uk](http://www.the-soc.org.uk)

## Editors:

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## Editorial correspondence:

c/o SOC, Waterston House,  
Aberlady, East Lothian EH32 0PY.  
Email: [mail@the-soc.org.uk](mailto:mail@the-soc.org.uk)

## Designed and typeset by:

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# Scottish Birds 30:1 (2010)



## PAPERS

- 2 Prey items of Merlins in the Lewis Peatlands S. Rae
- 7 Density and productivity of ground-nesting Merlins S. Rae
- 14 Breeding study of Grey Herons on Colonsay and Oronsay D.C. Jardine, J. Clarke & P.M. Clarke
- 21 Scottish Birds Records Committee criteria for identification of Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* C.J. McInerney (on behalf of the Scottish Birds Records Committee)

## SHORT NOTES

- 26 Predation of Northern Gannet and Great Northern Diver by White-tailed Eagle L. Macdonald
- 27 Reports of rare birds in the Aberdeen area during the mid-19th century C.J. McInerney
- 30 A breeding by European Nightjars on the Isle of Bute in 2009 W. Shields & B. Zonfrillo
- 31 Breeding attempt by Ring-billed Gull in Scotland in 2009 P.J. Barden

## OBITUARY

- 33 Mike Madders

## ARTICLES, NEWS & VIEWS

- 35 Report from the freezer J. Maxwell
- 41 News and notices
- 43 Bird Atlas 2007–11: the third summer R.L. Swann
- 46 Working for birds in the Cairngorms National Park K. Taylor
- 52 Notes and comment
- 54 Reviews
- 56 BirdSpot - Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler I.J. Andrews
- 58 Ringers' Round-up R. Duncan
- 64 Savi's Warbler, Cairnie Pier, Perth & Kinross A.J. Leitch
- 67 Kentish Plover, South Ford, South Uist A. Stevenson
- 70 Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Foula, Shetland P.R. Gordon & M.S. Scott
- 73 Brown Flycatcher on Fair Isle, 24–25 September D.N. Shaw
- 76 Gull-billed Tern, Tiree, Argyll M. McKee
- 79 Greater Sand Plover, Ythan Estuary, 12–19 September 2008 - the first record for North-east Scotland D. Cooper & B. Kay
- 83 The unprecedented influx of Grey Phalaropes in to northern Scotland in October 2008 R.L. McMillan, M. Chapman, D. Shaw, S. Williams, S. Duffield, B. Rabbitts & S. Rivers

## BIRDLINE SCOTLAND REVIEW

- 90 1 January to 30 June 2009 A. Murray & S.L. Rivers

## PHOTOSPOT

- BC Grey Phalarope H. Harrop

# Prey items of Merlins in the Lewis Peatlands

S. RAE

Food items of Merlins were counted in the Lewis Peatlands SPA, in April–July 2003 and 2005. The study area differs from others where Merlin diet has been studied in Britain, in having abundant breeding populations of waders including European Golden Plover, Dunlin and Common Greenshank. However, waders formed only a small part of the diet. Dunlin were the most frequently eaten wader (8% of all items). The main prey was Meadow Pipit (44%). Other birds frequently taken as prey were Sky Lark (8%) and Northern Wheatear (7%). High proportions of other prey items by number were moths and butterflies (19%) and dragonflies (6%), although these are not comparable with birds in terms of biomass. The main difference from diets studied elsewhere was the higher proportion of waders and the main difference between years in Lewis was a higher proportion of insects in 2005 than in 2003. It is likely that prey were caught mostly over moorland, and occasionally over farmland, grassland and shore.

## Introduction

Merlin *Falco columbarius* is a qualifying species for the designation of the Lewis Peatlands Special Protection Area (SPA) (Whitfield *et al.* 1998). Other qualifying species include European Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*, Dunlin *Calidris alpina* and Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*. The primary purpose of this study was to record Merlin diet in order to examine whether they ate high numbers of these designated wader species.

Merlins tend to prey upon small birds in proportion to their local abundance (Newton *et al.* 1984), and in Britain, Meadow Pipits *Anthus pratensis* are the most frequent prey in south-west Scotland (Watson 1979), Northumberland (Newton *et al.* 1984), Wales (Bibby 1987), Orkney (Meek 1988) and the Lammermuir Hills, south-east Scotland (Heavisides *et al.* 1995). Bibby (1987) discussed predation on waders in Iceland and Sweden and non-moorland species, especially farmland birds, in Wales. He found that birds nesting closer to farmland took a greater variety of birds than those nesting farther into the moorland. However, there were few waders in the Welsh study area, and the Lewis Peatlands differ from these other British study areas in having abundant breeding populations of waders including European Golden Plover, Dunlin and Common Greenshank. Farmland occurs frequently adjacent to the Peatlands and Meadow Pipits are abundant in both habitats (Rabbits 2001). The farmland is seldom more than a few kilometres wide and the coast is mainly rocky shore, with smaller areas of machair grasslands behind sandy beaches.

As Merlins can hunt several kilometres from their nest sites (Rebecca *et al.* 1990), these other habitats were within their range, and so a secondary aim of this study was to gain some insight to whether they hunted exclusively within the designated area or in habitat beyond.

## Methods

Nesting areas were surveyed in moorland (450 km<sup>2</sup>) which included 70% of the Lewis Peatlands SPA. Prey remains were collected during the breeding seasons, April to July, in 2003 and 2005 from nests and plucking posts at each visit to 29 territories (Newton *et al.* 1984). Avian prey remains, dismembered body parts and feathers, were identified to species level. Other prey remains, mainly insects, were identified to the lowest taxonomic order possible. Dragonflies and damselflies were not identified to species as usually only the wings remained and these were often incomplete. Bird prey were categorised as adult or juvenile by plumage and feather development. The minimum number of individual items was counted at each collection by collating the various body parts.



Plate 1. Female Merlin, Forest of Birse, North-east Scotland, 2001. © Phil Newman

All prey were categorised as moorland or non-moorland species as one or other being their preferred habitat (Table 1). Although most moorland bird species could also occur in other habitats, the non-moorland ones were infrequent on the moor. Northern Wheatears *Oenanthe oenanthe* occur on moorland where there are rocks, but they avoid tall heaths (Cramp 1988) and most in Lewis live on short sward stony grassland. Other birds considered as non-moorland prey species were coastal waders, and woodland/garden birds.

All prey eaten at each nest site would not have been recorded and a larger proportion of insects than birds would have likely been consumed without any remains left. Therefore, the minimum number of bird and insect remains, and the proportions of these, found at the nest sites or associated plucking posts were used as indices for comparative analyses. No pellets were examined for remains.

## Results

The main prey species was Meadow Pipit (44% of all items in both years combined). Secondary bird species which formed more than 5% of the total prey were Dunlin *Calidris alpina* (8%), Sky Lark *Alauda arvensis* (8%), and Northern Wheatear (7%). Other birds of which several were taken were European Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*, Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, Red Grouse *Lagopus lagopus*, Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*, and Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*. High proportions of other prey items were Lepidoptera (19%) and Odonata (6%), although these are not comparable with birds in terms of biomass. Two Pygmy Shrews *Sorex minutus* and two carabid beetles *Coleoptera* sp. were eaten in 2005 (Table 1).

More birds and fewer insects were taken in 2003 than in 2005 (Chi-sq, Yates' Correction. = 78.4, df = 1,  $P < 0.0001$ , Table 2). The main elements of this difference between the foods of 2005 and 2003 were lower proportions of Meadow Pipits and Dunlins in 2005, and higher proportions of Lepidoptera and Odonata. More Wheatears were taken in 2005 than in 2003, and all other six species of non-moorland bird were only taken in 2005.

**Table 1. Prey items recorded at Merlin nest sites in Lewis, Outer Hebrides, 2003 and 2005.**  
\* denotes species considered to mainly live on moorland

Prey species	Prey by number of occurrences in 2003	Prey by number of occurrences in 2005	Prey by % of occurrences in 2003	Prey by % of occurrences in 2005
Meadow Pipit <i>Anthus pratensis</i> *	192	217	54.3	37.4
Dunlin <i>Calidris alpina</i> *	38	34	10.8	5.9
Sky Lark <i>Alauda arvensis</i> *	32	43	9.0	7.4
Northern Wheatear <i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	25	41	7.0	7.1
European Golden Plover <i>Pluvialis apricaria</i> *	11	12	3.1	2.1
Common Snipe <i>Gallinago gallinago</i> *	8	2	2.3	0.3
Red Grouse <i>Lagopus lagopus scotica</i> *	6	11	1.7	1.9
Winter Wren <i>Troglodytes troglodytes hebridensis</i> *	1	6	0.3	1.0
Stonechat <i>Saxicola torquata</i> *	1	4	0.3	0.7
Hebridean Song Thrush <i>Turdus philomelos hebridensis</i>	0	2	0	0.3
Ruddy Turnstone <i>Arenaria interpres</i>	0	1	0	0.2
Ringed Plover <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	0	1	0	0.2
Common Greenshank <i>Tringa nebularia</i> *	0	1	0	0.2
Coal Tit <i>Periparus ater</i>	0	1	0	0.2
Goldcrest <i>Regulus regulus</i>	0	1	0	0.2
House Sparrow <i>Passer domesticus</i>	0	1	0	0.2
Pygmy Shrew <i>Sorex minutus</i>	0	2	0	0.3
Moth/butterfly <i>Lepidoptera</i> *	27	149	7.7	25.7
Beetle <i>Coleoptera</i> *	0	2	0	0.3
Dragonfly/damselfly <i>Odonata</i> *	12	48	3.4	8.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>353</b>	<b>579</b>		

**Table 2. The total numbers of all birds and insects recorded as Merlin prey items in Lewis, Outer Hebrides in 2003 and 2005.**

Prey	2003	2005	Total
All birds	314	378	692
All insects	39	199	238
<b>Total</b>	<b>353</b>	<b>577</b>	<b>930</b>



Plate 2. Merlin, Dumfries &amp; Galloway, July 2006. © Edmund Fellowes

Most birds eaten were moorland species, although some of these also feed or nest in grassland and could have been caught there. The overall proportion of non-moorland birds eaten was low (11%). The Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* and Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* are both shorebirds, and there were woodland species: Hebridean Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos hebridensis*, Coal Tit *Periparus ater* and Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* (Table 3). Merlins also seem to have hunted around buildings as one House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* was caught. The species of moth and butterfly caught were all typical of moorland species (Still 1996). These were Large Heath *Coenonympha tullia*, Northern Eggar *Lasiocampa quercus*, Emperor Moth *Saturnia pavonia* and Fox Moth *Macrothylacia rubi*.

In 2005, juvenile birds began to appear in the diet in late June and became dominant by late July. The number of juvenile Meadow Pipits increased from the end of June until the end of July. Juvenile Sky Lark numbers peaked in early to mid-July, and Northern Wheatear juveniles were continually more frequently taken than adults. The proportion of juvenile to adult birds in all species combined was 52% during the whole period,

**Table 3. The numbers of 'non-moorland' birds eaten by Merlins nesting on moorland, Lewis, Outer Hebrides, in 2003 and 2005. Northern Wheatears occur mostly in coastal areas, but also in stony areas within moorland.**

Species	April/May	June/July
Ringed Plover	1	0
Ruddy Turnstone	1	0
Hebridean Song Thrush	1	1
Goldcrest	2	0
Coal Tit	1	0
House Sparrow	0	1
Northern Wheatear	18	19
Total	24	21

**Table 4. Numbers and proportions of juvenile and adult birds taken by Merlin in June and July 2005 in Lewis, Outer Hebrides (n = 111 juvenile, 103 adult). There were also individual juveniles of Red Grouse, Common Greenshank and Hebridean Song Thrush.**

Species	22–30 June		1–7 July		8–14 July		15–24 July		Total		
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Meadow Pipit	adult	11	73	23	70	16	48	13	24	63	50
	juvenile	4	27	10	30	17	52	42	76	63	50
Sky Lark	adult	4	80	1	100	3	30	7	70	15	58
	juvenile	1	20	0	0	7	70	3	30	11	42
Northern Wheatear	adult	0	0	2	40	0	-	2	25	4	21
	juvenile	6	100	3	60	0	-	6	75	15	79
Dunlin	adult	6	100	1	50	5	41	6	60	18	60
	juvenile	0	0	1	50	7	59	4	40	12	40
European Golden Plover	adult	1	50	1	50	1	100	0	-	3	60
	juvenile	1	50	1	50	0	0	0	-	2	40
Common Snipe	adult	0	-	0	-	0	0	0	0	0	0
	juvenile	0	-	0	-	1	100	1	100	2	100
Winter Wren	adult	0	-	0	0	0	0	0	-	0	0
	juvenile	0	-	1	100	2	100	0	-	3	100

when 29% of all birds taken were juvenile Meadow Pipits. By late July 50% of birds eaten were juvenile Meadow Pipits (Table 4).

## Discussion

The Meadow Pipit was clearly the most common prey item of Merlins in Lewis. Although the main prey was similar to that of Merlins elsewhere in Britain, there was a higher proportion of waders than in diets from elsewhere, particularly in 2005, probably a consequence of the high densities of them breeding in north Lewis (Whitfield *et al.* 1998). More insects were also taken than elsewhere, and most of these were likely caught along the numerous watercourses in the moorland where moths, butterflies and dragonflies were often seen. The types of prey taken suggests that Merlins in Lewis hunted mostly over moorland but also occasionally along the shore or over farmland. So, some of their hunting ranges extended outside the moorland area which was surveyed for nesting territories.

The high number of insects eaten in 2005 might have been related to a higher number of these insects emerging in 2005 than in 2003, although this is unknown as the numbers emerging were not counted in either year. Alternatively, as birds are a more profitable food, it is possible that more insects were eaten as a consequence of there being less bird prey in the study area in 2005. However the relative abundances of bird prey species were not measured.

More non-moorland birds were also eaten in 2005. This might have been because the birds were hunting over a wider area if there were fewer of their favoured prey available on the moorland. Although small mammals might have been undercounted as prey by the methods followed

(Bielefeld *et al.* 1992), as they are scarce in Lewis (Corbet & Southern 1977), they are considered of little importance in the Merlin diet there. Only two were caught, both Pygmy Shrews *Sorex minutus* in 2005. They too might have been hunted as an option to small moorland birds if the birds were less abundant.

The high number of juvenile birds in the diet later in the year coincided with the adult Merlin feeding large young and also their fledglings beginning to catch prey themselves. Merlin fledglings were seen hunting dragonflies, and these, together with weak-flying juvenile birds would provide a timely food source, perhaps helping their survival as occurs in juvenile European Sparrowhawks *Accipiter nisus* hunting juvenile passerines (Newton & Marquiss 1982).

Merlins breeding in the Lewis Peatlands SPA did not prey heavily on waders nesting there. Although they did eat more waders than Merlins studied elsewhere in Britain, and these were mostly Dunlin which is the smallest wader breeding in the Peatlands. Nor did they seem to range much beyond the moorland for food, as there were few non-moorland species in their diet.

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**Stuart Rae, the Research School of Biology, Building 116, Daley Road,  
Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, Australia 0200  
Email: stuart@canberra.net.au**

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# Density and productivity of ground-nesting Merlins on an island with no indigenous terrestrial predators

S. RAE

The Isle of Lewis has no indigenous terrestrial predators which are the main cause of breeding failure by Merlins in mainland Britain. In a two-year study, moorland in Lewis held a high density of ground-nesting Merlins (0.06 pairs per km<sup>2</sup>) which were regularly spaced (2.4 km apart) and they reared average sized broods (3.0–3.9). The main causes of breeding failure were non-laying in a year with cooler weather and predation of young and adults in both years. Nesting density was similarly high in both years. Clutches were deserted and more eggs failed to hatch in a cool year. More chicks fledged from nests with a higher minimum number of birds provided for them. Most chick losses were of whole broods and Golden Eagle was the main predator.

## Introduction

The moorland in north Lewis, Outer Hebrides, has been recognised as holding an important breeding population of Merlins *Falco columbarius* (Whitfield *et al.* 1998) and much of the area has been designated as the Lewis Peatlands Special Protection Area (SPA) (Fig. 1), with Merlin a qualifying species. However, little is known of the breeding ecology of Merlins on the island which differs in habitat from other areas in Britain where the species has been studied.

In mainland Britain, where Merlins mostly nest on the ground, breeding failure is caused mainly by mammalian predation of eggs, chicks and adult females (Newton *et al.* 1978, Cosnette 1984, Newton *et al.* 1986, Wright 1997). There are no indigenous ground predators in Lewis (Corbet & Southern 1977) and those which have been introduced are scarce on the moorland where the Merlins nest. North American Mink *Mustela vison*, which are feral

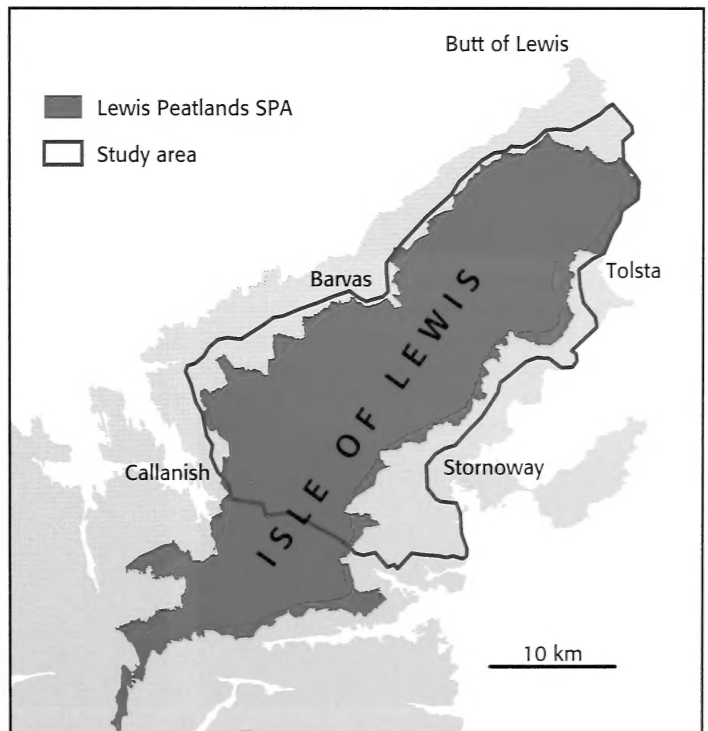


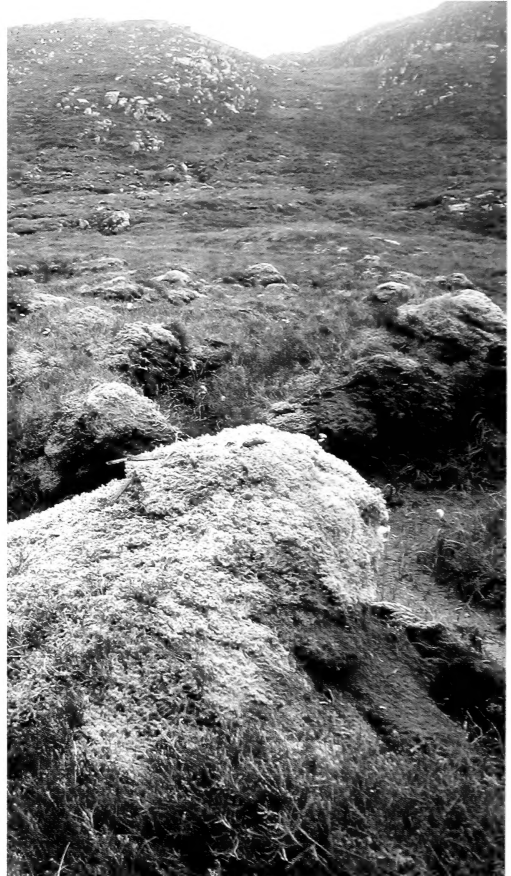
Figure 1. Location map showing the Merlin study area and the Lewis Peatlands Special Protection Area, Isle of Lewis, Outer Hebrides.

descendants of animals farmed on the island until 1961, occur mostly around the coast and along watercourses. Feral Ferrets *Mustela furo* and Cats *Felis catus* occur mostly in agricultural land where Rabbits *Oryctolagus cuniculus* are abundant. There is no known human persecution of Merlins in Lewis.

As suitable ground nest sites and a variety of prey seem to be abundant in the Lewis moorland, and their main predators absent; this study aimed to determine the breeding density and productivity of Merlins in this potentially favourable breeding area.

### Study area

The main habitat of the Lewis Peatlands and adjacent moorland is blanket mire, with dwarf-shrub heath on ridges, and many lochs and small pools. There are few native trees; all are in gullies or on cliff ledges and less than 5 m tall. The dominant plants are Heather *Calluna vulgaris* and Purple Moor-Grass *Molinia caerulea*. Between the moorland and the coast there is mostly enclosed pasture which is seldom wider than a few kilometres and as Merlins can hunt over farmland 5.6 km from their moorland nest (Rebecca *et al.* 1990) this was all considered as potential hunting habitat. The coast is a mix of rocky shore, cliffs, beaches and machair (fertile low-lying grassland). The area surveyed was approximately 450 km<sup>2</sup>, including 70 % of the Lewis Peatlands SPA (Fig. 1).



Plates 3–4 (left). Merlin nest site in heather bank with blanket mire/moorland below and in the distance. Plate 5 (right). Merlin plucking post on moss hummock *Racomitrium*, nest site in heather slope behind and above, all Lewis, June 2005. © S. Rae

## Methods

Following a preliminary survey in 2002, all nesting areas, known from the 2002 preliminary work were checked for occupancy in 2003 and 2005, and areas in between these were surveyed for any additional territories. The term 'nesting area' is used here as it might have been that there were more than one in any breeding territory (Newton *et al.* 1978). Survey methods were based on those for the 1993–94 national Merlin survey (Rebecca & Bainbridge 1998) described by Hardey *et al.* (2007). Observers walked within 250 m of all potentially suitable Merlin nesting habitat; mostly heather moorland and edges of any conifer plantations. Rocky outcrops, boulders, fence lines, isolated posts and hummocks were checked for signs of occupancy by Merlins (e.g. faecal splash, pellets, moulted feathers and the plucked remains of kills). Nests were regarded as the centres of the nesting areas and if no nest was found a central point within the area used for roosting and plucking was determined and taken to represent the centre. Distances between the centres of the nesting areas were measured to the nearest metre in a Geographic Information System (ArcView 3.X). Nest spacing regularity was calculated with the G-statistic (Tjernberg 1985, Watson & Rothery 1986), which is the ratio of the geometric mean to the arithmetic mean of the squared distances between nearest-neighbouring nests (Brown & Rothery 1978). Resultant values of G can range from zero to one where less than 0.65 indicates randomness and higher values indicate more regularity.

Temperatures used in the study were those recorded by the Meteorological Office station at Stornoway, approximately 10 km distant from the centre of the study area. Wind direction was recorded daily on site. Spring and early summer were cooler in 2005 than in 2003 by approximately one degree Centigrade each month from April to July. The maximum in April was 2.4 degrees Centigrade lower. In May 2005 there were 25 days with a north wind compared with seven in 2003.

Productivity was measured by recording nesting area occupancy from observation of a single or pair of birds, or finding signs of occupation such as moulted feathers, pellets, prey remains or droppings, clutch size, hatching success and number of young reared (Hardey *et al.* 2007). Laying dates were recorded when observed or back calculated from the known hatching dates by 28 days, the approximate incubation period (Newton *et al.* 1978). Causes of failure were identified where possible by evidence at the nest, such as predators' feathers or the nature of remains of young close to raided nests.

The main prey were birds and insects, mostly butterflies and moths *Lepidoptera* and dragonflies *Odonata*, all remains of which were collected from nest sites and plucking posts at each visit to nesting areas (Rae 2010). Prey remains were identified and classified as either moorland or non-moorland species with one or other being the preferred habitat of the species. Collections of prey items were timed to match the end of incubation at each nest, ranging approximately from late May to mid-June, and when the chicks fledged, approximately from late June to mid-July. The food items were classified to each period, to compare foods eaten by adult birds during the pre-laying and incubation periods with those available to young birds. As all prey eaten at each nesting area would not have been recorded, the minimum number of birds' and insects' remains, and the proportions of these, found at the nest sites or associated plucking posts were used as indices of the comparative provision of each prey type at each nest site (Rae 2010). Clutch size, hatching success and fledged brood size were compared with these indices.

## Results

### Density

The overall density of Merlin nesting areas was 0.06 per km<sup>2</sup> (n = 29 territories). This density refers to both years combined, whether nesting areas were occupied by pairs or singles and whether birds bred or not. There were 28 nesting areas in 2003 and almost all (27) were occupied again in 2005 by at least one bird and 24 by pairs. One new area identified in 2005 was where birds had been seen in 2003 but there was not enough evidence then to judge it to be a nesting area. The nearest neighbour

distances between nesting areas were similar in both years with a mean of 2.91 km in 2003, and 2.48 km in 2005 (analysis of variance (ANOVA), not significant (n.s.) normalised data) and the median distances were similar each year (2003, median = 2.4, range 1.8–5.8; 2005, median = 2.4, range 1.4–5.5). The nesting areas were regularly spaced in both years (2003,  $G = 0.70$ ; 2005,  $G = 0.68$ ).

In most nesting areas the centres were in very similar places in the two years, 88% of those in 2005 were within 1 km of the centre in the same locality in 2003, and 57% were within 250 m, the median distance was 188 m (mean = 401 m, range 0–2200 m,  $n = 26$ ,  $sd = 555$ ,  $se = 108$ ).

The success of breeding attempts in 2003 had a significant effect on the location of territory centres in 2005. In 2005 birds tended to nest closer to the 2003 nesting area (in most cases closer to the 2003 nest) if birds bred there successfully in 2003 than if they had been unsuccessful.

The distances from the centres of nesting areas in 2005 where birds bred successfully in 2003 were: median = 130 m, mean = 226 m,  $sd = 274$ ,  $se = 63$ ,  $n = 19$ , and those where the birds did not breed successfully were: median = 593 m, mean = 942 m,  $sd = 893$ ,  $se = 364$ ,  $n = 6$  (ANOVA of normalised data,  $n = 19,6$ :  $F = 7.19$ ,  $P = 0.01$ ).

All nests were set on the ground in blanket mire or dwarf-shrub heath. The nests were all in stands of heather, which were not necessarily tall or dense, and they were set on steep banks, low gentle slopes or on level ground. There were no nests in trees or on crags. The main features used as plucking posts were moss *Racomitrium lanuginosum* hummocks. Rocks or boulders were occasionally used when available, but fence posts rarely so as they were generally not available.

### Productivity

Eggs were laid at a minimum of 22 nesting areas in 2003 (85% of 26 sites monitored), and at 18 territories in 2005 (64% of 28 sites). The mean clutch size in 2003 was 3.9 ( $sd = 0.62$ , range 3–5,  $n = 16$ ) and in 2005 it was 4.5 ( $sd = 0.52$ , range 4–5,  $n = 14$ ), and laying dates were similar between years (ANOVA n.s. difference between Julian days). In 2003 the mean date of first egg was 4 May (range 25 April to 23 May,  $n = 16$ ) and in 2005 the mean date was 12 May (range 2 to 20 May,  $n = 16$ ). Young were reared at 68% of nests with eggs in 2003 and 61% in 2005. In 2003, 56 chicks fledged from 15 broods (2.2 young per occupied territory) and in 2005, 33 chicks fledged from 11 broods (1.2 young per occupied territory). The size of fledged broods was similar between years (ANOVA n.s.), 3.9 per successful nesting attempt in 2003 ( $sd = 0.64$ , range 3–5) and 3.0 in 2005 ( $sd = 1.55$ , range 1–5).

As only one egg failed to hatch in 2003 and one chick failed to fledge, comparative analyses of productivity with food remains at sites were restricted to data from 2005. There were no relationships between the number or proportion of insects eaten at each site and clutch size, hatching success or fledged-brood size. Nor were there any significant correlations between clutch size or hatching success and number or proportion of birds. However, there were more remains of non-moorland birds recorded during the incubation period at nest sites where all eggs hatched (mean = 3.8, range 0–9) than at sites where eggs failed (mean = 1, range 0–3), although this was statistically not significant (ANOVA,  $n = 8,6$ ;  $F = 4.54$ ,  $P = 0.054$ ). In addition, fledged-brood sizes were larger at nest sites where the number of all birds' remains recorded at the nest sites was greater during the nestling period ( $r = 0.65$ ,  $r^2 = 0.42$ ,  $P = 0.02$ ,  $n = 11$ ).

In 2005, the cooler year, two full clutches of eggs were deserted and single eggs failed to hatch in four nests. No clutches were deserted in 2003. Other causes of failure that were identified by evidence at the nest were: eggs were taken at one site by Common Raven *Corvus corax* - raven feathers at nest, young taken at three sites by Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* - eagle feathers, droppings and plucked bird remains, young taken at one site by Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus* - owl feathers at nest, and young eaten at one site by Mink - remains of young found nearby. The

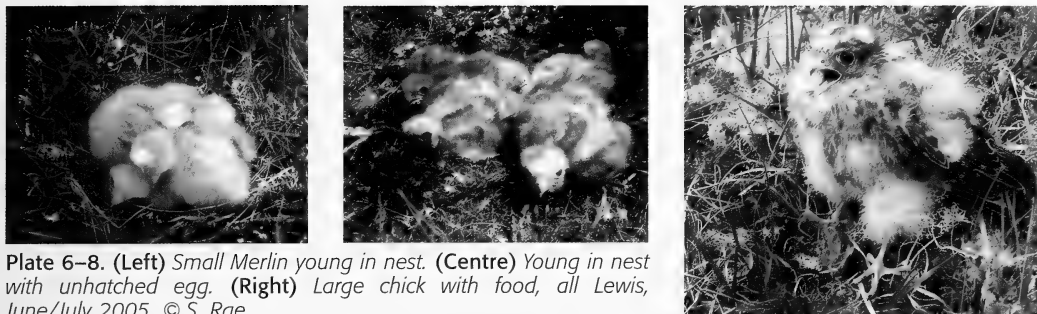


Plate 6–8. (Left) Small Merlin young in nest. (Centre) Young in nest with unhatched egg. (Right) Large chick with food, all Lewis, June/July 2005. © S. Rae

whole clutch or brood was taken each time. Two female Merlins were killed at the nest while with eggs, one by an eagle – eagle feathers next to nest and plucked bird nearby, another probably by a female Merlin – carcass found within twenty metres of first nest, uneaten but punctured by small talons. Both were replaced by new females, which subsequently laid in new nests within 50 m and reared young. Causes were unknown for the disappearances of two clutches and two broods, and it was unknown whether eggs were ever laid at four sites in 2003 and 11 in 2005. Remains of Merlin were also found at two Golden Eagle nests within the study area.

## Discussion

### Density

The density of nesting Merlins in the Lewis peatlands was six times the estimated mean for the Highlands and Outer Hebrides of Scotland, and more than three times higher than the previously regarded high mean density in northern England (Rebecca & Bainbridge 1998). It is not known from Rebecca & Bainbridge's results, which parts of the Outer Hebrides were surveyed. However, as there is an apparent discrepancy between the densities of Merlins in the Outer Hebrides, and numerous differences between the habitats and environmental conditions of the Outer Hebrides and the Highlands; such as predators, topography and land use, it would seem appropriate to count these populations separately.

The data, although only for two years, suggest the study population on Lewis was probably stable. In North-east Scotland, where the Merlin population was also regarded as stable, a territory occupation rate of 68% was recorded (Rebecca *et al.* 1992); in Lewis it was 96%. Not all raptor pairs breed in any year and there may be potential recruits waiting to fill any gaps which might occur (Newton & Marquis 1976). This is perhaps illustrated in Lewis by breeding females immediately replacing others that had been killed while incubating. It seems the Lewis peatlands were almost fully occupied by breeding Merlins each year, and any new nesting areas found were likely to have been missed in previous surveys, rather than created by an expanding population.

Density of Merlin pairs can be higher than that found in Lewis, as in Northumberland (0.1 per km<sup>2</sup>, Newton *et al.* 1978) and North Yorkshire where up to eight pairs bred at an equivalent density of twice that of Lewis (Wright 1997). However these surveys were over much smaller areas than this study, 30 km<sup>2</sup> and 57 km<sup>2</sup> respectively, and the birds possibly hunted over higher proportions of land beyond the nest survey areas. Density of breeding birds per km<sup>2</sup> is only correct if the birds occupied and used all of the survey areas and nothing more, but this is unlikely. The median nearest neighbour distance places the density of Merlins in Lewis within the ranges of those in Northumberland (1.0 to 4.8 km), Yorkshire (0.35 to 3.1 km) and North-east Scotland (0.5 to 6.0 km). It seems that Merlins in Lewis nest at a high density over a large area much of which is likely used for hunting and there was a smaller area beyond the study area where the birds could have hunted: there was only a narrow belt of farmland between the study area and sea. Unlike in the other studies where the potential hunting range was not limited by such a definite feature. It might have been that in the other areas, the birds were limited in potential nesting areas, but less limited by hunting areas.

### Productivity

The mean clutch sizes of Merlins in Lewis were similar to those in North-east Scotland, 4.4 (Rebecca *et al.* 1992), Northumberland, 4.2 (Newton *et al.* 1986) and Yorkshire, 4.2 (Wright 1997). As were the mean brood sizes to those in the same studies. The proportion of territories from which young fledged was similar to those studies in North-east Scotland (68%) and Northumberland (60%), but lower than in Yorkshire (85%). Failure to lay eggs and loss of complete broods to predators seemed to be the main causes of breeding failure in Lewis.

In 2005, the year of the cooler spring, the main cause of breeding failure was non-laying. Fewer birds laid eggs, probably because of insufficient food (Newton 1979). It might be that some hen Merlins arrived on their breeding sites in Lewis with enough resources to lay a full clutch, independent of local food supply. It is not known where these females might build up their reserves, as their non-breeding range is unknown. The food supply there might have an effect on the productivity of Merlins in Lewis. If eggs had been laid and predated at sites where no eggs were recorded they would have been expected to have been replaced by a second clutch (Newton *et al.* 1978). None were however, perhaps because there was not enough food locally available to the females in that year.

The cool weather might have had a direct effect on Merlin productivity or indirectly by reducing the abundance of prey, or both. As fewer eggs hatched in the cooler year it seems that the birds were stressed by low food supply. In addition, it might have been that the birds which hatched more eggs hunted over a wider range than the moorland as they ate more non-moorland birds. Female Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus* which desert their eggs are lighter than those that do not (Village 1990) and starvation is the highest cause of mortality in European Sparrowhawks *Accipiter nisus* chicks (Moss 1979). The same causes are considered likely in this study.

Despite the scarcity of ground predators in Lewis, predation was the main reason for reduced breeding success by Merlins in Lewis. This occurred each year, and weather would not be expected to have such a large effect every year. It was also important because the whole clutch or brood was lost on each occasion, unlike any partial loss due to weather.

Predation of eggs by corvids did not seem to be an important factor in Lewis, although in Sweden, eggs were taken by corvids and nestlings by Rough-legged Buzzards *Buteo lagopus* (Wiklund 1995). Common Buzzards *Buteo buteo* occur in Lewis but no losses were attributable to them. Short-eared Owls are uncommon in Lewis and do not breed on the island so are not considered a major predator, and the brood which was eaten by Mink was unusual in that the nest was set near a pool system where there were Mink. In North-east Scotland, 43% of failed nesting attempts were attributed to predators (Rebecca *et al.* 1992). In Yorkshire where more nests were successful (85%), egg and chick losses were likely reduced as corvids and terrestrial predators were controlled by gamekeepers (Wright 1997). There were however no eagles in Yorkshire. In Lewis the main cause of loss of Merlin chicks was predation by Golden Eagles.

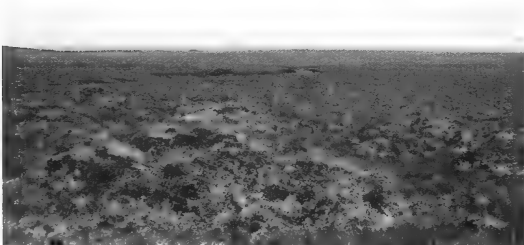


Plate 9. Merlin nest site on low heather-clad hummock, surrounded by blanket mire/moorland, Lewis, July 2005.  
© S. Rae

### Importance of the Lewis Peatland SPA for Merlins

When designated, the Lewis Peatlands SPA was recognised as holding 0.03 pairs of Merlins per km<sup>2</sup> (Whitfield *et al.* 1998). Although the present study doubled this figure, the study areas were not fully comparable. It is likely also that the higher figure was due to improved knowledge of habitat requirements for nesting Merlins in Lewis and more judicious investigation of

likely nesting areas, rather than a true increase in the number of occupied Merlin territories in the area. Regardless of this, it has been confirmed that north Lewis, including the Lewis Peatlands is of national and international importance for Merlin. The main outstanding unknown factors concerning their conservation are where the birds overwinter and the importance of the area adjacent to the moorland for their hunting.

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**Stuart Rae, the Research School of Biology, Building 116, Daley Road,  
Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, Australia 0200**  
Email: [stuart@canberra.net.au](mailto:stuart@canberra.net.au)

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# A long-term breeding study of Grey Herons on Colonsay and Oronsay, Argyll

D.C. JARDINE, J. CLARKE & P.M. CLARKE

*The population of Grey Herons on Colonsay and Oronsay, Argyll, was studied between 1982 and 2009. During this period ten different heronries were used: nine on Colonsay and one on Oronsay. Each year there was one principal heronry with up to four satellite sites. The total number of pairs varied between ten and 20 pairs, making this the highest reported density of breeding herons in Scotland. Breeding performance was similar to that reported elsewhere in Argyll.*

## Introduction

The complexities of monitoring the size of Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* populations have long been recognised (Marchant *et al.* 2004). In particular it has proved very difficult, if not impossible, to know what proportion of the colonies has been surveyed in the annual Heronry Census organised by the BTO. Additionally, the number of occupied nests in heronries can vary greatly between years: in small colonies, such as many of those in north and west Scotland, this can lead to colonies being unused in some years (Marquiss 1989).

Colonsay and Oronsay, Argyll, are relatively small islands of the Inner Hebrides, measuring 16 km in length by 5 km at their widest point, with a total area of around 50 km<sup>2</sup> above the high-water mark. The islands have six lochs and numerous lochans which support Brown Trout *Salmo trutta*, Three-spined Sticklebacks *Gasterosteus aculeatus* and European Eels *Anguilla anguilla*. There are a number of small streams, but no significant rivers. While no amphibians are found on the islands, they have a lengthy coastline (c. 70 km) and an extensive intertidal area (c. 8.5 km<sup>2</sup>), which taken together provide excellent feeding habitat for Grey Herons.

The relatively small size of the islands means that it has been possible to establish the occupancy of every heronry and the size of the islands' population with a high degree of certainty. In this paper we present results of a monitoring programme which has been conducted during 1982–2009; during 1995–2009 a more intensive (ringing) study was undertaken.

## History of heronries on Colonsay and Oronsay

Grey Herons have been noted on Colonsay since the 19th century; but as contemporary authors are silent in respect of their breeding status, it is not clear whether they nested on the islands at this time (Murray 1887, McNeill 1910). Early lists of heronries in Scotland do not include any on Colonsay and Oronsay (Harting 1872, Boyd Watt 1908, 1910, 1911, 1914). Neither were any reported in the first national Heronry Survey in 1928–29 (Garden 1958).

The first reported breeding was in 1921, when 17 nests were found (Baxter & Rintoul 1953), but the sites used are not listed. Loder (1935) reports two small heronries by Dubh Loch and Loch Cholla with two or three nests usually in the reeds and in 1936 a total of five nests were reported, and three (1937), five (1938) and four in 1939 (Baxter & Rintoul 1953).

Two other sites were noted in the 1954 Heronry Survey; at Lochan Roanabuilg, where five nests were found, and on Oronsay where a single nest was found (Garden 1958). In 1976 a total of five pairs were found breeding at three sites including a new site in Scalasaig Wood (per Brathay Trust).



## Methods

During 1982–87 and from 1996 all heronries, past and present, were visited at least once each spring, between late March and mid-June, to check for occupancy. In recent years, sites where Grey Herons were found to be nesting early in the spring were also visited later in the season to recheck the number of nesting attempts and to ring nestlings. Wherever possible, attempts were made to visit the heronries during the period of peak occupancy in mid- to late April (Marchant 2005). During visits to heronries the following information was gathered: number of occupied nests, nest contents and wing-lengths of chicks which were ringed. Hatching and laying dates were estimated from the wing-length of the largest chick in each nest, after Carss & Marquiss (1991).

Throughout the spring and early summer the movements of Grey Herons were observed, during the course of other ornithological studies, to help find the location of new heronries. Five new heronries were established during the period of this study, and no heronries were believed to have been overlooked after 1996 because of the comprehensive coverage made of the islands while studying other birds. At no time were adult Grey Herons seen departing from the islands, or arriving on them, during the spring and summer months.

## Results

### Description of heronries

A total of ten different heronries have been located in four different habitats on Colonsay and Oronsay (Table 1). There were two heronries on Colonsay which conformed to a typical ‘mainland’ heronry. One was in a mixed Sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus* and Alder *Alnus glutinosa* woodland situated between Scalasaig and Machrins. The other was in a larch *Larix sp.* and pine *Pinus sp.* wood, north of the old Mill and was only occupied in one year (1987). The nests were usually 5–10 m above the ground.



Plate 10. Site of heronry at Lochan Raonabuilg, Colonsay, Argyll. © A. Young



Plate 11. Grey Heron nest, Lochan Bhreac, Colonsay, Argyll. © D.C. Jardine



Plate 12. Heronry in willow bushes at Lochan Bhreac, Colonsay, Argyll. © D.C. Jardine



Plate 13. Grey Heron nest built on Juniper bush, Garvard Point, Colonsay, Argyll. © D.C. Jardine



Plate 14. Grey Heron nests situated on the wall of a ruined building, Eilean nan Ron, Oronsay, Argyll. © D.C. Jardine

Five heronries were situated in reedbeds: at Loch Fada (two sites), Dubh Loch, Lochan Raonabuilg and Loch Cholla. Nests have been found built of reeds on the ground in a manner similar to those of Great Bittern *Botaurus stellarus*, but normally they were stick and heather nests built in isolated Eared Willow *Salix aurita* bushes growing in the reedbed (Plate 10).

At two sites nests were situated in trees or bushes built in the lee of small crags. At Lochan Bhreac, these were willow bushes (3–4 m in height) at the edge of the lochan (Plates 11 & 12). At Garvard Point most of the nests were in stunted oak *Quercus* sp. trees, but one nest was situated on a low Juniper *Juniperus communis nana* (Plate 13) and two nests were on crag ledges.

The heronry on Eilean nan Ron, Oronsay, is situated on the wall of a ruined kelp-workers' bothy (Plate 14).

#### Breeding population size

During the 28-year period between 1982 and 2009, the total breeding population could be estimated in 21 years (Figure 1). The mean number of nesting pairs in these years was 13.57 (se = 0.62, range 10–20 pairs).

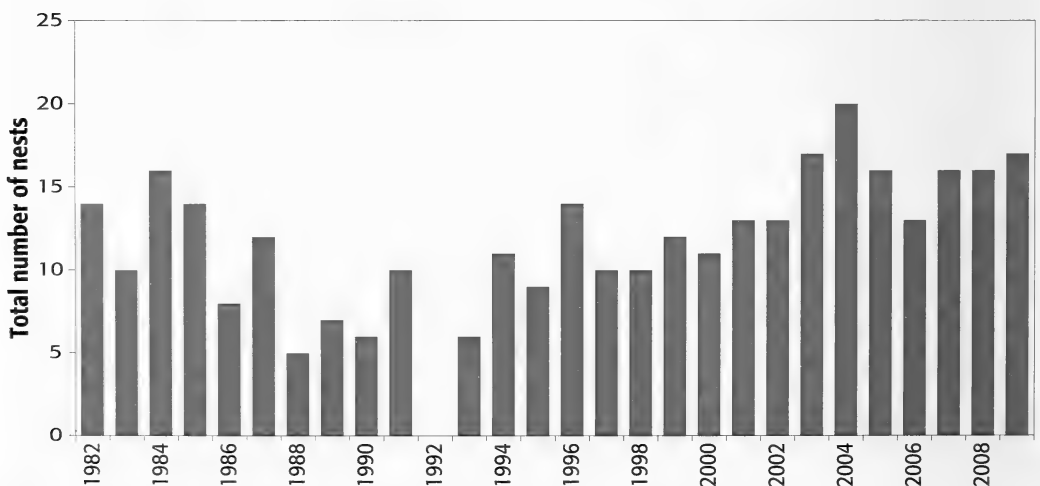


Figure 1. Total number of pairs of Grey Heron on Colonsay and Oronsay, Argyll, 1982–2009. Note - there are missing data from some heronries during 1988–95 and figures displayed should be interpreted as minimum figures for these years.

### Size of heronries

Individual heronries varied from a single nest to 16 pairs. During the period 1996–2009, when all heronries were believed to be found, six heronries were used. Using these sites the average number of nests in each heronry was 2.36 nests, but after allowing for the 38.3% of heronries which were unoccupied during this period, the average number of nests per occupied heronry was 5.5 nests.

### Occupancy of heronries

Since the start of this study all ten heronries known on the island have been used at least once (Tables 1 & 2).

During the whole study, three sites could be considered the principal heronry, with transition taking place between these sites over a number of years. During these transition years the principal heronry held between 36% and 56% of the total population, but, outside the transition period, the principal heronry held between 62% and 94% of the population. This variation was the result of the smaller 'satellite' heronries being occupied in some years and not in others, but re-occupation of such small heronries was regularly noted.

Between 1994 and 2009 the maximum number of heronries used in any year was five (62.5% of all sites used during this period), and in four years only two heronries (25%) were used (Table 2). The mean annual occupancy of heronries during this period was 41%.

### Breeding biology

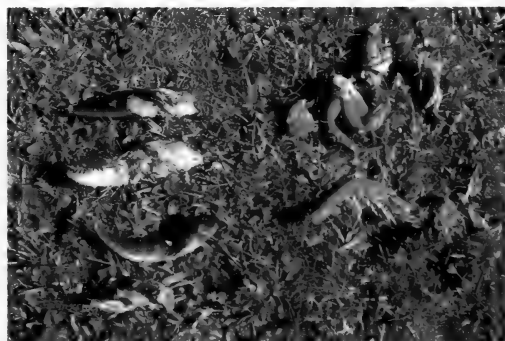
**Clutch size.** The mean clutch size of 32 clutches found during 1983–87 was 3.59 eggs. During 1995–2009 a total of 113 clutches were found. The clutch size varied between one and six eggs. The mean clutch size was 3.40 eggs ( $se = 0.06$ ) and 84% of clutches were either three or four eggs. Only four clutches (3.5%) were of five eggs and three clutches (2.6%) of six eggs. There was no evidence of variation in clutch sizes between years, with annual mean clutches varying between 2.90 and 3.67 eggs.

**Laying dates.** The median first egg date of 88 clutches (calculated from wing-length of the largest chick) over the period 1996–2009 was 5 April. Annual median first egg dates varied between 25 March and 17 April (Table 3). The earliest recorded first egg date was 7 March and the latest 5 April. The latest clutch found was started on 9 May; although this may have been a re-lay.

**Brood size.** during 1995–2009 a total of 85 broods with medium-sized, or larger, chicks were found. Broods with small chicks were not included in this analysis. The brood size varied between one and four young. The mean brood size was 1.93 chicks ( $se = 0.05$ ) and 82% of broods were either of one or two chicks. Only one brood of four chicks was found. Annual mean brood sizes varied between 1.11 and 2.88 chicks, but as sample sizes were small; this variation was not found to be significant.

### Food

Prey remains were not routinely studied, but a number of regurgitates were investigated (Plate 15). Most prey were of marine species, from the shore: 15-spined Stickleback *Spinachia spinachia*, Corkwing Wrasse *Crenilabrus melops*, Ballan Wrasse *Labrus bergylta*, Gunnel *Pholis gunnellus*, Long-spined Sea Scorpion *Taurulus bubalis*,



**Plate 15.** Prey remains from regurgitate of Grey Heron chick, Lochan Bhreac, Colonsay, Argyll. Shanny (left), Shore Crab (top right) and Common Prawn (lower right). © D.C. Jardine

Shanny *Blennius pholis*, Two-spot Goby *Signigobius biocellatus*, Shore Crab *Carcinus maenas* and Common Prawn *Palaemon serratus*, with only one water boatman Corixidae, the only freshwater species found. An eel, which may have been caught in either habitat, was also found.

**Table 1. Heronries on Colonsay and Oronsay, Argyll. All sites are on Colonsay except for Eilean nan Ron.**

	Location (grid ref)	BTO code	Year first noted occupied	Last year noted occupied
Mill Wood	NR383964	102035	1987	1987
East/Mid Loch Fada	NR391959	102024	1996	2009
Mid/West Loch Fada	NR378954	102031	1999	2007
Dubh Loch	NR371946	102034	1935	1985
Lochan Raonabuilg	NR369938	102008	1954	1994
Scalasaig Wood	NR378941	102026	1976	1996
Loch Cholla	NR379918	102029	1935	1996
Lochan Bhreac	NR358910	102028	1981	2009
Garvard Point	NR357905	102033	2007	2009
Eilean nan Ron	NR338867	102023	1954	2009

**Table 2. Occupancy of heronries on Colonsay and Oronsay, Argyll, 1994 to 2009 (numbers of pairs).**

	East/Mid Loch Fada	Mid/West Loch Fada	Lochan Raonabuilg	Scalasaig Wood	Loch Cholla	Lochan Bhreac	Garvard Point	Eilean nan Ron	Total
1994	0	0	1	4	2	3	0	1	11
1995	0	0	0	2	3	4	0	nd	9+
1996	1	0	0	0	1	6	0	6	14
1997	0	0	0	0	0	7	0	3	10
1998	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	2	10
1999	0	2	0	0	0	8	0	2	12
2000	0	3	0	0	0	7	0	1	11
2001	0	3	0	0	0	9	0	1	13
2002	1	1	0	0	0	8	0	3	13
2003	0	0	0	0	0	14	0	3	17
2004	1	0	0	0	0	16	0	3	20
2005	0	0	0	0	0	15	0	1	16
2006	1	1	0	0	0	9	0	2	13
2007	0	1	0	0	0	7	6	2	16
2008	1	0	0	0	0	3	9	3	16
2009	1	0	0	0	0	5	9	2	17

nd - no data

**Table 3. Median, earliest and last laying dates for Grey Herons on Colonsay and Oronsay, Argyll, 1996–2009.**

Year	Sample size (nests)	Median laying date	Earliest laying date	Last laying date
1996	7	6 April	5 April	7 May
1998	7	14 April	4 April	9 May
1999	6	17 April	2 April	1 May
2000	6	23 March	16 March	27 April
2001	1	5 April	5 April	5 April
2002	8	8 April	5 April	6 May
2003	7	31 March	17 March	3 April
2004	10	29 March	9 March	2 May
2005	11	31 March	7 March	5 May
2006	4	25 March	9 March	29 March
2007	9	6 April	2 April	20 April
2008	6	5 April	2 April	17 April
2009	6	3 April	28 March	13 April
Overall	88	5 April	7 March	9 May

## Ringling

During the period of this study around 200 nestlings have been ringed; there have been four recoveries. One individual was found four years later on Colonsay, 6 km from the heronry in which it was ringed. Two other recoveries were of birds in Northern Ireland: one in its first year, in Belfast (164 km) only 32 days after it was ringed; the other, at Larne (135 km) was almost four years old. The other bird was found dead in southern Norway (775 km) in the February following ringling.

## Discussion

This study provides details of occupancy of all of the heronries in a defined area, including details of sites which are unoccupied. These are the missing data required to make one of the corrections required during a census of heronries in Scotland (Marquiss 1989). Similarly the re-occupation of some satellite sites in the study suggests that care is required for these sites to ensure that when they are not occupied they are not designated as extinct in the methodology adopted by Marchant *et al.* (2004). While the errors caused by the omission of some satellite heronries from the population model may be relatively small, it is recommended that the study of the relationship between principal and satellite heronries is continued to allow appropriate corrections to be developed.



Plate 16. Nestling Grey Heron, Scalasaig Wood, Colonsay, Argyll. © D.C. Jardine

The mean population density found during the intensive period of this study (27.1 pairs/100 km<sup>2</sup>) is significantly greater than the highest density reported in Scotland (15 pairs/100 km<sup>2</sup> in North Uist and Benbecula) (Marquiss 1989). The density on Colonsay is based on the size of the study area above the mean high water mark; this basis of the calculation was also used by Marquiss. However, if all of the habitat available at low water on Colonsay and Oronsay is used, the density found in this study is 23.2 pairs/100 km<sup>2</sup>; the corresponding figure for North Uist and Benbecula is not known. The North Uist figure, which was derived from the 1985 census, was during a period when the population on Scotland was at a lower ebb, and is close to the minimum density found in this study (17.1 pairs/100 km<sup>2</sup> using low-water area) (Marchant 2005). Thus, the high density found on Colonsay and Oronsay may also be a consequence of the small size of the study area and the ratio of coastline to land. The dietary information suggests these Grey Herons are predominantly shore feeders so the numbers of breeders presumably reflects the amount and quality of this habitat, and perhaps the number of foraging sites along the shore. These are issues that should be taken into account when considering Grey Heron densities in future.

It is interesting to note that the number of nests recorded in 1921 (17) is very similar to the peak numbers recorded during this study, suggesting a long-term stability in the population of Grey Herons on these islands.

This study has watched the decline of two principal heronries and in each occasion it appeared that predation was implicated. A Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix* established a territory within the heronry at Scalasaig Wood and nesting success at this site declined. The site was eventually deserted in 1996 as the new heronry established at Lochan Bhreac became the principal site. This heronry remained the main site for around 11 years before it went into decline as a consequence of predation of adults by Golden Eagles *Aquila chrysaetos*. Grey Herons appear to be taken reasonably frequently by Golden Eagles in western Scotland (Marquiss 1993).

The clutch sizes found in this study are lower than those reported in most other studies elsewhere in Europe, including England, which found average clutches between 3.83 and 4.7 eggs (Cramp 1977, Voisin 1991). However, the average clutch size found in this study is the same as that found on Seil Island and Loch Feochan (Argyll) by Carss & Marquiss (1991). The late laying dates on Colonsay and Oronsay and the small number of chicks reared per egg (0.567) were similar to those found at these colonies and are probably typical of shore-feeding Grey Herons in north-western Scotland. Shore feeding offers regularly replenished food, but this is only available for a short part of the day. This means shore-foraging Grey Herons live at high densities but produce few young (Marquiss 1993).

### Acknowledgements

We thank Alex Howard and Fran Colburn, the landowners of Colonsay and Oronsay respectively, for access to carry out our studies. Mike Peacock has provided support and data from the Eilean nan Ron colony. We have received help in the field from many friends; in particular we wish to thank Janet Jardine, Martin Davison, Ann Middleton and Geoff Linkletter. Mick Marquiss assisted with identification of prey. Mick Marquiss and John Marchant kindly commented on a draft text; however, any remaining errors are ours.

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**David C. Jardine, 49 Bellfield Road, North Kessock, Inverness, IV1 3XX.**  
**John & Pamela M. Clarke, Ivy Cottage, Lower Kemerton, nr Tewkesbury,**  
**Gloucestershire, GL20 7HY.**  
Email: [dcjardine@btinternet.com](mailto:dcjardine@btinternet.com)

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# Scottish Birds Records Committee criteria for identification of Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*

C.J. MCINERNY (on behalf of the Scottish Birds Records Committee)

Recent taxonomic changes have resulted in the elevation of Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* to full specific status (Sangster *et al.* 2007). This has coincided with an increase in observations of this species in southern and eastern England, perhaps reflecting an expansion in the species' population range in eastern Europe, as well as an increased awareness of identification criteria.

Caspian Gull was first observed in Scotland when a first-winter was present at Dunbar and Belhaven Bay, Lothian from late December 2006 to February 2007 (Forrester *et al.* 2007). This was followed by another first-winter in Lothian, at Tynninghame, in October 2007. A third, also a first-winter, was found in Clyde at Strathclyde Country Park Loch in February 2008.

Because of the recent taxonomic changes, and the fact that Caspian Gull is so rare in Scotland, this is a species which requires a description to be submitted to and accepted by SBRC for formal admission of the sighting to the official record. In light of the publication of identification criteria used by the SBRC to assess records of the closely related Yellow-legged Gull *L. michahellis* (McInerny 2009 and previously on [www.the-soc.org.uk](http://www.the-soc.org.uk)), it was decided to publish similar details to enable observers in Scotland to be aware of the features used by the SBRC to identify Caspian Gull, and eliminate other related confusion species.

It is important to emphasise that while some Caspian Gulls *can* be surprisingly distinctive, *others* can be difficult to identify, with these latter individuals only showing a range of subtle features in all plumages and ages that each require careful examination even by well-experienced observers (Garner & Quinn 1997, Garner *et al.* 1997, Jonsson 1998, Olsen & Larsson 2003, Small 2006). Individuals can also show much variation in certain key identification features (Gibbins 2003). Thus to safely identify Caspian Gull requires the careful consideration of a number of features. Furthermore, it is essential that observers are aware of the variation shown by the more common large gull species, such as Herring, Lesser Black-backed and Great Black-backed Gulls (*L. argentatus argenteus/argentatus*, *L. fuscus graellsii* and *L. marinus*), and be particularly mindful of immature Yellow-legged Gulls, which can be a trap for the unwary.

## Identification features

### Structure and behaviour

Unusually for a large white-headed gull, first and second winter birds are easier to identify than adults. This is reflected in the fact that the three Scottish records so far have all been first winters. For this reason, this article will focus on immatures, with briefer notes on adults.

All descriptions should start by describing a *Larus* species similar in size to *argenteus* Herring Gull, though some, probably males, can be bigger. Differently from Herring Gull, however, the structure is more similar to Lesser Black-backed Gull (and Yellow-legged Gulls), having in folded wings a long primary projection (at least 150% that of the bill length) and an almost non-existent tertial step. However, in contrast to Lesser Black-backed Gull, Caspian Gull also has the prominent bulge of the breast higher up, giving a somewhat 'front-heavy' posture. The most striking feature is the subtly different head shape; with experience it is quite unlike other large gulls species seen in Scotland.

Caspian Gull has a relatively small head, with a long sloping forehead. This is emphasised by the bill-shape and structure, which is long, thin and parallel-sided, with a less prominent angle at the gonyes when compared with Herring and Yellow-legged Gulls. These latter two species usually show much thicker heavier bills, with distinct gonydeal angles, sometimes creating bulbous tips. Combined, the head and bill of *cachinnans* may give an elongated 'pulled-out' silhouette, appearing almost pear-shaped. However, it must be emphasised that not all *cachinnans* show this feature, and that Herring Gulls can occasionally show this head and bill shape. So, by itself, it does not identify Caspian Gull; other features (described later), must also be present for safe identification. Furthermore, female Caspian Gulls are smaller and less distinctive than males, having more rounded heads, shorter, though still thin bills, and shorter legs, almost looking like 'giant' Common Gulls *L. canus*: interbreeding with other closely related taxa also occurs (Jonsson 1998, Gibbins 2003). Thus, some individuals may be extremely subtle and consequently, as a vagrant in Scotland, remain unidentifiable with any degree of certainty amongst the range of variation within the commoner species.

Other useful identification features include leg length and shape, which are long and thin with much of the tibia visible, call and posture. Leg length and thickness can be a good feature for identification of Caspian Gull, but to judge these is subjective and thus requires direct comparison with other nearby large, white-headed gulls, ideally with photographs taken. As well as being long, the legs are coloured differently, having a chalky, clean, flesh tone unlike the bruised, more pink legs of Herring Gull; again direct comparison is required to see this.

If heard, the call is a quite un-gull-like hoarse laughter, sometimes described as sounding like a Jackass Penguin *Spheniscus demersus*. Individuals can also be very aggressive to other gulls, defending with an albatross-like posture, with the neck arched, head forward and wings outstretched. This aggressive behaviour of Caspian Gulls is often shown, and is a good feature for noticing and identifying this species.

## Plumage characters

### First-winter

Perhaps the first striking feature an observer might notice when finding first- or second-winter Caspian Gull is their very clean head and underparts. These are usually pearly white, with no streaking apart from some around the hind collar, although a few birds may also show just a small grey mask around the eye and smudgy flank streaking. This is unlike other similar gull species which, at this age, usually show much streaking around the head and breast, with a darker and dirtier ground colour. Observers should be aware that first- and second-winter Yellow-legged Gulls can have a similarly pale head and underparts, though it is very unusual for this species to be quite so pale, and usually it shows a much more pronounced mask behind the eye made up of narrow streaking (reminiscent of Mediterranean Gull *L. melanocephalus*). Rarely, other large gulls, such as Herring, Lesser Black-backed and Great Black-backed Gulls can have clean white heads and breasts in first- and second-winter plumage, so these must also be carefully eliminated.

Along with the white head and breast, first-winter Caspian Gulls often have plainer greyer mantle and scapular feathers, which are less prominently marked than other large white-headed gulls in showing just dark shaft streaks (becoming exaggerated by wear) and softer subterminal 'anchor' marks. The mantle becomes paler with wear and contrasts markedly with the brown wing-coverts (that also have a different and plainer pattern) and large, and notably plain, dark brown tertials, the latter with neat pale fringes and tips. The bill is blackish, but like *michahellis* often develops a paler base more quickly than other taxa and can also develop a pale tip. The primary feathers look long and black, with pointed tips.

All these features combine to create a distinctive 'four-toned' appearance, not seen in other first-winter gull species: a pale/white head and breast, grey mantle and scapulars, black bill and tail



band, and brown wings. First-winter *michahellis* can rarely exhibit this appearance, though can be eliminated by a more square-shaped head and a heavier, thicker bill.

Other important plumage features should ideally also be observed, including the underwing and tail pattern. The underwing is a good feature for identifying Caspian Gull, often significantly paler than other large white-headed gulls, sometimes almost unmarked or with fine, brown barring across the axillaries and underwing coverts. The tail is quite distinctive, being largely white, but marked by a black band at the tip (reminiscent of a Rough-legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus*), differing from the brown and streaked tail pattern of most Herring Gulls.

#### Second-winter

Second-winter birds appear more advanced than other large white-headed gulls but show a similar colouration to first-winters. They have moulted to a plainer grey mantle and the upperwing coverts are a mixture of newer grey feathers and older, worn and faded feathers - *michahellis* can be very similar though they frequently have more prominently barred coverts. The bill colour develops rapidly and can be rather variable, often looking pale with a dark cutting edge expanding towards a dark subterminal band, or more adult-like in being more or less yellow with a narrow black band and small red spot on lower mandible. In flight they show pale inner primaries and differ importantly in having a thin white mirror on P10 (the outer primary feather). Second winter *michahellis* and *argentatus* rarely show this feature, so as long as the bird is carefully aged, this feature if present strongly suggests Caspian Gull. Finally, the black tail band remains prominent, although it is broader than in first-winter birds.



Plate 17. First-winter Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*, Tynninghame, Lothian, October 2007 © Keith Gillon.



**Plate 18.** First-winter Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*, Dunbar Harbour, Lothian, December 2006 © Mark Wilkinson. These images show a number of features used to identify immatures of this species described in this article, including the long, thin, parallel sided bill, with a less obvious gonydeal angle, flat forehead, prominent white head and breast, and 'four-toned' appearance, of black bill and wing tips, white head and breast, grey mantle and scapulars, and brown wings. It is important to note that the individual above does not show a strikingly thin bill. Though this is partly due to the angle of the bird when it was photographed, resulting in foreshortening, this image is used to emphasise the fact that not all birds are 'classic', and that as stated in the text, a number of features (including the bill), must be used to identify this species with confidence.

### Third-winter and adult

As *cachinnans* acquire third-winter and adult plumage, they become increasingly difficult to identify, sharing more characteristics of both Yellow-legged and Herring Gulls. Even so, birds still possess the long thin bill and elongated body shape, and the eye is small and usually dark, placed well forward in the head. The mantle tone is darker than *argenteus* Herring Gull, but slightly paler than Yellow-legged and *argentatus* Herring Gulls, most similar to Common Gull. However, apparent mantle tone is influenced by light conditions and angle of the bird to the observer, so this feature should be very carefully scrutinised against other gull species present at the same time.

The pattern of the outer primaries in adults is different to Yellow-legged Gull. Though the black extends from P10 to P5 with, similar to that species, a complete broad black band in P5, the primaries have much more white at their base, with long pale 'tongues' extending down the inner webs of the outer four primaries. Also, P10 shows a characteristically long white tip, and a large white mirror is present in P9. So, a bird showing a long white tip to P10, white tongues and a complete black band on P5 is a good candidate for Caspian Gull. Furthermore, if the underside of P10 can be seen (often possible in the far wing of a settled bird, especially when preening), the combination of a long white tip separated from the pale tongue on the inner web by a black band is strongly indicative of *cachinnans*.

Usually, individuals are seen with other gull species, and direct comparison with these, especially Herring and *graellsii* Lesser Black-backed Gulls, would greatly strengthen the description. Indeed for the safe identification of Caspian Gull it is essential that observers directly compare any putative bird with other *Larus* gulls. Furthermore, as many photos/videograbs should be taken and submitted, as these often show features that are missed, allow jizz to be considered, and permit direct comparisons with other gull species under the same conditions, if these are present.

## Summary

In summary, and in order of importance, the following features should be described in as much detail as possible to be included in any submitted record of first- and second-winter Caspian Gulls observed in Scotland:

1. Head/bill shape, colour and structure.
2. The extent of markings on the head and underparts.
3. Size/structure (jizz), emphasizing length of primary projection and breast size.
4. Description of feather pattern on mantle, scapulars, greater coverts and tertials.
5. Colour, thickness and shape of tail band.
6. Presence of a white mirror in P10.
7. Colour and pattern of underwing.
8. Call and behaviour.
9. Leg length and thickness.

It is crucial that any bird is correctly aged, which should be determined by the shape of the primary tips, bill coloration, pattern of tertials and greater coverts, and the presence/absence of a mirror in P10. Furthermore, as many photos or videograbs as possible should accompany any submission, along with direct comparisons with other nearby and closely-related gull species.

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**Christopher J. McNerny, 10 Athole Gardens, Glasgow, G12 9AZ.**

**Email: C.McNerny@bio.gla.ac.uk**

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Plate 19. Painting of White-tailed Eagles attacking a Great Northern Diver in Norway by J.G. Millais. From Meinertzhagen, R. 1959. *Pirates and Predators*. Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh.

## Probable predation of Northern Gannet and Great Northern Diver by White-tailed Eagle

Plates 20 and 21 are pictures of a Great Northern Diver *Gavia immer* and a Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus* that were recovered from Loch Sunart, Lochaber, during 2007-09. Both exhibited very similar neck wounds with severe lacerations and deep puncture holes to the neck and windpipe. The gannet was picked up alive from the loch on 18 May 2009 by Matt Wilson who had earlier observed a White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* attacking two gannets. The diver was found by myself freshly dead washed up on the tideline at Camus na Geall, Loch Sunart on 7 May 2007. The latter is now preserved as a skin in the National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh (NMS.Z 2008.6.1).

I was puzzled as to the cause of death as the bird was in good condition and its injuries were too small to be caused by either Otter *Lutra lutra* or a species of seal, and too widely spaced for Mink *Mustela vison*. Since then both myself and Matt have seen White-tailed Eagles attacking gannets

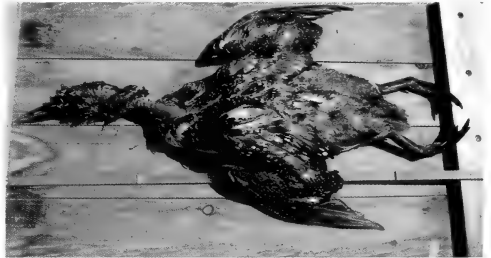


Plate 20. Predated Great Northern Diver, Loch Sunart, Lochaber, May 2007 © Liz Macdonald.



Plate 21. Predated Northern Gannet, Loch Sunart, Lochaber, May 2009 © Liz Macdonald.

over the loch and I have also seen the resident Golden Eagles *Aquila chrysaetos* making a serious though unsuccessful attack on a Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* flying close to the shore. I have also noticed that the gannets mob White-tailed Eagles. Matt has found gannets as prey items in eagle eyries with similar neck injuries. In view of these observations it seems likely that the diver was also a victim of White-tailed Eagle predation.

John Savory has kindly drawn my attention to a dramatic representation of this behaviour in a painting by J.G. Millais (Plate 19) who witnessed such an attack in the Lofoten Islands, Norway (Meinertzhagen 1959). The gannet, unlike divers, is not specifically mentioned as prey by Cramp & Simmons (1980).

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**Liz Macdonald, Ardsignish,  
Ardnamurchan, Argyll PH36 4JG**

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Roger Broad has commented: 'During the breeding season, seabirds are known to be a regular component of the diet of both Golden and White-tailed Eagles on the west coast of Scotland with Northern Fulmars, *Fulmarus glacialis* being generally the most numerous seabird found as prey at White-tailed Eagle nest sites. Along with lesser numbers of other seabird species, the remains of gannets have been found at several nests but it is rarely possible to be sure which have been killed outright and which were scavenged from the sea or shore. White-tailed Eagles have been seen in pursuit of gannets but, where the closing stages were witnessed, it seems the chase resulted in piracy with the gannet giving up its food and escaping with its life. If it could be shown, as seems likely, that the injuries to the diver were inflicted by a White-tailed rather than a Golden Eagle, then Great Northern might also be added to both Red-throated *Gavia stellata* and Black-throated Divers *G. arctica* that are among an increasing list of bird species which have been targeted occasionally by Scottish White-tailed Eagles.'

## Reports of rare birds in the Aberdeen area during the mid-19th century

While completing research on historical bird records for *The Birds of Scotland* (Forrester *et al.* 2007), it became apparent that a number of reports from the Aberdeen area (North-east Scotland) during the mid-19th century were not included in the standard authoritative published works, such as Sim's (1903) *The Vertebrate Fauna of Dee*, Baxter and Rintoul's *The Birds of Scotland* (1953) and Thom's *Birds in Scotland* (1986). These include potentially very important records such as the first Nearctic passerine to be observed in western Europe, a female White-throated Sparrow *Zonotrichia albicollis* shot near Broadhill, Old Links, Aberdeen, on 17 August 1867 (Angus 1869, Gray 1871), and the first Scottish records of two Nearctic waders: Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*, one shot at the Donmouth on 2 October 1867 (Gray 1871); and Spotted

Sandpiper *Actitis macularius*, a pair presented to Aberdeen University Museum in August of the same year (Gray 1871, Sim 1903).

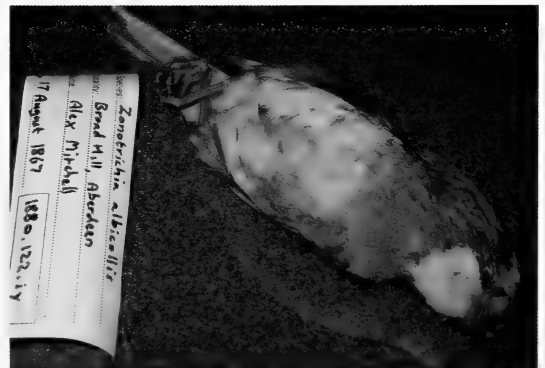


Plate 22. White-throated Sparrow, female, Aberdeen, North-east Scotland, August 1867, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow © Chris McInerny



Plate 23. Spotted Sandpiper, male, Aberdeen, North-east Scotland, August 1867, National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh © Trustees of NMS

In some cases these records have been subsequently reassessed in isolation: for example the White-throated Sparrow was examined in the 1950s and a strong case for acceptance as a genuine vagrant advanced (Williamson & Palmer 1955). Indeed, this bird is preserved in Glasgow at Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum (GLAMGZ 1880.122.iy) (Plate 22), and one of the Spotted Sandpipers, the male, is in Edinburgh at the National Museums of Scotland (NMSZ.1898.35.3) (Plate 23). So, if the identification of both records, and indeed all the others, is not in doubt, why were they not generally accepted by earlier authors?

The explanation appears to be, that when one trawls the literature and appreciates all the records of rare birds in North-east Scotland during this period, the provenance of these and a number of other specimens recoded at the time in the Aberdeen area all source back to a Mr Alexander Mitchell, a taxidermist, of 37 Castle Street, Aberdeen. Indeed, if one systematically goes through all the birds of the most comprehensive contemporary local avifauna *The Vertebrate Fauna of Dee* published in 1903, it is noticeable the number of Mr Mitchell's reports that George Sim considered not reliable, and consequently placed in square brackets by this meticulous, scrupulous, local and contemporary recorder.

**Table 1. Rare birds reported by Alexander Mitchell, Castle Street, Aberdeen as recorded in Sim (1903) and Gray (1871). Those in square brackets were so assigned by Sim (1903).**

1841	Pied Avocet, shot, Old Links, Aberdeen 'presented to Dr Fleming' (Gray 1871)
1861	Little Gull, shot, Aberdeen
1864	Little Gull, shot, Aberdeen
1866	Grey Phalarope, shot, Tile Burn, Donmouth, 1 November
1867	[White-throated Sparrow, female, shot, Broad Hill, Old Links, Aberdeen, 17 August] [Spotted Sandpiper, pair, shot, Aberdeen? August] Rosy Starling, near Aberdeen, June 'stomach crammed with beetles' (Gray 1871) [Pectoral Sandpiper, shot, immature, Donmouth, 2 October] (Gray 1871)
1868	Eurasian Hobby, shot, Broad Hill, Old Links, Aberdeen
1869	Little Gull, shot, Donmouth, 29 March, presented to R Gray
1870	Red-necked Phalarope, 2, shot, Old Links, 15 Aberdeen and 18 September (Gray 1871)
1871	Temminck's Stint, 2, shot, Old Links, Aberdeen, 28 August and 4 September (Gray 1871 appendix)
1872	Temminck's Stint, shot, Old Links, Aberdeen, June
1876	Grey Phalarope, shot, Old Links, Aberdeen, 24 December
1886	Golden Oriole, shot, Aberdeen

No Date Spoonbill, shot, Old Links, Aberdeen; Curlew Sandpiper, shot, Donmouth; Pied Flycatcher, 3, Old Links, Aberdeen; Hoopoe, 'several ...killed in various parts of the country' (Gray 1871)

The Mitchell records occur over a 46 year period, and many of them look very plausible, especially with the benefit of modern knowledge about occurrence patterns of these species in Scotland. For example, Grey Phalaropes *Phalaropus fulicarius* are seen in November, and migrant Temminck's Stints *Calidris temminckii* occur in June (Forrester *et al.* 2007). Where, however, the records look extremely questionable is during 1867. In this year, Mr Mitchell *himself* shot both the White-throated Sparrow and passed on the pair of Spotted Sandpipers to the Aberdeen University Museum, both in August. He also shot a Rosy Starling *Sturnus roseus* and a Pectoral Sandpiper, both near Aberdeen. White-throated Sparrow and Spotted Sandpiper have both remained incredibly rare in Scotland, with each less having than 20 records in total over 100 years (Forrester *et al.* 2007). Rosy Starling and Pectoral Sandpiper are less rare, being seen annually in small numbers in Scotland, and indeed 2 October looks a perfect date for a vagrant of the latter species. However, for all four birds to be found and shot by the same observer in the same year (with two probably in the same month!) in such a small area is highly improbable. In isolation, these records seem incredible but possible, but in combination, they look utterly implausible. The 1867 report of Pectoral Sandpiper was considered by the Scottish Birds Records Committee in 2005 as the first Scottish record, and given this context, it was rejected.

In Mr Mitchell's defence one of the great recorders of rare birds at the time, Robert Gray, included most if not all of his observations in his *Birds of the West of Scotland* (1871). But Gray did not know Mitchell personally, and particulars of the records reached him only by correspondence from Mitchell, as stated in his book. It seems far more prudent to accept the caution displayed by the local ornithologist Sim who clearly had serious reservations about reports from this observer. It is also perhaps pertinent that Sim (1903, page 132) notes that all of Mitchell's other 'ornithological rarities, got scattered before his death', and so were lost.

Though many of Mitchell's records before and after 1867 look plausible, those from 1867

appear much more doubtful. It is inevitable that such a series of records from one observer cast a cloud of doubt over others from the same person. Without further supporting corroboration it is suggested that all reports from Mr Mitchell should be treated with scepticism, and therefore not accepted on to the *Scottish List*. In consequence, this means that the 1841 record of Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* at the Old Links, Aberdeen (Sim 1903) should be reviewed for potential rejection as the first Scottish record (Forrester *et al.* 2007), with another shot on the sands at Kirkcaldy (Fife), by a Mr John Wilson in the second week of August 1862 (Gray 1871), being considered in its place.

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**Christopher J. McInerny, 10 Athole Gardens, Glasgow G12 9AZ**  
**Email: C.McInerny@bio.gla.ac.uk**

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## A breeding attempt by European Nightjars on the Isle of Bute in 2009



Plate 24. Incubating European Nightjar, with inset showing the nest and eggs, Isle of Bute, June 2009 © Billy Shields

The islands of Bute and Arran (Clyde Islands) held populations of breeding European Nightjars *Caprimulgus europaeus* for many decades. McWilliam (1927) mentions Dunagoil, Barnauld and the hills overlooking Loch Fad as regular nesting sites on Bute. In the 1920s it was also reported as common around the Kyles of Bute and in 1953 it was described as 'a regular summer visitor to Bute' (Baxter & Rintoul 1953). More recently, nests were found at Scalpsie in 1962 and near Dhu Loch in 1969 (Gibson *et al.* 1980). While some pairs may have nested after that time, there were no recent proven breeding records. No birds could be located on Bute after 1986, when calling birds were briefly heard (I. Hopkins, pers. comm.). During the Nightjar survey of 1992 (Morris *et al.* 1994) Ian Hopkins and BZ failed to locate any evidence of breeding from previously known breeding sites on Bute. The 2004 BTO Nightjar survey recorded none breeding in all of Strathclyde (Conway *et al.* 2007) with the last Arran bird recorded in 1998 (Zonfrillo 1999).

On 8 June 2009 forestry workers Graham McKirdy and Barry Low disturbed an unfamiliar bird from a nest, while clearing brash from an area of previously felled conifers on the Bute Estate near Kingarth. They informed head forester, WS, who identified the eggs and bird as Nightjar. Work in the area ceased immediately and the bird was left undisturbed after returning

to its nest. The male was located in a tree around 30 m from the nest, but was not seen again.

The site was visited and viewed from a distance with binoculars on several occasions; the bird was never subsequently disturbed and sat tight on the nest, incubating two eggs. On 6 July however there was no sign of the Nightjar, one cold egg was found and the other lay broken nearby. The whole egg was removed under permit and is now in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh (accession number NMS.Z 2009.150). The egg was infertile (R.Y. McGowan, pers. comm.), and probably indicated a first-time breeding attempt by the female.

Our thanks are due to The Marquess of Bute and to Ron Forrester and Ian Hopkins for their co-operation.

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**Billy Shields, Bute Estates, Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute PA20 9LR**

**Bernie Zonfrillo, Clyde Islands SOC Recorder, 28 Brodie Road, Glasgow G21 3SB**  
Email: B.Zonfrillo@bio.gla.ac.uk

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## Breeding attempt by Ring-billed Gull in Scotland in 2009

On 13 June 2009, during a week-long visit to Scotland, my son, his wife and I walked along the side of a highland loch that I had visited on previous holidays to the area. A pair of Common Sandpipers *Actitis hypoleucos* (with young) and two Red Grouse *Lagopus lagopus* were a welcome sight. We were also lucky to see an Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* as well as three Red Kites *Milvus milvus* flying along the ridge above. We then came upon a small loose colony of Common (Mew) Gulls *Larus canus* close to the track in a rocky area dominated by heather and Bracken on a slope leading down to the loch. As we approached I looked at the first pair, which was about 25 m up the slope from the path. I was very surprised when the bird sitting on the nest showed a broad dark band on the bill and a red eye-ring. It seemed to be a Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis* - a species that I had seen on several previous occasions - and after further checks I was very happy with the identification.

The bird standing beside the nest just a few yards away was a Common Gull, and so it was clear that this was a mixed pairing. Although I was very pleased with this find, it was only later that I realised how rare an occurrence this was. Ring-billed Gulls are now very frequent in the British Isles, and so I thought at the time that to find one in a Common Gull colony should not have been that surprising.

We stayed in the vicinity for about 20 minutes, taking a few photographs from the track. Before we left, the Ring-billed Gull got up from the nest and stood close by, allowing for a better comparison with the Common Gull.

I passed the news onto a bird information service the following afternoon. Given the fact the record involved a breeding attempt by a rare breeding bird, BirdGuides contacted the Rare Breeding Birds Panel and it was decided that the news should not be released, and the locality kept confidential in case of repeat attempts in future years.



Plate 25. Ring-billed Gull (right) with Common Gull, undisclosed site, Scotland, June 2009. © P.J. Barden



Plate 26. Ring-billed Gull (behind) with Common Gull, undisclosed site, Scotland, June 2009. © P.J. Barden

Further visits were made during the week, and on each occasion the Ring-billed Gull was seen in company with a Common Gull in the vicinity of the nest site. The birds were either seen standing on rocks, or flying around the nest site. However, they were not seen sitting on the nest again, which did not appear to contain any eggs or young (although it was only viewed from the track). When walking on the track past the nest site, both birds would fly around, calling and obviously slightly alarmed. There were probably at least six pairs of Common Gulls in the colony, although I did not make an accurate count. Of the nests that could be seen from the track, some had eggs in, while others had young either in the nest or on the shore of the loch.

### Description

The bird showed all the typical features of a summer-plumaged adult. The bill was heavy, thickset and broad, and yellow with an obvious, wide black band. The upper-parts were a paler grey than Common Gull, and the head was heavier-looking, with a more sloping forehead. The eyes were yellow, with an obvious red eye-ring, and with that distinctive 'mean' look that Ring-billed Gulls have. Overall the bird was obviously larger and bulkier than Common Gull. The legs were yellowish, similar to those of Common Gull.

**Phil J. Barden, 13, Lockeridge Road, Bere Alston, Yelverton, Devon PL20 7AW**

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*Mark Holling, Secretary of the Rare Breeding Birds Panel, has commented: "This is the first Scottish and British record of a nesting attempt by Ring-billed Gull, although for a number of years there has been speculation that the vagrants of this North American species recorded in Britain may actually stay on this side of the Atlantic, and settling in a colony of Common Gulls seemed the most likely eventuality. As this note confirms, this has now indeed happened."*

*"This record follows the identification of a hybrid Ring-billed x Common Gull along the coast of Co. Down in Northern Ireland early in 2008. The bird was ringed and the ring number confirmed that it had been ringed in 2004 on the Copeland Islands off Co. Down. An adult Ring-billed had been recorded holding territory in the gullery there that summer, so it would appear that it bred with a Common Gull and at least one chick fledged. For further information see [www.habitas.org.uk/cbo/sightings2008.htm](http://www.habitas.org.uk/cbo/sightings2008.htm). In addition, there have also been some records of Ring-billed Gulls summering in the Republic of Ireland in recent summers, so it may be that other breeding attempts have been made in the British Isles."*

# OBITUARIES

## Mike Madders 1957–2009

Mike Madders was an active ornithologist/avian ecologist, whose career spanned three decades. Although he was probably best known for his work in Scotland, his earliest ornithological work was in Cumbria, and he also worked on birds in continental Europe and Asia.

Mike was born in Leicester on 12 July 1957. First accounts of him showing an interest in ornithology are monitoring Peregrines in 1978 and protecting them from thieves. His early interest was as a bird watcher and there are tales of twitching escapades in his early years. This desire to actually see the birds may have been the foundation of his love of field work later in life and a spur for his writing of guide books that told others where to find them and how to recognize them.

Like so many professional ornithologists, Mike's early career included working as a volunteer. To make ends meet during those years Mike was at times a postmaster (youngest in Britain), bar manager (before he reached legal drinking age); he sold rock climbing equipment and ran a gourmet bed and breakfast. Mike set up a Young Ornithologists' Club group in Cumbria, participants of which, now adult, still remembering it with great fondness. Just before leaving Cumbria, Mike produced the first of his books, *Bird Watching in the Lake District* (1985), with Philip Snow as illustrator. He went on to collaborate with Philip on five more titles. He authored and published (Saker Press) *Birds of Mull* (1st edition 1987), *Birds of Arran* (1990) and *Birdwatching in the Outer Hebrides* (1996). *Birds of Mid-Argyll* (1992, Saker Press) and the very popular *Where to Watch Birds in Scotland* (1st edition 1997, Helm) were co-authored by his then partner, Julia Welstead.

Mike was recruited by the RSPB in 1984 to man a security watch of a sea eagle nest on Mull - the result of releases from Rum. In 1985 the first wild eagle chick to be produced in Scotland in 70 years was hatched. As the story



Plate 27. Mike Madders, India, January 2007 © Ashok Verma

is told, the event was marked by Mike's radio communication to his fellow eagle watcher, Dave Sexton: 'I think we're both daddies!'

Mull was the base from which he undertook a series of RSPB and NCC seasonal contracts, counting geese and monitoring raptors and other birds, and he came to be seen as the RSPB 'presence' there. During winter he gave evening classes and talks on birds and wildlife and travelled. One tour of the USA was facilitated by him giving bird talks along the way. Throughout his life he loved music (mostly modern instrumental). He liked 'rough' wine, strong coffee and good food, consumed in the presence of interesting company. In 1991 he and Julia moved to Islay.

He did not have an undergraduate degree, but in 1991 Mike undertook a PhD course at Glasgow University. At nearly 6 foot 6 inches (2 m) Mike seemed built for the field work, which involved going in and out of many forestry plantations studying Hen Harriers. He could stride over plantation furrows, leaving shorter companions to struggle. There was a tall tale that he could step over deer fences. He was awarded his PhD in 1997 on *The effects of forestry on Hen Harriers*.

In 1998–2002 he worked with Mick Marquiss at the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology looking at eagle predation of lambs on Mull. That study found that some lambs were killed, but most were scavenged. These findings, that endorsed some of the claims of shepherds, eased a highly polarized situation on the island, and led to the 'Natural Care' package aimed at rewarding shepherds for

looking after the interests of wildlife and improving lamb care. The timing of this coincided with the growth in eagle tourism to the island.

In the mid-1990s Mike started doing the ornithological component of Environmental Impact Assessments, including those for some of the first wind power developments in Scotland. By mid-1998 this was a full time job, based on Islay. As a consultant Mike was appreciated for the quality of his work by his clients, the regulatory agencies and conservation bodies. He had a rare collection of qualities that allowed him to operate effectively in this role, including his field experience, his commitment to conservation, his sharp and pragmatic mind, his honesty and his appreciation for commerce. He was a supporter of the Scottish Raptor Study Groups, and was chairman of the Argyll Raptor Study Group for a time.

In mid-1999 Mike and I hatched the notion of a wildlife research charity supported in part by a commercial environmental consultancy subsidiary. Soon thereafter we gathered a group of friends for a weekend on Mull to float the idea. Thus, Natural Research and its commercial subsidiary Natural Research (Projects) Ltd (NRP) were born, with the shared and seemingly simple mission of providing high quality research to underpin wise management of wildlife resources. Mike was the Managing Director of NRP, and a director of the charity.

Mike devised or helped devise many of the techniques currently used to measure bird responses to windfarm development, and many of these have been taken up as 'best practice' in the UK and abroad. He provided training in these techniques to staff from statutory agencies and to other environmental assessment professionals. He was sometimes brought in as an expert witness at public enquiries related to wind energy, both by developers and Scottish Natural Heritage.

Mike's skills and the growth of the wind power industry in the UK meant that NRP prospered, and as a result the parent company, Natural Research, also did well, supporting ecological research by its own biologists and others. Mike was very proud of how things developed at the

company. As a scientist he gained satisfaction from the high quality of work being done, but as a man with a sense for business he enjoyed the commercial success, too. He always felt that the whole point of the commercial endeavor was to make the charitable work of Natural Research possible, and so loved watching those not-for-profit projects succeed, taking particular interest in the work in Kazakhstan on Pallid Harriers being done by a Natural Research-funded PhD student.

Mike was a local representative for the British Trust for Ornithology (1988-99), a long-standing member of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club, a member of the Institute of Biology and the Raptor Research Foundation, and he was a long-time member of the Argyll Bird Club - he and Julia produced the newsletter.

Although in recent years Mike was more often found behind a computer or in a car driving across Scotland to meetings, he was really a field ornithologist and ecologist. His enthusiasm for the field work itself and his own experience made him fun to be with in the field, and fun to be with indoors when talking about working in the field. It made him expert in the practicalities and planning of field work and designing field studies. Enthusiasm and experience gave him excellent insight into data collected by others, so he was also good at analysing data that were not collected by him.

Mike's legacy is large. His fingerprints are all over Natural Research and NRP, and on the way likely impacts of wind energy developments on birds are assessed and monitored in the UK. He leaves behind a large volume of written work, both popular and scientific. He leaves behind a large flock of friends and acquaintances that were attracted to him for his sharp mind, humour, honesty and broad interests.

Mike Madders died with his son, Daniel, on 23 August 2009 in a tragic canoeing accident on Loch Maree, Wester Ross. He is survived by the three sons he had with his former partner, Julia Welstead. He is also survived by his partner, Christine Cain.

**Mike McGrady**



## Report from the freezer

Plate 28. *Woodcock* © Gay Christie.

Even now in the comparative warmth of March, we still have vivid memories of the extreme cold period from around Christmas to mid-January. Most of our birds seemed to be in trouble then finding enough food to keep warm and survive. We've gathered as many reports from around the country as possible in the time - some are notes from named contributors and many others are single sightings from a variety of sources.

The Woodcock photo above comes from Gay and Andy Christie at Hessilhead Wildlife Rescue Centre. Here's a glimpse from Gay of their important work at the time:

"The hard weather at the beginning of the year brought an unusual influx of waders into care. During the first week of January we admitted 13 Woodcock, and also Snipe, Jack Snipe, Lapwing, Redshank and Oystercatcher. All the birds were emaciated, with no chance of survival in the wild and most were caught by cats. Some of the birds died soon after arrival and any with injuries that would require long-term care were euthanized. The remainder were given rehydration fluids for 24 hours, then offered food."

"Worms, obviously, were in short supply in sub-zero temperatures so alternative foods had to be found. Mealworms are eaten by the smaller waders, and the Oystercatcher is most versatile of all, eating strips of beef and soaked cat biscuits. None of the Woodcock would eat anything but worms, and each needs approximately 250 g of worms a day to put on weight.



Plate 29. *Emaciated Redshank* © Gay Christie.



Plate 30. Woodcock in the warm area at Baron's Haugh. © Jimmy Maxwell

We have bought all the bait from local fishing tackle shops, and tomorrow we are expecting a delivery of 20 kg of earthworms. Hopefully we can return most of these waders to the wild, fit and healthy, after the thaw."

Woodcocks seemed the most frequently noted unusual bird in Scotland - in gardens in Milngavie, Kilcraggan, East Kilbride, South Uist, Montrose, and one sitting in snow on a Prestwick lawn. Foraging in streets too was noted in Musselburgh, Rhu and Benbecula with one in Lenzie a road casualty and another in Inverness picked up off the street emaciated, fed, but died in two days. Any unfrozen ground was sought - on mudflats at Ardmore, 13 seen together in woods at Balmaha and one on thawed ground near a methane flare!



Plate 31. Woodcock road casualty, Lenzie. © Linda Baillie

J.A. Brown writes: "I live on the airbase at RAF Kinloss and over the past few weeks have noticed lots of Woodcock flying around the gardens. They have been foraging at the base of the houses and fences, presumably the only unfrozen ground. This evening, to my complete shock, my wife noticed another on our front doorstep that seemed very docile - subsequently it sadly passed away.

Long-billed species were especially at risk with many Snipe feeding at roadsides where salt had melted the surface and several reported dead in Portnalong and Broadford, Skye. Jack Snipe too were seen in roadside drains on Skye and at Millichen Farm, Milngavie. Chris Taylor from Montrose Basin mentions Curlews and godwits in gardens near there and of course Water Rails feature largely - feeding with hens at Ullinish, Skye, in gardens there and North Uist, searching under a bird table in Lewis and in a barn at Tong.

At Baron's Haugh RSPB reserve at Motherwell the freezing conditions are somewhat relieved by a warm water spring near the Marsh Hide which permeates the vegetation in that area. More than one Woodcock moved in with also Snipe and Jack Snipe. These long-bill specialists, joined by the local Water Rails, were able to continue feeding while Grey Herons were observed there fighting more than usual,

presumably for feeding space. One resident, a Stonechat was pictured in the middle of the cold period with body puffed out and feet totally iced over - it disappeared soon after.

Several reserves have contacted us with reports on different bird groups. Firstly waterfowl - they have shown a huge decline at Loch Leven, many supposedly heading for the coast and beyond. From Islay, John Armitage writes: "all fresh water lochs appeared to be frozen and likewise the fringes of inner Loch Indaal. The number of duck species appeared to be reduced. Goose counts showed Barnacles to have packed in at certain locations, but Greenland White-fronts were in traditional areas, and also in less well-used sites."

From Paula Baker: "near Lochwinnoch, all three lochs in our area (Barr, Castle Semple and Aird Meadow) were completely frozen, save a few small sections of flowing water. From these came regular sightings of several Water Rail and Jack Snipe and all the remaining ducks and swans of the area congregated there. One of the Water Rails, here photographed, was then seen walking on the road!"



Plate 32. A frozen Stonechat. © Stephen Kane



Plate 33. Water Rail. © Zul Bhatia

Chris Rollie describes frantic activity by Cormorants on the Water of Ken in Galloway: "Operation of the Galloway hydro scheme helps to keep most of the river channel of the Ken open, but naturally has less effect on the reservoirs, which have been largely frozen in recent weeks. When this happens, Cormorants and Goosanders congregate on the river in greater numbers than usual. However, they appear not to be comfortable with this, as at low water flow, there are too few pools to cater for them all and perhaps the flow is too fast at high water. The result has been that, instead of seeing an odd Cormorant or two flying up or down the system, many have been seen, either singly or in groups of up to eight, apparently seeking suitable water. Clearly, their preferred forages are the trout-stocked reservoirs, but with open water on these at such a premium, the resultant failed manoeuvres and repeated fly-pasts were quite eye-catching and indicative of difficult times for these birds, as they tried to change from 'Lancaster bombers' to 'Mosquito pathfinders'".

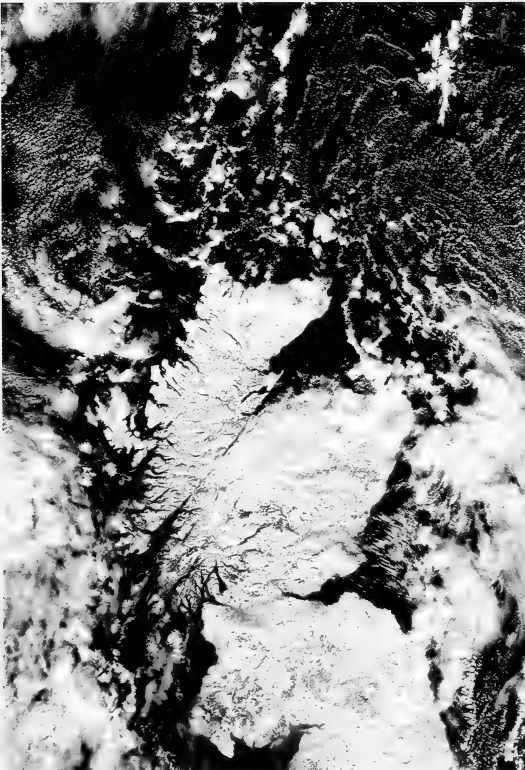


Plate 34. Scotland covered with snow. © NEODAAS, University of Dundee

The photo below (from NEODAAS-University of Dundee) shows that on 7 January 2010, almost all of Scotland was snow-covered. On that night, temperatures dropped to  $-22.7^{\circ}\text{C}$  in Altnaharra, Sutherland, and well below zero in most other places. The only major snow-free areas were the coastal fringes of Argyll and Galloway - traditionally the areas where most Greenland White-fronted Geese winter. Clearly, their strategy paid off in these extreme conditions. Elsewhere, inland across the snow fields, many birds just simply disappeared and numbers feeding at bird tables in inland locations dropped dramatically.

And then the Mute Swans - many movements reported here, with an increase up to 260 at Montrose Basin. Andrew Bramhall describes this species trampling others in desperation for food and a lot more fighting together than usual at Gunknowe Loch in Tweedbank. However, a tale of even more unusual Mute Swan behaviour comes from Gerry Palmer as he walked the path beside a 99% frozen Strathclyde Loch, Motherwell.

"My attention was drawn to an adult swan starting to peck the neck of a young one sitting on the path a few feet away. It was never gentle but became increasingly violent, biting and pulling the neck and neck feathers. This apparently motiveless act of bullying was distressing to watch and roused a feeling that intervention was needed. As the young bird became more stressed it became evident that its breast was in fact frozen to the path. Eventually, after around five long minutes, the persistence of the adult swan paid off and the struggling juvenile broke free."

"A short time later exactly the same scenario was to be played out with another adult and juvenile, this time on the ice of the loch. This lasted around ten minutes before release, as the frozen bird was less energetic and the adult's purchase on the slippery surface was difficult. Possibly the birds, on coming off the small section of open water had wet feathers which froze quickly to the ice. The lack of feathers left stuck to the ice when the birds were released was perhaps an indication that the adult birds were maintaining a constant vigil to avert a more serious situation."



Alistair Hart reports "the sight on Linlithgow Loch of a dead adult swan on the ice being eaten by Moorhens, Coots and corvids. Most particularly the sight of a Moorhen's head covered in blood emerging from the swan carcass."

Birds of prey may well have benefited due to the amount of vulnerable birds around in the cold snap. Here are three instances where they were observed in action.



Plate 35. Buzzard on gralloch. © Campbell McWilliam

Just before Christmas, a forest ranger in Dumfries & Galloway was gralloching a recently shot Roe Deer when a Buzzard landed on a conifer next to him. As soon as he started dragging the carcass back to his vehicle the Buzzard landed on the pluck and began to gorge. He returned with his camera to within

feet of the bird which continued to feed and showed no signs of wanting to flee.

Uwe Stoneman writes: "at Loch Leven, since the start of the cold spell there were daily sightings of up to three Sea Eagles and on one occasion an eagle and a Buzzard were sitting side by side in the middle of the iced-up loch, the Buzzard looking like a sparrow in comparison! There was also a sighting of a Sea Eagle fighting with a Fox over some carrion.

And from Graeme Reid a note about another hard weather interaction near Garlogie, Aberdeen: "My wife and I went out today for a short tour around and spotted a Red Kite crossing the road just down from the feeding area. I took a few pictures and then a female Sparrowhawk turned up. She was having a good old ding-dong with the kite hoping that he would release his small portion of Pheasant."

Barbara and Anne Cox, living three miles out of Scotland, in Wooler, tell us: "some of our garden winter female Pheasants have managed to get up into our roofed bird-table to steal seed intended for smaller birds. When one squeezes in there, there is no space left. During the recent severe spell, a Robin, desperate to get at the food, alighted on a Pheasant's back, staying there for perhaps half a minute, before giving up. Unfortunately no camera to hand!"



Plate 36. Red Kite and Sparrowhawk action. © Graeme Reid



Plate 37. *Fieldfare in snow cover.* © Jimmy Maxwell

Fieldfares and Redwings had been turning up in new areas, many people seeing them for the first time, including Barry and Barbara Prater in Eyemouth. They also had a Mistle Thrush typically defending a feeding area of the garden and making "a quiet, high-pitched 'seeep' call rather like a Redwing's flight-call" - they hadn't heard this before.

They've also noticed an unusual change of waders on the rocky shore there from the usual Turnstone and Purple Sandpipers to Golden Plover and Lapwing. A Fieldfare in Borders was regularly seen tucking into melon and a Blackbird there was observed eating snow, although fresh water was available!

Gamebirds have been reacting to the weather. Chris Rodger tells us that in Aberdeenshire large packs of Red Grouse were reported on many snow-covered moorlands, and in Fife, more Grey Partridge were seen by an observer over one week "than I think in my entire lifetime!" Red Grouse were also coming down from the Lammermuir Hills with birds seen at nine locations in lowland East Lothian right down to the coast. Many were displaced in Borders too, including one photographed on a house roof in Earlstoun, and others noted sitting on a hawthorn hedge on the edge of Duns, two miles from any moor. One bird table in Dalkeith had a Red-legged Partridge visiting. Wood Pigeons too were on the move with a colossal 7,500 in a field near Montrose Basin.

And lastly the smaller birds. This is when unharvested and wild bird cover crops really came into their own during the hard weather. At Strathkinness in Fife, one area was alive with birds - one Corn Bunting, 60 Reed Buntings, 16 Yellowhammers, 16 Grey Partridges, 18 Skylarks and two Dunnocks. At Vane Farm, staff were putting barley down for granivorous birds with good response from Yellowhammers (50+), Reed Buntings (7) and Tree Sparrows (10) - the latter encouraging as more than 100 boxes were put out last year to encourage them as breeding birds.

In north Aberdeenshire, some coastal farmland areas were holding enormous numbers of seed-eating birds with 1,300 finches and buntings at Rattray Head, but more impressively a flock of 2,000 at New Aberdour. Hywel Maggs tells us it contained 410 Corn Buntings - the biggest Scottish count for many years. He lists 600 Yellowhammers, 500 Reed Buntings, 100 Snow Buntings, a Lapland Bunting and lots of finches too. At times it was possible to see five species of bunting in the same field of view!

In Fife too, one observer saw two Linnets feeding on larch cones in a plantation. They were amongst a mixed flock of Siskins (45), Goldfinches (30), Coal Tits (10), Blue Tits (4) and Great Tits (1) - 8 Crossbills were also loosely associating.

In all this weather-induced change, some signs of hope remained. Our SOC President David Jardine was surprised to ring a Blackbird at North Kessock on 9 January at well over its normal weight! A Song Thrush in Benbecula adapted its normal snail-bashing technique to extract winkles on the shore and through all the freezing temperatures Chiffchaffs were still around in Glendale, Skye, and till 9 January in North Uist!

*Jimmy Maxwell*

*We'd like to thank, as well as those mentioned above, Zul Bhatia, Campbell McWilliam, Martin Scott, David Sexton, Colin Watret, Stephen Welsh and all the many members who responded to my request for extreme weather sightings. (See the back page of this edition for further advice on sending us material on a regular basis - it is your own publication!)*

# NEWS AND NOTICES

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## New SOC Members

We welcome the following new members to the Club: **Borders:** Mr A. Fishbourne, Mr D.M. Wallace, **Caithness:** Mr P.L. Wright, **Central Scotland:** Mr A. Dowse, **Clyde:** Mr & Mrs B. Clark, **Dumfries:** Mr B.D. Henderson, Mr & Mrs R.W. Mitchell, Mr R. Newton, **England, Wales & NI:** Mr S. Bentall, Ms L.A. McKenzie, Mr C.I. Shaw, Mr W.J. Stone, **Fife:** Miss A. Creamer, Mr A. Falconer, Miss S. Provan, **Grampian:** Mr M. Sullivan, **Highland:** Mr A. Keough, Mr G. Thompson, **Lothian:** Mr P. Bailey, Mrs O. Curran, Mr & Mrs N. Ellis, Mrs F. Fallmyr, Mr G. Hamilton, Mr & Mrs M. Hewitt, Mr G. Hogg, Mr & Mrs F. Johnstone, Mr & Mrs J. Keith, Mr & Mrs B. Mason, Miss P. McKerrow, Mr & Mrs W. Outhill, Mr Q. Pink, Mr & Mrs J. Redmond, Miss N. Somerville, Mr R.S. Turnbull, **Overseas:** Mr G. Mobakken, **Scotland - no branch:** Mr M. Chapman, Mr A. Kennedy, **Tayside:** Mr R. Mackenzie.

## 200 Club

The latest prize winners are: **November: 1st** £150 Stan da Prato, **2nd** £75 Dr Renwick, **3rd** £50 Mrs A. Inglis, **4th** £30 Chris Mylne, **5th** £20 Mrs Stabler, **6th** £10 Captain J. Owen. **December: 1st** £30 Ray Murray, **2nd** £20 Mrs Pascoe, **3rd** £10 A.D.K. Ramsay. **January: 1st** £30 Mrs A. McVie, **2nd** £20 Mrs Boddington, **3rd** £10 B. Pirie.

New members are always welcome. They must be over 18 and SOC members. Please contact: Daphne Peirse-Duncombe, Rosebank, Gattonside, Melrose TD6 9NH.

## Michael Thomas

It is with sadness that we have learned recently of the death of Michael Thomas. In these pages we have benefited greatly over the years from his regular articles which were always full of artistic insight and so perceptive concerning natural creatures and events. He will be greatly missed. An obituary will be published in the June issue.

*Eds.*

## SOC Annual Conference

This year's conference will be held on 29–31 October 2010 at the Windlestrae Hotel, Kinross. The theme is 'Night Birds'. Full programme

details and a booking form will be included in the June mailing.

## Scottish Raptor Monitoring Scheme wins national award

The Scottish Raptor Monitoring Scheme, of which the SOC is a founder member, has had its work recognised by the Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (IEEM). The partnership of seven conservation organisations has won the prestigious 2009 Award for best practice in environmental management for its work on monitoring the status of birds of prey in Scotland.

This IEEM Award which attracted a wide variety of high quality entries recognises work to the highest standard in Ecology in the UK. Roseanna Cunningham MSP, Minister for Environment said, "Our birds of prey are part of our unique natural heritage. Research is vital if we are to help these magnificent creatures thrive and this award shows that Scottish work is leading the way here and further afield. I congratulate all those involved in this important conservation project for gaining recognition for their hard work".

The scheme, led by Scottish Natural Heritage, has over the past seven years employed a Raptor Monitoring Officer Brian Etheridge, produced annual reports on breeding raptors in Scotland and published "Raptors: A Field Guide for Survey and Monitoring" which is now in its second edition.

The data collected by the scheme is provided by a group of dedicated fieldworkers, most of whom are in the network of Raptor Study Groups. This robust databank, plus the recently commissioned Golden Eagle framework, is widely used in the conservation of raptor species which are still under considerable threat despite a recovery in the past few decades. Further frameworks for the Hen Harrier and Peregrine are in the pipeline and will strengthen the information base.

*Gordon Riddle, SOC Representative on the Scottish Raptor Monitoring Scheme*

**New bird reports**

**Ayrshire Bird Report 2008.** Price £4. Available from various outlets including RSPB Lochwhinnoch Shop, Ayr Tourist Information Office and The Bookshelf, Newmarket Street, Ayr. Also available by post from Dick Vernon, 29 Knoll Park, Ayr KA7 4RH. Tel: 01292 442195. Please make cheques payable to 'Ayrshire Bird Report' and add 70p for P&P.

**Dumfries & Galloway Bird Report No. 19 (2007-08).** Price to members £7 including P&P. Available from Peter Swan, 3 Castle View, Castle Douglas DG7 1BG. Tel: 01556 502144. Please make cheques payable to 'SOC Dumfries & Galloway Branches'.

**North-east Scotland Bird Report 2008.** Price £8 plus £1 P&P. Available from Dave Gill, Drakemyre Croft, Cairnorrie, Methlick, Aberdeenshire AB41 0JN (david@gilldavid1.orangehome.co.uk). Cheques should be made payable to 'North-east Scotland Bird Report'.

**A request for photos from the Slender-billed Curlew Working Group (SBCWG)**

As part of the SBCWG's work, investigation is currently being made into the identification of several forms of *Numenius* in the Palearctic region and adjacent areas. The group is therefore seeking photos of the following taxa:

- *N. tenuirostris*
- *N.a. arquata*
- *N.a. orientalis*
- *N.a. suschkini*
- *N.p. alboaxillaris*
- *N.p. variegatus*
- *N.p. hudsonicus*
- *N.p. phaeopus*

Due to a lack of data and ambiguity associated with *Numenius* from eastern Europe/western Asia, photos from this area are particularly sought. All photos should be sent to [rossahmed@gmail.com](mailto:rossahmed@gmail.com), and correspondence should include any relevant details such as photographer, date taken and location. Photos should preferably not be manipulated before sending, although edited photos are also welcome.

**SOC contacts - updates**

**Highland Branch Secretary:** change of address: Ann Sime, Upper flat, 3 Blackwells Street, Dingwall IV15 9NW. Tel: 01349 862650.

**Highland Recorder:** change of email address: [kjdshoebill@live.co.uk](mailto:kjdshoebill@live.co.uk)

**Shetland Recorder:** Mark Chapman, Email: [msc.1@btinternet.com](mailto:msc.1@btinternet.com), tel. 01806 242401.

**Forthcoming events at Waterston House Art Exhibitions**

3 April to 26 May: paintings by John Threlfall  
29 May to 21 July: mixed exhibition by Robert Greenhalf, Andrew Haslen & David Koster

**Optics Demo Day (Viking Optical Ltd)**  
Sunday 23 May, 10 am-4 pm

**Branch Events**

**Highland:** The Rum & Eigg trip has now been brought forward to Saturday 12 June. Contact Ann Sime.

**Stewartry:** AGM has been moved from 8 April to 15th April; Outer Hebrides trip confirmed 15-22 May.

# Scottish Birds Advertising Rates

**FULL PAGE  
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245mm (h) x 170mm (w)

**Price: £175 +VAT**

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Landscape**

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**QUARTER PAGE  
Portrait**

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**Price: £50 +VAT**

## INSERTS

The charge for inserting 2,300 leaflets in one issue of *Scottish Birds* is £150+VAT. The leaflets must be received by us ready to insert i.e. pre-folded if necessary. Leaflets when folded should be no larger than A5 size. The Club may be required to charge extra to cover additional postage if leaflets are more than one sheet of A4 folded paper.

Wendy Hicks (Office Manager) SOC, Waterston House, Aberlady, East Lothian EH32 0PY.

**Phone: 01875 871330    Email: [mail@the-soc.org.uk](mailto:mail@the-soc.org.uk)**

# Bird Atlas 2007–11: the third summer

On 1 April 2010 the third summer of fieldwork for the 2007–11 Bird Atlas commenced. At the half way stage 69% of the minimum number of required tetrads had been covered for breeding season timed tetrad visits (TTVs) and thousands of Roving Records had been received. This is an excellent achievement and the challenge now is to complete the gaps in TTV coverage and boost species lists in every square.

## Timed Tetrad Visits

Figure 1 shows where help is still required. Red dots indicate 10-km squares where no tetrads have as yet been surveyed and grey dots indicate where fewer than the minimum requirement of eight per square have been surveyed. As can be seen there is still much to do throughout Scotland to achieve full coverage. The biggest gaps are in Argyll, Galloway, the Western and Northern Isles, but significant help is also required in Aberdeen, Angus, Perthshire, Dunbartonshire and Lanark. So how can you help? If you have been allocated tetrads for breeding season visits please make an effort to

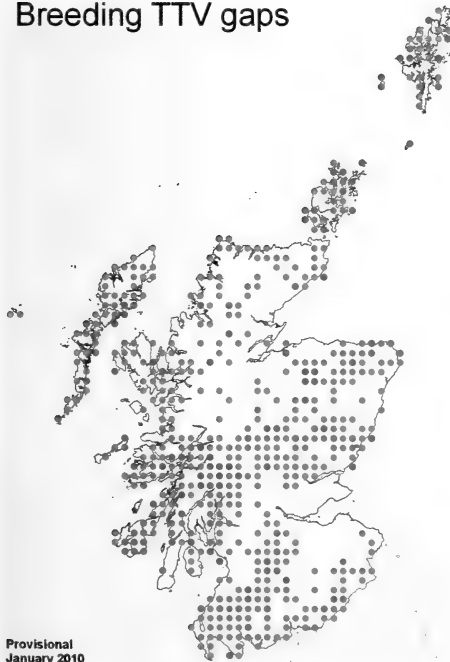
get these covered this summer. If you think you are unlikely to get them covered please inform your local atlas organiser so that the tetrads can be reallocated. If you would like to take on more tetrads log onto the [www.birdatlas.net](http://www.birdatlas.net) website and click on the **request a tetrad** button. For each 10-km square this will inform you of which tetrads require further coverage. The priority is to get eight covered in each square, so look for squares with fewer than eight and target these.

If you are planning a summer break in one of the remoter parts of Scotland, particularly the islands, consider contacting the local atlas organiser to see if you could help out with coverage. In these areas it may be possible to survey a tetrad with a single two hour visit (with separate tally lists kept for both hours) as long as the visit takes place during late May or June.

## Roving Records and breeding evidence codes

We are also very keen to gather Roving Records in order to boost species lists in all Scottish squares. The **Any Square Summary** button on

## Breeding TTV gaps



Provisional  
January 2010

Figure 1. Scotland TTV coverage



Provisional  
January 2010

Figure 2. Species richness gaps

the website allows you to print out species lists for any 10-km square or tetrad in Scotland. Consider adopting a few of your local squares and see if you can help boost the species lists for these squares.

Figure 2 shows where most help is required. This map looks at the number of species recorded in each 10-km square so far and compares it with the number recorded in that square in the last breeding atlas. Squares where more than 50% of species are 'missing' (red and black dots) are very under recorded and need more effort. Even those squares coloured yellow and brown (10–49% missing) also require a bit more effort to boost species lists.

A major aim of the atlas project is to map the current breeding range of all breeding species. To achieve this all breeding season atlas or Bird Track records can be greatly enhanced by adding breeding evidence codes. For most species possible breeding evidence codes like H (= in breeding habitat such as a Dipper on a river) or S (= singing bird) can usually be added. The use of codes such as P (= pair in suitable



Plate 39. Robin showing breeding evidence Code FL  
© John Harding

habitat), T (= several singing territorial birds), B (= bird carrying nest material) or A (= agitated, alarm calling bird) can boost the record up to the probable breeding category. Confirmed breeding codes include NE or NY (= nest with eggs or young) and ON (= bird going on or into a nest site), but also useful ones like DD (= distraction display), FF (= bird carrying food or faecal sac) (see Plate 38) or FL (= recently fledged dependant young) (see Plate 39). These latter codes mean that you can confirm breeding without necessarily finding a nest. Please try and add codes at as high a level as applicable. As the breeding season progresses it should be possible to add more probable and confirmed codes on later visits to squares for TTVs or Roving Records.

There are a few tricky species with regards to these codes. Herons, gulls and terns away from known colonies should probably be coded as U (= summering). This can also be used for immature raptors such as Golden Eagles outwith nesting territories. During April and May many 'wintering' species such as geese, waders, Redwing and Fieldfare are still present in Scotland. It is perhaps best not to give these birds a code. Any that remain to summer can be coded as U.

Figure 3 shows the current breeding season distribution of Curlew throughout Scotland. The large red dots indicate confirmed breeding, medium dots probable breeding and small dots possible breeding. Even with a large obvious wader such as this a high percentage of records do not confirm breeding. Although finding a nest or a chick can be tricky, the adult's behaviour can be used to confirm breeding. The noisy calling as they try to lead an intruder away from their nest or young is a form of distraction display (= DD).



Plate 38. Whinchat showing breeding evidence Code FF  
© Lawrence G. Baxter



Figure 3. Breeding Curlew throughout Scotland

Gathering breeding evidence using these codes is not too onerous. Please add suitable codes to all your breeding season records whether they are TTVs, Roving Records or Bird Track records - they are a vital part of the Bird Atlas project. The full list of Breeding Evidence codes can be found on all atlas data or instruction forms or can be downloaded from the atlas website from the drop down menu under **Taking Part** on the top menu bar. An examination of the species lists via the Any Square Summary button will show which species still require evidence of probable or confirmed breeding. You may think your local square has been completed, but in fact there could still be much more work to do in order to gather this breeding evidence. This might involve a few carefully targeted visits. For instance visits on good clear days in February or March looking for displaying eagles or Goshawks. Visits after dusk in May or June listening for roding Woodcock or the hunger calls of young owlets. Visits in July and August looking for recently fledged young of late breeders such as Spotted Flycatcher and Bullfinch.

*Bob Swann, Scottish Organiser  
Bird Atlas 2007–11*



Plate 40. Curlew at nest with chick. © Derek Belsey



Plate 41. *Beinn Mheadhoin, May 2009. © Ian Francis*

Cairngorms. One word, but so many superlatives that can be linked to it. Four of the five highest Scottish peaks; more land above 600 m than anywhere else in Britain and Ireland; the largest expanses of surviving Caledonian forest; an array of scarce creatures, including one-quarter of the UK's threatened bird, animal and plant species. The list could run and run.

Those are some of the statistics. But for birdwatchers, the essential zing of the Cairngorms is the way that several of those headline aspects can merge. Think of a cock Scottish Crossbill, feathers aglow as he sings in the crown of an old Scots Pine, with the dark shapes of mountains behind. Or of listening to the drumming of Snipe, the piping of Redshanks and Oystercatchers and the call of a Curlew, all within one rough pasture not far from the banks of the Spey.

Such are the natural riches that now come under the wing of the Cairngorms National Park. Taking stock of all the work that has been done here to research, conserve and better appreciate birds would be a huge task. Just think of some of the famous ornithologists

associated with the Cairngorms, such as Seton Gordon, Desmond Nethersole-Thompson, Adam Watson and Roy Dennis.

This article aims to give an account of the work that has been stimulated since the late 1990s through the Cairngorms Local Biodiversity Action Plan (CNLBAP) and also more recently by the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA). But before taking a tour of the bird projects linked to those bodies over the last decade and more, it may help to describe the geographical and historical context of the work.

### **Expanding horizons and partnerships**

Established in 2002, the Cairngorms is by far the largest of the 15 National Parks in the UK. It covers 3,800 km<sup>2</sup> (about twice the area of the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park) but later in 2010 it is set to expand by a further few hundred square kilometres into highland Perthshire, when the Scottish Parliament passes new legislation to allow it. Since 1998, the CNLBAP has operated across an area that encompasses both the enlarged Park area and a larger zone beyond this.



Local Biodiversity Action Plans (or LBAPs) stem from the Convention on Biological Diversity at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. This led to the UK Biodiversity Action Plan in 1994, which sets out a plan for the conservation of our biological resources and lists species and habitats that are priorities for conservation action. The CNLBAP has played its part locally by stimulating actions for biodiversity across the whole Cairngorms area. From the outset, work with a wide variety of groups and individuals has been key to the CNLBAP's success. Funding has come through a mixture of agencies and local authorities and action on the ground has involved an enormous range of people.

### Taking stock

Early CNLBAP work included publishing, in 1999, the 'Biodiversity of the Cairngorms'. Researched by Genevieve Leaper, this identified which species and habitats on national lists produced by the UK Biodiversity Steering Group were present in the area. It confirmed the Cairngorms as one of the most important parts of Britain and Ireland for diversity of wildlife. More than 400 UK biodiversity-action-listed species are present here, including one hundred (a quarter of the UK's total) on the UK Government's 'priority' biodiversity list. For many of these, the Cairngorms holds a sizeable chunk of the UK population and range.

For birds, the audit showed that the area contains a large proportion of the UK population and range of Capercaillie, Black Grouse, Goldeneye and Dotterel, as well as being a key location for Scottish Crossbill. The amount of native pinewood (more than half the UK total) and montane pinewood stand out as two of the most notable aspects of the broad range of 29 habitats documented, which include a high percentage of all those listed in UK's Biodiversity Action Plan.

The inventory, and work with the North-East Biological Records Centre and the Highland Biological Recording Group, has provided an important baseline to help implement UK-wide habitat and species action plans at a local level. Assisted by the project's first full-time officer, Peter Cosgrove (funded by the CNLBAP partners), the Cairngorms Local Biodiversity Action Plan was published in November 2002.

Based on action within four broad categories of habitats, this pays heed to national priorities such as Black Grouse, but also emphasises the value of conserving locally important habitats and species such as seed-eating finches and Swifts.

### Early success

The Upland Grain Project was an early CNLBAP success. It was set up in response to the decline in cereal growing in the Scottish uplands since the 1970s and following suggestions from local farmers in Badenoch and Strathspey. These folk remembered how birds such as Capercaillie and Black Grouse would come to cereal stooks (still with grain on the stalks) left at the wooded margins of fields over autumn and winter.

Supported by various bodies, including SNH, the Upland Grain Project ran from 2000 and 2004. Between five and ten upland farm sites were included each year. Participants agreed to grow 'sacrificial' grain- and seed-bearing crops for birds in small areas of their farms, with bird monitoring (principally in winter) carried out by a team of volunteers. The emphasis changed through the years, with an initial emphasis on stooks (labour-intensive to make and subject to damage by deer and corvids) shifting to the less time-consuming provision of winter grain.



Plate 42. Dotterel. © Jill Matthews



The Strathspey Wader Initiative, supported by the RSPB, the CNPA and others, aims to help manage for waders at a landscape scale, and safeguard large stretches of floodplain habitat. Rush control is one important part of this work. It is also trying to improve wader habitat on farms through promoting the Scottish Government's Scottish Rural Development Programme. This follows an earlier 'Action for Breeding Waders' project that encouraged wader-friendly management on 13 farms in Badenoch and Strathspey, Glenlivet and Tomintoul.

Elsewhere, the CNLBAP's grant scheme has been a boon for waders and many other kinds of birds. Since 2005, it has awarded tens of thousands of pounds of grants to support biodiversity-linked work. Much of this money has gone to projects which have a strong community link and which can boost work for birds and other wildlife. In 2006, for example, a CNLBAP grant helped the then Grampian Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group to develop action plans for Lapwings on farms in Strathdon, carry out a baseline survey and create Lapwing habitat. In 2009–2010, the scheme is part-funding the RSPB to lop rushes to improve nesting conditions for waders in key breeding areas within the Park.

Strathspey is the hub of the UK's Goldeneye population, which has built-up since initial colonisation in 1970. Keeping tabs on this attractive hole-nester has often meant counts from land or canoes. But in 2006, the grant scheme supported an ambitious aerial survey of Goldeneye and other waterfowl along the Spey. A light aircraft was chartered to give observers a relatively quick and efficient alternative means of counting. The Goldeneye Study Group was also helped to provide nestboxes to give a boost to Park's population.

The wider wetland picture has also come into the frame in the last couple of years, and the development of a Wetland Inventory is being taken forward through the CNLBAP, to identify areas that could be suitable for wetland restoration and creation. In the long run, this could be of huge benefit to waterbirds, as well as many other kinds of wetland wildlife. That also applies to the boost waterbirds should get from



Plate 44. Insh Marshes and Loch Insh, aerial view. © Jill Matthews

the Cairngorms Water Vole project, designed to help a nationally scarce mammal, but of great potential benefit to birds through reduction of American Mink across the National Park.

### Nests in focus

Nests and nest sites have featured in several CNLBAP-supported projects. Barn Owls have been among the birds to benefit. In both Angus and Grampian parts of the area, volunteers were helped to build Barn Owl nestboxes and give them to farmers, who placed the boxes in suitable locations and managed the surrounding land in owl-friendly ways. The scheme was so successful that it has now been extended throughout Tayside. The same is true of a Tree Sparrow nestbox scheme that began in Angus with CNLBAP help and has now spread across the region.



Plate 45. Goldeneye. © Nick Picozzi

Nestboxes for the SOC's mascot, the Crested Tit, have been erected near Boat-of-Garten, while at Mar Lodge Estate, Swift nestboxes were installed to provide additional nest sites. This also helped towards achieving the aims of long-running work to monitor and protect Swifts across the National Park. Since 2005, several surveys have been run to identify nesting sites and specific buildings used by Swifts. The brainchild of Stephen Corcoran, who has been Cairngorms Biodiversity Officer since 2004, it was prompted by concern at the decline in Swift numbers in Scotland during the last ten years. One suggestion is that old buildings preferred by Swifts are being replaced or renovated, removing traditional nesting places.

Many small-scale projects, not necessarily focused on particular species, but with strong community links and benefits for birds and other wildlife, have also been supported by the CNLBAP grant scheme. These include several in school grounds, such as at Braemar, where a wildlife garden has been created and a nestbox camera installed to give pupils a view of avian family life.

### Vital monitoring

A different kind of monitoring is being supported by the CNPA, RSPB, SNH and Grampian Police - partners in the North-East Scotland Raptor Watch, which works with upland estates to monitor raptor breeding success and guard against illegal persecution. According to the Raptor Watch Project Officer, Jim Craib, Golden Eagle, Peregrine and Hen Harrier all breed less successfully in North-east Scotland than in other areas with less grouse shooting.

Such illegal persecution was highlighted in the summer of 2009 through another project - 'Golden Eagles in the Cairngorms National Park' - supported by the CNPA in partnership with SNH, the Highland Foundation for Wildlife, private estates and others. In July, a young female Golden Eagle that had been fitted with a GPS satellite transmitter as a chick in 2007 and named 'Alma' by the Glenfeshie Estate was found poisoned in Tayside - a crime described by Roy Dennis as a "dreadful loss, which robs us of an important scientific project, and robs her of her life."

On a more positive note, funding was given through partners in the CNPA's Community Investment Programme to install a video camera at a Golden Eagle nest on the Atholl Estate in Highland Perthshire. Through sending live nest-site images to a free viewing facility in Blair Atholl, this project helps to monitor activity at the nest and protect it, while also giving members of the public a unique window on life at a Golden Eagle eyrie.

### Iconic species

Capercaillie is another iconic bird that has featured in recent work within the National Park. Many key sites for Capercaillie are in the pinewoods that skirt the National Park's namesake mountains. Strathspey is maintaining its status as the national core area for the species (with good breeding success in 2009), but both Deeside and Donside are showing downward trends. So it was appropriate for the CNPA to give advice and support as a partner in the multi-million-pound LIFE project 'Urgent Action for Capercaillie' that ran between 2002 and 2007.



Plate 46. *Capercaillie in flight.* © Ian Francis

The Caper's close relative, the Black Grouse, has also been the focus of a variety of work, including funding to help the RSPB modify heathland at Abernethy to improve conditions for the species. The RSPB has also been given a grant to help it to identify areas most worthy of management to benefit Black Grouse. At the same time, a three-year project, led by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, is investigating how radio-tagged chicks are using forest habitats around the National Park. Both these initiatives will help the CNPA to target future support for Black Grouse conservation to the right places.

The Ring Ouzel is another species that has declined in the Park in recent decades, with a pronounced downturn between 1990 and 1997. "This is a serious concern", says Park staff member Justin Prigmore, "and it is vital that we determine what is behind their decline." Part-funded by the CNLBAP, the RSPB's ongoing Ring Ouzel project has been using radio tags to track the movements, preferred habitats, diet and survival of several dozen Ring Ouzel chicks from nests near Braemar for three to four months after fledging. The results should make interesting and important reading.

### Looking ahead

There's no doubt that the Cairngorms National Park and its surrounds is a top place for conservation of biodiversity. Few other areas in the UK come close to its sheer variety of species and habitats. Looking to the future, those qualities can also have extra significance at a time of rapid climate change. Perhaps understandably, concern about the impact of global warming on birds in the Cairngorms has tended to focus on



Plate 48. Ring Ouzel male on heather. © Andy Hay (RSPB Images)

how mountain birds, such as Snow Bunting, might be affected. Opinions vary about the nature and extent of possible changes in the mountains. But on lower ground, there is plenty of scope to consider habitat changes that could be positive for birds, even assuming a warmer climate over the next few decades.

For example, native woods here are numerous, in good heart and have already been expanded significantly by restoration work in the Glenmore National Nature Reserve and elsewhere. The moors are also extensive and the rivers and wetlands relatively unpolluted. Viewed as building blocks, rather than end points, such places have great potential to be part of more extensive habitat networks. Such networks could be useful as routes for species dispersal in a changing climate.

Similarly, expansion of wetlands could be a boon for many species of plants, insects and birds. Breeding waders are among those that could benefit. But so too could a species whose bugling mating calls have not been heard in the wild in Scotland for many generations.

Common Cranes dancing in the marshes of the Spey: now there's a thought to add to the future store of memorable Cairngorms bird images.



Plate 47. Common Crane, Cairngorms National Park. © Harry Scott

**Kenny Taylor**

Email: [KennyTaylor@cairngorms.co.uk](mailto:KennyTaylor@cairngorms.co.uk)  
and [kennyt@globalnet.co.uk](mailto:kennyt@globalnet.co.uk)

# NOTES AND COMMENT

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## Another Grey Heron kill

I felt I must write to you after reading the account of a Great Skua killing a Grey Heron in the December *Scottish Birds*. My partner and I, who are also very enthusiastic bird watchers, were staying at the Eddrachillies Hotel looking over Badcall Bay near Scourie in Sutherland. Exactly a year before the reported "kill", we witnessed the very same behaviour of a Bonxie killing a heron.

On 3 August 2008 we were on the foreshore of the hotel before dinner and heard tremendously agitated calls from the sky near the shore. Two Grey Herons were being mobbed by two Bonxies. After about 20 minutes one of the herons had been forced to land on the water with the Bonxie still attacking it. Eventually, the heron's head was forced under the water by the bonxie and it drowned. The Bonxie then proceeded to peck at the heron's breast and eat it's fill with the other Bonxie hovering nearby.

It was a very memorable and poignant experience which ended with the yellow bill of the heron straight up out of the water after the Bonxie flew off quite replete. The whole episode lasted about 45 minutes.



Plate 49. *Bonxie feeding on Heron.* © John Cockerill

We had the telescope with us and saw all the gory details but only had a small digital camera with us which we tried to use as a digiscope.

*Wendy MacAlpine and John Cockerill*



Plate 50. *Golden Eagle stooping Raven.* © Frank Stark

## Ravens on Lewis

### Part 2. Ravens vs. Golden Eagles

There seems to be a state of perpetual conflict between Golden Eagles and Ravens on Lewis and although my experiences are limited to the Hebridean island I now call home, I'm sure this situation will be similar wherever both species are found together.

Confrontations between our largest crow and second largest raptor are as varied as the temperament of each species and of each individual corvid and eagle involved. There are many reasons why they constantly bicker, some more obvious than others. Here I will describe a few of the events I have observed, and I hope this might give some insight into the relationship that exists between these two birds.

Golden Eagles kill Ravens. I have never witnessed it, but the Raven remains I have found close to eagle eyries at a time when the adult raptors are taking live prey for their growing chicks, is irrefutable evidence that it does happen. Fledging Ravens are particularly vulnerable and are easy targets for eagles that are rearing youngsters of their own. The old crows become more anxious when their chicks leave the nest, croaking nervously as they attempt to guide them to safety. A family group flying purposefully in a straight line is a common sight in July/August and it is the only time I have observed these corvids change direction drastically in an apparent effort to avoid an eagle's air space. Ravens will not

normally engage with anything they regard as dangerous, and an Eagle, a bird clearly designed and equipped to kill and eat crows, certainly falls into this category. They tend to become more enthusiastic about attacking larger birds with sharper beaks and talons, if they outnumber them.

I have watched single birds swoop at eagles, but these confrontations are usually half-hearted affairs and seldom last long. On the rare occasions they are alone when confronted with an eagle, they usually choose to avoid the large raptor completely. I do recall a solitary female Raven leaving her hill-top nest after an eagle had obviously crossed some imaginary boundary. She made a bee-line for the bird of prey, striking it from behind before swooping up in preparation for another attack. The surprise blow had the desired effect on the eagle, forcing it to change course and it is the only time I have witnessed any physical contact between these two species. She was not alone for long. A few seconds later her mate joined the fray, both of them cawing loudly as they dive-bombed the retreating raptor.

An exchange involving two Ravens and one eagle is the commonest in my experience, but the most interesting took place between three Ravens and a pair of breeding Golden Eagles.

A female eagle crouched low in her eyrie while her mate soared into view high above her. She had been incubating for most of the afternoon and the male bird had arrived to relieve her from her duties, allowing her to stretch her wings and defecate. He swept round in large circles, gradually drifting lower.

Suddenly, three Ravens appeared in the air from behind a rocky ridge and as two harried the male eagle, the third bird landed on top of a hill across the glen. The male eagle seemed unperturbed, dipping and casually flicking a wing at the persisting crows, but his mate's patience had been sorely tested and she rose from her two eggs to help him. This was the moment the third Raven had been waiting for. It flew back across the glen to perch on a rock directly above the eagle's nest, glanced nervously around, cocked its head to one side and peered down at its prize. All was going to plan - but then it hesitated - suddenly it seemed, aware of the dangerous game it was playing.

The Raven's instincts had not let it down, for the female eagle, realising her mistake, was speeding back towards her nest.

The Raven, perceptive as ever, decided quite correctly that to "run away and live to fight another day" was the best policy at this particular time, and escaped. It is worth mentioning that although the two Ravens that were mobbing the male eagle were very vocal, the one acting furtively above the eyrie remained silent.

I believe that I almost witnessed what I have long suspected - that a number of Ravens working in a concerted manner are capable of stealing Golden Eagle eggs. Golden Eagles undoubtedly kill Ravens. However, perhaps the relationship between the two species is not as simple or as one-sided as we might think.

**Frank Stark**

*Email: frank482@btinternet.com*



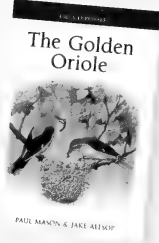
Plate 51. Golden Eagle chasing Raven. © Frank Stark



# BOOK REVIEWS

**The Golden Oriole.** Paul Mason & Jake Alsop, 2009. T. & A.D. Poyser. ISBN 978-0-7136-7683-9, hardback, 280 pages, £45.00.

A new addition to the Poyser Monograph series, this book maintains a high standard in its detailed examination of the Golden Oriole.



The authors helped establish the Golden Oriole Group which for more than 20 years has studied and protected the UK Golden Oriole population. As a result the book is written from a British perspective but gives considerable detail and comparison of oriole populations in Europe, Asia and the Middle East. It opens with a review of oriole species in general and describes the Lakenheath and fenland oriole population in some detail. A later chapter on population trends provides a fascinating insight into the likely dependence of the fenland population on that of the Low Countries. A series of chapters describe habitats, with detail of Golden Orioles' preference for particular fast growing and early leafing poplar species for nesting and feeding. The use of other tree species such as sessile oak in southern and central Europe is also described. Of particular interest to local populations is the observation that Dutch plantations were rapidly populated as soon as suitable habitat had developed.

Subsequent chapters explore the observed effects of weather and natural climate cycles on oriole populations, particularly the negative effects of wet summer weather and cold spring on breeding success. The authors

provided a balanced perspective on the potential harmful impact of accelerated climate change and associated effects on food sources and summer rainfall on both British and mainland European populations. Territory, courtship, nest building, egg laying and incubation, and incubation and fledging are covered in fine detail. Important factors are such as orioles' preference for plantation margins, and a territory average of 400 poplars per oriole pair, provide helpful information which allows examination of actual versus potential oriole population density.

Diet, inter-specific relationships (e.g. intolerance of corvids, owls and birds of prey), songs and calls, and migration are covered in later chapters. The book is well illustrated with black and white artist drawings, supplemented by an excellent colour plate section. Numerous statistical tables are provided to support chapters on habitat, population and feeding. This book is undoubtedly targeted at the oriole enthusiast and, as with the other Poyser Monographs, is likely to be regarded as a seminal work.

*Neil Grubb*

**RSPB Where to Discover Nature in Britain and Northern Ireland.** Marianne Taylor, 2009. A. & C. Black. ISBN 978-1408108642, paperback, 352 pages, £12.99.



This colourful and attractive book is really a 'where to watch birds' which covers just RSPB reserves. It fulfils that role very well,

giving background notes on the sites plus sections covering access information, what to look for, when to visit, how to get there and a seasonal calendar. There are good quality and very helpful maps showing access, paths and hides, and many photographs of the sites, birds and some other wildlife. With over 200 reserves under RSPB care there are plenty of places to choose from, although just 43 are in Scotland and almost half of them are on the northern and western isles, so less accessible for mainland-based birdwatchers. Nevertheless this is a book to inspire and I would recommend it to all who travel outside their local areas in search of a good day's birding.

*Mark Holling*

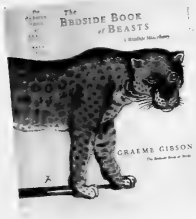
**Beside Book of Beasts.** Graeme Gibson, 2009. Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd, ISBN 978-0747596103, hardback, 384 pages, £20.00.

This is subtitled a 'Wildlife Miscellany' and is intended to complement the author's "Beside Book of Birds" (reviewed in *SNB* 79). Both are anthologies, containing excerpts from a miscellany of writings and art from the last 700 years. The artwork ranges from cave paintings through photographs of statues, to a recent photograph by Laurie Campbell.

Like the "Beside Book of Birds", the publishers have tried to produce an antique style. The paper is off-white and matt. Even Campbell's picture is subjected to the same treatment.

Gibson is a Canadian who has trawled widely and researched more than 700 years of literature and art to produce a fascinating





book. Not to be read from cover to cover, but to be accessed at will, to be kept at

hand by the bedside or easy chair to dip into during quiet moments. For me it might even enliven a quiet day at Waterston House!

*Harriet Trevelyan*

***Skye Birds - an illustrated guide to the birds of Skye.*** R.L. McMillan, 2009 (2nd edition). [Skye-birds.com](http://Skye-birds.com), Elgol, Broadford, Isle of Skye, IV49 9BL, ISBN 0 9550253 0 3, paperback, £11.95.

This is a revised edition of the 2005 first publication reviewed in *Scottish Bird News* 78, December 2005. The first edition was well received and had sold out by early 2009.



The publication of the revised edition reflects the volume of species records for, and new species recorded on, Skye. The book is well illustrated by Jean Thomas and has colour photographs by the author and M. Benson. Not only does this book deal systematically with the birds of Skye and where to find them, it also discusses topography, habitat conservation and birdwatching history. Having recently visited Skye, I regret this revised edition was not available at that time.

*Jean Torrance*

***DVD Guide to the Birds of North America.*** Filmed and narrated by Paul Doherty, 2009. Bird Images DVD Guides, £19.95 plus £2.50 UK P&P from Paul Doherty, 28 Carousel Walk, Sherburn in Elmet LS25 6LP or [www.birdvideodvd.com](http://www.birdvideodvd.com)

This is a double DVD set, featuring 522 species of most of the common birds and many of the regional specialities of North America, with a total running time of 7 hours 27 minutes. It has a choice of audio tracks (with or without commentary) and selectable captions giving the plumage shown (male, female, first-summer, etc).

My first experience of bird identification DVDs was interesting and successful. I tried it on my computer and it ran well under Windows Media Player, Real Player and Power DVD. Best of all, though, was running it on my DVD player through the TV; it gave far better picture clarity (although that may just be a function of my less-than-perfect computer monitor). There is a card enclosed giving brief instructions, with a helpline number and email address in case of problems, although I experienced none. The card also gives a full list of species included and this is included in the searchable menu.

So what does it actually contain? Each species starts with a still image with species name; if the English name is different from the American, it is included in brackets. There follows one or more video sequences of the bird, often in different plumages, with audio giving song, etc. The commentary includes brief distribution comments and then picks out particular plumage, structural and behavioural features to help identification. Each species lasts from about 25 seconds to over 1

minute 40 seconds, depending presumably on the suitable footage available and the number of different plumages shown. The quality overall is excellent, although a few of the flight shots were not as good - probably the sort of flight views we usually see!

Would I buy it? If I was planning a birding trip to North America, I would. In the short time allocated to each species, you can't expect feather-by-feather descriptions but the normal birder wouldn't need such detail anyway. You still need to take a good field guide but as an introduction to the birds you may see, it fits the bill perfectly.

*Paul Speak*

***The Running Sky - a Birdwatching Life.*** Tim Dee, 2009. Jonathan Cape Ltd, ISBN 978-0224081986, hardback, 258 pages, £16.99.

This book is a very personal narrative of the author's interest and experiences over a period of 40 years of birdwatching, during which time his travels took him to such diverse places as Fair Isle, California and Africa. He has a rare ability to communicate to the reader a sense of place, combined with his thoughts that include the wider picture of birds and their overall part in the natural and human world. Personal anecdotes, often in relation to his early birdwatching days, add to the diversity encompassed and which will strike a chord with many readers. Altogether an absorbing and thought-provoking autobiography, but at the same time entertaining and beautifully written.



*Keith Macgregor*

# BIRDSPOT - Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler

It won't be long before this pair of leaf-warblers returns to our shores for the summer, and they can pose an identification headache for beginners and more experienced birdwatchers alike. All too often the temptation is to lump them as willow/chiff or *Phylloscopus* warbler sp. However, with a bit of experience and lots of patience, this doesn't have to be the case.

There are subtle differences in plumage and structure that can only be seen in a close view, but in most cases you don't get that luxury. We can look at those features later. Let's start with a few basics of habitat and actions, and also with birds in breeding habitat and leave out-of-place migrants till later.

Differences in song are clear cut, and it is always worth waiting a short while to see if your bird is going to sing. Problem solved - did it go *chiff-chaff* or sing with a descending lilt? If it is silent, look around to see what habitat the bird is in. Chiffchaffs prefer to breed in mature woodland, normally a mixture of large deciduous and pine trees. They often forage and sing high up against the light, so this may be the only clue you get. [Remember to rule out the larger and brighter Wood Warbler]. Willow Warblers, on the other hand, breed in scrub, bushes and lower woodland and the two species are not usually found together, unless these habitats abut. However, wintering Chiffchaffs are often attracted to willows, and migrants can turn up anywhere.

Chiffchaffs are overall more dumpy and have a rounder body shape than Willow Warbler, and move about quietly and gently within the branches, a little like a Goldcrest. On the other hand Willow Warblers are a little sleeker than Chiffchaffs, and are more energetic, often dashing actively through the branches after flies.

The bird's actions may give another clue. Chiffchaffs have the habit of dipping their tails downwards, sometimes continuously and very obviously. Willow Warblers can do this, but rarely as persistently. Of course, Chiffchaffs don't always do it, but it's a good indicator if they do, and a personal favourite!

Calls are only useful after much practice as they both have a soft *hoo-eeet* or *huit* call. The Willow Warbler's is stronger, purer and more disyllabic *hoo-weet* (the opposite of what you'd expect based on the song), and is rather like a Redstart's call. A sudden rise in pitch at the end is something to listen out for; it is this that makes it disyllabic. The Chiffchaff's call is a simpler monosyllabic *hweet*, Young, migrant and wintering Chiffchaffs can have distinct calls (see below).

The older field guides tended to emphasise leg colour as a key (and only) separator. Willow Warbler has pale brown or orangey legs and feet, while Chiffchaff's are dark. However this feature is not reliable and depends much on the light.

Ringers rely on wing length to separate the species in the hand; the longer wings of the Willow Warbler evolving as a function of its longer migration. This feature can also be useful in the field if you get a close view. The key thing to measure in your mind is the length of the visible primaries relative to the length of the overlying tertials - known as the "primary projection". This might sound technical and impossible to see in the field, but look at the diagram (Figure 1) and be prepared for some patient watching. Photographs are useful in this respect.



Plate 52. Detail of Willow Warbler head pattern, Fife Ness, Fife, May 2007 © John Anderson



Plate 53. Willow Warbler, Errol, Perth & Kinross, May 2008 © John Anderson



Plate 54. Chiffchaff, Kilconquhar, Fife, March 2007 © John Anderson

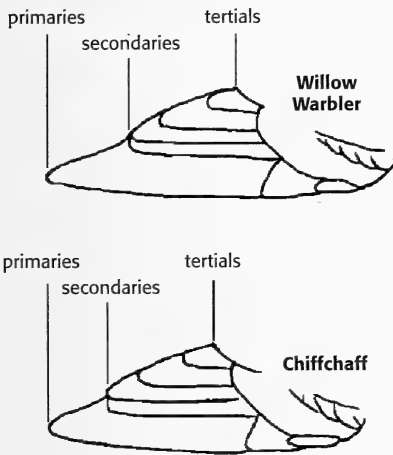


Figure 1. Diagram showing the difference in wing shape and primary projection between Willow Warbler (above) and Chiffchaff (below) (Vinicombe & Hathway 2007).

You will notice that I haven't mentioned plumage at all yet. In spring they can be remarkably similar. The Willow Warbler is slightly greener above, whereas the Chiffchaff is slightly more olive with less yellow on the head and throat. More significant is the head pattern, which is more prominent in Willow Warbler (slightly brighter supercilium and darker eye-stripe) whereas in Chiffchaff the face is less well marked with the eye-stripe fading out level with the back of the eye. This gives Chiffchaffs a more 'open-faced' and gentler appearance, well illustrated in the photo. An eye-ring is visible on Chiffchaffs and it might even be obvious. In autumn the bright yellow juvenile and freshly moulted adult Willow Warblers are more distinctive.

Chiffchaffs can give a different call in autumn and what exactly this means has intrigued many birdwatchers. It appears to be mainly young local Chiffchaffs that give this anomalous *wheoo* call, and not immigrants of some different subspecies.

That leads us on to wintering Chiffchaffs which can be distinctly greyish and white with black legs and beaks. These are not our local breeders, but birds from further east in the species' range. They become gradually more distinct as you go east from the race *abietinus* in Scandinavia to *tristis* in Siberia. Their calls differ too, with the plaintive *pee* given by eastern birds said to recall a lost chick.

However if we get too involved with rare subspecies, odd migrants and various calls we risk straying from the main identification features of the birds we are most likely to see in Scotland. Here's hoping you don't see as many willow/chiffs in future, just more Chiffchaffs and more Willow Warblers! Remember to see if it is flicking its tail down.

Ian Andrews

#### Further reading

- Constantine, M. & the Sound Approach. 2006. *The Sound Approach to Birding: a guide to understanding bird sound*. The Sound Approach, Poole. See pages 26–27 and 88–91.
- Harris, A., Tucker, L. & Vinicombe, K. 1989. *The Macmillan Field Guide to Bird Identification*. Macmillan, London. See pages 189–195.
- Vinicombe, K. & Hathway, R. 2007. Willow Warbler and Common Chiffchaff. <http://www.birdwatch.co.uk/website/content/view/322/102/>

# RINGERS' ROUND-UP

R. DUNCAN

Welcome to the first of what is hoped to be a regular bi-annual feature about bird ringing in Scotland. The intention is to summarise and promote some of the valuable and fascinating information generated by bird ringers, and bird watchers, by publishing selected ringing recoveries and short articles. There is also a 'Request for Information' section where we can all contribute by looking out for, and reporting, colour-marked birds from featured projects, as well as the many others currently in progress. If you have any interesting ringing recoveries, articles or projects which you would like to be included in the next issue, please email Raymond Duncan by early July at [Raymond@waxwing.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:Raymond@waxwing.fsnet.co.uk).

Thanks go to the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and the many ringers and ringing groups who provided the information for this first 'Ringer's Round-up'. Thanks also to the many bird watchers who take the time and trouble to read rings in the field, or find dead ringed birds and report them.

## Greylag Goose ringing in Orkney

In recent years Orkney has seen a dramatic increase in both breeding and wintering numbers of Greylag Geese (see graphs below). So much so they are becoming a bit of an issue with farmers and their potential damage to the availability of grazing for livestock.

Sightings of neck-collared birds in winter ringed in Iceland and elsewhere in Scotland suggest more birds are remaining further north in Orkney throughout the winter. Little is known about the movements of the breeding/summering population. In 2008, efforts were made by Orkney Ringing Group to catch and mark some Greylags in summer to increase their knowledge of local movements, survival and productivity. A few small catches here and there during July plus a very successful

round up of flightless adults and goslings at Loch of Hundland resulted in 139 birds being either neck collared or leg ringed with engraved three-letter darvic rings.

Between August and mid-December a large amount of re-sightings of many of these birds were obtained locally, within 10 km of the ringing site. This was perhaps to be expected given similar findings from an intensive ringing study of breeding Greylags on Coll and Tiree on the west coast of Scotland. So it was with some surprise on 22 December that Alan Leitch received an email from Andrew Easton and Rob Wilton reporting Greylags wearing orange collars DIS and DIU on their local patch at Lound Water Works in Suffolk. Accompanying digital images clearly showed the birds swimming amongst a flock. Both these birds

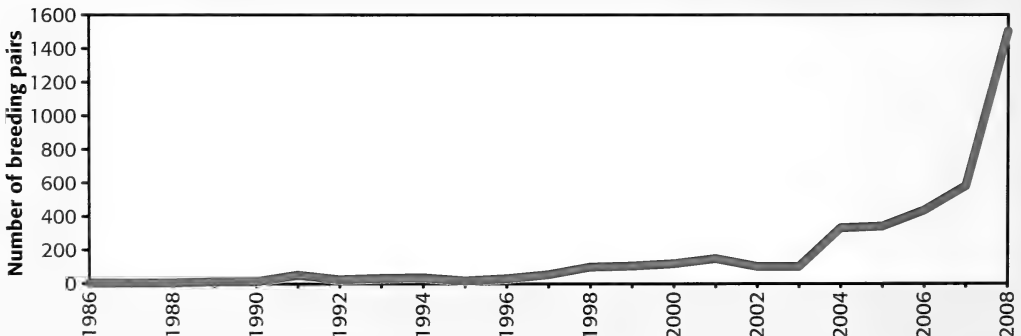


Figure 1: Estimated numbers of breeding pairs of Greylag Geese on Orkney, 1980 to 2008. (RSPB)



Plates 55–56: Orkney Greylag goslings DIS and DIU at Lound Water Works, Suffolk, December 2008. © Andrew Easton

had been ringed as large goslings in Orkney in July. They were subsequently seen two days later 20 km north-west at Strumpshaw Fen, Norfolk by Tim Strudwick and remained here into 2009. No other sightings were recorded outwith Orkney last winter.

The catching and ringing programme was repeated in 2009 with Loch of Hundland again the most productive site, where 186 new birds were ringed. Early winter results were similar to 2008 with lots of sightings, nearly all within 10 km of the loch. Many birds ringed and re-sighted in 2008 were again present in 2009.

Then lo and behold, Alan received an email via Greylag Goose ringing coordinator Bob Swann saying DIS and DIU had been reported by Chris Alcock back in Norfolk at Buckenham Marshes, Yare Valley on 3 January 2010. Not only that, but they had taken a few pals with them, including two of 2009's collared goslings HAK and HAJ. They were reported by Chris as being in a very discrete group of ten birds which didn't mingle

with the many other feral Greylags ever present on the marshes.

What a strange movement for (clearly a small minority of) Orkney Greylag goslings to make, turning up in East Anglia in mid-winter while the majority appear to remain on Orkney close to their natal area. As Greylags don't breed in their second year these four collared birds can't be an immediately related family group, but perhaps of the same parentage? Is there some sort of ancestral historic link between these two populations? Some long-ago introduction in Orkney involving birds from East Anglia? It will be fascinating to see what results further ringing produces.

Orkney Ringing Group are grateful for the financial assistance from SNH for a further four years of funding. For more details about the Orkney Greylag ringing, contact [alan.leitch@rspb.org.uk](mailto:alan.leitch@rspb.org.uk). Bob Swann is the co-ordinator of marked Greylag Geese in Scotland. Please send all sightings to [robert.swann@homecall.co.uk](mailto:robert.swann@homecall.co.uk).

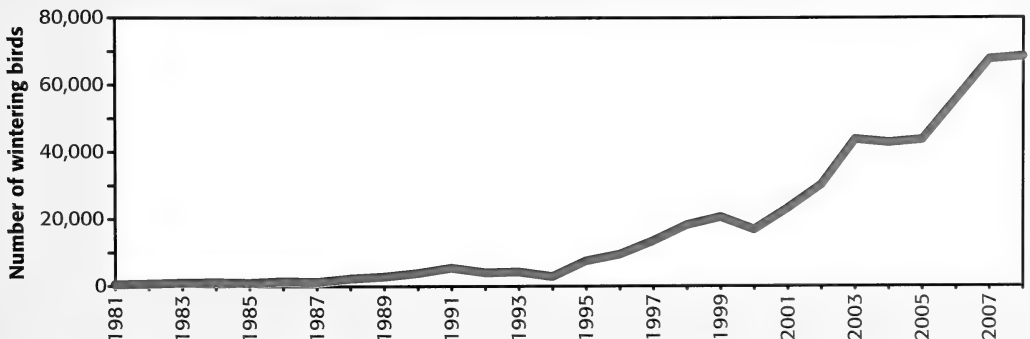


Figure 2: Peak counts of wintering Greylag Geese on Orkney, 1981 to 2008. (RSPB)

**Gaelic Twite in North-east Scotland**

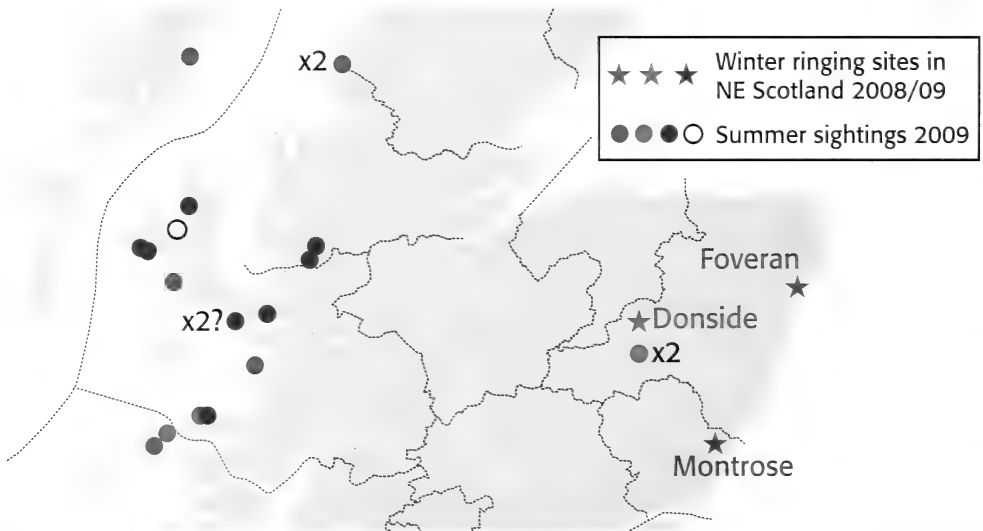
The number and distribution of wintering Twite in North-east Scotland is variable and greatly influenced by the availability of weedy neep fields and other areas where fine seeds can be found. In recent years regular flocks have been recorded in Donside, Foveran Links (south of Newburgh) and at Montrose Basin. Grampian Ringing Group have ringed nearly 1000 Twite at Foveran since 2001 and re-trapped several hundred individuals at this site on more than one occasion within and between winters, suggesting a high degree of site fidelity. Movements away from the site have nearly always involved other ringers in winter, leading to a saying amongst group members that "NASA can put a man on the moon, yet we haven't a clue where these Foveran Twite breed."

Recent winter Twite colour-ringing in north-west England by Dave Sowter and colleagues has revealed a previously undetected southerly migration of breeding birds from the Hebrides to winter along the coast of north-west Lancashire. Inspired by their success we decided to colour-ring our birds in winter 2008/09 in the hope of similar summer sightings from birdwatchers. Seventy-four were colour-ringed in Donside, 165 at Foveran and, in a joint venture with Tay Ringing Group, over 300 were colour-ringed at Montrose Basin.

The results from our first winter of colour-ringing have been tremendous (see map). To get such a good idea of breeding origins so quickly was most unexpected. This is thanks to the many bird watchers who so kindly reported their sightings of colour-ringed birds in the field (and one was killed by a car). We plan to colour-ring Twite for a further two winters. A total of 250 has been colour-ringed in North-east Scotland this winter up to mid-January 2010 while over 300 have been colour-ringed on Orkney. Building on the success and participation of birders in 2009, if we get enough sightings it will be interesting to see if there is any segregation in the breeding areas between birds wintering in Orkney, North-east Scotland and north-west England. Given the high return rate of birds to Foveran each winter it was a bit surprising to see the widespread dispersal of sightings in the summer.



**Plate 57.** *With the match off again due to snow, the Partick Thistle squad do a bit of light eating down at Foveran Links.*  
© Chris Jones



**Figure 3.** Summer 2009 distribution of Twite colour-ringed in North-east Scotland in winter 2008/09. Stars are ringing sites and dots are recoveries.

## Selected Ringing Recoveries

**Age/sex:** 1 nestling, 3 hatched during calendar year of ringing, 4 hatched before calendar year of ringing but exact year unknown, 5 hatched during previous calendar year, 6 hatched previous calendar year but exact year unknown. **f** = female, **m** = male. **Circumstances:** **x** found dead, **+** shot or intentionally killed by man, **F** - fresh, **L** - not recent, **VV** ring read in field, **R** caught and released by ringer, **N** nesting.

### Mute Swan

X6659	5	28/03/07 Hogganfield Loch, Glasgow, Clyde	
	VV	20/01/08 Watermead Country Park, Leicestershire	406 km SSE

### Wigeon

FP14433	4f	19/12/04 Birnie Gaddon Lochs, Fife	
	+F	15/12/07 Porto Di Baseleghe, Caorle, Venezia, ITALY	1634 km SE

### Goldeneye

4184595	4f	16/06/02 Odda, Trondheim, Sor-Trondelag, NORWAY	
	+F	30/01/08 Loch of Skene, North-east Scotland	992 km SW
FP63298	4fN	13/05/05 Loch Kinord, North-east Scotland	
	+F	16/12/08 Loch of Skene, North-east Scotland	34 km WNW
FP89049	4fN	27/05/06 Loch Davan, North-east Scotland	
	+F	22/12/08 Loch of Skene, North-east Scotland	34 km WNW
FP67655	6f	11/05/05 Insh Marshes, Highland	
	+F	01/10/05 Lough Neagh, Northern Ireland	323 km SW

*Scandinavian and Scottish breeding females wintering on the same loch in North-east Scotland and a Strathspey bird wintering in Ireland.*

### Red-throated Diver

1188997	1	29/07/84 Hoy, Orkney	
	xF	20/03/08 Rousay, Orkney (23 years, 7 months, 20 days)	41 km NE
1440094	1	11/07/06 Skeld, Shetland	
	x	12/11/06 La Baule-Escoublac, Loire-Atlantique, FRANCE	1435 km S

*1188997 is a new longevity record for this species from BTO ringing.*

### Manx Shearwater

EG42200	4	29/08/00 Hallival, Isle of Rum, Highland	
	x	15/01/02 Santa Teresita, ARGENTINA	11,449 km SW
ES83828	4	09/04/97 Hallival, Isle of Rum, Highland	
	x	15/11/02 Tres Arroyos, Buenos Aires, ARGENTINA	11,828 km SW

*Our seabirds undertake some incredible journeys, as demonstrated by these two Manx Shearwaters wintering off the coast of Argentina.*

### Gannet

BS003048	1	07/08/08 Kandalakshskiy NR, Kharlov Island, Murmansk, RUSSIA	
	xL	31/10/08 Quendale beach, Dunrossness, Shetland	2091 km WSW

### Cormorant

5230392	1	28/06/07 Forvie, Newburgh, North-east Scotland	
	xF	06/08/07 Lake Frisjon, Vastergotland, SWEDEN	897 km NE

*Only the second BTO-ringed Cormorant to be recovered in Sweden.*

### Osprey

233609	1	27/06/92 Minatangen, Valer, Ostfold, NORWAY	
	VVN	01/07/97 near Forres, North-east Scotland (also 1998 & 1999)	865 km WSW
	VVN	26/07/00 Glenferness, Highland	871 km WSW

*Only the second Norwegian-ringed Osprey to be recovered in Britain & Ireland, breeding at one site in Grampian for three consecutive years then at another the following year. The male of the second breeding pair of Ospreys to return to Scotland at the start of the re-colonisation in the early 1960s had been ringed as a chick in Sweden three years previously (Roy Dennis "A life of Ospreys").*

### Peregrine

PB02944	1f	14/06/08 Longerak, Bygland, Aust-Agder, NORWAY	
	xF	26/10/08 Portlithen, North-east Scotland	618 km WSW

*Peregrines from Fennoscandia tend to migrate south-west.*

**Great Black-backed Gull**

HW58179 1 15/07/83 Auskerry, Orkney  
 xF 10/07/08 Burray Ness, Burray, Orkney (24 years, 11 months, 25 days) 41 km NE

*A new longevity record for this species from BTO ringing.*

**Sandwich Tern**

DD09350 1 04/06/02 Forvie, Newburgh, North-east Scotland  
 WV 11/09/08 Krynica Morska, Elblag, POLAND 1375 km ESE

*First BTO-ringed Sandwich Tern recovery in Poland.*

**Bar-tailed Godwit**

DK13870 3 29/12/89 Alness Bay, Highland  
 xF 25/07/08 Kiby, Vadso, Finnmark, NORWAY 2142 km NE

**Greenshank**

DD59511 3 02/09/06 Ythan Estuary, North-east Scotland  
 WV 21/03/09 Island Santiago, CAPE VERDE ISLANDS 5020 km SSW

**Swallow**

P312986 3 13/08/00 Watten, Caithness  
 R=m 24/05/01 Lista Fyr, Farsund, Vest-Agder, NORWAY 578 km E

**Pied Wagtail**

V434717 3 02/09/08 East Kilbride, Clyde  
 xF 19/12/08 Davenham, Northwich, Cheshire 304 km SSE

**Waxwing**

NW14875 6m 31/03/05 Hilton, Aberdeen, North-east Scotland  
 xF 15/02/06 Sovetskiy, Khanty-Mansi, RUSSIA 3714 km WNW

*We seldom get Waxwing invasions in consecutive winters. This bird was in Aberdeen one winter then killed by a cat east of the Urals the next, roughly on the same longitude as Kazakhstan!*

**Wren**

9U0401 3 19/06/04 Insh, Highland  
 R 06/11/04 Hallyards, Lothian 133 km SSE

*Wrens can barely fly from bush to bush so this dispersing juvenile must have found a lot of bushes on its journey south!*

**Dunnock**

T948705 3 30/09/07 Isle of May, Fife  
 R 22/09/08 Sandsgard, Akershus, NORWAY 877 km ENE

*Some of the Dunnocks encountered in autumn are Scandinavian birds like this bird on the Isle of May.*

**Hawfinch**

NV37634 6f 17/02/04 Scone Palace, Perth & Kinross  
 xF 01/02/07 Hishult, Halland, SWEDEN 1030 km ENE

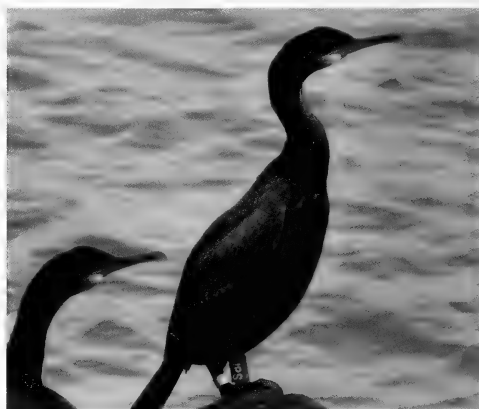
*A rather surprising recovery from Scone Palace, freshly dead after hitting a window. Only the second ever BTO-ringed Hawfinch to be recovered abroad.*

**REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION**

**Breeding at a colony near you?**

**Shags:** Shags have been ringed on the Isle of May for many moons as part of the long-term seabird monitoring scheme. Like Cormorants, a large number return to their natal colonies to breed, but a few don't. Recent efforts have been made to try to locate the whereabouts of these absconders. Any sightings at colonies away from the Isle of May would be greatly appreciated. Please report to [manew@ceh.ac.uk](mailto:manew@ceh.ac.uk).

**Plate 58.** *Immature Shag JPS from the Isle of May on rocks at Rosehearty, North-east Scotland, 14 September 2008 © Euan Ferguson.*



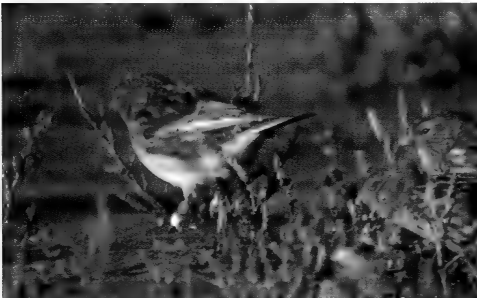




**Plate 59.** Cormorant CUA back breeding at its natal colony at Sands of Forvie, North-east Scotland in summer 2008. It was reported back at Tring Reservoirs in Hertfordshire by David Bilcock for its fifth winter on 31 October 2009. © Chris Jones



**Plate 60.** Great Black-backed Gull blue H35 at Cairnbulg, North-east Scotland on 29 August 2008. It had been ringed as a chick on Stronsay, Orkney in 2008. © Ed Duthie



**Plate 61.** A Montrose colour-ringed Twite from March 2009 resighted at Theddlethorpe on the Humber Estuary on 1 December 2009. © Graham Catley



**Plate 62.** A colour-ringed Starling nesting in one of the many drystone dykes on Fair Isle. © Peter G.H. Evans

**Cormorants:** Cormorant chicks have been colour-ringed in North-east Scotland since 2003. Many have been reported wintering throughout Scotland and on water bodies inland in central and southern England. Many also return to their natal colonies to breed. However, the initial colonization of North-east Scotland in the early 2000s involved chicks from other colonies throughout Scotland and also a *sinesis* race chick from Denmark. Anybody visiting seabird colonies please check all Cormorants for a darvic colour-ringing (white with green letters as in picture) and report to [Raymond@waxwing.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:Raymond@waxwing.fsnet.co.uk). Colour-ringing is now taking place at several other Scottish colonies.

**Great Black-backed Gulls:** Chicks are being colour-ringed at several colonies in northern Scotland to investigate the movements and fidelity to wintering and breeding sites. Various coloured inscribed darvic rings are being used (see photo). Please report to [markoksien@btinternet.com](mailto:markoksien@btinternet.com).

**Twite:** Colour-ringing of Twite in winter in north-west England by Dave Sowter and colleagues revealed a previously unknown south-easterly migration of Twite from the Hebrides to spend the winter around the salt marshes of north-west Lancashire. As can be seen from the previous article on Gaelic Twite, similar success has been achieved from colour-ringing in North-east Scotland. The Outer Hebrides are a favourite holiday and birding haunt for many of you so please keep your eyes peeled for colour-ringed Twite when visiting. Please report all sightings to [davidsowter@freenet.co.uk](mailto:davidsowter@freenet.co.uk).

**Starlings:** Starlings have been the subject of a long-term study on Fair Isle by Peter Evans and various students. A breeding study is also being carried out in the Highlands at Nethybridge, while more recently Ben Herschell has been Potter trapping and colour-ringing Starlings in his garden at Montrose. Amongst other things Ben is investigating the rather mysterious apparent abmigration of southern birds from England moving up into Scotland in autumn and returning south for the following summer. Please report any colour-ringed Starlings (except on Fair Isle!) to [benherschell@hotmail.com](mailto:benherschell@hotmail.com).

# Savi's Warbler, Cairnie Pier, Perth & Kinross, 10–16 May 2005 – first record for mainland Scotland

A.J. LEITCH

The reedbeds on the north bank of the inner Tay Estuary are the largest in Great Britain, at approximately 410 ha. They comprise over 15% of this rare habitat within the UK, thus supporting important communities of reedbed species which include Marsh Harrier, Water Rail, Grasshopper, Reed and Sedge Warblers, Bearded Tit and Reed Bunting.

RSPB Scotland began managing parts of the Tay Reedbeds in 2004. Previously, much of the reedbeds were managed by the Tayreed Company for commercial reed-cutting, however, the company stopped operating in 2004. Quick thinking by RSPB and some funding by SNH enabled the RSPB to kick-start the management before any loss of condition occurred by securing the operator and machinery services. The reed-cutting is an important management process to create a diversity of different-aged reed stands within the reedbed and providing a greater degree of edge habitat which is known to be an important element for certain species within the Tay reedbeds.

Near the end of a breeding bird transect between Port Allen and Cairnie Pier, I came across a relatively large, long-tailed brown warbler being chased by a male Reed Bunting across the reed tops. The bird dropped down after a short flight and I was just praying it would appear again. A few moments later the warbler was seen climbing up the reeds and began to sing. Immediately, I knew that the bird was a Savi's Warbler from the song alone, although the unstreaked plumage and colouration confirmed the identity.

The bird was harassed by a nearby Sedge Warbler and the male Reed Bunting which were both holding territory in this section of the

reedbed. However, between the occasional bouts of mobbing it was very bold, singing from just below the reed panicle (seed head). The song was a continuous reel similar to that of the nearby Grasshopper Warbler except duller/quieter in tone and less clicky! The comparison was good to have, although not necessary. While doing Bittern research in East Anglia I was fortunate to come across a couple of Savi's Warbler sites. When singing the bird was in full view during the periods of my observations; unlike Grasshopper Warblers which, in my experience, can be difficult to see while reeling from their song perch.

## Description

Similar build to European Reed Warbler, but appeared heavier, haunched and bigger, with a distinct pouting gullet. An active bird - flitting from stem to stem, often perching just below reed seed heads. Strong flight through tops of reeds. Not skulking like Grasshopper Warbler. Tail bobbing. Head usually up whilst singing. Moved head from side-to-side when singing, broad tail was used pendulum-like as a counter-balance.

**Head:** forehead, crown and nape warm brown and unmarked (as upperparts). Ear-coverts brown. White supercillium was quite neat, extending beyond the eye. **Upperparts:** uniform warm brown and unstreaked. **Underparts:** chin, throat and belly were off-white/cream and unstreaked. Breast, flanks and vent dusky olive-brown and unstreaked and unspckled. Brown feathers of undertail and undertail coverts were indistinctly tipped pale resulting in soft scalloping effect. **Bare parts:** legs were fleshy-pink. Bill: long and slender, noted as dark, with light lemon-pink gape. Eye appeared black. **Voice:** song was a more droning 'buzz' than Grasshopper Warbler.

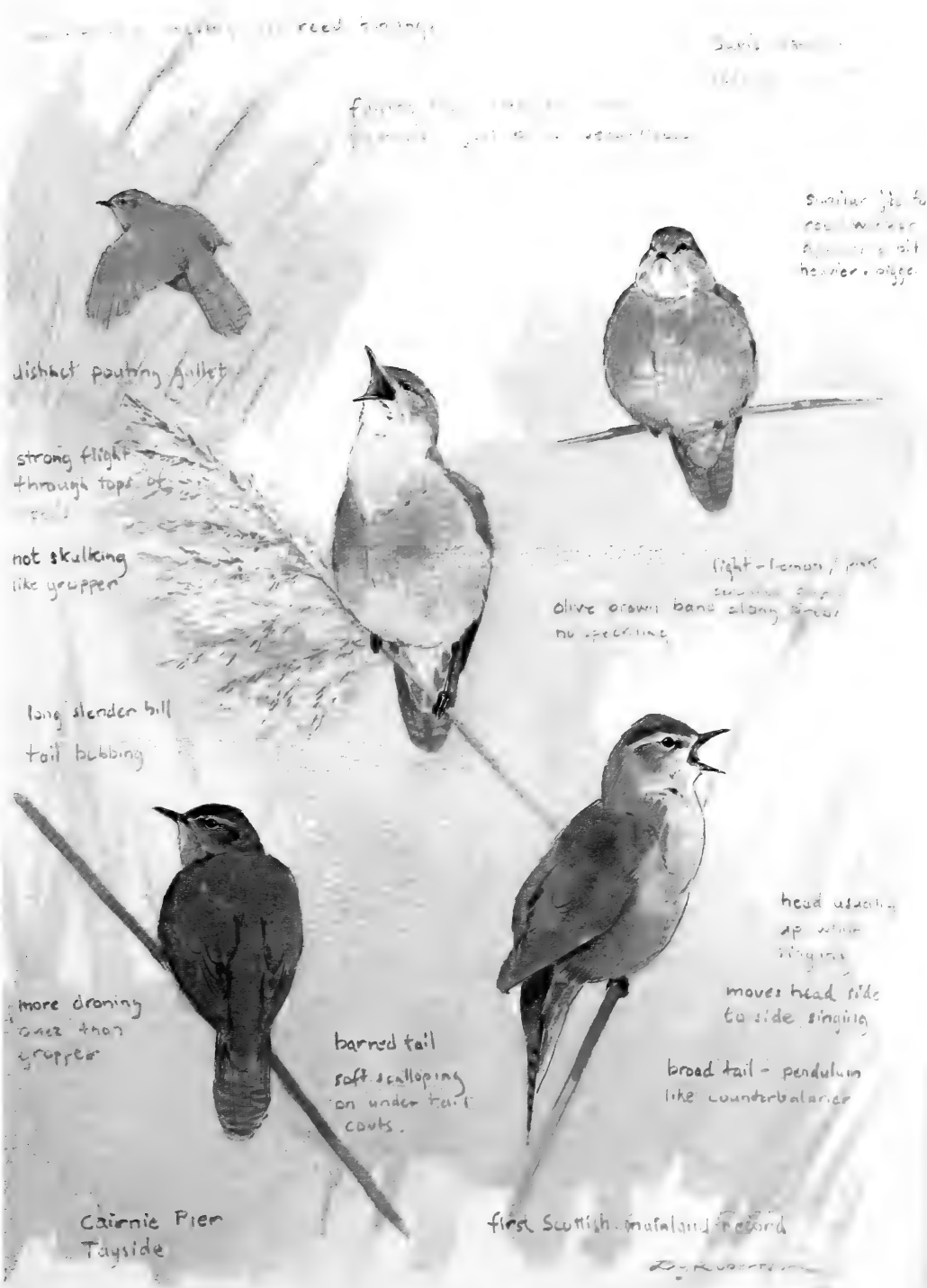


Plate 63. Painting of the Cairnie Pier Savi's Warbler, May 2005 by Derek Robertson. (Courtesy of Agnes Gunn)

Unfortunately, due to some sensitive land management negotiations by RSPB Scotland at the time it was decided not to release news of this bird generally. The long-term management of the site for other species of conservation concern was/is more important. Obviously the possibility of breeding was also taken into account. However, the bird was not seen after 16 May to my knowledge.

In May 2007, Cairnie Pier (within 100 m of the Savi's Warbler location) produced the goods again during an early morning breeding bird survey, with a singing male White-spotted Bluethroat found on 2 May and last seen on the 4th. During its stay, it defended a small territory and spent short periods song-flighting, mimicking other species like Barn Swallow and Great Tit, and also disappearing for long periods within willow scrub/reedbed habitat.

It is assumed that both the Savi's Warbler and Bluethroat did not find mates as subsequent visits made to the site later in the season produced no sightings.

**Alan Leitch, The Willows, Finstown,  
Orkney KW17 2EJ**

## Savi's Warbler – its status in Scotland

*This species breeds patchily from Iberia and north-west Africa, eastwards to Denmark, Germany, Austria, northern Italy and the eastern Mediterranean and Turkey, with the bulk of the population found from eastern Germany and Hungary eastwards to the Baltic States, western Russia, Kazakhstan, the Ukraine and northern Iran. They formerly bred in England in very small numbers, and though one or two singing males have taken up territory in England in recent years the last confirmed breeding record was in 2000. The population is entirely migratory, and winters in sub-Saharan Africa, along the Nile Valley south from Sudan and eastwards to the Red Sea coast.*

*Prior to 1950 this species was considered a regular, but scarce and declining, visitor to Britain. A small breeding population was present in the wetlands of East Anglia, but died out in the 1850s. It was not until the 1960s that*

*breeding was proven to have occurred again, when a few pairs colonised Stodmarsh in Kent, and by the end of the decade breeding had taken place at several other sites in south-east England. The species has become steadily rarer since the early 1990s and was restored as a BBRC description species from 1999 as a consequence. Virtually all records have occurred south of Lancashire and Yorkshire, with the majority from Kent, Suffolk and Norfolk, though there a number from south-west England and Yorkshire. There have been just five birds in Wales and nine in Ireland to the end of 2008.*

*There have been around 640 Savi's Warblers recorded in Britain between 1950 and the end of 2008, with just 11 recorded in Scotland: two on Fair Isle on 14 May 1908 (one shot); a first-summer on Fair Isle on 24 June 1981; an adult on Fair Isle on 7 June 1986; one on Fair Isle on 4–6 May 1993; one on Whalsay, Shetland on 29–30 May 1995; one on Fair Isle on 24–31 May 1996; one on Foula, Shetland on 29–30 May; one on Fair Isle on 30 September 2003 (pending formal acceptance, see below); the Cairnie Pier bird above, and subsequently one at Skaw, Unst, Shetland from 29 May to 3 June 2006.*

*The near total monopolisation of Scottish records by Shetland, and Fair Isle in particular, is obvious. The generally skulking nature of this species means that the chances of finding one in anything but the scantest of cover are much reduced. As elsewhere in Britain virtually all birds have been found in spring and early summer. The 2003 Fair Isle bird is interestingly the only autumn record in Scotland, and one of the few in Britain and Ireland, and when trapped showed plumage feature suggesting it was of the subspecies *Locustella luscinioides fusca* which occupies the eastern part of the breeding range from the Caspian to Kazakhstan (Green 2004). This possibility is still under consideration by BBRC. All other records in Britain are believed to be of the nominate race *L. l. luscinioides*.*

## Reference

**Green, N. 2004.** Britain's first Eastern Savi's Warbler, Fair Isle, Shetland, September 2003. *Birding Scotland* 7: 31–34.



Plate 54. Kentish Plover, South Uist, Outer Hebrides, November 2007. © Steve Duffield

## Kentish Plover, South Uist, 10 November 2007 to 20 April 2008 - first for the Outer Hebrides

A. STEVENSON

Whilst carrying out a WeBS count at the South Ford, South Uist, on 10 November 2007, I found a small, pale plover huddled behind a clump of seaweed, keeping out of the wind and rain, as the weather deteriorated. Although there were other waders nearby it was on its own and consequently it was hard to gauge its size because of the poor light conditions and the long distance involved. Trying to zoom up with the scope didn't help as much as hoped given the weather conditions and the fact that the bird was static and hunched up. It was clearly either a sand plover or a Kentish Plover, with the apparent lack of neck collar and pale grey legs suggesting the former option. I tried to take some digital SLR photos but it was on the limit of getting even a poor image, however, I was glad I did latterly. I also phoned-out news tentatively of a probable sand plover species -

whilst I was doing so the bird flew off and I didn't see it go, I just looked back and it had gone. Terry Fountain came to look for it with me, but after a short search with the tide dropping, we received news of an Ivory Gull having been seen further down the coast! Given the large area of intertidal mud and sand being exposed as the tide dropped we cut our losses and headed for the gull - and dipped!

When I got back to the house I downloaded my photos and blew them up on the computer screen to find that I had captured the bird preening and showing a complete collar after all, so it was a Kentish, despite the pale legs. I quickly corrected the identification of the bird to the news services. The bird remained at South Ford until 20 April 2008, often favouring the drier, sandier area close to the Hebridean Jewellery shop. It was last

photographed in late March when it didn't appear to be showing any sign of moulting in a male head pattern, so unless it was a late moulting bird, it was probably a female. The bird had been aged as a first-winter based on pale fringes on the wing coverts, giving it a very slightly scaly appearance rather than the very plain sandy-brown plumage of adults.

Even though it was 'downgraded' to a Kentish, the bird attracted some debate as to its origin with some suggesting a possible Nearctic origin. However, a check of the available literature showed that the North American (sub)species, called Snowy Plover, is very rare on the north-eastern seaboard of the USA and a very unlikely vagrant. With much apparent integration of subspecies across Asia it is unlikely that the bird could be ascertained to be anything other than a 'normal' Kentish, despite the relatively large breast-side patches which almost met and some suggestion of it looking large-billed. These latter features are regularly shown by the east-Asian subspecies.

### Description

**Size/shape:** a small, round-bodied plover, similar to Ringed Plover, but with longer, thinner legs and a longer, finer bill. **Plumage:** the upperparts were a pale fawn/sandy-brown. Many of the wing covert and mantle feathers showed a faint, thin, pale edging. The head showed a similarly sandy coloured crown and ear-coverts. The forehead and lores were white, with a whitish supercilium extending back over the eye and dying out towards the rear of the ear-coverts. The underparts were completely white apart from two crescent-shaped breast band patches extending from the bend of the wing. These didn't quite meet in the middle of the breast. The tail had fawn-brown central tail feathers with whiter sides.

**Bare parts:** the eye was large and dark. The bill was dark, and longer and finer than that of Ringed or Little Ringed Plover. The legs were obviously a lightish grey and not blackish as in many Kentish Plovers, however, this is well within the variation found in all subspecies.

Andrew Stevenson, Ardrishaig, Argyll



Plate 65. Kentish Plover, South Uist, Outer Hebrides, November 2007. © Steve Duffield

## Kentish Plover

### - its status in Scotland

*This species has a widespread global breeding range, with five races generally recognised. All British records are believed to involve the nominate race alexandrinus which breeds from Iberia, the Atlantic Islands and north-west Africa north to Denmark and southernmost Sweden, and eastwards through the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and Arabian Gulf coasts to India, and from southern Europe through the Black Sea, Ukraine and southern Caspian Sea eastwards to Mongolia and Northern China. This form is predominantly migratory with northern populations generally wintering in coastal West Africa, the Atlantic Islands and Mediterranean eastwards to the Red Sea, India and southern Asia, but occasionally individuals remain in more northerly locations, including England.*

*The first documented British record of Kentish Plover is of three shot at Sandwich Bay, Kent in May 1787. At the time this species actually bred in reasonable numbers along the sandy coasts of Kent and Sussex, but declined as a result of egg-collecting in Victorian times and markedly again from increased disturbance in the 1920s. It was lost as an annual breeding species in the 1930s, though isolated breeding attempts occurred at Rye Harbour, East Sussex in the 1940s and 1950s. The last documented successful breeding was from a pair in Lincolnshire in 1979.*

*Kentish Plover is now regarded as a scarce but annual passage migrant, with an average of c. 30 records per year in Britain in the last 20 years, with the great majority of records coming from the south-east coastal counties of England and East Anglia. In Scotland this species has always been a rarity with just 17 individuals recorded to the end of 2008. The first was a probable male on Fair Isle on 14 May 1949, and there has been one other Shetland record - a female at Pool of Virkie, south Mainland from 24–27 April 2004. Other than these, and the 2007/08 South Ford individual above, the 14 remaining records have come from the Scottish mainland. Lothian has provided six of these: a male at Aberlady Bay on 5–6 April 1985, a male on 1–3 May 1993, a first-summer male at Tynninghame on 25 April 1998, a female at*



**Plate 66.** Kentish Plover, South Uist, Outer Hebrides, November 2007. © Steve Duffield

*Musselburgh on 3 May 1999, a female at Aberlady Bay on 11–14 May 2002 (Clunie 2002) and a male at Aberlady Bay on 1–2 June 2008. There have been three in North-east Scotland: one on the Ythan Estuary on 3–4 May 1962, a female there on 10–14 May 1981, and one at Rattray on 30 April 1984. There are two records from Fife: one at Elie Bay on 21 April 1966, and one on the Eden Estuary on 22 April 1985. There are also three single records: one at Carnoustie, Angus on 8 September 1974, one at Culbin Bar, Moray & Nairn on 12 June 1975, and a male at Brora, Sutherland (Highland) on 27 May 1994.*

*The 2007/08 bird at South Ford was the first record for the Outer Hebrides and was very atypical of previous Scottish records, being the first to overwinter. Kentish Plover remains a very rare visitor to Scotland and the pattern of occurrence is one of predominantly east coast records in spring. Elsewhere in Britain most records are also in spring with a notable bias to south-east England. Most previous birds in Scotland have been very short-stayers, with none lingering more than five days, whereas in England many birds tend to stay around the area they are found much longer.*

*The fact that there is only one previous autumn record for Scotland (Angus 1974) and no previous west coast record makes the occurrence of the South Ford bird all the more remarkable.*

### Reference

**Clunie, B. 2002.** Kentish Plover, Aberlady Bay, Lothian 11–14th May 2002. *Birding Scotland* 5 (3): 60–61.



Plate 67. Eastern Olivaceous warbler, Foula, Shetland, September 2008. © Pete Gordon

## Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Foula, Shetland, 23–25 September 2008 – the fifth Scottish record

P.R. GORDON & M.S. SCOTT

At about 09:00 on the morning of 23 September 2008 we were birding at Harrier, towards the north end of Foula, when PRG became aware of a pale greyish bird on a wire fence, which was making sallies down to the ground in a grassy field. Having alerted MSS to the bird our first impression was of a medium-sized, greyish warbler somewhat like a Garden Warbler. However, once we had seen the bird well, the pale supercilium, whitish fringes to many of the wing feathers, long bill, sloping forehead and regular tail-dipping all suggested it was an 'olivaceous warbler', but which one? We were also aware of recent difficulties over identification

of greyish *Hippolais* warblers and so spent considerable time in critical examination of each plumage feature and taking photographs of the bird. Although it disappeared shortly after being found, after an extensive search it then reappeared in the same spot. The bird was still present for the next two days allowing at least 10 other birders to catch up with it. The bird had a routine by which it was seen well in the mornings but would disappear, presumably to roost, in late afternoon and was only reliably reported, as far as we are aware, on or near various fence lines within 100 m of where it was originally found.



## Description

The bird was a strongly built, but rather elongated warbler with rather long tail, a primary projection in the folded wing equal to the length of the exposed tertials, a long and fairly strong bill with (usually) sloping forehead and thick legs. It kept mostly to the fence line, making occasional sallies down to the ground, but would sometimes spend more time feeding on the ground, when it appeared to prefer open, short turf to the stands of rushes (*Juncus* sp.). It frequently dipped its tail, but with no sign of any circular movements (looked for).

Upperparts: grey-brown with tail and wings slightly darker than back, all flight-feathers with conspicuous pale fringes. Had an obvious white supercilium extending from base of bill to rear of eye only; at times showed slightly warmer, brown cheek-patch which contrasted with white lower portion of eye-ring. Conspicuous white outer tail feathers, though the exact extent of white was not determined. Underparts: white, but hint of buffier shoulders at times, depending on posture. Long, white undertail coverts. Bare parts: bill - fairly stout and dagger-shaped in profile, wide-based when seen from above, pink with darker grey on upper mandible not extending down to cutting edges, conspicuous paler tip. Legs - grey.

**Peter Gordon, Nethybridge, Inverness-shire**

Email: [peter.gordon@rspb.org.uk](mailto:peter.gordon@rspb.org.uk)

**Martin Scott, Brue, Isle of Lewis**

Email: [martin.scott@rspb.org.uk](mailto:martin.scott@rspb.org.uk)

## Eastern Olivaceous Warbler

### - its status in Scotland

This 'new' species resulted from the split of 'Olivaceous Warbler' into two by the BOURC in 2002. The westernmost race of 'Olivaceous Warbler' *Hippolais pallida opaca*, which breeds in Spain and coastal north-west Africa, gained full species status as Western Olivaceous Warbler *H. opaca*, while the remaining four races were considered to represent another single species -



Plates 68–69. Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, Foula, Shetland, September 2008. © Pete Gordon (above). Martin Scott (below)



Eastern Olivaceous Warbler *H. pallida* (Knox et al. 2002, Parkin et al. 2004). This species pair and the very closely related Booted Warbler *H. caligata* and Sykes's Warbler *H. rama* (both also elevated to separate full species by BOURC in 2002) represent one of the most tricky set of identification challenges to birders in Britain and the wider Palearctic (Svensson 2001).

The races of Eastern Olivaceous Warbler breed in the following areas: *reiseri* - easternmost Morocco, northern and eastern Algeria (inland), Tunisia, and westernmost Libya; *laneni* - east Niger to westernmost Sudan and south to NE Nigeria and northernmost Cameroon; *pallida* - Egypt and Sudan; *elaieca* - coastal Slovenia, Croatia and Albania, Hungary, Romania and the western Black Sea coast southwards through Greece, Turkey and the Caucasus to Syria, The Lebanon, Israel and Jordan, and eastwards through northern Iraq, Iran, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and along the south-west coast of the Arabian Gulf. The *laneni* population is sedentary, but the other three races of Eastern Olivaceous Warbler winter in sub-Saharan Africa eastwards to Sudan and the Red Sea coast and south to Kenya and northern Tanzania.

There have been 13 records of Eastern Olivaceous Warbler in Britain to the end of 2008, all attributed to the race *elaieca*, with five of these in Scotland including the Foula individual. The four previous Scottish records were all trapped and ringed. The first for Scotland (and Britain) was on the Isle of May on 24 September 1967. This bird was killed by a Great Grey Shrike on 26 September, with the headless corpse now in the National Museums of Scotland's collection. The second was on Fair Isle on 5–13 June 1995, the third was a first-winter at Collieston, North-east Scotland on 13–21 September 2000 (see Crockett 2001), and the fourth was an adult at Sandwick and Hoswick, Shetland on 18–28 August 2002.

The other British records are: Sandwich Bay, Kent on 27 September 1967 (remarkably within days of the Isle of May bird's occurrence); St Mary's, Scilly on 16–26 October 1984; St Mary's, Scilly on 17–27 October 1985; Benacre, Suffolk on 12–13 August 1995; St Agnes, Scilly

from 24 September to 8 October 1998; Portland, Dorset on 4–5 July 1999; a first-winter at Portland, Dorset on 31 August 2003, and Portland, Dorset on 17 May 2008.

There are also three records from Ireland, all in County Cork: at Dursley Island on 16 September 1977; at Cape Clear from 18 September to 9 October, and at Cape Clear from 24 September to 1 October 2006. In addition there are records from France (3), Belgium, Austria (3), Germany (3), Denmark, Finland (3), Sweden (3), Norway and Iceland, with three of these found in May, two in June, two in July, one in August, six in September and four in October.

The spring and early July records presumably involve displaced overshooting birds heading north to their normal breeding areas. The autumn records could be explained to be a result of these individuals being genetically aberrant for their navigational compass and undergoing a 'reversed migration'.

An interesting feature of the British and Irish records is that most of the birds actually stay around for several days with only four of the 16 only seen on the first finding date - average length of stay is seven days in Scotland, 5.5 days in England and 10.3 days in Ireland (overall = 6.9). The next mainland Scottish bird will hopefully follow this same trend.

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- Svensson, L. 2001. Identification of Western and Eastern Olivaceous, Booted and Sykes's Warbler. *Birding World* 14: 192–219.



Plate 70. Brown Flycatcher, Fair Isle, September 2008. © Mark Breaks

## Brown Flycatcher on Fair Isle, 24–25 September 2008 – the second Scottish record

D.N. SHAW

Despite the (very light) westerly winds, 23 September 2008 had seen a significant arrival of quality birds on Fair Isle, including a Pectoral Sandpiper, a Red-throated Pipit, two Lanceolated Warblers and rounded off with a Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler. The wind was still in the west the following morning, but slightly more northerly and very light. Trap-round had produced a few warblers, including Yellow-broweds and with everyone still on a high from yesterday, it was with optimism that I headed off on the 'north census' - whilst *everyone* else headed south.

It had been a pleasant walk (nice not to be battling against a wind) and I'd seen a handful of migrants, including half-a-dozen Yellow-browed Warblers and a few flycatchers by the time I'd reached Felsi Geo on the west side of Ward Hill. As I started to ascend the steep side of the hill I could see a few Yellow-browed Warblers flitting ahead of me and as I got within sight of the ruins on the top I spied the silhouette of a dumpy-looking flycatcher doing its thing (flycatching!). It puzzled me slightly but I thought I'd catch up with it in a minute once I reached the top. Meanwhile I had a load of Yellow-browed Warblers to try and count.

As I reached the top I managed to count 10 Yellow-browed Warblers in view at once (there may have been more) but there was no sign of the flycatcher. I headed down to the next building, half way down the other side of the hill, with a couple of Yellow-broweds moving ahead of me. As I got there a greyish bird flitted out at the far end and sat for a split second in the open. I raised my binoculars and saw it had a fairly plain, greyish-brown face, with a large black eye with a prominent whitish eye-ring - the missing flycatcher! From the fleeting view, I thought it looked most like a Red-breasted Flycatcher and as it disappeared round the end of the building I expected to see the white in the tail. But no! It was completely plain - greyish! This got me thinking - could it have been a Brown Flycatcher? I rushed to the end of the building but it had gone again! Blast! I hurried down to the peat cuttings, hoping to find it there but no sign.

I made my way round to the mast where I saw a few more Yellow-browed Warblers and a Pied Flycatcher and then spent 10–15 minutes chatting to the workman there and identified the large brown bird with white wing tips he had

seen as a Bonxie. He departed and I was having another look around the buildings when I saw the mystery bird again on the roof of one of the old buildings before it flitted off again and sat on the hillside behind. This was the first chance I had to get a decent look at it and I had almost convinced myself that yes, it was a Brown Flycatcher! Trembling, I attempted to take a few record shots in case it disappeared. I then phoned my Assistant Wardens and a few birders on the isle who I had numbers for and phoned the Observatory to get the 'Red Flag' in motion. I then texted the Shetland Grapevine before settling down to write some notes and take a few more photos of the bird.

My assistant Mark Breaks was first to arrive and the flycatcher was by now much more settled and feeding from the fence surrounding the mast. The crowds (c. 40 people in total) soon arrived and all had excellent views. There was a trickle of interested islanders all afternoon making their way up there and the bird dutifully obliged right up to dusk. It was seen again, at first light, the following morning by one Observatory guest with a big camera, but not afterwards.



Plate 71. Brown Flycatcher, Fair Isle, September 2008. © Deryk Shaw



Plates 72–73. *Brown Flycatcher, Fair Isle, September 2008.* © Deryk Shaw

### Description

A small, squat, greyish-brown flycatcher with a short tail and large black eye. **Head:** crown plain, grey-brown. Lores and ear-coverts similar. Although photos actually show an area of grey in front of eye, I did not notice this in the field. Narrow white eye-ring and large black eye stood out. Broad off-white sub-moustachial stripe and a faint thin grey-brown malar stripe. **Upperparts:** nape, mantle, back, and rump all uniform greyish-brown. Tail and wings slightly darker but tertials were also thinly edged buff along outer web with prominent white blobs at the tip that extended onto inner web. Similarly, the greater coverts were also thinly edged white-buff with prominent white tips forming an obvious wing bar (and confirming it as a first-winter) although the outer two seemed slightly shorter with a deeper buff along edge and at tip. On close views, the secondaries were also very thinly edged white-buff, forming a very slight panel. **Underparts:** chin/throat unmarked off-white. A very slight greyish wash to unmarked breast. Belly and undertail coverts white. **Bare parts:** eye, large, black; legs, short, black; bill, broad-based, dark with pale pinkish base to lower mandible.

*Deryk Shaw, Fair Isle Bird Observatory*

### Brown Flycatcher

#### – its status in Scotland

*This species breeds in small numbers in south-eastern China, with the bulk of the population occupying a breeding range from southern Russia and Mongolia eastwards through south-east Russia and north-east China to Japan. The northern population (nominat race) migrates to southern China, west and south India and south into Malaysia as far as the Philippines.*

*There have been three British records: a first-summer on Fair Isle on 1–2 July 1992, an adult at Flamborough Head, East Yorkshire on 3–4 October 2007, and the first-winter bird on Fair Isle described above.*

*The 1992 Fair Isle bird was initially placed in Category D of the British List by the BOURC on the grounds that its date of occurrence was outside of typical vagrancy dates expected of a long-distance Far-East Asian vagrant. The discovery of the 2007 bird led to a re-assessment of the 1992 bird and its subsequent elevation to Category A and acceptance as the first British record. There are three other European records: in Denmark on 24–25 September 1959; in Sweden on 27–30 September 1986, and in Greece on 4 September 1993.*

*An account of the finding of the 1992 bird, including a full description, is given in Harvey, P. 1992. The Brown Flycatcher on Fair Isle - a new British bird. Birding World 5: 252–255.*



Plate 14. Gull-billed Tern, Tiree, Argyll, September 2008. © Michael McKee

## Gull-billed Tern, Tiree, Argyll, 29 September to 2 October 2008 - the first Argyll record

**M. McKEE**

Our annual autumn birding trip in 2008 saw us heading for Tiree, one of several Scottish islands I have spent time on over many years. Our first full day on Tiree was 29 September, a day which was overcast with near total cloud cover, showers and a Force 6 westerly wind. We picked up our hire-car by the quay before heading south, and our first stop was at Crossapol to look at the Lapwing flock there at about 10.30 am. Shortly after getting out of the car Trevor Warrick called to the rest of the group (Chris Turner, Alan Hayden, Leo Pyke and myself) that he had a tern flying over the adjacent field towards us. We all got on to the bird, and as it approached we all quickly

realised that the bill structure wasn't right for Sandwich Tern and that amazingly we were watching a Gull-billed Tern.

The bird remained in the Crossapol area throughout our stay and was still present when we left the island on 2 October. During these four days we regularly saw it again in the field that we had initially seen it, although it did go missing for long periods as it fed further afield. The original field was sheep-grazed grassland, and the tern fed by flying over the field regularly swooping down to pick up worms. Occasionally it landed to pick up the worms, but more often than not it picked them up in flight.

Based on the full black cap speckled with white we initially aged the bird as an adult but after subsequent reference to *Terns of Europe and North America* (Malling Olsen, K. & Larsson, H. 1995. Helm, London) the appearance of the bird seemed to more closely match the illustration of second-summer plumage. The Teree individual had worn dark primaries & primary coverts and the presence of a faint secondary bar. In the field the rump appeared white in flight, but close examination of photographs indicates it to be a mixture of grey and white feathers with the white feathers mainly confined to the uppertail coverts, a feature that may also suggest immaturity. Despite these features the bird was aged/accepted as being an adult by BBRC.

**Michael McKee, Windsor, Berkshire**  
 Email: michael.mckee@virgin.net

## Gull-billed Tern - its status in Scotland

*This is a widespread species globally with six different subspecies and it is the nominate race *Gelochelidon nilotica nilotica* which occurs in the Western Palearctic. Its breeding range is fragmented with isolated colonies in wetland areas in Denmark and northern Germany and from southern Spain and France eastwards through the Mediterranean, Turkey and the Middle East, around the Black and Caspian Seas and through Kazakhstan, Pakistan, and northern India. European birds winter in sub-Saharan West Africa, in East Africa south from the Nile, and throughout the Persian Gulf states east to India.*

*The 2008 Teree individual was the 10th Gull-billed Tern to be recorded in Scotland out of a total of 330 birds in Britain to the end of 2008, and was the first in Argyll. The first accepted British record is of a bird obtained in 1813 in Sussex, while the first Scottish record was not*



Plate 75. Gull-billed Tern, Teree, Argyll, September 2008. © Michael McKee

until 100 years later when an exhausted male (which died) was found on Pentland Skerries, Orkney on 7 May 1913. The next Scottish record was on Fair Isle in 1971, followed by the only mainland record - one at Bo'ness (Upper Forth) on 21 May 1977. Subsequent records have come from the Outer Hebrides (3–6 May 1987, 14–16 July 2000, 13–31 July 2003), Dumfries & Galloway (12 October 1990), Orkney (27 May 1992) and Shetland (25 June 1995).

The Tiree bird was only the second (proper) autumn record in Scotland, with two 'summer' records in July and all others occurring in spring between 3 May and 25 June. This mirrors the occurrence pattern elsewhere in Britain where birds have been found in mid-March and from mid-April to the end of October, with a notable peak in early and mid-May and a smaller autumn peak in mid-August to early September.

The geographical distribution of records in Scotland is slightly surprising with four on the Northern Isles, five in the west and just one in the east (Bo'ness 1977), particularly when considering observer distribution and that records elsewhere in Britain show a marked bias to the coastal counties of SE England in spring and to the south-east and east coasts as far as Northumberland, and inland counties in the southern half of England, in autumn. Norfolk alone accounts for nearly 70% of all records in England.

The great majority of records in Britain are of fly-past birds or individuals only seen for short periods on the date they are found. Half of the records in Scotland are of 'one-day' birds, but interestingly half involve birds that have stayed for several days, with the 2003 bird at Rubha Ardvule, South Uist (Outer Hebrides) actually lingering at the same site for 19 days. Only one bird in England is documented to have stayed longer - at Titchwell, Norfolk from 7–27 July 1980, though a pair bred at Abberton Reservoir, Essex in 1950 (the only time ever in Britain), and while only noted from 2–10 July must have been present for much longer as they successfully hatched a chick, though sadly this was found dead on 13 July.

Many older British records were rejected following a review in 1993 (BBRC Report in British Birds 1993), and this is a notoriously difficult bird to identify and get a record accepted due to its similarity to immature Sandwich Terns. There has been a steady decline in Gull-billed Tern records in Britain since the formation of BBRC, with an average of 7.7 records per year during the 1960s, but 3.3 in the 1990s and less than three from 2000 to date. This downturn is thought to be a direct result of the decline of the breeding populations in Denmark and Germany.



Plate 76. Gull-billed Tern, Tiree, Argyll, September 2008. © Michael McKee





Plate 77. Greater Sand Plover, Ythan Estuary, North-east Scotland, September 2008. © Graham Mead

## Greater Sand Plover, Ythan Estuary, 12–19 September 2008 - the first record for North-east Scotland

D. COOPER & B. KAY

With time to spare before catching the ferry from Aberdeen to Shetland on the evening of 12 September 2008, Brenda Kay and I visited the Ythan estuary over the midday high tide period. At 1 p.m. we headed towards the estuary mouth and scoped a distant Dunlin flock on the opposite shore. Beside, and standing taller than, a couple of Ringed Plovers was a significantly larger non-breeding plumaged sand plover! It had ungainly proportions, a long and large black bill, a large, bold, black eye, large, deep and obvious pectoral patch, paler and sandier upperparts colouration than the darker Ringed Plovers, and long legs.

Whilst scoping the now motionless bird, I asked BK to read the relevant text on Greater and Lesser Sand Plovers from the *Collins Bird Guide*; my

heart sank knowing it was going to be difficult to see any critical detail at this range. However, I reconfirmed my initial impressions: of its large size; of it being considerably larger and longer-legged than the accompanying Ringed Plovers - pro Greater; large head with a steep forehead and very plump body of ungainly proportions - pro Greater; all black bill, always appeared large, heavy, long and deep-based - pro Greater; huge bold round black eye very obviously centred on the head - pro Greater; large, deep pectoral patches clearly not meeting in the centre of the breast (eliminating any thoughts of Caspian Plover); long sturdy legs with obvious long tibia that appeared pale, certainly not black, although the actual colour was impossible to determine at the range - again pro Greater Sand Plover.

Over the next 15 minutes the following plumage features were also noted: pale forehead and broad indistinct supercilium extending well behind the eye; the crown was a pale, sandy-brown with some darker markings giving a slightly scaly appearance; lores and ear-coverts sandy-brown neatly demarcated from a clean white throat that in turn was neatly bordered below by large, 'deep', slightly rufous-toned pectoral patches that failed to meet in the centre of the breast; breast, belly, flanks and undertail-coverts white; mantle sandy-brown but clearly very faded being paler over large areas and thus not giving a uniform appearance; upperwing coverts and tertials also very faded appearing very pale and clearly abraded; primaries noticeably projecting beyond, and being contrastingly darker, than the tertials and proving the darkest visible plumage anywhere on the bird. Thus, no plumage seemed at odds with an identification of Greater Sand Plover and referring to the *Collins Bird Guide* it was a close fit to the illustration of an adult female Greater Sand Plover.

A phone conversation with my father stressed the importance of the difference in the flight pattern of the species - it hadn't yet been seen to fly. Then the bird started to preen its tail and twice revealed much white at the base of the tail sides, and, more importantly, a noticeable dark subterminal bar. This felt like 'the clincher', so at this point I phoned the news out.

Then a Peregrine flew across the estuary unsettling the Dunlin flock, but the Ringed Plovers and sand plover thankfully remained in situ. Then pandemonium; a low-flying helicopter flushed everything; the sand plover took flight with the Ringed Plovers, revealing broad white wingbars across its upperwings. The flock flew up the river and were lost to view behind the dunes. We spent the next 90 minutes scanning the estuary with the two local birders whilst others searched unsuccessfully upriver.



Plate 78. Greater Sand Plover, Dunbar, Lothian, September 2008. © Mark Darling

Then at 3 p.m., the hoped-for phone call - it had been relocated in a ploughed field on the northern side of the estuary and was showing well... a quick car dash, and a short walk, and there it was. At a much closer range now, it appeared even larger and of even greater proportions, and viewed against a background of dark soil it appeared much paler and greyer, its upperparts clearly very heavily abraded. More critically its leg colour could be seen to be a dirty-yellowish with a slight greenish component and its large black bill still appeared reassuringly long and was clearly pointed and not blunt-tipped. In the next 30 minutes around 25 birders arrived to see it and everyone seemed content with the identification as Greater Sand Plover, with more discussion taking place on the elimination of the possibility of it being a Caspian Plover rather than a Lesser Sand Plover. At 3.40 p.m. it flew back towards the estuary and appeared to land close to where we had first found it.

The Greater Sand Plover was subsequently seen daily up to 19 September, either in the outer estuary or in the large ploughed field on the east side south of the A975 road bridge. It was still present until 'early afternoon' on the 19th, but there was then no sign of it between 1.45 p.m. and 4 p.m. Remarkably it was relocated at 7 p.m. that evening 150 km to the SSW on the rocky shore at Broxmouth, East Lothian by Mark Eden and his wife Harriet. Next morning it proved difficult to relocate, but it was eventually seen well on the same rock pool and further north towards Dunbar. At 3.40 p.m. it was spooked by a Grey Heron and flew off east, and did not return.

On reading Hirschfeld *et al.* (2000), the first-summer Greater Sand Plover illustrated in their Figure 10 is clearly depicted with heavily abraded and bleached wing coverts, plain mantle feathers and rufous-toned pectoral patches all very reminiscent of the Ythan bird. Indeed it was accepted by BBRC as a first-summer bird. Furthermore, close examination of images by Graham Morrice and Craig Shaw reveal a pencil-fine upper border to the pectoral patch (not noted by ourselves in the field). This may be a clue as to its racial identity, as Hirschfeld *et al.* suggest this is a feature of *crassirostris*, although such a tentative subspecific diagnosis of a non-breeding plumaged individual is probably just wishful thinking and pushing the boundaries far too far...

#### Acknowledgement

Calum Scott provided the details of the bird's relocation in Lothian.

**David Cooper & Brenda Kay, 19 Copestake Drive, Burgess Hill, West Sussex RH15 0LD.**

*Email: d.cooper@burgesshill-school.com*

#### Greater Sand Plover - its status in Scotland

*Greater Sand Plover Charadrius leschenaultii is typically divided into three subspecies: columbinus – which breeds in Turkey south to Israel and Jordan and into Iraq and south-west Iran and winters in the eastern Mediterranean, Red Sea and north Arabian Gulf coasts; crassirostris – which breeds in Armenia,*



Plate 79. Greater Sand Plover, Dunbar, Lothian, September 2008. © Dave Brown ([birding.daveb.co.uk](http://birding.daveb.co.uk))

Azerbaijan, north-west Iran and from the Caspian Sea eastwards to southern Kazakhstan, westernmost Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan and winters coastally in the southern Red Sea, the Arabian Gulf and Gulf of Oman to Pakistan; and nominate *leschenaultii* – which breeds from south-east Kazakhstan and western China eastwards through northern China to Mongolia and winters in south-east Africa, Pakistan and Indonesia. Racial identification of these three forms in the field is extremely difficult, with the situation further complicated by the fact that Lesser Sand Plover is very similar and has five subspecies to consider. Although none of the British records has been definitely ascribed to a particular race, it is believed that sightings most likely involve *crassirostris* or *leschenaultii* birds.

There have been accepted records of 14 Greater Sand Plovers in Britain to the end of 2008, with four of these in Scotland. The first British record was one at Paghham Harbour, Sussex from at least 9 December 1978 to 1 January 1979, while during 1979 two further birds were found – an immature at Sandside Bay, Deerness, Orkney from 9–14 June and a first-winter at Chew Valley Lake, Avon from 17 November to 10 February 1980. The other Scottish records are: a first-summer male at Aberlady Bay, Lothian on 24 June 1982; a male at Tynninghame, Lothian on 6–7 June 1999 (Scott & Griffin 1999); the fourth individual is the Ythan Estuary and Dunbar bird featured above. A summer-plumaged bird at Donmouth, North-east Scotland on 18–19 August 1991 was originally accepted as a Greater Sand Plover (and included as such in Forrester *et al.* 2007), but 19 years later, in 2010, its re-identification as a Lesser Sand Plover was accepted (*British Birds* 102: 530). The record currently awaits confirmation by BOURC as the first for Britain. This makes the 2008 Ythan bird the first Greater Sand Plover for the North-east Scotland recording area.

The other British records are: one at Breydon Water, Norfolk on 17 April 1981; one seen at Spurn, Yorkshire from 29 July to 6 August 1981, and then again at North Coates Point, Lincolnshire on 7 August; a first-summer or adult at Cley and Blakeney Harbour, Norfolk from 30 July to 22 August and 2 September

1985; one at Dawlish Warren, Devon, from 27 April to 4 May 1988, with presumably the same bird present at St Bride's, Peterstone Wentlooge, Gwent on 16 May; one at South Walney, Cumbria, from 19 July to 5 August 1988; a female or first-summer at Cley, Norfolk from 5–8 August 1992 and then at Tilbury, Essex, from 10–14 August, and at Cliffe, Kent on 14 August 1992; a female or first-summer at Pilsey Island, Sussex, on 28 July 1996; a male at Beacon Ponds, Kilsay, Yorkshire on 3 July 2004, with presumably the same individual then re-found at Snettisham, Norfolk on 4–5 July.

Despite two of the first three British records (1978 Sussex & 1979/80 Avon) being of birds 'overwintering', the other 12 birds have all been found between 17 April and 12 September, with most occurring in July and August. Apart from the 1979/80 Avon bird, all records have involved birds in coastal habitats, and all have been on the east side of Britain except for the Avon bird and the 1988 Cumbria individual. While this is still a very rare bird in Britain many individuals have lingered for several days at their site of discovery allowing observers to catch up with them. The average stay in Britain is just over 15 days: boosted by the long-stays of the 1979/80 Avon bird – 86 days, and 1985 Norfolk bird – 35 days. However, would-be observers of this species in Scotland should be mindful that this average drops to 4.25 days north of the border, with eight days the maximum stay.

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Plate 80. Grey Phalarope, Scatness, Shetland, October 2008. © Hugh Harrop

## The unprecedented influx of Grey Phalaropes into northern Scotland in October 2008

R.L. MCMILLAN, M.S. CHAPMAN, S.E. DUFFIELD, D.N. SHAW,  
S.J. WILLIAMS, B. RABBITS & S.L. RIVERS

The Grey (Red) Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicarius* has a circumpolar breeding range, with the bulk of the world population nesting along the northern coasts of North America and the Eastern Palearctic, and on islands in the Arctic and sub-Arctic zones north of 60°. In the Western Palearctic it is a scarce and localised breeding bird confined to Iceland (less than 50 pairs), Svalbard (around 300 pairs) and Novaya Zemlya (less than 50 pairs). There are three principal wintering areas, all in plankton-rich zones 'at sea': in the Canary and Guinea currents off the west coast of Africa, to the south of the Canary Islands and north of the Equator; in the Benguela current off the west coast of Namibia and South Africa, and in the Humboldt current off the west coast of South America. It is the most pelagic of the phalaropes, and its migration routes are typically entirely oceanic. Sightings of birds in the North Atlantic indicate that there is a major south-easterly migration

route for the North American population to the wintering grounds off Africa (Bourne 1970, Cramp & Simmons 1983).

The Grey Phalarope is a rare to scarce passage migrant in Scotland, seen most regularly off exposed west coast headlands during and after strong westerly winds between early September and late October. Up until October 2008, Grey Phalaropes had been recorded from all coastal counties/recording areas except the Clyde Islands. However, only the Outer Hebrides had recorded high numbers – at least 460 to the end of 2007, with the next highest totals coming from Orkney and Shetland, though in both cases far fewer than 100 birds had been noted. The highest year total was from 1990 when over 110 were noted, all but 12 of these on the Outer Hebrides (Dix 1991, Rivers 2004), and the highest day count from a single site was of 19 past North Bornish, South Uist (OH) on 21 September 1990.

In October 2008 all this changed, with an unprecedented influx of birds into north and north-west Scotland which set new national and recording area highest annual and day counts as detailed below.

### **Shetland and Fair Isle (MSC & DNS)**

The weather in October 2008 in sea area Fair Isle was predominately Atlantic. Birds of eastern origin were increasingly hard to find on Shetland and the strength of the mainly SW to W winds seemed to steadily increase through the latter part of the month. The first Grey Phalaropes were on Fair Isle with a single at Klingers Geo on 11 October followed by two in South Haven on 15 October. Further north, in the rest of Shetland, force 9 south-westerlies on 20th tempted seawatchers to the headlands, and a Grey Phalarope bouncing off the wave crests as it flew south off Eshaness in north-west mainland Shetland signalled the start of what was by far the largest influx ever recorded in the isles. There was a further singleton at Fair Isle on 23rd and one at Sumburgh on 24th, but the main arrival was from 25th, when winds increased to SW force 11. The vast majority of birds were found between 25–27 October, with weather conditions calming thereafter. The last new discoveries were three on 31 October on Shetland, by which time most of the earlier birds had departed, and singles on 2nd and 9 November on Fair Isle.

New bird arrival dates were as follows:

**Fair Isle:** one on 11 October; two from 15–19 October when one departed plus another present on 18th; one on 23rd taking total back to two; two more on 27th; then singles on 2nd and 9 November.

**Shetland:** one at Esha Ness on 20 October; one at Scord, Sumburgh on 24th, with presumably the same there on 27th; three first-winters at Boddam Voe on 25th; one at Pool of Virkie on 25th; three at Scatness, three at Loch of Hillwell, two at Wick of Ireland, Bigton, and eight at Scalloway – all on 26th; four at Wick of Ireland, Bigton on 27th; four at Pool of Virkie on 27th with one remaining to 28th; six first-winters at Scatness from 27–28th; four first-winters at Norwick, Unst, from 27 October to 2 November, with one still present to 8th; six at Wick of Ireland, Bigton on 28th, including at least five

first-winters; two at Hillswick on 29th, including one found dead under a window (specimen now at NMS, Edinburgh); three at Hamars Ness, Fetlar on 31 October.

The majority of birds were in South Mainland, generally in small groups and close inshore off beaches or headlands. As there seemed to be some duplication in records, with a few birds apparently commuting between locations, around 20 there is a reasonable approximation, with a further 18 elsewhere in Shetland, and at least nine on Fair Isle, giving a minimum total of 47 individuals. This is a relatively small number compared to the counts in other parts of Scotland at the same time, but is approximately equal to the total of previous records in Shetland. The previous best year was 1989, when similar weather conditions brought in seven birds - all in South Mainland or Fair Isle. However, these occurred earlier in the autumn, in mid-September.

### **Orkney (SJW)**

On Orkney, Grey Phalaropes are a rare and infrequent visitor with one to five birds usually recorded each year. In the autumn of 2008 birds this was the case until late October when birds started to appear in unusual numbers. Two had been seen flying past Dennis Head, North Ronaldsay as early as 11 August, but the next were singles past there on 6–8 October, then one at Brides Ness, North Ronaldsay on 18th and two at Bewan and two more off North Ronaldsay on 20th.

From 21st, and even more so after the gale on 25th, birds started to occur in unprecedented numbers, including ten on 21st, ten at Brides Ness alone on 22nd and even one on a flooded field at Wester Sand, Holm on 25th. On 26th some bays around the West Mainland were checked: nearly every bay contained birds, and in the seven that did, the numbers ranged from one to 12 birds – the latter off Point of Ness, Stromness.

After 26th the vast majority of high counts occurred around the boundaries of Scapa Flow, with the Churchill Barriers that link the South Isles acting as a collecting basket for the birds. Large concentrations occurred along the western sides of the Barriers and along the

west shores of Glimps Holm and Hunda. Figure 1 shows the highest flock numbers recorded daily in late October and early November at Number 2 Barrier and off the neighbouring island, Glimps Holm.

Although no birds were recorded on 31st, this was almost certainly due to a lack of observer coverage. The large concentrations of birds were very mobile at times and went absent for short periods but always returned. The highest day count from the areas near the Barriers/Causeways was 141 on 30 October, with 110 of these noted about 100 m off the north-west corner of Glimps Holm. Birds remained there in large numbers up until 2 November, with 90 at Number 1 Causeway alone and a further 20 at the southern entrance to Scapa Flow at Hoxa Sound, South Ronaldsay. Numbers dropped quickly from then, with the last sighting off the No. 1 Barrier on 8 November, while North Ronaldsay had four on 29 October, three on 31st and a final single on 9 November.

Away from Scapa Flow birds were recorded in much smaller numbers during this period, mainly involving one to three birds, however a flock of 33 were in Carness Bay, St Ola on the east side of Mainland on 27th. Assuming that birds seen in peripheral areas were additional to those at the Barriers, then a total of at least 200 birds being involved would be a conservative estimate.

**Outer Hebrides (SED & BR)**

Prior to 1986, Grey Phalarope was considered a rare visitor to the Outer Hebrides, but a subsequent increase in sightings changed its status to a scarce to uncommon autumn migrant, with a few winter records and a handful of records from spring. The largest annual totals were of 98–138 birds in 1990 (Dix 1991), and 65 in 2005, with the best day count being 19 off North Bornish, South Uist on 21 September 1990, with 18 there the following day, and five flying south plus 6–10 birds on the beach at North Bay, South Uist on 1 October 1991.

In autumn 2008, the first bird to appear was a single at Rubha Ardvule, South Uist from 13–16 September (a Stilt Sandpiper was also present here on 14–15th). There was a single at Smerclate, South Uist on 3 October, but then no

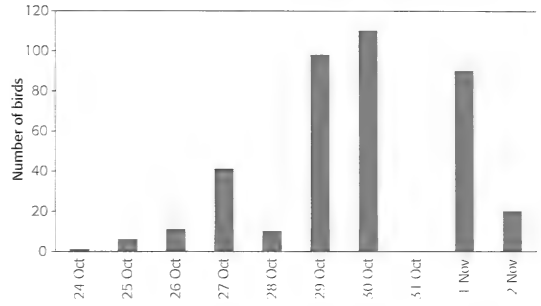


Figure 1. Numbers of Grey Phalaropes recorded off Number 2 Barrier and Glimps Holm, Orkney, October–November 2008.

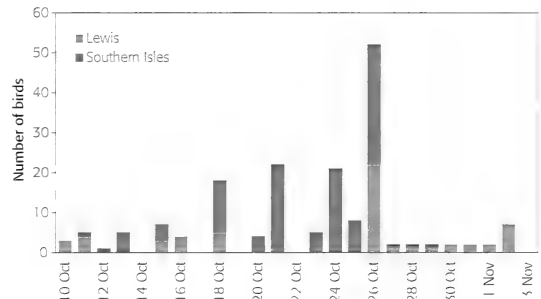


Figure 2. Numbers of Grey Phalaropes recorded in the Outer Hebrides, October–November 2008.

more reports until 10th, with three off Bru, Lewis during the morning. Four were seen in a 2.5 hour afternoon watch at Labost, Lewis on 11th, and just singles in the south on 11th and 12th. On 13th a force 4–5 westerly wind produced at least four off Griminish Point, North Uist, and a further single at Rubha Ardvule.

All other records listed by islands:

**Lewis:** three were seen off Labost on 15 October in a F 7–8 WSW to W wind. Four were noted flying south-west past Labost, on 16th in a F 7 NW wind, whilst five were seen in a morning seawatch from near Arnol on 18th (heavy hail showers). The main influx occurred a week later. On 26 October six were seen around Bragar Bay (Port Mhòr Bragar), with three more nearby at Arnol Bay (Port Arnol) and another three at the beach near Barvas. One lingered off Siadar from 27th, with two there on 30 October, and both remained to 2 November, with five also present at Port Mhòr Bragar on the latter date. The last was a single in Bragar Bay on 11–13 November.

**North Uist:** sightings from Griminish Point included - one south on 15 October; 13 south on 18th (W wind F6); a single on 20th; 22 on 21st (W F6–7), and 20 south on 26 October (W F6). In addition a single bird was found at a croft at Claddach Kirkibost on 26 October.

**Benbecula:** four flew through Stinky Bay on 24 October.

**South Uist:** sightings from Rubha Ardvule included four on 24 October; six flying past on 25th, with another lingering on the north side of the point; eight south on 26th, when one was still lingering on the north side of the point, and this is presumably also the individual seen there on 2 November. In addition, five were seen off Ardivachar on 24 October, one at Balgarva on 25 October, and one lingered off Peninerine on 27–29th. The last of the year was one seen briefly in North Bay on 17 November, but was rather overshadowed by the presence of the American Black Tern!

Very few, if any, of the birds noted in Lewis are thought likely to be responsible for sightings in the 'southern' isles since counts were either

around the same time or there was no corresponding increases further south later in the day or even the next day. Figure 2 above shows a series of peaks and troughs in the number of phalaropes recorded. The blank days may reflect lack of coverage rather than indicate waves of phalaropes passing the islands, although the sudden drop in numbers seen after the largest movement on 26 October indicates that birds didn't linger for long.

Given the gaps in observer coverage, the total of 165 birds noted during October–November is a very conservative representation of the likely numbers involved. A belief based on the fact that only 31 paused for more than a few minutes - 23 of these in Lewis. Just under 80% of the autumn's total (129 birds) were seen between 18–26 October, and as expected the favoured sea-watching sites clocked-up the majority of the birds, with 10 off the Butt of Lewis, 11 off Labost, about 37 off Rubha Ardvule and about 72 off Griminish Point.

The difference in numbers seen from Lewis (c. 50) and the 'southern' isles (c. 116) may simply reflect observer coverage, but may also be



Plate 81. Grey Phalarope, Bigton, Shetland, October 2008. © Hugh Harrop



influenced by the geography of the islands and the location of the key seawatching sites. Birds arriving at Lewis from north and north-west directions presumably split into those entering the Minch (unseen) and those heading down the west coast and passing the favoured seawatch sites, all of which lie within 20 miles of the Butt of Lewis at the extreme north end of the island. By contrast the headlands of North and South Uist have much longer stretches of coast to the north which will gather and funnel birds displaced by westerly storms, and which subsequently head south close inshore. Judging by the huge numbers seen off Skye many birds did end up to the east of Lewis before filtering south onto the north-east coast of Skye.

The increase in Grey Phalarope records in the Outer Hebrides since the mid-1980s reflects greater observer coverage, but is still probably under-representative of true numbers that occur. In addition to the previous high of 98–138 birds in 1990, there were 47 seen in 1991, at least 34 in 1989 and 2004, and 65 in 2005. In 2007 approximately 41 Grey Phalaropes were logged from the islands, with 36 of these seen during seawatches. The records were much more widely spread than during the autumn of 2008, with 15 seen between 1–23 September, 25 from 16–31 October and one on 8 November. 2007 also showed many more records from the southern isles, with 33 of the 41 birds recorded from there.

Unsurprisingly, 2008 provided the best ever annual total of Grey Phalaropes on the Outer Hebrides, and the count of 22 birds past Griminish Point, North Uist on 22 October is a new highest day total for a single site, closely followed by the 20 there on 26 October.

#### **Skye/Highland (RLM):**

Within the Highland recording area there were only eight previous accepted records of Grey Phalarope between 1983 and 2007 (D. Butterfield pers. comm.). In the context of Skye,

there were just three known records – singles on 10 October 1986, 2nd November 2000 and 17 October 2003, with only the latter seen from land (McMillan 2005).

During October 2008 Grey Phalaropes were recorded throughout the month on the Outer Hebrides. However, no birds were seen in Highland area until a dead bird was found at Kilmorie House, Strathaird, Skye, following a westerly gale, on 25 October. These winds then turned northerly, and on 27 October two reports were received of Grey Phalaropes feeding in the bay at Camas a Mhor-bheoil, near Gedintailor (at the south end of the Sound/Narrows of Raasay), involving a flock of 30 birds. The number of birds increased over the subsequent week as shown in the table below.

Conditions varied over the duration of the birds' stay and this might account for some fluctuations in the numbers of birds estimated. Although they tended to feed together, they would also disperse into smaller groups, and if these were feeding in other areas, they might have been overlooked. However, it is suspected that new birds were moving into the area until numbers peaked on 2 November, and then rapidly dispersed thereafter. What were assumed to be stragglers, remained in the vicinity until 18 November.

The scale of this influx into Skye/Highland is unprecedented, and although very large numbers were also recorded in Orkney, the overall numbers on Skye were higher, and concentrated even more into one area. At times the birds were behaving as a single large feeding flock. Birds were observed close to shore and were clearly systematically feeding along rough water at the tidal edge. Feeding flocks tended to be strung out along this edge, with birds constantly moving, presumably in response to food concentrations. Such behaviour is common on the wintering grounds,

	<b>October</b>					<b>November</b>						
Date	27	28	29	30	31	2	3	4	5	8	12	18
Number	30	52	36	150+	150+	197	100	80	16	2	1	2

**Table 1.** Numbers of Grey Phalaropes recorded near Gedintailor, Skye, October–November 2008.



Plate 82. 18 Grey Phalaropes, near Glimps Holm, Orkney, October 2008. © Stuart Williams

and may involve thousands of birds (Cramp & Simmons 1983), but is extremely unusual within the British Isles.

As the winds turned northerly after the initial influx it is suspected that birds which were distributed along the north-west coast of mainland Scotland were then pushed southwards into the seas between the mainland and Skye. Broadford Bay on Skye often holds large numbers of auks and petrels in such conditions, and it was significant that in a limited search on 28 October, eight Grey Phalaropes were also seen at this location. It would also seem that the Narrows of Raasay acted as a funnel for birds, and with its strong tidal currents and upwellings, provided rich feeding conditions for the birds which would explain why the birds favoured this area for such a protracted period of time. However, there is every possibility that the species may have used this location previously and had simply been overlooked. It is also interesting to speculate how many concentrations of birds there were in other parts of coastal north-west Highland during this period.

### Discussion

The October 2008 influx of Grey Phalaropes was the largest recorded in Scotland to date, and must have involved thousands of birds. In each of the four main areas of north and north-west Scotland involved (Shetland, Orkney, Highland & Outer Hebrides) new records were set for both overall numbers of birds and for day counts

from particular sites. As a result, the 197 birds present at Camas a Mhor-bheoil, near Gedintailor (Skye/Highland), on 2 November 2008 constitutes a new record day count (from a single site) for Scotland.

Given that the 2008 displacement involved thousands of birds, this strongly supports the idea that birds seen in Scotland/Britain after westerly gales originate from Nearctic populations moving to their wintering grounds off West and Southern Africa rather than from European breeding populations. One interesting aspect of this influx is that it occurred notably later than any previous ones. Up until the end of 2004, the vast majority of Grey Phalaropes recorded in Scotland had been in early September to early October (Forrester *et al.* 2007, p. 720), with 430 birds in September compared to at least 193 in October. Birds had been found in all other months, but only in low numbers (less than 30 in any month).

Observations from their breeding grounds indicate that adult females leave from the first half of July, with males staying until the young are fully fledged. The males and first of the juveniles depart from late July, and some juveniles can still be present to the end of August. Initially birds move to coastal areas before migrating south. The late date of the 2008 influx indicates many birds were either slow starting migration or were held-up by weather conditions in the Atlantic

before being displaced to north-west Scotland. Interestingly of those birds aged in the field, all were identified as being in first-winter plumage (juveniles initiate moult from September). Several Scottish observers commented that the birds close inshore did not appear to be moribund or starved, so they had obviously not struggled to find food.

Despite the comparatively large number of birds recorded in Scotland, there remain only a handful of truly inland records, involving birds in Clyde (3), Borders (2) and Ayrshire (Rivers 2004, Forrester *et al.* 2007, p. 721). It is difficult to know just how long certain birds in the 2008 influx actually lingered, though one at Rubha Ardvule, South Uist (OH) is believed to have been present for nine days and birds in Orkney and Skye could have stayed longer. The longest confirmed stay of a Grey Phalarope in Scotland is of one at Musselburgh, Lothian present from 27 July to 27 August 1972, though an adult female at Aberlady Bay, Lothian in 1960 probably stayed longer, and one at Strathclyde Country Park, Clyde in 2003 may have been present for over four weeks.

Elsewhere in Britain there have been several exceptionally high days counts of Grey Phalaropes, all from south-west England, and all associated with massive storms in autumn. A large flock of 'not less than 350 birds' was observed off Horse Point, St Agnes, Scilly on 23 September 1959, whilst a minimum of 1,000 birds was seen off St Agnes on 15 September 1960, with flocks of at least 700 birds observed off Torquay, Devon on 5 October, about 500 in the Portland/Weymouth area, Dorset on 9th and up to 1,000 in St Ives Bay, Cornwall on 16 October. In 2001, about 200 birds were seen from Horse Point, St Agnes on 5 October (Ferguson-Lees & Williamson 1960, Flood *et al.* 2005).

In Ireland, there have been similar large influxes of birds on several occasions, most notably again in 1960, when in the week of 16–23 September there were day counts of around 320 birds (possibly up to 500) at Cape Clear Island on both 17th and 20th, and 210 flew past Brandon Head, Co. Kerry on 16 October 1983 (Hutchinson 1989).

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**Bob McMillan, Elgol, Skye**

Email: [www.skye-birds.com](http://www.skye-birds.com)

**Mark Chapman, Mossbank, Shetland**

Email: [msc.1@btinternet.com](mailto:msc.1@btinternet.com)

**Deryk Shaw, Fair Isle**

Email: [deryk.shaw@btconnect.com](mailto:deryk.shaw@btconnect.com)

**Stuart Williams, Firth, Orkney**

Email: [stuart@craftyfirth.freemove.co.uk](mailto:stuart@craftyfirth.freemove.co.uk)

**Steve Duffield, Isle of South Uist**

Email: [steveduffield@hebrides.net](mailto:steveduffield@hebrides.net)

**Brian Rabbitts, Isle of North Uist**

Email: [rabbitts@hebrides.net](mailto:rabbitts@hebrides.net)

**Stuart Rivers, Edinburgh**

Email: [slr.bee-eater@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:slr.bee-eater@blueyonder.co.uk)

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# Birdline Scotland Review: 1 January to 30 June 2009

A. MURRAY & S.L. RIVERS



All records refer to the period 1 January–30 June 2009 unless otherwise stated.

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The highlights of January were definitely amongst the wildfowl and gulls, with wildfowl again to the fore in February. Interestingly several Ring Ouzels were reported during the winter, mostly in association with Fieldfares. While two Gyrfalcons provided the main rarity excitement, March saw some record-breaking early dates for some of the first 'summer' migrants to be seen in Scotland, most notably amongst hirundines. Many other common migrants also arrived early this spring, with Willow Warbler, Grasshopper Warbler and Lesser Whitethroat all appearing in good numbers. RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (NES) and NW Lewis both experienced 'purple patches' for

rarities in April, while a suite of Nearctic wildfowl found during the month led credibility to the origins of a Wood Duck on Shetland. Strathbeg continued to host a great range of birds in May, though Shetland and Fair Isle hosted most of the headline birds, including several Nearctic vagrants, with the pick of these being the second ever Brown-headed Cowbird for Scotland. By contrast June provided some very rare warblers from southern and eastern Europe with a River Warbler in Highland providing only the second ever chance to see this species on the mainland.

The following abbreviations for the respective recording areas are used within the text: Ang - Angus & Dundee; Arg - Argyll; Ayr - Ayrshire; Bord - Borders; Caith - Caithness; D&G - Dumfries & Galloway; High - Highland; Loth - Lothian; M&N - Moray & Nairn; NES - NE Scotland; Ork - Orkney; OH - Outer Hebrides; P&K - Perth & Kinross; Shet - Shetland; UF - Upper Forth.

**Tundra Bean Goose:** in January up to three were on Shetland, with one on Mainland Orkney from 16th and two seen near Meikle Loch (NES) on 24th. Up to 18 were seen in February with singles at Skateraw (Loth) on 7th and Auchlossan (NES) on 28th and the remainder on Orkney and Shetland. Around 10 were reported from Shetland during March, with the only one noted elsewhere being at Auchlossan (NES) still on 8th. **Taiga Bean Goose:** apart from the Central Scotland flock two were noted on Orkney in February - on North Ronaldsay and at Tankerness.

**Lesser White-fronted Goose:** a probable was reported at Tankerness (Ork) on 12 February. **Snow Goose:** a blue morph and a white morph were seen at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg reserve (NES) during January, single white morph Lessers were still in Ayrshire and Argyll, a blue morph Lesser was near Kinloss (M&N) on 19–20th and an adult white morph was seen flying south with Greylag Geese near Carsphairn (D&G) on 23 January. The white morph birds were still in Ayrshire and Argyll throughout February and March with another at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (NES) on 10–12 February, and one seen at Blackgrange (UF) on 23 March, and a white morph and a blue morph were again amongst the Pink-footed Geese at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (NES) during April and into May. **Ross's Goose:** an adult was with Pink-footed Geese near Kinross (P&K) on 27 February, with possibly the same bird having been seen flying north with Pink-feet off Eyemouth (Bord) on 25th. One was also reported from Alloa Inch (UF) on 9–10 May. **Canada Goose:** three different small race birds were with the Barnacle Geese at WWT Caerlaverock (D&G) during January, including one of the type *minima*, with further presumed vagrant birds reported from the Outer Hebrides & Argyll. Two birds remained in and around the WWT Caerlaverock reserve (D&G) during February - one of the type *taverneri* and the other of the type *minima*. Further birds were seen on Islay (two Richardson's Canada Geese - type *hutchinsii*) and on Tiree (both Arg) during the month. A 'Cackling' Goose (race *minima*) was present at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (NES) at

the start of May. **Red-breasted Goose:** one was at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (NES) on 31 May–4 June.

**Wood Duck:** a drake at Loch of Brow, South Mainland (Shet) from 16 April, and then Loch of Hillwell (Shet) until 20 June at least, arguably had very good credentials to be taken seriously as a potential vagrant. **American Wigeon:** the overwintering drake was again at WWT Caerlaverock (D&G) on 16 January. Three drakes were seen in February - one again at WWT Caerlaverock (D&G) on 3rd, one on South Uist from 23rd, and at Wick (Caith) throughout. Drakes were on South Uist (OH) in March, and at Tankerness (Ork) on 10–14th, whilst two drakes were found in early April - on the Ythan Estuary (NES) from 1st and at Loch Sandary, North Uist (OH) from 3rd, and these remained all month. A drake was seen on the River Tay at Errol (P&K) from 25–27 May, and another was at Graemeshall (Ork) on 21–25 June.

**Green-winged Teal:** eight were reported in January - from Outer Hebrides (2), Orkney, Moray & Nairn, Highland, Angus, Upper Forth and Ayrshire. Seven drakes were noted in February including two each in Ayrshire and on the Outer Hebrides, and the good showing continued in March with eight drakes seen - in Ayrshire (2), Outer Hebrides (2), Kinneil (UF) still, Letham Pools (Fife) from 21st, Orkney and Argyll. Single drakes were at Loch Stiapavat, Lewis (OH) and RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (NES) from 27 April, with a further six drakes being seen elsewhere in Scotland during the month. Birds remained on the Outer Hebrides and at Strathbeg during May, while up to three different drakes were on the Outer Hebrides during June with reports from Lewis, North Uist and St. Kilda. **American Black Duck:** two were on Loch of Hillwell (Shet) on 9–11 May. **Garganey:** a drake at Burrafirth, Unst on 11 March equals the previous earliest ever to be seen on Shetland, with

a pair also noted before the end of the month at Turnberry (Ayr) on 29th. Three (two drakes) were seen at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (NES) from mid-April with a further 16 birds elsewhere during the month. **Canvasback:** a female was at Loch Indaal, Islay (Arg) on 6–8 January and then reported again at Loch Skerrols, Islay on 22nd - the only previous Scottish record was also a female, on Sanday (Ork) on 21–23 June 2000. **Ring-necked Duck:** in January a female remained at Martnaham Loch (Ayr) throughout January; a drake was noted again at Loch Calder (Caith) on 12–14th; three drakes were on Tiree (Argyll), an adult still up to 19th and two first-winters on 12–19th. A female was on North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 11–24 February - a first record for the island, the female remained at Martnaham Loch (Ayr) throughout and a drake was noted again on Tiree (Arg) on 16–19 February. Five were seen in March - females still in Ayrshire and Orkney, single drakes still on Tiree (Arg) and in Caithness, and a drake on Shetland. At least 10 were noted in April, and one was present on the Outer Hebrides from 27–30 May at least. **Lesser Scaup:** a female was at Loch Skerrols, Islay (Arg) on 8–23 January and two drakes were noted again at Loch Leven (P&K) from 26 January to 19 February, and a drake was at Blair Drummond (UF) on 15–18 April. A drake ranged between Loch of

Benston and Loch of Houlland from 13 May and then remained at Loch of Benston (Shet) until 24 June at least. **King Eider:** the second-winter drake at Earlsferry (Fife) and the adult drake at Mousa Sound (Shet) were present throughout January. The second-winter drake was seen flying east offshore at Aberlady Bay (Loth) on 2 February, then refound nearby off Yellowcraig on 4–7th before relocating back to Earlsferry on 8 February where it remained throughout March, and was last reported on 6 April, whilst at least one drake was noted on Mainland Shetland on 3–10 April. One was at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (NES) on 4 May. **Surf Scoter:** five were in the Sound of Taransay, Harris (OH) on 3 January, with at least two drakes on Orkney and up to two drakes at Largo Bay (Fife) throughout and the female still on Tiree (Arg). Eight were reported in February - in Fife and Tiree still, at Embo (High) on 22nd and three drakes and two females in the Sound of Taransay (OH) on 9th. In March up to two drakes were in Largo Bay (Fife), with a drake on Orkney again at Inganess Bay on 13th and the female still at Hough Bay, Tiree (Arg) on 28th. Up to eight were reported in April, and one was found off Blackdog (NES) on 21 May. A drake was at Dales Voe on 14–15 June, and up to two drakes remained with the moulting scoter flock off Blackdog (NES) throughout the month. **Smew:** only 12 were reported in January



Plate 83. Two Ring-necked Ducks with Tufted Duck (centre), Loch Kinord, North-east Scotland, April 2009. © Harry Scott



Plate 84. Little Egret, Lochgilphead, Argyll, January 2009. © Jim Dickson

including up to five (all redheads) at Castle Loch, Lochmaben (D&G) and up to four (three drakes) on Loch Leven (P&K). At least 16 were noted in February including up to eight in Dumfries & Galloway and up to four, including three drakes, at Loch Leven (P&K).

**Quail:** a notable arrival in May included birds on Fair Isle on 20th and 24th, while good numbers continued to be found into June with c.50 reported, mostly singing birds. **White-billed Diver:** an adult showed very well in the harbour at John o' Groats (Caith) on 2–3 January, whilst on Shetland the adult was still at Kirkabister. Two were reported in February - off Port Skigersta, Lewis (OH) on 12th and again in Bluemull Sound (Shet) on 15th. Two adults were seen in March - on Mull (Arg) on 1–13th and at Little Loch Broom (High) on 19th–5 April at least. Seven adults were seen off Lewis (OH) in April - off Port Skigersta on 13th, with then 1–2 birds off there and nearby Port of Ness up to the end of the month. Elsewhere three were in Shetland during the month and two different birds off North Ronaldsay (Ork), on 6th and 15th with the weekend of the 11–13 April also producing reports of up to five birds at Loch Ewe and one at Gruinard Bay (both High), with a controversial bird continuing to be reported nearby at Little Loch Broom during the month - though

most observers considered this bird to be a pale-billed immature Great Northern Diver. Two were off Port Nis, Lewis on 1 May, with singles off Burghead (M&N) on 1–4th, Loch Gairloch, Wester Ross (High) on 2–3rd, Mull (Arg) on 4th and 13th, Gruinard Bay (High) on 8th, Girdleness (NES) on 11th and Saltcoats (Ayr) from 16–18 May. **Cory's Shearwater:** one flew past Fife Ness (Fife) on 27 June. **Manx Shearwater:** the first reports in the west were of 12 from the Oban-Coll ferry on 15 March and one past Aird an Runair, North Uist (OH) on 22 March, while in the east one flew past RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (NES) on 18 April but otherwise sightings did not start until 10 May.

**Bittern:** two were reported in January - at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (NES) again on 23rd and at Loch Ken (D&G) on 5th. One was at Aberlady Bay (Loth) on 1–2 February, and one was again at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (NES) on 11 February. **Little Egret:** at least eight were reported in January including three on North Uist (OH), one in Argyll and four near Glencaple (D&G) on 30th–31st. Up to nine were reported in February, all in Dumfries & Galloway, including a count of four birds near Glencaple between 1–9th. At least four were seen in March - again all in Dumfries & Galloway, with five reported from

there in April and another at Musselburgh and then Aberlady Bay (both Loth) on 24–30 April. In June one was seen at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (NES) with further birds on Shetland, Orkney, Islay (Arg) and at Montrose Basin (Ang). **Great White Egret:** one was present briefly at Aberlady Bay (Loth) on 3 February and was then seen in Lanarkshire (Clyde) at Merryton then Baron's Haugh RSPB on 7th. This long-staying bird was present throughout March up until 26 April at least at Gilmourton (Clyde). One was at Brow Marsh/Spiggie area (Shet) on 29–30 April at least, and one was at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (NES) from 30 April into May, this bird also frequenting the nearby Ythan Estuary and being seen again at Strathbeg on 27–29 June. **White Stork:** a presumed escape was thought to be responsible for all sightings in Scotland during April - with reports from Aberdeenshire, Angus, Upper Forth and Dumfries & Galloway. **Spoonbill:** an adult was at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (NES) on 19–23 April; one was also present there from 9 June with two further birds joining it on 12–18th, one remaining to 19th. Three were at WWT Caerlaverock (D&G) still on 1st–6th whilst an adult was at Kinneil (UF) on 1st–7th with then two adult birds there on 19th–30th, one of which was presumably responsible for the sighting nearby on Inchcolm Island (Fife) on 21st.

**Honey-buzzard:** a migrant was at Machrihanish (Arg) on 4 June, with another reported on Stronsay (Ork) on 23rd. In May singles were seen at Campbeltown (Arg) on 1st, Noss Head, (Caith) on 6th, Foula (Shet) on 15th, North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 19th, Fair Isle on 21st and 24th, with others on Mainland Shetland on 21st, 22–23rd, 29th and 30 May. **Black Kite:** one was at Sandwick and then Channerwick (both Shet) from 27 April. **Marsh Harrier:** the first migrants were a female at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg

(NES) on 29 March and a male at RSPB Loch of Kinnordy (Ang) on 31 March, but most did not arrive until the latter part of April. **Osprey:** a notably early bird was one at Caerlaverock WWT reserve (D&G) on 17 Feb, though the main passage did not start until late March with birds seen in Lothian and Highland on 18th. **Hobby:** several birds were seen in May including a confiding individual at Leogh, Fair Isle on 31st, while ten were seen in June - a good Scottish showing. **Gyrfalcon:** two white morph birds were in Argyll at the end of March - an adult on Islay from at least 21 March, and a second-calendar-year on Tiree from 24 March, which remained to 3rd and 7 April respectively.

**Spotted Crake:** in June two different singing birds were reported from Argyll, up to these singing birds were at RSPB Loch of Kinnordy (Ang) and one was at Howmore, South Uist (OH). **Corncrake:** a total of 386 singing males were recorded on Tiree (Arg) in June - slightly down on the record 408 singing birds recorded there in 2008. **Common Crane:** singles were on Unst (Shet) on 9–19 April and Papa Westray (Ork) on 12th, one flew over Port of Ness, Lewis (OH) on 19th, and three birds over RSPB Loch of Strathbeg on 20 April. One was seen at various sites in Aberdeenshire (NES) between 6–19 June with one seen on Shetland at Mid Walls on at least 14–15th, and two adult birds were at WWT Caerlaverock (D&G) on 23rd, with one still there on 24th. One flew over RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (NES) on the afternoon of 29 May, while one at Wats Ness, Mainland (Shet) on 30th had apparently been in the area for up to 10 days.

**Avocet:** two were on North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 9–26 April, whilst four birds were at Kinneil (UF) on 20th, two of them remaining until 28 April. **Stone-**

**curlew:** one was found on Meoneess, Fair Isle on 24 May - remarkably the eighth record for the island. **Killdeer:** one was at Loch Stiapavat, Lewis (OH) on 6 April. **Dotterel:** two early birds were at The Oa, Islay (Arg) on 16 April with five birds there on 24–25th and five also at Port of Ness, Lewis on 28th, and a female on The Range, South Uist on 30th (both OH). The bulk of birds did not arrive until the first week of May, with several birds noted away from the usual breeding areas - in Aberdeenshire (NES) on 6th, and on the Outer Hebrides, Orkney and Shetland.

**Semipalmated Sandpiper:** one was reported on North Uist (OH) on 23 May. **Temminck's Stint:** a small passage of birds was noted from mid-May. **Pectoral Sandpiper:** one was at Loch Stiapavat, Lewis (OH) on 16–20 April, with one also at on 11–12 April and then presumably the same bird again there on 26–30 April. One was at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (NES) on 3 May, one on Foula (Shet) on 8 May and one at Loch of Swartmill, Westray (Ork) on 13 June. **Long-billed Dowitcher:** the over-wintering but elusive individual was still on South Uist (OH) in February - at West Gerenish on 9th and then nearby at Loch Bee on 22nd, and one was at RSPB Loch Gruinart reserve on Islay (Arg) on

26 April. **Whimbrel:** apart from a couple of over-wintering birds, the first birds of the year arrived in early April with one at Loch of Swannay (Ork) on 8th, and two at St. Abbs Head on 12th. **Hudsonian Whimbrel:** one was seen from Usaied Point (Arg) on 11 May. **Common Sandpiper:** earliest reports were from the River Urie at Whiteford (NES) on 19 March and Letham Pools (Fife) on 23rd, but most arrived from early April. **Solitary Sandpiper:** one was found on Foula (Shet) on 6 May. **Lesser Yellowlegs:** one was present at RSPB Loch Gruinart reserve on Islay (Arg) on 26 April. **Red-necked Phalarope:** at least 10 presumed migrants were noted in June, all on islands apart from a female seen near Balgavies Loch (Ang) on 11th. **Grey Phalarope:** in January singles were at Ardvule Point, South Uist (OH) on 16th and Caol (High) on 22nd.

**Long-tailed Skua:** an adult was present on Fair Isle on 16 May. **Ivory Gull:** one was at Clachan na Luib, North Uist (OH) on 21–22 January. It was probably a second-winter due to black speckling around the eye and a lack of a red orbital ring - only the second bird to be aged as a second-winter in Scotland after one in Argyll in 1969. **Sabine's Gull:** a first-winter was seen near Neilston (Clyde) on



Plate 85. Ivory Gull, North Uist, Outer Hebrides January 2009. © Steve Duffield

1 February - an exceptional but not unprecedented winter record. **Bonaparte's Gull**: an adult was on South Uist (OH) from 30 March, possibly a returning bird. **Laughing Gull**: one was found on Foula on 6 May, with another on Mainland Shetland from 17th to the end of May. A second-summer was at Loch a' Phuill, Tiree (Arg) on 13 June presumably the same bird seen on nearby Coll on 2nd, whilst another was on St. Kilda (OH) on 19th. **Franklin's Gull**: a first-winter was present among the roosting gulls at Barassie (Ayr) on the evenings of the 16–18 January - only the fourth record for mainland Scotland though the second for Ayrshire after a first-summer at Irvine in 1980. An adult was present roving between Lerwick and Scatster (Shet) on 11–12 May with presumably the same individual then relocated on Unst (Shet) on 24–25 May. **Ring-billed Gull**: three over-wintering adults lingered from 2008 - one at Dundee (Ang) remained into February, one at Oban (Arg) was seen up until end March, and one was noted at Dingwall (High) in January and in March until 29th. One was at Kinneil (UF) throughout February, and an adult at Strathclyde Loch (Clyde) noted in March until 23rd. An adult paired with a Common Gull was seen at a nest at an undisclosed site in mid-June [see pages 31–32]. **Yellow-legged Gull**: four adults were reported in January - three in the Clyde area and one in Lothian. Up to five were reported in February - four in the Clyde area and a first-winter at Girdleness, Aberdeen on 28th. **Caspian Gull**: a second-winter was at the Ugie Estuary (NES) on 10 January - only the fourth record for Scotland. **Iceland Gull**: c.115 were reported in January - the largest counts were 12 at Lerwick (Shet) on the 7th, six Troon Harbour (Ayr) on 17–19th, at least six at Mallaig (High) on 21st, five at Stornoway (OH) on 24th, and at least four at Forfar Loch (Ang) during the month. Over 100

were reported in February - the best counts were up to 11 at Lerwick (Shet) in the first week, four on Westray (Ork) on 10th, four at Forfar Loch (Ang) on 11th, five at Stornoway (OH) on 14th, and at least five at Mallaig (High) on 25th. About 115 were noted in March, with the highest count being 13 at Lerwick (Shet) on 7th. **Kumlien's Gull**: six were noted in January and one was at Forfar Loch (Ang) on 11 February. Late individuals were seen at Loch Ryan (D&G) on 2–4 May and on Whalsay (Shet) on 20–28 May at least. **Glaucous Gull**: c.100 were seen in January with a notable increase in numbers in the last week especially on the Outer Hebrides and Argyll with at least 14 seen on Tiree (Arg) on 31st and at least 12 on South Uist (OH) the same day. Over 120 were seen in February with most reports from the Outer Hebrides and Argyll and notably few were in southern Scotland with there being no records from Fife, Lothian, Borders, Ayrshire or Dumfries & Galloway. The highest counts were 18 on Tiree (Arg) on 2nd and 17 at Gualan, South Uist (OH) on 28th. Over 100 were noted in March with highest numbers again on the Outer Hebrides with 29 counted on South Uist on 9th. **Whiskered Tern**: one was seen off Seafield (D&G) on 10 May. **White-winged Black Tern**: one was seen on the Eden Estuary between Guardbridge and St Andrews (Fife) on 18–19 May. **Little Tern**: the earliest returning birds were one at Ardivachar Point, South Uist (OH) on 12 April and three in Gott Bay, Tiree (Arg) on 14th. **Sandwich Tern**: the first sighting of the year was on the Ythan Estuary (NES) on 17 March, with birds at Aberlady Bay (Loth) on 19th and Loch Ryan (D&G) on 24th, but most arrived from early April.

**Turtle Dove**: one was reported at Talmine (High) on 26 April. Five were noted in June - one on North Ronaldsay (Ork), two different birds on Lewis (OH) and two on

Tiree (Arg) on 28th, with one still there on 30th. **Cuckoo**: the earliest report was of one near East Linton (Loth) on 7 April, with birds noted in most areas from mid-April. **Snowy Owl**: a female was seen on Shapinsay (Ork) at the end of January and again on 18–21 February, and one was at Aird Uig, Lewis (OH) on 8 February. The female was again seen on Orkney, at Harray on 13–14 March, one was at Galson, Lewis on 2 April with the regular male again at Aird an Runair, North Uist on 8th–28th (both OH), and a male was at Holm (Ork) on at least 28–30 April. Birds were seen on Orkney from 8–14 May, and on St Kilda (OH) on 21 May, with at least two birds reported from the Outer Hebrides during June including the long-staying mobile male. **Nightjar**: a notable influx up the east coast of Scotland in late May included birds on the Isle of May - the 12th for the island but the first there since 1971, and on Fair Isle on 18th and 22nd. **Swift**: the first reports were of one at Dunfermline (Fife) and one at Carbars (Clyde) both on 25 April, with birds reported throughout Scotland by early May. **Alpine Swift**: individuals were noted over Glasgow (Clyde) and on Lewis (OH) on 30–31 May. **Bee-eater**: a small influx in May brought singles to Angus on 17th, Barns Ness (Loth) on 18th, Elie Ness (Fife) on 19th, Fair Isle on 22nd and North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 29th and one was heard flying over Cults (NES) on 16 June. **Hoopoe**: one was on Whalsay (Shet) on 10–12 April, and a small influx occurred from 15 May. **Wryneck**: in April up to three different birds were on North Ronaldsay between 15th and 28 April, and one at Firth on 18th (both Ork), while just a trickle of birds occurred in May - mostly on Shetland from mid-month.

**Short-toed Lark**: one at Arbroath on 2–17 January was the first for Angus. **Shore Lark**: the over-wintering bird was reported again at





Plate 86. *Red-rumped Swallow*, Kilmany, Fife, April 2009. © Willie McBay

Lamba Ness, Unst (Shet) on 14 January and 16 February and was still present through to the end of March. **Sand Martin:** one at Strathclyde Loch (Clyde) on 4 March was the earliest ever record for Scotland, while two at Musselburgh (Loth) on 15th and one on North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 20 March were earliest records for those counties. **Swallow:** the earliest birds were two at Chanony Point (High) on 21 March, with birds reported from most areas by the end of the month including the earliest ever to be recorded in Angus - two at Craigmill Den on 25th. **House Martin:** one at Grenitote, North Uist on 20 March was the earliest ever to be noted on the Outer Hebrides, though the main arrival of birds was in the first weeks of May. **Red-rumped Swallow:** three were seen in April - at Thurso on 15th - third record for Caithness, on Fair Isle on 20th and at Kilmany (Fife) on 28–30th - the first record for Fife. One was also seen on the Out Skerries (Shet) on 1st May, and remarkably one at Kilconquhar (Fife) on 18–19 May. **Tree Pipit:** the earliest reports were from Lochanbreck Loch (D&G) and Nairn and the Culbin Forest (M&N) on 2 April. **Red-throated Pipit:** one was present on Fair Isle on 18 May. **Water Pipit:** the individual at the Endrick Mouth, Loch Lomond (Clyde) lingered from 2008 through January and February to 25 March at least, with another at Rigg Bay (D&G) on 22 January, and two

others reported from Fife during March. **Yellow Wagtail:** the earliest bird of the year was one at Gullane (Loth) on 7 April. **Blue-headed Wagtail:** singles were at Letham Pools (Fife) on 10 April and Musselburgh Lagoons (Loth) on 23rd. **Grey-headed Wagtail:** two were found on the Isle of May on 17 May. **Waxwing:** up to 600 were noted in January; at least 1,000 were noted throughout Scotland during February with the best counts being 140 at Motherwell and 100 at Netherlee (both Clyde) on 1st, 80 at Tranent (Loth) on 2–6th, 72 at Haddington (Loth) on 4th, 70 at Dunfermline (Fife) on 6th and 52 at Crieff (P&K) on 28th. Just over 1,000 birds were still around Scotland during March - the peak count was of at least 253 birds in Glasgow on 30th. Elsewhere 70 were at Dumbarton (Clyde) on 7th, 70 at Dundee on 31st (this flock included at least two birds colour-ringed in Aberdeenshire earlier in the winter), 64+ at Aboyne (NES) on 10th, and 60 at Forres (M&N) on 6th. Birds continued to linger throughout April with good counts still at the start of the month - including 200 at Cranhill, Glasgow on 9–10th, 75 at Clarkston on 9th (both Clyde) 73 at Dundee on 1st, 50+ at New Sauchie (UF) on 4–6th and 50 at Netherlee (Clyde) on 3–4 April. The latest report was of one on Lewis (OH) on 10 May.

**Common Nightingale:** one was at Toab (Shet) on 28–29 April, and on Fair Isle on 21st and 23 May. **Thrush Nightingale:** one was at Sands of Forvie NNR (NES) on 17 May. **Bluethroat:** a small passage in May was noted in the Northern Isles, while in June single males were noted at Kilkenneth, Tiree (Arg) on 1st, on Fair Isle on 2nd and 9th, and the Isle of May on 22nd. **Black Redstart:** the female was at North Berwick (Loth) throughout January with further birds reported near Thurso (Caith) on 14th and North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 28th. Spring passage was

mostly in April with about 25 reported. **Redstart:** the first report of the year was one on Fair Isle on 11 April, with arrivals in Angus, Aberdeenshire, Dumfries & Galloway, Lothian and Clyde over the next few days. **Wheatear:** first arrivals of the year were recorded from 16 March. **White's Thrush:** one trapped and ringed on the Isle of May on the evening of 2 June was the first record for the island and unsurprisingly is the first June record for Britain. **Ring Ouzel:** an unseasonal male was on North Ronaldsay on 17 January with a male reported the next day at Westhill (NES). In February singles were at Newmains Farm, Reston (Bord) on 12th and Collieston (NES) on 15th, while a notably early returnee to breeding habitat was a male at the Findhorn Valley (High) on 2 March.

**River Warbler:** one was found at Vaile's Trees, Fair Isle on 31 May, and a singing male was at Applecross Bay (High) from 28 June into July - only the second ever for mainland Scotland after a singing bird in Fife in July 1994. **Grasshopper Warbler:** birds arrived throughout Scotland in the first two weeks of April, with the earliest report being one on North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 7th. **Marsh Warbler:** in a good spring for this species in Scotland, several were found in May - mainly singing birds



Plate 87. *Black Redstart*, North Berwick, Lothian, February 2009. © Mike Thrower

on Orkney and Shetland including four on Fair Isle on 31st, and 17 were reported in June, again mostly on the Northern Isles though in the first week of the month one was at Arbroath (Ang) and one on St. Kilda (OH). **Great Reed Warbler:** one was present on Out Skerries (Shet) from 28 May to 3 June, with another on Fair Isle on 30 May. **Eastern Olivaceous Warbler:** one was on Fair Isle on 21 June - 6th record for Scotland and a not unprecedented midsummer record. **Icterine Warbler:** c.20 were seen on the Northern Isles from 15 May to 2 June, with singles in A&D and Lothian. Significantly, inland birds were also seen at three sites in Sutherland and four in Invernesshire (both High), with breeding confirmed in both areas - there are three previous confirmed breeding records in Scotland, all since 1992, two of which were also in Highland, the other being on Stronsay (Ork). **Lesser Whitethroat:** the first bird reported was one at Brough, Whalsay (Shet) on 12 April - the earliest ever on Shetland by 10 days, otherwise birds were noted throughout Scotland by the latter half of the month. **Subalpine Warbler:** a singing male at Skaw, Unst (Shetland) on 1-10 April was of the form *moltonii* and hence potentially the first record of this race in Britain. A male was at Scatness (Shet) on 22-25 April, and several individuals were found on Orkney and Shetland from 16 May. Just how rare birds of the race *moltonii* will prove to be remains to be seen but another bird at Scatness in May also appeared to be of this form. **Wood Warbler:** the earliest report was of one singing at Brig O' Turk (UF) on 17 April, with birds present in most breeding areas by the end of the month. **Chiffchaff:** arrivals were reported from 16 March, with the first noted at Musselburgh (Loth) and Carinish, North Uist (OH). **Iberian Chiffchaff:** a singing male was found at South Uist (OH) on 31 May - only the second record

for Scotland if accepted. Remarkably it or another was found at Cheese Bay, North Uist (OH) on 11 June. The latter bird was not photographed or sound recorded so may not be submitted to BBRC. **Willow Warbler:** the first was at Lochwinnoch RSPB (Clyde) on 31 March - an early date, with birds noted in all parts of Scotland in the first two weeks of April.

**Spotted Flycatcher:** the first of the year were in Lothian and Clyde on 10 May, with records from most areas of Scotland over the next week. **Red-breasted Flycatcher:** two different birds were seen on Fair Isle in June - an adult male on 9th and a female on 24th. **Collared Flycatcher:** a male was present at Denburn Wood, Crail on 16-19 May - the first record for Fife. **Pied Flycatcher:** the first of the year was at Knockman Wood (D&G) on 11 April, then near Dowally Loch (P&K) on 17th and Barr Lagan, Cowal (Arg) on 18th, but east coast counties did not record birds until 15th and 16 May. **Golden Oriole:** four were reported in June - all predictably on Shetland. **Red-backed Shrike:** several were reported on the Northern Isles in May. Twelve were reported in June including two different birds on the Isle of May between 16-20th, two different birds at Kincaig Point (Fife) between 18-21st, and a female at Kinneil on 16th - only the third record for Upper Forth. **Lesser Grey Shrike:** one was on Bressay (Shet) on 16-18 June. **Great Grey Shrike:** in January singles were at Shell Bay (Fife) on 3rd and Cannich (High) around 19th, with another at Dalwhinnie (High) throughout February to 17 March at least.

**Common Rosefinch:** a very early bird was on the Isle of May on 2 April, but generally numbers in April and May were very low and from the Northern Isles. Four were noted in June, all between 5-13th, in Caithness, on Shetland, on Fair Isle and a singing male at Bridge of Weir - the first record for

Renfrewshire (Clyde). **Hawfinch:** the peak count at Scone Palace (P&K) was 30 on 21 March, while at least 19 migrants were noted during an influx in April - mainly on Orkney and Shetland. **Lapland Bunting:** the only report in February was of four at Newmains Farm, Reston (Bord) on 13th. Four different birds passed through the Butt of Lewis area, Lewis (OH) between 10th and 21 April. **Rustic Bunting:** one was on Whalsay (Shet) on 15-16 May, and another on Fair Isle on 26 May. **Little Bunting:** the bird at Coaltown of Callange (Fife) lingered from 2008 to 8 January. **Brown-headed Cowbird:** a male was present on Fair Isle from 8-10 May, and was heard singing on the latter date - the second record for Scotland and the second, third or fourth individual to have occurred in Britain depending on whether or not the two sightings in England immediately prior to the Fair Isle occurrence are viewed as relating to the same individual.

#### Migrant arrival dates

A very popular feature of the SOC website has been the migrant arrival date table - a table showing the first arrival dates in each region for the commoner Scottish migrants. Previous years tables can be seen on the website at: [www.the-soc.org.uk/migrants.htm](http://www.the-soc.org.uk/migrants.htm)

The table is updated every few days normally between March and the end of June, and a grateful thanks go to all local recorders, bird observatories and individuals who have contributed records of first migrant dates over the last six years thus enabling the table to be as complete and comprehensive as possible. To contribute any records for the 2010 table simply phone the Birdline Scotland hotline on: **01292 611994** or send records by email to: [birdlinescot@btconnect.com](mailto:birdlinescot@btconnect.com). Every attempt will be made to acknowledge all records, even those not featured on the table.

## Advice to contributors

There is a basic division in *Scottish Birds* between papers and short notes that are peer-reviewed and articles, news and Club items that are not. This split in content is differentiated by fonts used and paper colour.

The first part accepts manuscripts on the status, distribution and populations of birds in Scotland and, particularly, changes in these over time. Write-ups of census work find a natural home in this section, as do the culmination of research topics and updates to information in *The Birds of Scotland* (Forrester *et al.* 2007). Original work and observations are encouraged, but summary papers will be considered and key-note papers of a more general nature may occasionally be commissioned. Papers should be fully referenced as in any scientific work, and our house style should be followed. Articles of less than 700 words are generally considered as Short Notes, but are otherwise in the same format.

Authors should bear in mind that only a small proportion of the *Scottish Birds* readership are scientists and should aim to present their material concisely, interestingly and clearly. Unfamiliar technical terms and symbols should be avoided wherever possible and, if deemed essential, should be explained. Supporting statistics should be kept to a minimum. All papers and short notes are accepted on the understanding that they have not been offered for publication elsewhere and that they will be subject to editing. Papers will be acknowledged on receipt and are normally reviewed by at least two members of the editorial panel and, in most cases also by an independent referee. They will normally be published in order of acceptance of fully revised manuscripts.

*Scottish Birds* publishes obituaries of Club members and others who have contributed to Scottish ornithology. These are organised through Waterston House, where the Office Manager will liaise with contributors. Book reviews are organised through the Club Librarian.

The second part of *Scottish Birds* welcomes informal as well as more serious contributions about any aspect of birds and their habitats in Scotland. It is not peer-reviewed, has minimal editing and contributions can be descriptive, anecdotal, controversial, humorous or quirky. They can report on surveys, express opinions, describe birds and places, look back into history, speculate as to the future and can represent organisations or be the work of private individuals. The documentation of rare and scarce birds in Scotland, plus a wide range of identification, site and species related information is lavishly illustrated by high quality colour photographs. We welcome photographs, maps, cartoons, and will accept basic graphs and tables when relevant. Meeting reports or field trip accounts are all welcome, but our main aim is to focus on Scottish birds in Scotland or abroad. We will occasionally include articles from other parts of the world and sometimes about other wildlife. In terms of length, we accept anything from short notes up to articles of c. 2,000 words. There are no strict guidelines as to format, but we would encourage contributors to follow our house style shown in the excerpts from a recent issue available on the SOC publications web page.

Please submit articles! We very much wish to encourage unsolicited contributions to this part of *Scottish Birds*. The editors spend much time requesting articles - a task that would be far less onerous if they are submitted freely from members and other readers. We wish to make it as easy as possible for contributors to send us material that reflects the enormous range of news, work and opinion relevant to Scotland's birds.

### Text, image and graphics formats

Contributions should preferably be submitted in electronic format either on disk or by email to [mail@the-soc.org.uk](mailto:mail@the-soc.org.uk), stating the type of word processing package used if not Microsoft Word or a generic 'rich text format'. Only short articles and letters can be accepted in printed or hand written form. No fees are paid.

Tables, maps and diagrams should be designed to fit either a single column or the full page width. Table and photograph captions should be self explanatory and should be able to stand alone from the text. Please include all captions after the text. For photographs please supply the locality and month/year taken, together with the name of the photographer.

Maps and other graphics should preferably be provided in eps (Encapsulated PostScript) format, or as a high resolution jpg/tiff file, good quality computer print-out or drawn in black ink. Other formats can be accepted; please liaise with the Office Manager. Photographs should be supplied as high resolution jpg/tiff files with minimal or no cropping or enhancement.

Reference should be made to *The Birds of Scotland* (Forrester *et al.* 2007) for guidance on style of presentation, use of capitals, form of references, etc. Detailed instructions for contributors with respect to house style conventions can be found on the SOC website's publication page.

Please send all correspondence to the SOC Office Manager at Waterston House, Aberlady, East Lothian EH32 0PY or e-mail [mail@the-soc.org.uk](mailto:mail@the-soc.org.uk). Telephone 01875 871330 or e-mail for further advice and assistance.



# PhotoSPOT

**Plate 88.** Late October 2008 saw an unprecedented arrival of Grey Phalaropes to Shetland. The birds offered tremendous views as they fed on the sea. To get something better than a run-of-the-mill bird-on-water shot, I was keen to capture them in flight as they lifted up for their short flights.

After a day of 'beach-bound' shooting I noticed that most of my flight shots were at least sharp, but the lobed feet - one of the most important features I wanted to capture - were obscured by either the wings or the body of the bird. This was because I had been photographing on a sloping pebble beach and was 'above' the birds. I needed to be lower - and lower meant going in to the sea to get level with them! Neoprene chest waders were required - they keep you dry and warm up to your breast, so they seemed ideal for the job...

Wading in to a freezing, cold rough sea - even just a few metres offshore - and 'sinking' to get on an even level with the birds was pretty scary to say the

least. The power of the waves was moving even a man of my girth, but I was getting the shots I wanted of birds lifting up and then settling back down on the sea. Magic stuff - until the inevitable happened. A 'roller' that I knew was going to be at least shoulder-height was heading my way, so I turned to face it with a degree of apprehension. Camera and lens held well above my head, the wave rolled 'through' me at breast level and freezing cold water started pouring into my chest waders. Walking just 10 or so metres with heaven knows how many litres of icy water inside them was a nightmare and I clambered up the beach back to my van like one of Shackleton's crew landing on Elephant Island! The result? Well, I'm still picking bits of battered seaweed from my waders but as they say... I got the shot.

This particular image was photographed with a Canon EOS-1D Mark III attached to a 400 mm f/4 DO IS lens. Exposure was set manually in RAW mode at f7.1 at 1/1000.

**Hugh Harrop** ([www.hughharrop.com](http://www.hughharrop.com))



**Photospot is a feature showcasing the best image posted on the SOC website each quarter. It may be a stunning portrait, or a record shot of something unique, but when presented in Scottish Birds, it will be accompanied by the story behind the photograph and the equipment used. Send in your photos now - it's open to all.**