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# Scottish Birds



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# Scottish Birds

Established in 1958.

## Published quarterly by:

The Scottish Ornithologists' Club,  
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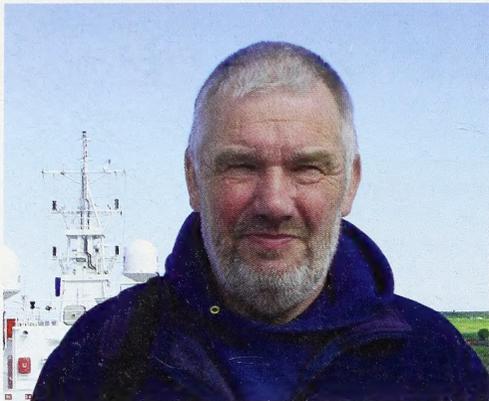
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## President's Foreword

It is late autumn and I am preparing to go to the annual conference. There is some time for reflection. It has been a good year for the Club. We are in a good position, I am pleased to report. Membership is increasing and we are involved in more successful projects than ever. One of the large pieces of work at the moment is the upgrading of our website. This will be a good investment for the Club. My sincere thanks to all those involved.

Plate 244. Ken Shaw, May 2008. © Amanda Coia Steele

Last night I took a little time to catch up with my daily log and when I was finished I looked back over the autumn. One of the highlights for me was the skua watching at Hound Point, west of Edinburgh. We had some great days in September. Black Terns provided early interest, then the skuas took over. We had a lovely group of seven adult Pomarine Skuas on the 9th and excellent views of an adult Long-tailed Skua on the 22nd. A couple of days after that a strong easterly system pushed lots of seabirds up the Forth. On the 24th we saw another Long-tailed Skua and a juvenile Sabine's Gull. The north side of the Forth did better, with several Sabine's. Late that afternoon, two stalwarts of the Forth, Mervyn Griffin and Gerry Owens, watched a Leach's Petrel off South Queensferry – an exceptional event. We were all out at dawn the next day and several Leach's and a single Storm Petrel were seen on both sides of the estuary.

Towards the end of the autumn, I stood on the Fife coast just round from Fife Ness and watched the winter thrushes flooding in. Standing with Willie Irvine, he remarked that most flocks were coming directly from the Isle of May. How I love to be on that tiny island when migration is in full swing. The May represents so much that is good about the history of ornithology in our country. The men and women who were the early pioneers there will never be forgotten.

I wonder how the winter will be. I hope I get the chance to go goose watching in Dumfries and Galloway, one of my favourite counties. The diversity of birdlife in our small country is remarkable.

Sorting out autumn bird records and starting the species accounts for the Perth and Kinross atlas are two priorities for the early winter. An increasing number of us are using BirdTrack for our records. The BTO has worked very hard on this system, making it user-friendly. It deserves increased usage in Scotland, where the BTO has been an excellent partner to the SOC.

The President's role is widening and recently I found myself writing the legacy advert for *Scottish Birds*! You never really know if you get these things right. However, I think I hit the right note with the last two sentences and I end with them today; SOC Council would like to acknowledge and thank the families who have already left legacies to the Club. Their kindness, thoughtfulness and generosity ensure the future of the Club for years to come. Thank you.

Welcome to all new members and thanks to all old ones! Have a great birdwatching winter.

Ken Shaw, President



Plate 245. Scots Pine regeneration in restored Native Pinewood at Glenmore, November 2006. © Colin Leslie

# Plotting the recent fortunes of the Capercaillie on the national forest estate in Scotland

K. Kortland, C. Leslie & D.C. Jardine

## Introduction

In Scotland, the Capercaillie *Tetrao urogallus* population declined from a guess of about 20,000 birds in the 1970s to 2200 (95% CLs 1500–3200) during winters 1992/93 and 1993/94, and 1073 (95% CLs 549–2041) in winter 1998/99 (Catt *et al.* 1998, Wilkinson *et al.* 2002). Analyses done around the turn of this century (Moss 2001) indicated that Capercaillie might become extinct in Scotland for a second time by 2014. However, the serious decline was stalled and the number estimated in 2003/04 was 1980 (95% CLs 1284–2758) (Eaton *et al.* 2007). Low productivity and mortality due to collisions with deer fences were the main proximate reasons for the decline (Moss 2000).

Significant conservation effort through removing and marking fences, through the Forestry Commission's Capercaillie Challenge Fund (Forestry Commission 2002), and the LIFE Project *Urgent Action for Capercaillie* (Kortland 2003) probably helped to stop the decline temporarily, and counts at leks suggested an increase in some areas (Kortland, unpublished data). However, the population subsequently declined to around 1285 birds in 2009/10 (95% CLs 822–1822) (Ewing *et al.* 2012). Although this result was not significantly different from the previous national survey, lek counts during the same period also suggested a national decline.

This paper summarises the recent fortunes of this Biodiversity Action Plan species on the national forest estate, the land managed by Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS).

Capercaillie is listed as a conservation priority in the FCS Biodiversity Programme and FCS has two levels of interventions for this species. The Level 1 actions, which are carried out in 27 forests, occur where there have been records of Capercaillie within the previous ten to 20 years. These comprise:

- Inclusion of Capercaillie as a management objective in forest plans
- Timing and zoning of forest operations and recreation to avoid active leks
- Increasing suitable habitat through silvicultural management
- Use of alternatives to clear-felling where possible
- Enhancement of Caledonian pinewood habitat e.g. through deer control and removal of exotic tree species
- New deer fences only used in exceptional circumstances
- All existing deer fences removed or marked
- Recording of all Capercaillie sightings
- Periodic lek surveys

In the forests where there are extant leks the following Level 2 actions are also carried out:

- Annual population monitoring (lek counts and some brood counts)
- Specific habitat work for Capercaillie e.g. brood habitat enhancement
- Targeted control of crows and foxes in the breeding season

An example of the implementation of Level 1 and 2 actions can be found in two FCS forests in Badenoch & Strathspey. This approach has been developed further to deal with specific issues, such as high levels of recreational activity (see Appendix).



Plate 246. Male Capercaillie, Forest A, March 2009. © Colin Leslie



Plate 247. Female Capercaillie, Glenmore Forest, April 2006. © Colin Leslie

### Methods

Since 2000, the population of Capercaillie using the national forest estate has been monitored using a number of different methods. Three kinds of information are collected:

1. Casual sightings and other records are collated to monitor the continuing presence and distribution of Capercaillie within FCS forests. This information is obtained from a variety of sources, including the national surveys, reports of sightings from FCS staff, FCS contractors, and birdwatchers, and also from signs of presence such as droppings and moulted feathers found during pre-operational site checks. In this summary, we compare the known distribution (by number of woodlands) in 2002, when consistent recording of presence was introduced, and 2011.
2. From 1999, a programme of lek counts was developed (with coverage increased over the years) to allow the number of males present at leks to be assessed annually. This became more consistent from 2002. Lek counts are carried out by FCS staff, RSPB staff, and skilled contractors, who count the number of males present, mainly from a hide that was entered during darkness. These counts are done in the second half of April and the number of males recorded at the lek is used in population assessment.
3. Since 2002, brood counts with pointer dogs have been carried out to assess productivity in at least six FCS forests each year. These counts provide counts of males - which tend to correlate well with lek counts (Kortland, unpublished data) - and counts of females and the number of large chicks. Annual productivity is expressed as the numbers of large chicks reared per female.

The above data are placed on the FCS GIS system and used to inform ongoing forest and operational management. The lek and brood counts were carried out with licences, in line with the increased protection provided to Capercaillie in the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004.

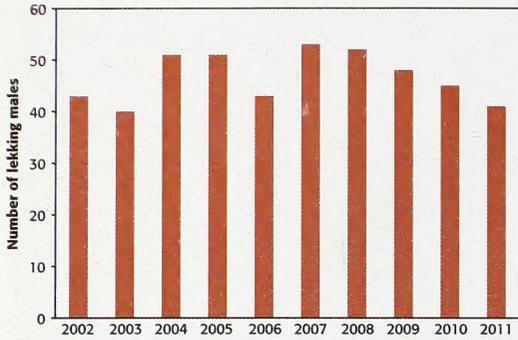


Figure 1. Number of male Capercaillie counted at the same 27 leks, 2002–11.

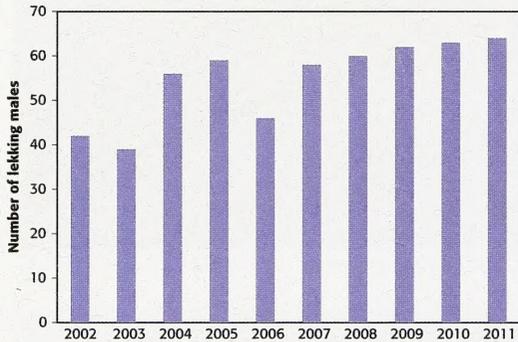


Figure 2. Number of male Capercaillie at all leks counted on the national forest estate, 2002–11. Twenty-seven leks were counted in 2002 with 23 extant with a total of 43 males. Forty-four leks counted in 2011 with 28 extant with a total of 63 males. Between 2002 and 2011, four leks went extinct and nine new leks were formed, seven of which were in Badenoch & Strathspey.

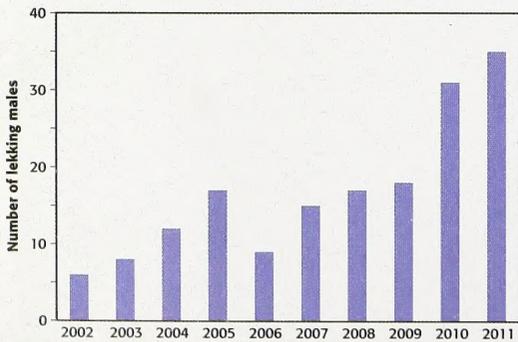


Figure 3. Number of male Capercaillie counted at leks in Glenmore Forest and Forest A (Badenoch & Strathspey), 2000–11. Note that unusual weather conditions in 2006 may have led to an underestimate in the count.

Results

Distribution

In 2002 and 2011, Capercaillie were found in 15 FCS forests. However, they are no longer found in two forests in which they were found in 2002, but have re-established in two others.

In 2011, Capercaillie were still to be found on the national forest estate in the following recording areas: Highland (Badenoch & Strathspey (2 forests), Easter Ross (1)), Moray & Nairn (5), North-east Scotland (3) and Perth & Kinross (4).

Lek counts on the national forest estate

Details of the total number of male Capercaillie counted on the same 27 leks on the national forest estate from 2002 to 2011 are provided in Figure 1. Numbers on this sample of consistently counted leks increased up to 2007 then declined each year until 2011. However, during this period, the total number of male Capercaillie on all leks on the national forest estate increased (Figure 2), despite four leks going extinct and four leks declining. This increase is almost entirely attributable to increases in two FCS forests in Badenoch & Strathspey (Figure 3), forests wherein seven new leks appeared between 2002 and 2011. If these two sites are removed, the overall number of males on all leks on the national forest estate has started to decline since 2009 (Figure 4).

In 2002 on the national forest estate, 27 leks were counted and 23 were extant, with a total of 43 males. Only 13% (3/23) of the extant leks and 14% (6/43) of the males were in the two forests in Badenoch & Strathspey in 2002. In 2011, 44 leks were counted and 28 were extant, with a total of 63 males. However, 36% (10/28) of the extant leks and 54% (34/63) of the males were now in the two forests in Badenoch & Strathspey. The number of lekking males in the national forest estate by recording area in 2011 is given in Table 1.

Table 1. The number of lekking male Capercaillie on the national forest estate in 2011.

Recording area	Number of lekking males
Ross-shire	11
Badenoch & Strathspey	34
Moray & Nairn	8
North-east Scotland	5
Perth & Kinross	5

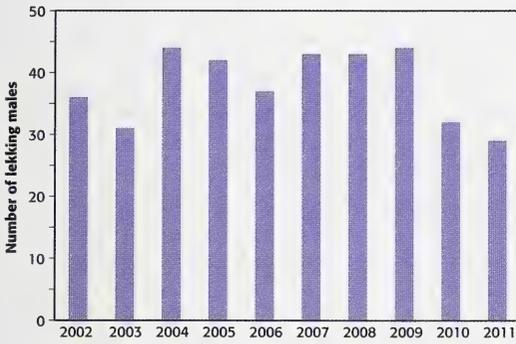


Figure 4. Number of male Capercaillie counted at leks on the national forest estate excluding Glenmore Forest and Forest A, 2002–11.

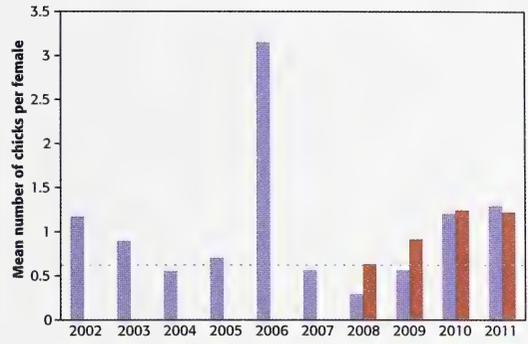


Figure 5. Productivity of Capercaillie in Glenmore Forest, 2002–11 (blue) and Forest A, 2008–11 (red). Note: 0.62 chicks/female is the level of productivity which is currently believed to be required to maintain Capercaillie populations.

The consistent lek counts in Glenmore and another forest (Forest A) commenced in 2000, to coincide with Glenmore Forest's inclusion within the Cairngorms Special Protection Area. From ten displaying males in Glenmore and Forest A in 2000 the population has steadily increased to 34 males in 2011. As well as a numerical increase, there has been a noticeable expansion in the range of Capercaillie in these two forests. In Glenmore the range of Capercaillie is estimated to have increased from around 1000 ha in 2000 to 1900 ha in 2011. The range increase has been particularly marked in Forest A, where the number of leks has increased from one to three in four years and the area of forest occupied from less than 300 ha in 2000 to 3000 ha in 2011. In 2000, only one small lek of one or two males was known in forest A. By 2011, this had increased to three main leks plus two or three other areas where males were seen displaying in areas used by hens in spring.



Plate 248. Forest thinning for Capercaillie at Glenmore Forest, November 2006. © David Jardine

## Brood counts

Brood counts in FCS forests in Badenoch & Strathspey had relatively high productivity compared to sites elsewhere in Scotland. Of all FCS forests where brood counts were carried out, only the Badenoch & Strathspey sites had mean productivity greater than 0.6 chicks per hen, which is considered high enough to maintain the population (see below). In the other FCS sites, very few hens and broods were located. Capercaillie productivity at Glenmore Forest has been monitored since 2002 and in Forest A since 2008 (Figure 5). From 2002 to 2005, the mean number of females located each year at Glenmore during brood counts was nine, but from 2006 to 2010, the mean number was sixteen. These counts indicate that hens have increased at Glenmore. At Glenmore, between 2002 and 2011, 123 hens were located during brood counts and these hens had 122 chicks, giving an average of 0.99 chicks per hen. There was a peak in 2005 in Glenmore, when 11 hens were found with 41 chicks, giving an average of 3.15 chicks per hen. At Forest A, from 2008 to 2011, 27 females were accompanied by 41 chicks (1.52 chicks per female).

## Discussion

While there was no change in the number of state forests in which Capercaillie were found between 2002 and 2011, the numbers of males declined in all state forests apart from those in Badenoch & Strathspey. This generally reflects the national picture of lek counts across other ownerships (T. Poole, pers. comm.). Similarly, productivity was extremely low (often zero) in FCS sites outwith Badenoch & Strathspey, which again reflects the national situation across other ownerships (D. Baines, pers. comm.). Current productivity, even in Badenoch & Strathspey, is low compared to previous decades (R. Moss, pers. comm.). The widespread declines noted outside Badenoch & Strathspey are possibly a consequence of local factors depressing already low productivity below a critical threshold for continuous periods of time. For example, areas such as Moray have higher populations of generalist predators than Badenoch & Strathspey (V. Saint, unpublished thesis).

So, in contrast to the national picture, the Capercaillie populations in Glenmore and Forest A have continued to grow. The reasons for this are not yet clear, but work has started to clarify the important factors. Glenmore and Forest A are large, multi-purpose forests that meet a number of management objectives, including timber production, recreation provision and priority habitat management. Reconciling these objectives with Capercaillie conservation has been complex, but has been achieved through careful planning and management by FCS staff and partners. The consistent lek counts in Glenmore and Forest A commenced in 2000, to coincide with Glenmore Forest's inclusion within the Cairngorms Special Protection Area.

From fewer than ten displaying males in Glenmore and Forest A in 2000 the population has steadily increased to at least 34 males in 2011. As well as a numerical increase, there has been a noticeable expansion in the range of Capercaillie in these two forests; particularly in Forest A, where the number of leks has increased from one to three or more in four years. Capercaillie are now found throughout this forest. Productivity has also been high in these two sites - at least by contemporary standards. It has been estimated that an average of 0.62 chicks per female per year is needed to maintain a population in Scotland in the absence of deaths attributable to fences (Moss *et al.* 2000). Given the fence-free environment in these two forests, the measured Capercaillie productivity at Glenmore and Forest A more than explains the observed population increase and it is likely that in some years these forests produce excess Capercaillie that disperse to other forests in Badenoch & Strathspey. While Summers *et al.* (2009) showed that Pine Martens *Martes martes* were important predators of Capercaillie nests, it is notable that this high productivity has been achieved where Pine Martens are present in apparently high densities and no population control has been exercised.

One interesting recent observation is that Capercaillie appear to respond positively to thinning of plantations the previous winter. Birds sometimes move into such areas even as they are being thinned - feeding on the needles on the fallen tops of trees - and commence breeding in such areas within

a couple of years of them being thinned. Productivity in these areas appears to be high, by contemporary standards, and could reflect changes in the availability of nutrients and cover for nesting provided by the brash (branch wood left on the forest floor) produced during thinning, or could indicate that invertebrate food for chicks increases following forestry operations. Measurements are now underway to test these ideas which may provide useful advice to assist Capercaillie populations. The importance of the first thinning of commercial stands has been detected recently in Finland (Miettinen *et al.* 2008), where a positive relationship between the proportion of first-thinning stands and Capercaillie density was found. These authors also speculate about how thinning changes forests for Capercaillie.

Disturbance by birdwatchers and other visitors is a matter of concern to local forest managers and individuals wishing to view Capercaillie are strongly encouraged to comply with the birdwatchers' code and visit the public viewing provided at the RSPB Osprey hide at Loch Garten during April where they can be regularly seen. It is important that birdwatchers and forest managers note that Capercaillie received increased protection in the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004. It is for this reason that the location of Forest A has been withheld in this paper. Lekking Capercaillie are now protected from disturbance whilst they are lekking.

Forestry Commission Scotland is committed to Capercaillie conservation and the complex and demanding management in place in Badenoch & Strathspey and elsewhere to benefit this species will continue. The ultimate objective is to learn how to reconcile fully Capercaillie conservation with other forest management and societal objectives. Already, members of the IUCN Grouse Group have described the FCS work for Capercaillie in Scotland as an exemplar of grouse management.

### Acknowledgements

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## **Appendix:** Management for Capercaillie in FCS Badenoch & Strathspey forests

### **Forest operations**

Timber operations are timed to avoid disturbing Capercaillie leks and broods, with no thinning or clear felling during the Capercaillie breeding season (April to July). This commitment makes the delivery of harvesting programmes significantly more complicated - given the winter conditions that can occur in Strathspey.

Wherever possible, various forms of Capercaillie-friendly, continuous-cover forestry are being carried out, particularly in the Scots Pine areas. Elsewhere, a transition from non-native tree species to a forest comprised mainly of native species is under way. However, in places, non-native tree species such as larch are being retained because of their value to Capercaillie as a food source. The main objective of all of this management is to create a structurally diverse, Vaccinium-rich forest that provides abundant food and cover for Capercaillie.

### **Priority habitat management**

Restoration of the Native Pinewood, a UK BAP habitat, is a major priority at Glenmore (Jardine *et al.* 2010). The objective is to have a large forest comprising native species such as Scots Pine *Pinus sylvestris*, Aspen *Populus tremula*, birch *Betula pubescens* and *B. pendula* and Juniper *Juniperis communis*. This is being achieved through natural regeneration and removal of non-native tree species. Given that these forests are now deer fence-free forests, natural regeneration is being achieved through deer culling, which is a significant commitment. However, the results are very apparent and natural regeneration of Scots Pine is spectacular at Glenmore. This work will secure high quality habitat for Capercaillie in the long term, but already the regeneration provides excellent cover and brood habitat.

Small-scale drain blocking improves wetland areas and the supply of nutrient-rich *Eriophorum* buds in the pre-breeding period.

### **Fences**

All of the above silvicultural and habitat management is done without the use of fences. Over 25 km of deer fencing has been removed since 2000. Less than 1 km of fencing remains and most of this is outwith the forest and is marked to reduce collisions.

### Predator control

Targeted fox and crow control has been carried out in response to high predator numbers, although since 2004 this has been done on an opportunistic, rather than a systematic basis. Pine Martens are not controlled.

### Visitor management - general and events

Strathspey is a popular tourism and recreation destination and these forests have many visitors throughout the year. These visitors are actively encouraged by FCS, which means they need to be managed to minimise the disturbance to Capercaillie. This is a major task, given that Glenmore currently attracts around 250,000 visitors per year. The main management approach is to zone the forest, both spatially and temporally, into areas where recreation is encouraged and areas where it is not encouraged. Zoning the forest in this way takes an enormous amount of short-term and long-term planning, as well as a huge amount of ongoing, active management of everyday recreation and specific events. Visitor management is also adaptive and is adjusted as visitor numbers and activities change, and as visitor behaviour is better understood. The net result of this management activity is that about half of Glenmore forest and three-quarters of Forest A have much reduced recreational activity, which appears to be of enormous benefit to Capercaillie.

Specific features of recreation management which are thought to have helped Capercaillie:

- moving way-marked trails away from sensitive areas
- retention of screening vegetation on track-sides in key areas.
- careful scheduling of large events to minimise conflicts with Capercaillie conservation
- provision of interpretation at the visitor centre to help visitors understand the requirements of Capercaillie



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## A possible instance of a Barn Owl scavenging in severe weather

At 17:20 hrs on 8 December 2010 I came across a Barn Owl *Tyto alba* lying on the road in the centre of the northbound lane of a minor road (B6415) below the A1 bridge at Old Craighall in East Lothian (NT335708). The owl was still alive and was taken into my car where it flapped, but then went still. On the road within a metre of the owl was a dead Feral Pigeon *Columba livia* which had open flesh visible, the bones of the neck entirely exposed and the abdomen punctured (Plate 250). There was fresh blood around the mouth of the owl (Plate 249). Re-examining the owl 20 minutes later it was confirmed dead. Both birds were sent for post mortem analysis to try to ascertain details of their activity prior to death.

The owl was found to be a sub-adult male in poor condition, weighing 280 g, with no fat reserves and advanced muscle atrophy ("body score" 2/5). The gastrointestinal tract was empty save for a mass of blood and feathers in the crop. Some feathers were missing from the ventral abdomen and there was slight sub-cutaneous bruising. No other pathology was found.

The pigeon on the other hand had been in very good physical condition, weighing 320 g, with ample fat reserves and well developed muscles ("body score" 5/5). The gastrointestinal tract was well filled throughout. Pulmonary haemorrhage had occurred on both sides, also thoracic haemorrhage with large blood clots apparently as a result of a damaged right atrium. In addition, the skin and muscle of the neck was missing and there was a large tear in the right abdominal tunic exposing viscera and some of the intestines were missing. Examination of the subcutis failed to find any puncture wounds.

It is of interest to consider a possible sequence of events. The area had been in the grip of severe winter weather since late November. Following heavy snowfalls from 27 November, sub-zero temperatures prevailed, and compacted snow was still lying to a depth of 10–20 cm in the local area. The parapet below the road bridge is a regular pigeon haunt. However, the evidence does not support the possibility that the owl had taken a live pigeon roosting there. The pigeon's body temperature



Plate 249. Barn Owl casualty, recovered from Old Craighall, Lothian, December 2010. © Stephen Welch

when found was already lukewarm, and from comparison with the owl as it cooled, being a similar weight, it was possible to estimate that it had been dead for roughly three hours, indicating it had died around 14:30 hrs, thus before sunset at 15:39 hrs. Moreover, the post mortem examination of the pigeon had found various injuries indicative of a high-speed collision, which would have caused death very quickly. Thus it seems rather unlikely that it was killed by the owl.

For the owl, the tentative diagnosis was that starvation was the primary cause of death. Evidence in support of the owl having engaged in scavenging of the pigeon carcass comes from details of the post mortem. The edges of the damaged tissue of the pigeon's neck were observed to be ragged, consistent with scavenging in the opinion of the vet. The matted blood in the crop was mixed with chewed and wet feathers which were identified by him as those of a pigeon. There was extensive fresh blood on the bill base and over all of the feathers around the mouth, also extending in a line across the upper breast, and on the feet (Plate 250) - features that are inconsistent with ingestion of typical small mammal prey. It seems possible that the owl, already weak and very hungry, had seen the fresh pigeon carcass on the road and gone to feed on it. This stretch of road is busy at this time of day, with several vehicles passing each minute, many travelling at a speed of 40–50 mph on the derestricted section immediately below the road bridge. The owl would probably have had little chance to feed before being dazzled by headlights and then struck by a passing vehicle.

A search of the literature found only one previous case of presumed scavenging behaviour in this species. Dunsire & Dunsire (1978) reported a Barn Owl perched on a freshly dead European Hedgehog *Erinaceus europaeus* at about 23:00 hrs on 30 July 1977, on a minor road near Carrington in Midlothian. Though it was thought from the position of the owl that it had been eating from the hedgehog's underside, or was about to commence doing so, proof of this was not possible and the bird flew off after five seconds. An editorial comment with that



Plate 250. Feral Pigeon casualty, recovered from Old Craighall, Lothian, December 2010. © Stephen Welch

account is that no previous instances of Barn Owl taking hedgehog or other carrion could be traced, and nothing is mentioned by Cramp (1985). It seems that true carrion feeding is highly unusual in this species, perhaps only occurring in extreme conditions.

### Acknowledgements

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## Successful cohabitation of a Black Grouse lek with a model airplane club in Clyde

Black Grouse *Tetrao tetrix* is a highly attractive and charismatic species that is undergoing serious population declines in Scotland and the UK (Gregory *et al.* 2002, Forrester *et al.* 2007). The population decline is particularly severe in southern Scotland where reductions of 49% and 69% in south-west and south-east areas, respectively, have been recorded between 1995–6 and 2005 (Sim *et al.* 2008).

Black Grouse is unusual in that as part of its breeding biology it forms groups at so called lek sites, usually flat open areas, where males congregate to compete for prime locations, which in turn allows them to mate with visiting females. These lek sites are an essential element of Black Grouse breeding biology, with their protection an important part in conservation of the species.

Black Grouse can be sensitive to disturbance by human activities. Studies in Europe have shown that the species range and abundance can be affected by disturbance caused by human recreation that coincides with their distribution (Patthey *et al.* 2008, Braunisch *et al.* 2011). Though studies in Northern England have found weaker links between human disturbance and decreases in numbers, precautionary strategies aimed at mitigating any

potential effects have been proposed (Baines & Richardson 2007, Warren *et al.* 2009).

Black Grouse use a lek site at Stockie Muir, c. 200 m west of the A809 road, c. 8 km north of Milngavie, Clyde (NS506817; Plate 251). The lek site is in a region of upland moorland that appears to have an ideal mixture of key habitats for the species, with a mosaic of open heather moorland, wet grassland, dwarf shrub moorland, open woodland and introduced woodland. This habitat extends from the Kilpatrick Hills to the south and west across to Dumbarton Muir and Stockie Muir in the north, an area of around 60–70 km<sup>2</sup>. However, only small, declining numbers of Black Grouse have been observed elsewhere in the area, with the largest lek by far at Stockie Muir (*Clyde Bird Reports*). Males have been observed at this site since at least 1985, originally in smaller numbers, though slowly rising to 9 in April 2005, and with a significant increase to a peak count of 21 in January 2006. Subsequently, a slight decline occurred, with 16 males in March 2012. This remains the most important lek site in the recording area and south-western Scotland, where up to 3–4 birds are more typically seen. Against a backdrop of decline of the species in the immediate area and the region as a whole, the large numbers of birds at this lek is striking.



Plate 251. The Stockie Muir Black Grouse lek site, Clyde, photographed from the car park on the A809 on 8 January 2012 at 3 pm. © Chris McInerney



**Plate 252.** *The Stockie Muir Black Grouse lek site, Clyde, photographed from the car park on the A809 on 8 January 2012 at 3 pm. © Chris McInerney*

This lek site is extraordinary, and perhaps unique, in the UK, in that it is used and managed by a model airplane club to fly their planes. The Glasgow Barnstormers Model Aero Club (<http://glasgowbarnstormers.co.uk/>) created a small airfield at the site approximately 100 m by 50 m, which is naturally elevated around the surrounding muir (Plate 251). The airfield has short cut grass, which the club created and maintains, and is surrounded by heather moorland, dwarf shrubs and open woodland. This habitat, along with the prospect of the site, makes it ideal for lekking Black Grouse. The Barnstormers use the airfield to fly model airplanes on an irregular basis, mostly through the summer months on windless days. During this period the club might use the site a few times per week, usually through the middle of the day, and particularly at weekends. This irregular use has allowed the site to be cohabited by Black Grouse. Birds are typically seen at dawn, but also at other times of the day when the Barnstormers are not present. Males have been observed lekking at all times of the day, and throughout the year, as has been noticed elsewhere in Scotland (Baines 1996). In the context of studies showing negative impacts on Black Grouse populations by human recreational activities (Patthey *et al.* 2008, Braunisch *et al.* 2011), it is striking that this lek has successfully cohabited, and indeed increased, with the air club development. It appears that the management of the site for this use by humans

has, coincidentally, been advantageous for the birds and not inhibited the lekking activity.

The regular presence of the grouse and the location, next to a public road with an adjacent car parking space, makes this one of the best sites in Scotland for observing the species. As long as observers use their car as a hide, and act responsibly remaining next to the road, birds can be watched with no disturbance. This practice has occurred so far (apart from a few irresponsible photographers setting up hides on the lek site), with birds using the lek in large numbers.

Sadly, man-made changes are occurring near the site, which may negatively impact the lek. Adjacent land on the muir has changed ownership with, in 2012, trees being planted. Furthermore, fences have been placed around the lek that do not have colour markers to prevent bird collisions. Fences are a major cause of mortality of Black Grouse, with the consequent recommendation that they are not situated near to lek sites (Baines & Summers 1997, MacLennan & Summers 2007). The Clyde Branch of the SOC has approached interested bodies, including the RSPB, to ensure that this site is not degraded for Black Grouse. But only time will tell. It would be a deep tragedy to lose this lek at a location close to where many new (and old) observers could come to see and appreciate this wonderful, iconic species in Scotland.

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## Blackbird feeding on a shrew

Early in the evening of 22 April 2012 at Carinish, North Uist, Outer Hebrides, I glanced out of the front window to see a male Blackbird *Turdus merula* pecking at a small animal. Through binoculars, I could see that the mammal was a Pygmy Shrew *Sorex minutus*, the only species of shrew that occurs in North



Plate 253. Blackbird eating Pygmy Shrew, Carinish, North Uist, Outer Hebrides, April 2012. © Steve Duffield

Uist. As far as I could tell it was already dead. I had not noticed a body there previously and presumed that the Blackbird had recently caught it or brought it to that location. I cannot be certain whether the bird had killed the shrew or found its corpse. The bird proceeded to shake the shrew violently before attempting to swallow it whole (Plate 253). The rest of my family joined me to watch the gruesome spectacle, although the bird remained quite unaware of us even though it was only c.3 m away. However, it then flew off with its prey and out of sight into a bush, presumably to finish off its meal. There appeared to be plenty of the Blackbird's normal invertebrate prey available at the time and it seems this was an opportunistic meal.

Cramp (1988) noted that Blackbirds have many unusual items in their diet including small fish, newts and lizards, although there is no reference

to shrews. However, a search of the literature revealed four published occurrences (Ennion 1963, Hollick 1965, Meadows 1965, Waite & Waite 1995) and, on the internet, a similar account from summer 2009 in Derbyshire, where a Blackbird was seen to kill a shrew then fly off with the body (Paley & Peck 2009).

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## Attempted predation by Buzzard at Sand Martin colony

While checking a Sand Martin *Riparia riparia* colony at Colmonell in South Ayrshire on 13 July 2012, I was aware of the unusual absence of nesting hirundines and assumed that this may largely be due to the juveniles having departed their nest holes. In an attempt to obtain a better view of the nest holes, I made my way along the edge of a field to a point where I could see more clearly into the face of the colony. As I did so, the flapping wing of a medium-sized raptor caught my attention. After a short distance further along the field edge, I could see that a Buzzard *Buteo buteo* was perched somewhat precariously on a protruding stone and was using this to balance on while searching some nearby nest-holes for occupants. This behaviour was observed for about five minutes, after which the bird noticed that it too was being observed, and left quickly. Although small passerines are quoted as forming a regular part of the Buzzard's diet, only one reference to hirundines as prey items has been traced. Mead & Pepler (1975) record a Buzzard eating a juvenile Sand Martin and attempting to capture others at a Dorest sand pit. Although this would appear to be unusual behaviour for such a bulky raptor, largely unsuited to the task it was undertaking, the bird had an injury to its left eye and its efforts may either have been as a consequence of this disability, or merely another example of just how versatile this raptor can be.

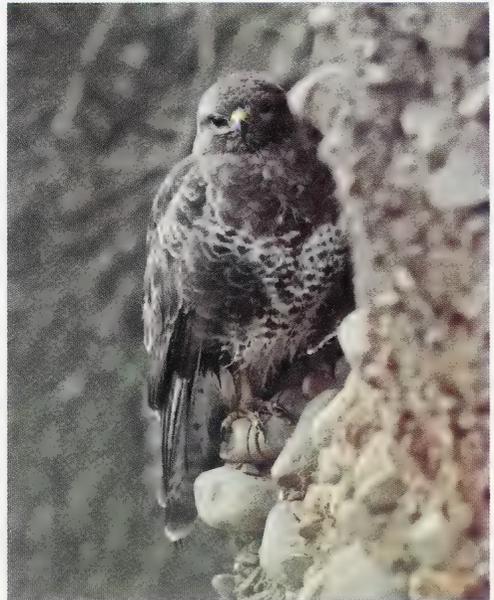


Plate 254. Buzzard at Sand Martin colony, Colmonell, South Ayrshire, July 2012. © Angus Hogg

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## Large Raven flocks on the Isle of Lewis, Outer Hebrides

The back cover of *Scottish Birds* 32(3) (September 2012) depicted a large aerial gathering of Ravens *Corvus corax* in April 2012 on the Isle of Lewis, Outer Hebrides. It is normally in late autumn and winter that Ravens are at their most sociable and it seems relevant to describe a flock that I observed on the same island in 1965. This was briefly noted in Slater (1965) and in the 'Errata and additions' to *The Birds of Scotland* (Forrester *et al.* 2012).

A large roost on moorland adjacent to Marybank Quarry, outside Stornoway, was counted several times in 1965. Numbers rose from 26 on 22 March to 70 on 6 August. However, on 15 September, on a breezy evening just before sunset, I noticed birds flying in from all directions between south-west and north and settling on the ground. The highest count was achieved 30 minutes after sunset, at 19:15 GMT, when the roost numbered 540 and birds ceased to arrive.

The literature contains many examples of large congregations in Britain. At the beginning of this century, one Anglesey roost numbered 2000, but there are few modern roosts that exceed 500. It would be of interest to know whether the Lewis site is still used.

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**Norman Elkins 18 Scotstarvit View, Cupar, Fife KY15 5DX.**

Email: [jandnelkins@btinternet.com](mailto:jandnelkins@btinternet.com)

Tristan ap Rheinallt comments: "There is still a large Raven roost in Stornoway, though the birds now roost in trees approximately 1 km to the south-east of Marybank Quarry. I have counted 300 or more birds going to roost on several occasions, my maximum count being 552 on 27 May 2009."

"The change of roost location may be related to the fact that in 1965 there was a waste disposal site at Marybank, directly opposite the quarry on the west side of the main A859 road. Newspaper reports from the time show that this dump, which served the town of Stornoway, received a great deal of slaughterhouse waste in particular and attracted many gulls, to the consternation of local inhabitants. There is no mention of Ravens, but it can be surmised that they would have had a ready supply of food in close proximity to the roost site identified by Norman Elkins.

"The Marybank dump closed at the end of the 1960s. Today, waste is taken to the large Bennadrove Landfill Site, which is situated on open moorland about 2 km to the north-west of the old dump. Not surprisingly, this is also attractive to Ravens, with birds feeding during the daytime both at the landfill site and across adjacent moorland. In winter, they are accompanied by several thousand gulls. Towards dusk most of the Ravens congregate in the immediate vicinity of the landfill site before flying directly to the roost site about 3 km away.

"It is interesting to note that despite the common perception locally that the presence of the Bennadrove Landfill Site has led to an increase in bird numbers, the close match between peak counts of Ravens in 1965 and 2009 suggests that the population today may be much the same as it was nearly half a century ago."

*Revised ms accepted November 2012*

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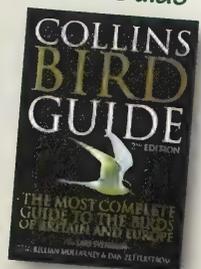


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Birdwatcher silhouette image courtesy of David Palmar ([www.photoscot.co.uk](http://www.photoscot.co.uk)). Image of man and child with telescope courtesy of Jimmy Maxwell. Image of child birdwatching courtesy of Sandy Howe. Image of Waterston House courtesy of June Scott.



Plate 255. Hotel through the snow. © Jimmy Maxwell

This northerly venue ushered 159 delegates into its spacious warmth from a real late-October blizzard. Ken Shaw, SOC President, welcomed everyone, thanking our sponsors, Swarovski, and detailing all the contributing organisations and stands which were on display. A warm introduction to the first speaker, Alan Lauder, led into the opening lecture, which engaged with the Celtic theme of this Conference.

### Celtic connections: exploring links between Scottish and Irish birds

- Alan Lauder

Alan plunged straight into our conference theme - "Celtic Connections". As Chief Executive of BirdWatch Ireland and also chairman of SBRC he was in an admirable position to link, compare and contrast ornithology in the two countries. He spent some time explaining the various Irish organisations. Personally I was pleased to learn that WeBS counts extended to Ireland, because of Alan's past experience with BTO and work on the Atlas, plus time with the RSPB. His presentation majored on population dynamics and changes therein.

However, historical factors, e.g. the stripping of peat bogs, were not omitted and the position of the country as a small island located

offshore from another island was important. Changes in habitat and the wet climate were well covered and differences between east and west explained. Alan revealed his liking for particular reserves in this context, with reference to sea-watching and the occurrence of North American migrants.



Plate 256. Alan Lauder after his opening lecture. © Jimmy Maxwell

I have not ventured to explain the details of individual species as Alan did, but was very aware of the pleasure and relief in the audience with news that Yellowhammer, Roseate Tern and Greenland White-fronted Goose are thriving. But shock, horror, total disbelief - the Curlew could go extinct!

A very stimulating and informative talk.

### *Campbell McLellan*

The evening's entertainment, as usual, was the quiz. This year Ian Thomson, 'fresh' from a trip to Malta, teased the audience with a great variety of ornithological identifications and other, sometimes audio, questions. The audience had fun and relaxed into the usual conference spirit - some of us even recognised the upside-down Curlew bill! Many thanks to Ian for a fine, varied and enjoyable show.

## **Saturday**

Early birders, under Peter Moore's guidance, were invited out to two local venues - Craigellachie National Nature Reserve and the Coylumbridge area. All witnessed the massive influx of winter thrushes and even enjoyed the crisp freezing conditions. Thereafter, a BirdTrack session in the hotel consolidated the morning's sightings into recorded format and various questions about this system were resolved under the guidance of Chris Wernham, with James Bray and Anne Cotton from BTO Stirling office. Elsewhere, a Great Grey Shrike was located by Russ Wynn and Andrew Colenutt. After lunch, the afternoon's lectures began.

### **Celtic raptors: insights on Irish raptors**

#### **- John Lusby**

John Lusby gave an excellent overview of the current level of raptor research in Ireland and highlighted the close connections with Scotland. From small beginnings, there has been a surge of interest and positive progress in the last five years. The input by and co-operation with individuals from the well established Scottish Raptor Groups has been very important, including a high successful Merlin workshop led by Ken Shaw.

The monitoring of Merlin breeding pairs has revealed that many use tree sites on islands in



**Plate 257.** John Lusby in full flow. © Jimmy Maxwell

the large tracts of bog country which are a common habitat in Ireland. Very few ground nesting attempts are recorded in contrast with the Scottish population. Nest box schemes and studies, based on the Kestrel work in southern Scotland, have been set up and in one interesting parallel, Peregrine pairs are taking over Kestrel nesting territories particularly in suitable ruined buildings.

Another successful area of co-operation has been the re-introduction of Golden Eagles to Ireland using Scottish stock and expertise. Donor birds have been transferred since 2001 by the Golden Eagle Trust and the first Irish born eaglet was in 2007, an exciting development.

John identified the impact of secondary rodenticide poisoning of raptors as a major problem with for example 88% of the liver samples tested from 75 dead Barn Owls showing multiple toxic compounds present. A major push for changes in legislation and illegal poisoning is afoot to try and address the issue. Lack of enforcement is a frustration mirrored in Scotland.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Irish situation is the three distinct zones of different mammals which naturally reflects in the birds' ecology, plus the fact that there is little fluctuation in the vole population, which is a factor here. The discovery of a population of Greater White-toothed Shrews in 2008 was an added bonus for the raptor workers.

The challenge for the raptor workers is almost universal, raising awareness, changing perceptions and addressing ingrained attitudes. John ably illustrated that the Irish raptor workers are making their mark with their enthusiasm and drive and this bodes well for the raptors they study.

*Gordon Riddle*

### Golden Eagles in south-west Scotland

- Chris Rollie

The Golden Eagle has had a strong public image from the time of the Book of Kells (800 AD) and, more locally, in a poem of 1808, Sir Walter Scott referred to the species being at Loch Skeen on the Dumfriesshire-Peeblesshire border. This has not, however, ensured that the Golden Eagle has had a welcome from everyone living or working in the countryside. As a result of persecution, the species was rare in south-west Scotland throughout the 19th century and at times was reduced to one pair. A respite from persecution during the two World Wars and legal protection since 1954 allowed the species to make a partial recovery. During the rapid period of afforestation in the second half of the 20th century, the population rose to four pairs but the benefit was temporary and there is now only one pair again. Golden Eagles nest on crags or in pine trees, laying two eggs, although in south-west Scotland it is unusual for both chicks to fledge. Mountain Hares, Brown Hares, sheep carrion and deer fawns are frequently brought to the nest. Current prospects for eagles are better again, with collab-

oration from Forestry Commission Scotland in the Galloway Forest Park and the designation by UNESCO of a Biosphere Reserve. There is also a new Eagle Project in the wider south of Scotland led by Scottish Natural Heritage. Chris was enthused by the satellite-tracking project run by Roy Dennis, which is providing much new information about the behaviour of one bird in southern Scotland code-named 'Roxy'. He strongly condemned the continued killing of eagles caught 'accidentally' in crow-traps.

*Graham Pyatt*

Over coffee, members were now beginning to investigate the various presentations around the auditorium, especially that by Keith Brockie in the promotion of his new book - "A Return to One Man's Island". Lectures resumed...

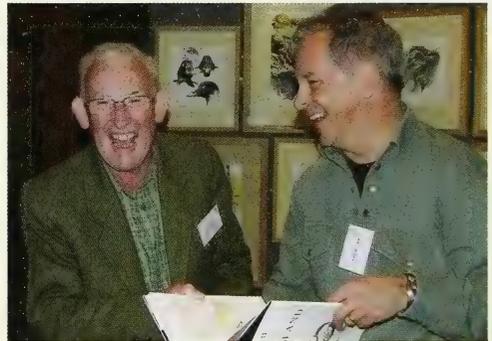


Plate 259. David Clugston enjoying a joke with Keith Brockie. © Jimmy Maxwell



Plate 258. Chris Rollie emphasises a point. © Jimmy Maxwell

### The Art of Bird Identification

- Killian Mullarney

My first bird book was the *Observer's Guide to British Birds*, then aged 12, I got my second, *Bird Spotting* (Blandford) at the Osprey Project in 1961. The latter was illustrated by Rein Stuurman and it was he who first inspired Killian Mullarney to see the art of bird identification! A more concise title for his talk is not possible. In his original youthful drawings in early sketchbooks, he showed us the learning of his craft by reminding us of the succession of fieldguides, from the much-loved *Peterson* in 1954, the *Hamlyn Guide* (1970) and the similar *Heinzel Guide* of 1972; the *Shell Guide* of 1983 and the *Macmillan Guide* (1989). There were other books, of course, and nowadays the bird guides have transferred to digital technology



Plate 260. Killian Mullarney with DIM Wallace.  
© Ian Andrews

available in the field on a smartphone, but the illustrations drawn by human hand are still the key 'art' to bird identification. Killian made special reference to the arrival of modern tripod-mounted telescopes. That innovation of powerful user-friendly optics made surveillance of wildlife much easier, and with 45° angled prisms, ideal for the draftsman. Killian had shown us drawings made through his old Kowa TSB, which proved his drafting dexterity and his developing skill in bird identification, but suddenly he mentioned the work of our own DIM Wallace. Now, I could see where his talk's title had come from ... the *raison d'être* behind his work on the *Collins Bird Guide*, 1999. The word 'art' simply means 'doing' and to do a good job as a guide means that both the arts of seeing and showing have to be expertly combined - in his case they have been.

**Duncan Watt**

### AGM

The 76th SOC AGM duly got underway. Last year's Minutes were accepted and the only matter arising concerned the valuing of Waterston House Library. This was to be listed as a "Heritage Asset" and not as involving an actual amount of money. The Annual Report was accepted.

In the Annual Accounts, SOCTreasurer, Alan Fox, thanked both Jean Torrance and Sandy Scotland for their valued help. Our financial position was very healthy with a surplus of £77,000 and a total club value of £1,390,000. There had been a £6,500 increase from subscriptions, a £45,000 profit from the sale of art at Waterston House (here Dave Allan's contribution was

applauded), and £102,000 in legacies. Looking ahead, our situation looked secure but caution was advised considering a financial situation dependent on sales and legacies. More legacies were announced for the current year.

Concerning SOC connections with various organisations, Alan made special mention of Scottish Environmental LINK which allowed us to contribute a coherent voice regarding the environment and a possible say in policies concerning it. The audience then voted positively on certain membership wording changes, including the option to pay subscriptions by quarterly instalments.

Office bearers remain unchanged as does our auditor, Sandy Scotland. There was no other business.

For quality, the Conference Dinner was one of the best I can remember - quickly and efficiently served by pleasant staff. Chris Rollie's after-dinner speech was more of an extended story about happenings in a Dalmellington pub, but the message was clear - for birdwatchers to be proud of their passion in whatever situation and recognise their acceptance within society. The point was made in Chris's own engaging Ayrshire manner - funny, but honest, impassioned and direct as we know he always is.

Tweed Ceilidh band then provided excellent music (and instruction) for delegates to dance to, or just enjoy.



Plate 261. Wendy Hicks entertaining the crowds late into the night. © Harry Scott



Plate 262. *Stuart Rivers and Chris Wernham relax at coffee.* © Jimmy Maxwell

## Sunday

### Are we there yet? Recent advances in the study of long-distance migrants and their Scottish populations

- Chris Wernham & Stuart Rivers

Having been awarded the 'death spot' after breakfast on Sunday morning, Chris decided that the best way to keep the audience awake was to keep asking questions, and reward correct answers with sweets or miniatures of whisky. Her intriguing survey of the changing fortunes of our summer visitors would have kept us alert anyway. Breeding records for the new atlas have shown that many birds are doing better in Scotland than in England. Some of this is associated with climate change here, and many bird ranges have extended northwards (by 19 km on average) in recent years. However, not all changes are due to altered conditions in Britain. Studies on Pied Flycatchers suggested that their decline since about 1994 is not due to changed breeding success here, but lower survival rates during migration or in winter. Until recently, our knowledge of where our summer migrants go in winter has been patchy at best, and often almost non-existent.

Recent satellite tracking of Cuckoos gives an example of how rapidly our knowledge can now expand. These show that our Cuckoos do not all take the same route to their wintering area, even if they end up together. Tracking can also aid conservation efforts by indicating the important staging areas during migration - apparently they

include Flanders Moss and the Po Estuary for our Cuckoos. Detailed knowledge of migration and wintering grounds will also aid prediction of the effects of climate change.

Chris ended with a plea for more fieldwork to set the tracking data in context. More BBS squares are needed in Scotland and more full lists on Birdtrack would give us a better understanding of the bulk of migration than just arrival and departure dates. The process of elucidating where our migrants go and the problems they encounter, is as exciting as the final picture will be.

*Roger Hissett*

### Bird Atlas 2007–11 - the end At..las(t)!

- Bob Swann

At the outset of the project the organisers were uncertain as to whether the winter survey of all 10-km squares would be achieved in Scotland. In the event it was achieved within the four years and in spite of two of the winters being the most severe for many years. Hundreds of timed tetrad visits (TTVs) in the highest hills actually recorded no birds at all, further emphasising the dedication needed by volunteers. The breeding season survey was also completed on time. The whole survey, undertaken by 17,000 observers, comprised 182,000 TTVs and produced 5 million roving records. The task of validating all these results has been undertaken by some of the regional organisers. The publication is expected during 2013 and will deal with 300 species and run to about 650 pages. Bob previewed a few of the most interesting results. Species that have extended their range since the 1988–91 atlas

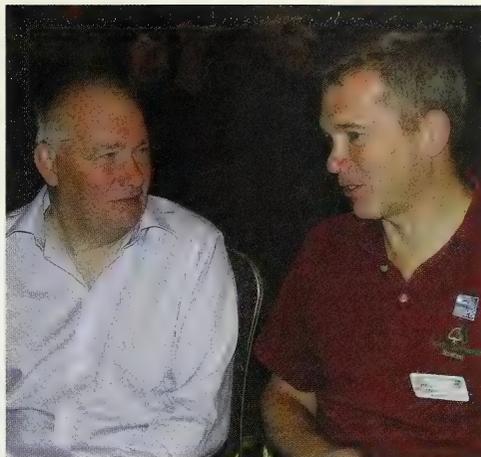


Plate 263. *Gordon Riddle and Bob Swann discuss fieldwork.* © Jimmy Maxwell

include Golden and White-tailed Eagles, Red-throated Diver, Great Skua, Barn Owl, Goldfinch, Swallow, Blackcap and Jay. Species in decline, either in range or abundance, include Ptarmigan, Lapwing, Yellowhammer and Ring Ouzel. A few species showing losses in England, but not necessarily in Scotland, include Willow Warbler and Cuckoo. Bob ended his talk with a 'thank you' to all the fieldworkers, organisers and validators.

*Graham Pyatt*

A coffee break allowed members to discuss the lectures and now seek out that special Christmas present from the excellent book displays, jewellery, sketches and photograph presentations.



**Plate 265.** *Ken Shaw and David Sexton.*  
© Jimmy Maxwell



**Plate 264.** *Browsing the stands.* © Jimmy Maxwell

### **Mull: Eagle Island & Springwatch: behind the scenes**

- David Sexton

Many have had their first experiences of natural history on TV - *Look* with Peter Scott, *Safari* with Armand and Michaela Denis, *Zooquest* with David Attenborough and *Under the Sea* with Hans and Lotte Haas - all of course in black-and-white and filmed with seldom more than two cameras. Dave Sexton has been involved with the 'Eagle Island' of Mull since the early Sea Eagle nest success in 1985. With wonderful photographs of Mull's fauna, Dave gave an overview of the year-round wildlife spectacles to

be witnessed there. Mull has enjoyed the most enormous financial boost from eco-tourism. The greatest came with the BBC *Springwatch* series. Dave told the tale of the planning of the live Sea Eagle camera shoot. He claimed that just one Land Rover and a Transit van had been expected - ha! The five-truck cavalcade was inevitable, and as Dave had previously worked with the BBC in Bristol, he didn't fully convince me of his surprise. The secret video record of *Springwatch* was a privileged view for Conference. The TV nature programmes I grew up with did inspire me to go out as a child observer and see the world for myself. As I write this report, the BBC *Autumnwatch* from Aigas Field Centre is being broadcast live ...in colour and online, with remote digital cameras... press the red button!

*Duncan Watt*

### **Tracking and monitoring the movements of the critically endangered Balearic Shearwater: a true Celtic Wanderer**

- Russell Wynn

This species, endemic to the Balearic Islands, is faced with extinction this century. Russ illustrated the northwards spread of the species into UK and Irish waters, making it a fitting candidate for the theme of the conference. He showed how 5000 hours of seawatching off SW Cornwall has produced a huge dataset of seabird and cetacean movements over five years with annual totals of Balearic Shearwaters rising to 2,878 by 2011, probably influenced by climate change.



Plate 266. Stephen Hunter with Russ Wynn checking the visuals. © Jimmy Maxwell

With the aid of various tracking devices, British and Mallorcan researchers have been able to map the movements of the species. Breeding birds fly from Mallorcan colonies directly to Catalunyan and southern French coastal waters to forage and collect food for their young, diving to 22m or more. The post-breeding population then disperses through the Strait of Gibraltar and north to Biscay. As no tagged adults have been found north of Biscay, it is probably the non-breeding element that moves into our seas, increasingly so to Scotland. Up to 2% of the world population visits SW England, circumnavigating anticlockwise in the western English Channel. This occurs in late summer and autumn before birds return south and withdraw to the Mediterranean. Further work has discovered that Menorcan breeders are more comparable to the eastern Mediterranean Yelkouan Shearwater. Although birds resembling these have been recorded off western Europe, tagging has shown no movements of Menorcan birds outside the Mediterranean.

At times amusing, but always illuminating, Russ demonstrated the perils of difficult cliff landings to crawl into the most complex of breeding caves and crevices to tag and ring birds, treating the audience to a recording of their unearthly calls. He

also revealed the funny side of the seawatching, from a rescued cow passing by slung underneath a helicopter to someone's ashes being poured over the cliff edge onto unsuspecting seawatchers! This was a brilliant talk to end the conference, but with a very serious message.

*Norman Elkins*

The Raffle was drawn by Russ Wynn with Wendy Hicks in charge - she thanked all the donors of prizes and announced a fine total for Club funds of £482. Vicky McLellan then read out the special 200 Club winners paying tribute to Daphne Peirse-Duncan's tremendous organisational work, over 24 years! and the huge profits accumulated for the SOC.

Ken Shaw then rounded off the proceedings by thanking all the speakers for coming, then especially Wendy and the girls, the hotel staff, Alan Fox for all his work, the untiring Stephen Hunter on whom we totally depend for all electronic happenings, Peter Moore and all the others. The weather by now was a good deal milder and he wished us a safe journey back among the glorious autumn colours of Speyside.

*Jimmy Maxwell*

# NEWS AND NOTICES

## New SOC Members

**Ayrshire:** Mr M.E. Crowe, Miss L. Cuthbertson, Dr M. Grant, Mr D. Thomson, **Central Scotland:** Mr P. Brooks, Mr M. Butterworth, **Clyde:** Mr G. Baptie, Mr S. Black, Mr A.J. Fraser, Ms N. O'Hanlon, Mr & Mrs K. Walker, **England, Wales & NI:** P. Aseervatham, Mr & Mrs M. Briggs, Mr & Mrs A. Chamberlain, Mr C. Everett, Mr T. Farooqi, Mr D. Gascoigne, Mr J. Holland, Miss S. Jackson, Mr M. Kerr, Mr M. McLaren, Mr P. Morgan, **Fife:** Mr A. McCubbin, Dr M. Wilson, **Grampian:** Mr & Mrs J. Addison, Mr & Mrs P. Vann, **Highland:** Mr B.T. Shoult, **Lothian:** Mr D. Atkins, Miss C. Bell, Ms J. Binnie, Mr J. Boak, Ms J. Cochrane, Mr M. Downing, Mr M. Eden, Mr T. Edwards, Mr C. Foster, Mr A. Friel, Mr & Mrs C. Giles, Mrs C.J. Harris, Mr & Mrs S. Humphreys, Mrs J. Larkin, Mr & Mrs I. Parker, Mr D.A. Potts, Ms P. Rogerson, Mr J. Russell, Ms S. Saunders, Mr G.B. Scott, Mr J. Vaughan, Ms N. Weisshaupt, Dr & Mrs P. Wells, **Overseas:** Mr S. Hepburn.

## 200 Club

New members are always welcome. They must be over 18 and SOC members. Please contact: Daphne Peirse-Duncombe, Rosebank, Gattonside, Melrose TD6 9NH. The latest prizewinners are: £150 Mrs R.A. Pyatt, £75 R.S. Smith, £50 Mrs P.M. Millar, £30 Dr R. Jenkins, £20 J. Walker, £10 Karen Miller.

The latest (much-needed) additions to HQ using 200 Club funds are car park floodlights and the conversion of a space in the foyer to create extra secure storage space. Thanks go to all involved.

## The editorial team says 'thank you' to Ian Francis

Ian Francis has been part of the editorial team for almost 10 years and has chosen to stand down at the end of 2012. He started working on Scottish Bird News back in 2003 and then on the new-look, combined Scottish Birds in 2009. The editors tend to work in the background and the extent of Ian's input may not be immediately apparent. Suffice it to say that he has made full use of his knowledge

and contacts to stimulate the flow of varied and pertinent articles. Thank you!

*Ian Andrews (Co-ordinating Editor)*

## Invitation to all branches

In the "Articles, News and Views" section of Scottish Birds we very much rely on contributions from the membership. We know interesting and exciting things are happening across the country, but these may only appear locally (if at all) and the chance to share them with other members is lost. Would it be an idea for there to be one nominated "reporter" in each branch, not necessarily on the committee, to be on the lookout for interesting happenings arising from that area and perhaps elicit a short note and/or photograph(s) from those involved? The inside back cover of this issue spells out the kind of material we are looking for and the format, style etc. I think it is worth each branch committee trying this idea out and I'd be pleased to hear your thoughts on it or be contacted direct by the nominated reporter in each branch.

*Jimmy Maxwell (editor)*

*jimmy.maxwell@talktalk.net*

## Events at Waterston House

### Art exhibitions

- Michael Warren, showing until 16 January 2013
- Laurie Campbell, 19 January–27 February
- John Busby, Fran Knowles & Sonas Maclean, 2 March–10 April
- Tim Wootton, 13 April–5 June

## Waterston House Christmas closing

The office will be closed from 25 December 2012 and will re-open on Thursday 3 January 2013. Wendy and the team at Waterston House would like to wish everyone a very happy festive season as well as give a special thank you to all the wonderful volunteers who have given their time to come and help out at HQ during what has been an exciting and busy year.

### Other dates for your diary

#### Scottish Birdwatchers' Conference

Saturday 16 March 2013, Our Dynamic Earth, Edinburgh. Programme and booking form enclosed or visit the SOC website for details.

#### Scottish Birdfair

11 & 12 May 2013, Hopetoun House, Edinburgh.

### Branch updates

Note new Email contact details for:

Ray Murray - Borders Recorder:

Email: ray1murray@btinternet.com

Iain Gibson - Clyde Recorder:

Email: iaingibson.soc@btinternet.com

And correction to telephone number for:

Hugh Addelese - Grampian Secretary:

Tel: 01330 820949

### Central Branch

The indoor meeting scheduled for 4 April 2013 has been cancelled.

### Caitness Branch

Contact Julian Smith 01847 851280 or Sinclair Manson 01847 892379. Excursions have been arranged for the following dates in early 2013:

Sunday 13 January - Purple Sandpiper survey

Sunday 10 February - seaducks



### New leaflet

#### *Birdwatching on the East Lothian coast*

This new, free Club leaflet gives information on birdwatching at Musselburgh, Gosford Bay, Aberlady Bay, Bass Rock, John Muir Country Park, Dunbar and Barns Ness. There are maps and access information. Copies are available at

Waterston House, Aberlady, or contact Jane Cleaver there (Email: jane.cleaver@the-soc.org.uk).

### Facebook update

Many thanks to all those who have 'liked' our SOC Facebook page! In case you haven't yet, you can find us at [www.Facebook.com/ScotlandsBirdClub](http://www.Facebook.com/ScotlandsBirdClub) or follow the link from the SOC website.

With around 300 fans of the page so far, we're enjoying our foray into Facebook and hope that you are too!

### Watch this space for...

A new SOC website, nearing completion at the time of going to press!

The soon-to-be launched site will carry over the fantastic wealth of information from the pre-existing website, but will benefit from a few extra features, such as having a facility for web users to join online, or buy gift membership, at the mere click of the mouse!

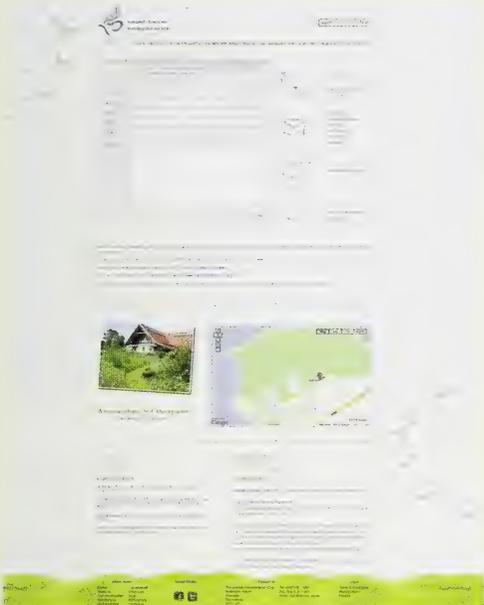
You'll have the option to renew your SOC membership online, which will hopefully make the process quicker and easier... and reduce paperwork! Likewise, you'll also be able to book a place at our Annual and Scottish Birdwatchers' conferences over the net.

The Photo Gallery area of the new site is being designed to allow web users to upload their own images to the web page. This will also be searchable to permit quick and easy navigation through the image gallery; whether you're looking for photographs of a particular species, at a certain site, or those taken by a specific photographer. Exclusive to the soon-to-be launched site will also be a Kids Page, stocked with free, downloadable activity sheets for the young birdwatcher and nature enthusiast.



Plate 267. Draft of how the new website's 'contact us' page will look. © The SOC

There will be a few other nifty features on the new site, but we don't want to tell you all about them here; we'd rather let you discover them for yourself by visiting [www.the-soc.org.uk](http://www.the-soc.org.uk).

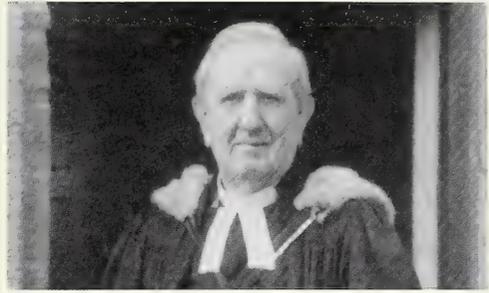


**Plate 268.** Draft of how the new website's membership page will look. © The SOC

The Club would like to sincerely thank Stephen Hunter, our volunteer webmaster, who has almost single-handedly undertaken the mammoth task of managing the Club's website for the past five years.



**Plate 269.** Stephen Hunter. © Stephen Hunter



**Plate 270.** J. M. McWilliam during his time as Minister at Tynron, Dumfriesshire. Photo courtesy of Mrs. Sarah Thompson, Thornhill.

### Republication of two classic books by a founding member and Honorary President of the SOC, J. M. McWilliam

Two sought-after bird guides by the Rev. J. M. McWilliam, a founding member and Honorary President of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club, have been republished as eBooks. Proceeds are being donated to the SOC. *The Birds of the Island of Bute* (1927) and *The Birds of the Firth of Clyde* (1936) have long been collector's items with copies sometimes selling for more than £100 each. The Clyde book covers what McWilliam described as "South Argyllshire", which he chose to interpret as roughly Kintyre, Knapdale and Cowal, and includes an account of the early Eider colonisation of the Clyde.

Costing just £3.29 each the books can be downloaded for use on Kindle eReaders, iPads, iPhones and Android phones and with Kindle's free software can be read on PC or Mac laptops and desktop computers. The publisher of the new digital editions is SOC member, Roger Ratcliffe, who obtained the permission of the Rev. McWilliam's family. The books have interactive bird lists which allow quick access to sections describing each of the 168 Bute birds and the 251 Clyde birds.

One benefit of eBook publishing as opposed to traditional printed books, says Roger, is that digital books are much cheaper. After taking into account 80 years of inflation *The Birds of the Firth of Clyde*, for example, costs just one-fifth the price of the original.

The books can be viewed by visiting [www.jmmcwilliam.co.uk](http://www.jmmcwilliam.co.uk) and purchased from [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)

## NOTES AND COMMENT

### Arctic Skuas vs. auks

The precipitous black cliffs that lie north of the Port of Ness on the northerly tip of the Isle of Lewis are well known locally for their large numbers of breeding seabirds.

On a photographic mission there in June 2012, as I reached these cliffs, the first thing that caught my eye was a dark bird leaving a ledge in the distance. I could make out no markings, but the long pointed wings looked very raptor-like. It was also fast, very fast, and I began to consider the possibility of Peregrine as that species was known in the area. However, the image was soon transformed into an almost totally dark brown, dark phase, Arctic Skua. Another appeared beside it, perhaps a mate, with lighter markings on the back of the head, contrasting with a dark cap, and a white belly behind a dark collar. It was the first time I had witnessed Arctic Skuas in this area.

Both birds started to pursue auks - Guillemots and Razorbills flying back to their breeding ledges with fish. They would harry the birds, swooping at them and snapping at their tails until they dropped whatever it was they were carrying. Sometimes the auks would hold on to their catch, even when they were driven into the sea at the foot of the cliffs by the dive-bombing. I watched as these birds surfaced, gave themselves a shake and began paddling out to sea again, still holding tightly to their hard-earned food. On the surface, the skuas would ignore them, but once again in flight to regain their cliff ledges, the dumpy auks with their relatively short wings were clearly no match for these swift pirates.

*Frank Stark*



Plate 271. Arctic Skua pursuing Guillemot, Ness, Lewis, June 2012. © Frank Stark



Plate 272. A Heligoland trap (the Low Trap) on the Isle of May. © Ron Summers

## Keeping an eye on Scotland's birds - ringing, tagging and satellite-tracking

R.L. SWANN

Once a young bird has fledged, it usually undergoes a post-juvenile moult, prior to undertaking a degree of dispersal from its natal area in a search for suitable wintering and breeding sites. In some species, this may also involve a longer migratory movement to more distant wintering areas. Many adult birds also undertake movements, usually following a moult of all their feather tracts. These are all key stages in the life of a bird and, for conservation reasons, it is important that we gather information on these events. One way of doing this is to fit birds with unique marks allowing them to be individually identified and tracked. Hence the development of bird ringing schemes.

### The early years

Scotland has a long heritage in bird ringing. Indeed, the first bird ringing scheme established in the UK was set up by Landsborough Thomson in 1909 at Aberdeen University. By 1926, he was producing maps to

show routes and directions of bird movements. He also commented on features such as partial migration and fidelity of individuals to breeding and wintering areas (Thomson 1926). This scheme closed during the war and merged with Witherby's British Birds ringing scheme, which evolved into the current national ringing scheme.

The early years of ringing focussed on the study of bird movements. Much of it was concentrated at bird observatories and with Fair Isle and the Isle of May, Scotland was at the forefront of these studies. At the observatories birds were mainly caught in large Heligoland traps. Elsewhere, individual ringers concentrated on ringing chicks or used a variety of small traps to catch adult birds. The introduction of mist nets in the 1950s revolutionised the ability to catch birds. This led to a large increase in the number of people training to become licensed bird ringers under the auspices of the BTO ringing scheme, managed by Bob Spencer.

Ringling was also being used as an important research tool by university zoology departments and scientific institutions in Scotland. Aberdeen University started long-term studies on Fulmars in Orkney in the 1950s and Eiders and Shelduck on the Ythan Estuary in the 1960s, whilst the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology at Banchory worked on Red Grouse. In all these studies ringing and tagging provided important information by allowing individual birds to be identified.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, amateur bird ringers were operating throughout Scotland and it was the desire of many of the keen young birders of the day to train and obtain a ringing licence. Once ringing had commenced there was then anticipation in waiting for the envelope of pink ringing recovery forms from the BTO in the hope of a spectacular recovery in some far off land. In some areas, such as Aberdeen, groups of ringers began to co-operate and focus their activities on project ringing. For instance, studies were made of communal roosts of Blackbirds and Robins to examine their changing age/sex composition throughout the year and the origins of birds using the roosts. Colour rings were also fitted to ascertain the catchment areas of these roosts (Swann 1975).

Such local studies were encouraged by the BTO, who were running an annual ringing conference in Swanwick in Derbyshire, where talks on various bird ringing projects stimulated interest across the country. In addition, between 1962 and 1968 they organised a special national ringing enquiry on Sand Martins which was well supported in Scotland.

### **Establishment of ringing groups**

During the 1970s and early 1980s further developments took place. Ringers began to organise themselves into more formal groups often with centrally-held ring stocks. In Scotland these were based on geographical regions and eight groups were established from the Solway to Shetland. The ringing conducted by these groups was often project-orientated and many of the groups produced annual reports to highlight the results of their work. This was further encouraged by the BTO who launched a

new journal - "Ringing and Migration" in 1975 to encourage the dissemination of the results of such studies in peer-reviewed papers. In the same year, the Scottish groups began to organise their own annual ringing conference with the first one, organised by the Tay Ringing Group in Perth and attended by 65 delegates.

One major benefit of the Scottish Ringing Conference was that folk got to know ringers in other groups and to exchange ideas and techniques. This led to collaborative studies involving several groups. Snow Buntings, for instance, were targeted and caught and colour-ringed at many sites throughout Scotland to build up a picture of their origins and movements (Banks *et al.* 1991). This work still continues, with Twite having recently been the target of this cooperative activity (Corse *et al.* 2011).

Getting a lot of ringers together created large teams of skilled personnel and this is one of the key requirements for activities such as cannon-netting. Within most of the Scottish groups, one or more individuals commenced training for a licence to operate cannon-nets. Once teams were established, netting took place in the estuaries and along the shores targeting waders and later wildfowl. Encouraged by the Wader Study Group, dye marks as well as colour rings were applied to waders in order to reveal movements within and between estuaries and to establish the origins and migration routes of waders utilising our estuaries at different times of year (e.g. Symonds & Langslow 1984, 1986). These showed that Scottish estuaries formed an integral part of the East Atlantic flyway for a wide range of wader species. During the 1980s, members of the Tay and Grampian Ringing Groups took these studies further by following their birds to the breeding grounds. This involved a series of expeditions to ring and colour-ring waders on the Hardangervidda in southern Norway. Such expeditions have continued, with groups visiting Iceland, north Norway and Svalbard.

Local Scottish groups also targeted seabird colonies for ringing campaigns. Others such as the Shiant's Ringing Group and the Treshnish Isles' Auk-ringing group were set up mainly by



**Plate 273.** Cannon netting rocky shore waders on Papa Westray, Orkney, December 2007. © Ron Summers

ringers from outwith Scotland. Many of these are still running but now have more of a monitoring role, involving counting and assessing breeding productivity as well as general ringing.

In the 1990s, encouraged by the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust increased emphasis was put on wildfowl-catching by some of the groups. The use of darvik colour rings and then neck collars with unique permutations that could be read in the field greatly increased our knowledge of the movements of geese and swans. This showed, amongst other things, that the wintering range of the Icelandic population of Greylag Geese extended beyond Scotland south to Yorkshire and east to coastal areas in southwest Norway (Swann *et al.* 2005). Colour-marking using different combinations of rings or rings with unique alphanumeric codes to identify individual birds is currently being widely used in Scotland to study a variety of species including Cormorants, Shags, Ospreys, gulls, waders, wagtails and pipits. Similarly, raptor workers started using wing tags with unique codes. This was particularly important in tracking individual birds during the early phases of the re-introduction programmes for White-tailed Eagles and Red Kites.

In 2002, the results of over 90 years of bird ringing were brought together in a single tome - The Migration Atlas (Wernham *et al.* 2002).

This used around half a million recoveries of birds ringed in the UK and provided a picture of the movements of around 200 species. It highlighted many of the phenomenal journeys undertaken by some of our breeding birds such as Garden Warblers to Ghana, Swallows to South Africa and Manx Shearwaters to South America. Similarly, winter visitors to Scotland were shown to be undertaking huge journeys, with Knots coming from as far west as Ellesmere Island in Canada and Wigeon from as far east as the Yenisei river valley in Siberia.

Currently around 370 ringers are registered in Scotland, where in 2011 almost 145,000 birds were ringed, the top three species being Siskin, Puffin and Blue Tit.

### **New tracking technologies**

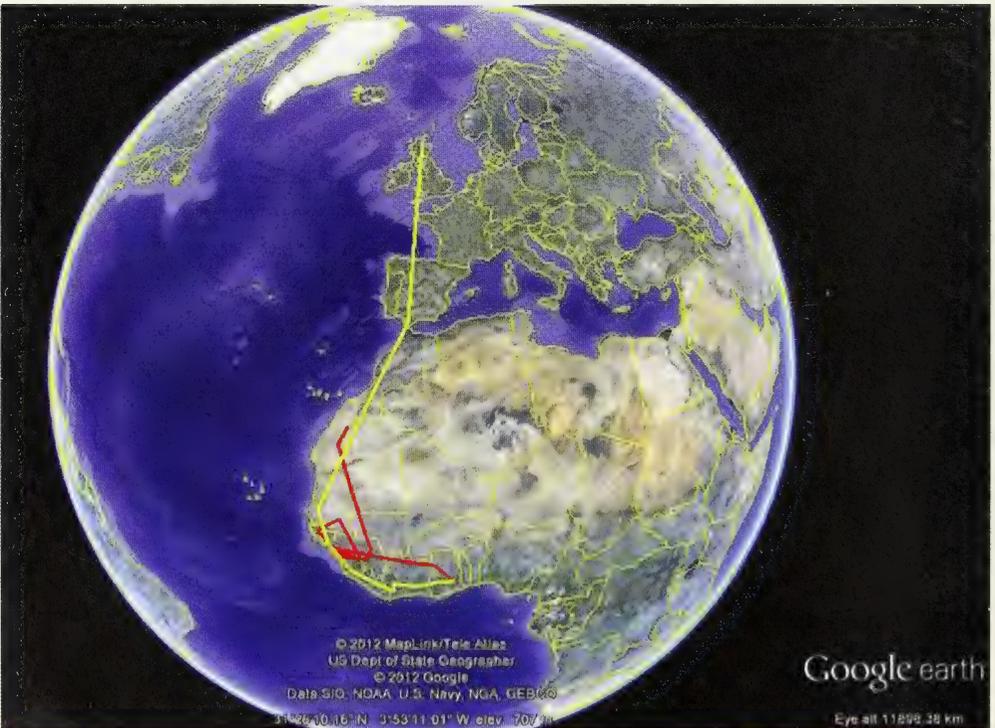
New technologies started to make their appearance on the ornithological research scene in the 1980s. The first of these involved radio tags to track short distance movements. These could be fitted to tail feathers and, by using hand-held Yagi antenna, the location of birds could be worked out by triangulation. University research workers and scientists at organisations such as WWT and RSPB often undertook these studies. An example was the work on Tiree in the late 1980s on breeding Corncrakes (e.g. Stowe & Hudson 1991). Radio-tracking was an ideal way to follow individual birds of this difficult-to-see species. The results

from this work helped formulate a conservation plan, which has since led to a recovery in numbers of this iconic species of the machair.

Radio tags have been used on a large range of species in Scotland from Golden Eagles to finches. Recent work on Hawfinches at Scone Palace showed that during the winter, one male covered an area of over 30 km<sup>2</sup>, whilst a female strayed little more than 1km from its place of capture. Radio tags have the advantage of being relatively small and cheap. However, if a bird moves beyond the study area they are 'lost'.

To track birds over a wider area, satellite tags are undoubtedly the way forward. Roy Dennis was a pioneer of their use in Scotland when in 1999 he started fitting platform transmitting terminals (PTTs) to Ospreys. The tags could be programmed to give a location on a predetermined pattern per day or week, limited only by the life of the battery. The original models were quite bulky, meaning they could

only be fitted to large birds. They were also quite expensive as not only did you need to buy the tag, you also had to pay to get the data downloaded from the polar orbiting Argos satellite system. The results were, however, fantastic and Roy was probably the first to use the data to draw maps on Google Earth and then update them frequently on the web so that they were instantly accessible to all. They told dramatic stories of how some young Ospreys made mistakes on their first migrations, ending well out over the sea to the west of their intended route, occasionally with disastrous consequences, whilst adults seldom made these errors enroute to their west African wintering grounds (Dennis 2008). This work has been extended to other raptors such as Honey Buzzard, Marsh Harrier and Hobby as well as waders such as Woodcock and Curlew. WWT scientists used similar systems to track Whooper Swans from Caerlaverock to Iceland and Barnacle Geese from the Solway to Svalbard.



**Figure 1.** Hobby migration. This bird was fitted with a PTT in Strathspey in July 2010. She left in mid-September and was in Senegal by 26 September. On 10 November she moved again arriving in Ghana on 7 December, where she remained till 3 April. She moved back to Guinea and on 25 April headed north. Unfortunately, she appears to have died in southern Morocco some time later. (Source: Roy Dennis)



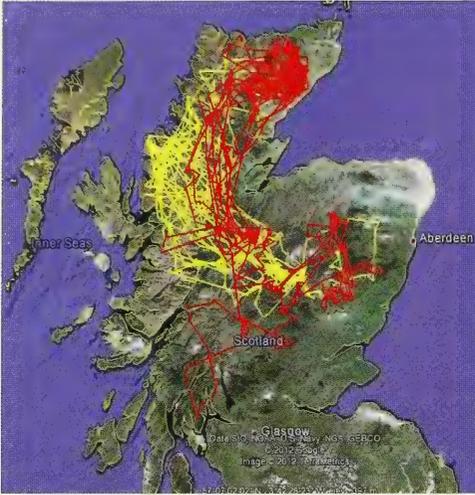
**Figure 2.** Woodcock migration. Map shows a Woodcock fitted with a PTT on Islay in February 2009. She left there on 25 March and by 10 April was in Estonia. She finally arrived in her breeding grounds in northern Russia, 4093 km from Islay, on 27 May. (Source: Roy Dennis)

The latest generation of PTTs are now fitted with a GPS unit, giving locations accurate to within 18m and powered by solar batteries. This makes them an even more powerful tool to track the movements of birds. Their recent deployment on Golden Eagles has shown how young birds wander widely throughout much of highland Scotland prior to establishing breeding territories.

As tags get lighter they can be fitted on smaller birds. In summer 2012, the BTO tagged five Cuckoos in Scotland in order to ascertain their migration routes and African wintering grounds and the progress of these birds can be followed at [www.bto.org/science/migration/tracking-studies/cuckoo-tracking](http://www.bto.org/science/migration/tracking-studies/cuckoo-tracking).



**Plate 274.** Three Golden Eagle chicks, two fitted with a PTT and GPS unit by Justin Grant. © Ewan Weston



**Figure 3.** Map showing the wide-ranging movements of two Golden Eagle chicks from initial marking at Forsinard in summer 2010 to September 2012. Source: Roy Dennis.

Recently, geolocators have become another important new technology for tracking birds. These devices are very small, very light (1 g) and relatively cheap. They incorporate a light sensor and a clock. This allows latitude and longitude to be calculated using day length and the timing of noon and midnight respectively. They are only accurate to within 200 km and cannot give locations if birds go into continuous daylight during the arctic summer. An added inconvenience is that the bird has to be recaptured to download the data from the geocator. Despite these issues, they have been used in Scotland to provide a great deal of information on seabird dispersal during the non-breeding season.

The use of geolocators has now been extended beyond seabird work. The Highland Ringing Group recently used them to discover the previously unknown breeding grounds and migration routes of the 'long-billed' Purple Sandpipers that winter in northern Scotland. More recently they have attached them to breeding Greenshank and Common Sandpipers in order to identify wintering areas and migration routes. Their use is bound to increase even further in the future, particularly if data can be downloaded remotely using Bluetooth technology.

Even more accurate are GPS-loggers. Using waterproof tape, tags have been attached by seabird research workers to breeding seabirds at many Scottish colonies. The birds need to be recaptured within a week to retrieve the logger and download the valuable data, which is used to plot foraging trips. Six Puffins marked on the Isle of May travelled a mean distance of 38 km from the colony to feed. In the same study, time-depth recorders (TDRs) were fitted to other Puffins to provide data on the number, depth and timing of dives. This showed that the birds did not feed at night, with peaks in diving occurring in early morning or late evening. They also showed that birds feeding chicks typically made a very large number (mean 1,148) of shallow (mean 4 m) dives per day (Harris & Wanless 2011).



**Plate 275.** Highland Ringing Group member Alastair Young holding a Purple Sandpiper fitted with a geocator. © Tony Backx



**Figure 4.** Map showing migration route and wintering area of a Common Sandpiper fitted with a geolocator in Strathspey in June 2011 (Source: Ron Summers)

These devices are currently being fitted to seabirds at breeding colonies on Colonsay, Fair Isle and in Orkney by the FAME project in order to map out marine sites that are critical to the survival of seabirds and to assess the potential impact of activities such as fisheries and offshore renewable energy developments. The results have revealed some incredibly long journeys from northern colonies such as a Kittiwake from Copinsay which flew 230 km out into the North Sea, taking it almost half way to Norway on a single trip. Unsurprisingly, birds undertaking such long foraging trips have very low breeding success ([www.fameproject.eu](http://www.fameproject.eu))

## Demographic studies

It should always be remembered that conventional metal rings are not just used to track bird movements. They are also important as they identify individual birds. Increasingly data from bird-ringing schemes is being used to provide demographic information on bird populations. In 2011, 15 Constant Effort Sites were operated in Scotland, where ringers catch birds in a standardised manner over 12 visits between May and August. Annual catching at these sites provides robust data on survival rates and productivity.

Other long-term ringing studies where a large number of birds are retrapped from one year to the next can also provide information on survival rates and how these have varied through time. Such studies are important to determine which demographic factors are causing population change and subsequent modelling is used to ascertain which environmental variables may be driving these changes. WeBS counts in the Moray Firth revealed a long-term decline in wintering Purple Sandpiper numbers since the late 1980s. Mark-recapture data from Purple Sandpipers caught at three sites in the Moray Firth over the same time period were used to try to explain the decline. This showed that there had been no significant change in adult survival rates, but that there had been a reduction in the number of first year birds in catches. Modelling suggested that the declines were driven by poor recruitment rates and that further research should perhaps be targeted in the breeding areas rather than on the wintering grounds (Summers *et al.* 2012).

Ringers also collect a wide range of biometric and moult data from the birds they catch. It is necessary to have a large sample of individually marked birds so that seasonal and long term changes in features such as peak winter weights or moult duration, perhaps as a result of climatic change, can be determined.

Overall, it appears unlikely that the use of metal rings and the role of the volunteer ringer will soon come to an end. Although as new high-tech tagging devices get cheaper and smaller they will have an increased role in studying bird movements it will probably be part of an



Plate 276. Mist netting at the Loch Eye constant effort site, Easter Ross. © Tony Mainwood

integrated approach with multiple methods of marking techniques. Keen, skilled and trained amateur ringers will still be needed to catch birds and fit devices. The Scottish ringing scene will still be vibrant for some time to come, but what we must do is to continue to train new volunteers in the art of bird catching and marking to ensure we have the personnel in place to help undertake these studies.

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Bob Swann

## FIELD NOTE: Snipe feeding young

At about 10 a.m. on 14 August 2012, I noticed a group of three Snipe in close proximity at the edge of our lawn at Balephuill, Isle of Tiree. Snipe are occasional visitors to the garden from the adjacent wet grassland, where they breed at high densities, but this tight-knit group was unusual. Closer inspection revealed that the leading bird was an adult, recognisable from its full-length bill and complete plumage, whilst the other two were recently fledged juveniles with shorter bills, rather stubby tails and wings, darker markings above plus a rather different head pattern with a broad white line under the eye.

I watched the birds at close quarters for some 30 minutes until they disappeared into longer grass, during which time the adult continuously probed the lawn edges for food and the two juveniles followed it very closely, often probing the soil directly adjacent to the adult's bill. One of the juveniles eventually wandered off for a while but the other followed the adult throughout. It was not possible to see if the following juveniles were successful in finding their own food, but their feeding spots were frequently being determined by the location of the adult. After about 10 minutes, the adult suddenly stopped probing and immediately passed a food object that it had encountered to the closest juvenile. It was not possible to see what this item was, as the transfer happened very quickly, but it was not a large object. Further close observation revealed that the adult fed the following juvenile on at least three more occasions over the next 20 minutes. One item was clearly an earthworm, whilst the other two were smaller and appeared to be leatherjackets or other small grubs. The food transfers all happened very quickly and there was no obvious mastication or beating of the food items by the adult prior to passing them on to the juvenile, even for the earthworm. I took some photos of this interaction (Plates



**Plate 277.** Foraging adult Snipe with juvenile following behind, Tiree, 14 August 1912. © John Bowler



**Plate 278.** Foraging adult Snipe with juvenile following closely behind, Tiree, 14 August 1912. © John Bowler



**Plate 279.** Adult Snipe resting in evening sunshine with juvenile (right), Tiree, 14 August 1912. © John Bowler



**Plate 280.** Foraging adult Snipe (right-hand bird) with two juveniles in close attendance, Tiree, 19 August 1912. © John Bowler

277–279) although food transfers were too infrequent and too quick to capture. The birds eventually wandered off into longer grass and were lost from view.

Later that morning, when I went out into the garden to place seed in our birdfeeders, I realised that the family was still present, but instead of taking flight as I would expect lone adults to do, they simply crouched low in short grass at a distance of 2 m from me. The family remained present for the rest of the day, with the adult regularly feeding both juveniles as they followed it around the lawn, although they would also disappear for long periods in the taller grass. The family was again present the following day and was last seen in the garden on 19 August, when both juveniles continued to follow the adult closely and both were still being fed regularly by the parent bird (Plate 280).

As Snipe tend to be rather secretive birds, often living in dense wet grassland, the opportunity for prolonged observation of the feeding behaviour of a family group in the field like this is rare. According to Cramp & Simmons (1982), after hatching, the brood is evenly divided between the two parents, with the male taking the two older chicks and the female the two younger ones. The parents split up permanently at this point and the female generally takes hers to a part of the breeding territory that she used as a

retreat during incubation. The young are fed bill-to-bill initially, with the parent processing the food first in its mandibles (Wormald 1909, 1910), at least in captivity. There is apparently no information on the food of young in the wild. The bond with the parents breaks down after about six weeks. In North America, the parents of the closely related Wilson's Snipe feed the young at first, although they start to probe for their own food at about six days. By ten days of age, they find most of their own food but the parents continue to supplement their diet until they become independent at about 18 to 20 days. ([birdweb.org/birdweb/bird/wilsons\\_snipe](http://birdweb.org/birdweb/bird/wilsons_snipe)).

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# SOC SPOTLIGHT: Ayrshire Branch

The Ayrshire branch of the SOC was established in 1962, with its inaugural meeting being held in Ayr's historic Loudoun Hall. Our first chairman, "Mac" Ramage was assisted in the early years by such local stalwarts as Gordon Richards, Malcolm Castle, Lesley Hunter and Graham Stewart. During the 1980s and 1990s the branch grew steadily under the stewardship of chairmen like John Melrose, Norman Lawrie and Roger Hissett - we've never been short of folk willing to take on a challenge!

Branch meetings have moved around a bit during the past 50 years, occupying halls and lecture rooms at Ayr Academy, Auchincruive

**Plate 281.** SOC Ayrshire Committee (from left to right): Roger Hissett (Conservation Officer), Tony Scott, Angus Hogg (Chairman), David Rackham (Vice Chair), Duncan Watt, Norman Lawrie, Ian Clark (Treasurer). Insets: Pat Gibbs and Anne Dick (Secretary). © John Rogers

College and our present venue at the Pioneer Café & Community Church Hall, Monkton. Interests within the branch are varied, from the *specialists* like our previous Chairman, Gordon Riddle whose life has been dictated by Kestrels, to the *generalists* such as Tony Scott who simply enjoys organising a good day in the field for branch members, especially if it can be combined with an equally good meal at the end of it.





**Plates 282–283.** *Some of our 26-strong SOC & RSPB group's long weekend to the Farne Islands and Coquet Island. Here aboard a Puffin cruise to Coquet Island from Amble. Inset: Arctic Tern on Inner Farne, June 2012. © John Rogers*



**Field trips and overseas excursions**

For at least twelve years now, our monthly field trips have been organised jointly with RSPB Central Ayrshire Local Group and outdoor leader Jim Thomson. In recent times there have been extended trips including a long weekend to Leighton Moss and Martin Mere in 2011 and to the Farne Islands and Coquet Island in 2012. For 2013 we are planning a three-night stay on Mull. Coach trips have featured in all our annual programmes with two being organised - one

in winter and one in late spring. Tony has been organising both these and our overseas trips since 1995. When we started in that year with a trip to the Humber Estuary we decided to find a name for this type of venture and came up with the name 'SOC Touring' which was used until around 2008 before changing to 'Ayrshire Birders Abroad' (suggested by Mary Hogg) to cover SOC, RSPB and any other participating local birders. These most popular holidays have taken members to a wide variety of places both in Europe and further

afield. These have included Cyprus; Hong Kong; Sri Lanka: Andalucia and Extremadura; the Crane migration on the island of Rügen, Groß Mohrdorf and the Müritz National Park; Southern India; Bolivia - the Highlands and Amazonias; Birds and Steam (narrow-gauge railways!) in the Harz Mountains; United Arab Emirates; the Mose! Valley; Burgenland; Flevoland and numerous other destinations. Within the UK - north Norfolk; mid Wales; Anglesey and Bardsey Island; a winter trip to the Ouse Washes; Isle of Arran - also in winter; Barra, Mingulay and the Uists, and there are even more within the UK so... where next we ask?

### Branch survey work

Work undertaken by the branch has included species surveys on Mute Swans, Buzzards, Stonechats and Rooks, while many branch members have taken part in the national atlas surveys and Seabird 2000. Ayrshire's Bird Report is supported by the branch and contains the results of many other projects carried out by SOC members, such as the annual Sparrowhawk breeding results, a Dipper breeding project, and regular reports on key locations within the county like Kilkerran and Hunterston. Indeed, much of the information contained within the annual report, comes from skilled amateurs who cover all sorts of habitats within the county. SOC Ayrshire Branch is also pleased to work closely with South Strathclyde Raptor Study Group, RSPB and SWT, plus involvement with the Local Biodiversity Action Plan of South Ayrshire Council.

Lying on the west side of Scotland, we're not blessed with the rarities enjoyed by the east of the country (or maybe we just don't find them!). However, some recent surprises such as Harlequin Duck, Snowy Egret, Franklin's Gull, Richard's Pipit and, the bird that no-one expected, Pallid Harrier, show that you can never take things for granted. An increased interest in seawatching has revealed surprisingly regular numbers of spring skuas moving through North Ayrshire and more patch work, which has improved our knowledge of key locations with one under-watched location near Barassie turning in an

overwintering Pectoral Sandpiper, followed by a spring Glossy Ibis this year. The Ayrshire Branch was among the first to introduce a site guide with its "Birdwatching in Ayrshire and Arran" in 2003, and the information available to both local and visiting birders has steadily increased through the Ayrshire Birding website ([www.ayrshire-birding.co.uk](http://www.ayrshire-birding.co.uk)) managed by Kevin Waite. It also gives advice on access for disabled birders. The website contains a host of both articles and photographs of county birds and has almost taken on an archival quality. We also produce a local newsletter - "The Stonechat" three times each year.

### Current developments

With the branch always striving to find new ways of attracting and enthusing members, some of our current effort has been directed towards "in-the-field" tuition followed by some survey work. This session, members attending our monthly outings will have the benefit of an experienced observer who will act as a guide for participants by helping with some of the trickier aspects of field identification. In addition, a survey of Ayrshire's coastal Stonechat population is seen as a way of encouraging local birders to participate in a piece of work, which might not only lead them to taking part in further similar work, but result in publicity for the Club's activities.



Angus Hogg  
& Tony Scott



## Michael Warren - wildlife artist



Plate 284. Michael Warren, June 2012. © Simon Warren

Michael Warren has been a professional artist for over 40 years, specialising in paintings of birds in their natural habitats. He has lived in Winthorpe, Nottinghamshire since 1975. His work has enabled him to travel widely, drawing and studying birds. These journeys have taken him to many European countries, North America, Micronesia, Peru, Ecuador, Africa and

Australia. His early training was at the College of Art, Wolverhampton. In 1972 on the offer of a one-man exhibition in Cork Street, London, he began to paint full-time. Since then he has had numerous one-man exhibitions in England, Scotland, USA (New York), France and Spain (mainland and Mallorca).



Plate 285. Turtle Doves (watercolour). © Michael Warren

He has been a member of The Society of Wildlife Artists since 1971 (currently treasurer), and exhibits at their annual exhibition at The Mall Galleries, London. He is President of Nottinghamshire Birdwatchers. Michael is also a member of the Artists for Nature Foundation (ANF), a Netherlands-based organisation of artists from around the world that uses art to focus attention on endangered species and habitats. He has joined them on numerous projects since 1991, the latest to Sark in the Channel Islands in 2011, which produced the book *Art for the Love of Sark*. Michael has had six books published: *Shorelines*, *Field Sketches*,

*Langford Lowfields*, *Lac du Bourget*, *Images from Birding* and *American Birding Sketchbook*. He has also designed postage stamps for the British Post Office, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands, also conservation stamps in Britain and USA.

Michael is a keen and active birdwatcher. He regularly watches his local patch (Langford Lowfields), a sand and gravel quarry which is a putative RSPB reserve, takes part in BTO surveys such as the Breeding Birds Survey (BBS), and does a monthly WeBS count. He still does a bit of twitching; this year has added Common



Plate 286. Woodcock (watercolour). © Michael Warren



Plate 287. *Tree Sparrows, Chaffinches, Greenfinches & Reed Buntings* (watercolour). © Michael Warren

Yellowthroat and Thayer's Gull. This ongoing contact with birds is an essential element in finding subjects that become paintings. All paintings are based on field observations. Sometimes these are completed outdoors but more usually in the studio. The paintings are done with graphite and watercolour on Fabriano or Arches paper.

This is Michael's second exhibition at the George Waterston Gallery, Aberlady. The show will feature a mix of work, a lot of British subjects but also some North American. He has recently had published (Langford Press), *American Birding Sketchbook*, and as well as the book on sale there will be a selection of the originals. The book, with foreword by Robert Bateman, describes birding in all 50 states of the USA. From the mid-1980s and through the 1990s Michael did a lot of work in America. Several major commissions for the Uncover Corporation of Wyoming, also 13 years of designing conservation stamp sheetlets for the National Audubon Society. The work involved

painting birds in all different habitats and seasons. Many visits were family trips with wife Kate, son Simon (designer of his American book) and daughter Clara. They went to swamps, mosquito-infested mud flats and tick-ridden grasslands. They were dragged through forests, across deserts and over mountains as he searched for birds, thankfully without too much complaint. Some of the results of these efforts can be seen at the SOC exhibition.

Michael looks forward to revisiting Aberlady, meeting all the people there again, and of course some birding around the Forth estuary.

Michael Warren's exhibition at Waterston House, Aberlady ends on 16 January 2013, and a review of his book *American Birding Sketchbook* can be found on page 337. Copies of this book are available at Waterston House.

# BOOK REVIEWS

**Wildlife Crime: the Makings of an Investigations Officer.** Dave Dick, 2012. Whittles Publishing, ISBN: 978-1-84995-036-7, paperback, 196 pages, £18.99.



This book documents the extensive career of Dave Dick, the first senior wildlife investigations officer for the RSPB in Scotland (1984 to 2006). It charts his very early experience of monitoring birds of prey and establishing the first raptor study groups to collecting enough evidence to charge and convict the criminals who perpetrate heinous crimes against some of our most iconic wildlife, such as badger baiting, raptor persecution and hare coursing. You do gain a real sense that Dave's passion has been instrumental towards raising the profile of wildlife crime in Scotland, which has led to the development of a network of Wildlife and Environmental Crime Officers throughout the police force. However, although great progress has been made over the last two decades, you sense the author's frustrations in that not enough resources are committed to effectively tackling wildlife crime in Scotland.

The book may be a little uncomfortable reading for some of those in authority. However, there is a strong argument that in addition to criminals being accountable for their actions, those charged with protecting our environment must also be seen to be fulfilling their responsibilities. The book will be an eye-opener to

most and is an essential read for those who care about what is happening in our countryside.

*Mike Thornton*

**The Black Grouse.** Patrick Laurie, 2012. Merlin Unwin Books Ltd, Ludlow, ISBN 978-1-906122-43-0, hardback, 224 pages, £20.

Do not be misled by the title of this book, or by its claim to be "the first book ever dedicated to this fascinating severely-declining species". It is written by a shooter and is clearly aimed at a shooting readership. If you want to learn more about black grouse biology, do not bother buying it, because he has nothing new to say on the subject. Indeed, as a self-confessed amateur who is concerned more with shooting than with what he calls "technical minutiae", he even gives the impression that he has not fully grasped the fundamental difference (and its consequences) between the promiscuity of Black Grouse and the monogamy of Red Grouse. On the plus side, however, his pencil and watercolour vignettes which richly illustrate the book are delightful, and his section on the history of Black Grouse in Britain is well-researched and very interesting.

Patrick Laurie's passion for Black Grouse and their conservation stems from his discovering they were shot near his family home in Dumfriesshire in the 1930s, his uncle's memory of seeing plenty there in the 1960s, and their apparent recent absence there until his first encounter with a single blackcock in 2006. So, he embarks upon an ambitious project to boost their numbers

with the ultimate aim of shooting them there again! He describes other Black Grouse conservation

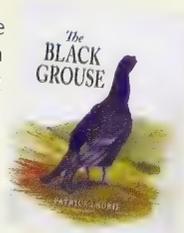
projects, there is the inevitable chapter on vermin control, he rants against RSPB's support for protection and reintroduction of raptors, and he seems to think artificial reintroduction of Black Grouse is a viable option despite numerous attempts over the years having proved unsuccessful. His conclusion is that, although shooting has contributed to their downfall, the key to their future survival now depends upon country sports. If you want a revealing insight into the utilitarian mindset of the shooting fraternity, this book does the job!

*John Savory*

**Barn Owl Conservation Handbook.** The Barn Owl Trust, 2012. Pelagic Publishing, ISBN 978-1-907807-14-5, paperback, 400 pages, £39.99.

This is a well written and comprehensive book on Barn Owls. However, its title is slightly misleading, as it is almost more a monograph than a handbook. It includes a 58 page chapter on ecology and, with extensive references, it covers pretty well all aspects of Barn Owls.

As a handbook, it is full of advice on habitat management, planning, and even rehabilitation. However, it might be easier to use as a handbook if the text was less anecdotal and more focused. A lot of space is given up to lobbying on



subjects such as planning, rodenticides and bad design of motorways and nestboxes - all fine, but not in a handbook. Also, for some subjects, reference needs to be made to The Barn Owl Trust website in addition to the handbook.

As far as Scotland is concerned, although it attempts to be as wide reaching as possible, quoting regularly from Iain Taylor's work in south-west Scotland, it is inevitable that a Devon-based publication is poor in this respect. Scottish conservation legislation is inadequately referred to, and interaction with other species is very definitely not Scottish. There is regular reference to Stone Marten, but Pine Marten are never mentioned, despite the fact that their range overlaps with Barn Owls.

I learnt plenty from reading this book, but if I were to buy it as a handbook I would expect it to be much more focused, smaller and consequently cheaper.



Alan Leitch

**Birds of Durham.** Keith Bowey & Mark Newsome, 2012. Durham Bird Club, Durham. ISBN 978-1-874701-03-3, hardback, 1014 pages, £30.

The previous avifauna for the county of Durham was published in 1951 and, the publication of this monumental tome 60 years later is the culmination of The Birds of Durham Heritage Project. This laudably sought to "bring the wildlife of today to the people of tomorrow" and there is no doubt that the wealth of information in this book means that it immediately becomes the

definitive resource for those interested in finding out more about the birds of the county. Birders from



across Britain will be interested in the details of the 2002 breeding record of Bee-eaters at Bishop Middleham, and the first British Eastern Crowned Warbler at South Shields in 2009, but there is much more to pore over.

Co. Durham is just one county away from the Scottish border and the original home of a number of prominent ornithologists now based in Scotland. For these people, and to anyone else with a connection to the county, I would without question recommend this book, especially at just £30 for over 1,000 pages. Other people with an interest in avifaunas will also find much here to their liking, although be prepared for a lot of reading! All 386 species recorded up to the end of 2011 are included, so it is commendably up to date. Typically there are 2-4 large format pages of dense text per species. Most have (small) black and white vignettes, and a few have photographs, graphs or tables, but the overall impression is of a lot of words. The two blocks of colour photographs, of birds and sites taken within the county, come as a bit of relief. There are only two maps, one of birding sites and one of rookeries. A county atlas was produced in 2000, but much text here is taken up repeating findings from that work. Although each account follows a standard sequence of headings, tighter editorial control could have been applied to make the accounts more succinct, but nevertheless I salute the two lead authors, and their team of eight other

volunteers, for their huge effort to collate, compile, analyse and finally write the long and detailed treatises of each species recorded. Take a look at this book the next time you visit the Waterston Library.

Mark Holling

**RSPB British Birdfinder.** Marianne Taylor, 2012. A. & C. Black, ISBN 978-1-4081-5867-8, paperback, 288 pages, £12.99.

Although well-illustrated with mostly excellent photographs that are appropriate to the season that they occur in Britain (so no 'red' Grey Phalaropes), this is not meant as a field-guide, but rather as a means of tracking down when and where to see birds in the Britain Isles. As well as all of the regular and abundant species, it extends to some of the rarer species such as Pallas's Warbler. Each species account describes the timing of their occurrence and the habitats in which they are mostly likely to occur. It then provides 'search tips' to help, for instance, in picking out one species of gull from a flock of others. In general these tips are pretty comprehensive, but are not exhaustive. Most provide excellent advice for learners, however.

The biggest problem in this book comes with the maps that illustrate where in the British Isles species are likely to be seen. They are pretty poor. Snipe, for instance don't apparently occur at all on the Outer Hebrides, where in reality they have their greatest breeding density in Britain as well as fair numbers in winter. Apparently the Lothian coast is a good area for the migration of



Bearded Tits. In reality, there have been no records there whatsoever! Other instances of errors come with the 'super-sites', the best locations to see some species. Many blatantly plug, sometimes undeservedly, RSPB reserves, but others are subject to gross errors, such as the Firth of Forth site for Red-necked Grebe being placed in the Moray Firth.

So a great idea for beginners, let down by sloppy mapping.

Ray Murray

**Scottish Wild Flowers - Mini Guide.** Michael Scott, 2012. Birlinn, Edinburgh, ISBN 9781841589541, 208 pages, paperback, £5.99.

Most birdwatchers look at other things when in the field. Things with wings such as butterflies or dragonflies are often a birder's next interest. Plants pose other problems. There are many more of them and several are so similar you really need to carry a field guide to be able to check crucial points of detail. Serious botanists use keys, especially for difficult groups. For general use, most people use guides with coloured plates that only cover the British Isles, unlike bird guides that comfortably deal with Europe or even the Western Palearctic. As many British plants do not occur in Scotland, there is a niche for a smaller book.

Michael Scott has years of experience botanising throughout Scotland and chose c. 350 plants found in Scotland for his *Scottish Wild Flowers* to give a genuinely pocketable book. This version is even smaller and about the size of a small diary, with around 300 species. In both versions, each species is illustrated in colour with a description and the plant's English and Latin names. Plants

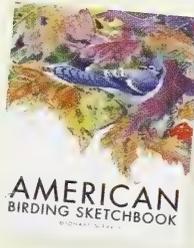
are grouped by the type of habitat in which they can be found, including Highlands, Lowlands and Coasts. Habitats are arranged from those most influenced by humans, progressing towards wilder areas. The mini version has lost the Gaelic names and advice on finding wild flowers in Scotland. As a first field guide, either version would be useful.

Stan da Prato

**American Birding Sketchbook.** Michael Warren, 2012. Langford Press, ISBN 978-19040-78470, hardback, 144 pages, £38.

In this beautifully presented book, the author takes the reader on a tour of the States and habitats of the USA.

Each double-page presents a picture or group of pictures on a particular theme: "Alabama" or "Spring Warblers" or "Saguaro forest". Michael Warren is an experienced birdwatcher and has enjoyed a distinguished career as a wildlife artist. In these watercolour sketches, without resorting to "photographic" realism, he catches the distinctive appearance and character of the different species. The result is a series of images that are vividly evocative both of the birds and of their settings. At one moment, he can portray the cold mountainous backdrop to Eagle Bay near Juneau with its Bald Eagles, gulls and crows, and at another revel in the rich colours of the tanagers or the Red-breasted Nuthatch, or the autumn leaves in Connecticut, backdrop to the Blue Jay. The accompanying notes on each



page highlight the species represented and the principal features of their environment. Whether you want a survey of the birdlife of the different regions of the USA, or merely wish to enjoy a series of vivid watercolours, this volume is to be recommended highly.

Ian Ebbage

**RSPB Pocket Guide to British Birds.** Simon Harrap, 2012. Bloomsbury, ISBN 978-1-4081-7456-2, paperback, 224 pages. £5.99.

This is the second edition of this pocket guide, launched due to the success of the Big Garden Birdwatch, in which half a million people took part. The guide provides descriptions of the 215 most common birds in Britain; 41 species more than the first edition.

This compact volume is aimed at the beginner; the colour coding makes it easy to navigate and the text is concise and non-technical. I particularly like the 'confusion species' for each bird as it can be daunting separating species as a beginner. It features descriptions of each bird's main characteristics, including plumage, population, habitat and voice. The 950 illustrations by Dave Nurney are of a very high quality and the distribution maps are clear and colour-coded.



This would be an excellent book to buy as a present for beginner birdwatching friends or to keep in the car.

Karen Bidgood



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# OBSERVATORIES' ROUNDUP

*Observatories' Roundup is a regular bi-annual feature about our bird observatories in Scotland. The intention is to publicize the work of the observatories, visiting opportunities, as well as incidental snippets of news from the islands.*

## North Ronaldsay

A new development this year has been the publication of the first separate annual report for NRBO. Our data and sightings have always been, and will continue to be, summarised and published annually in the Orkney Bird Report, along with those from the rest of Orkney.

From 2012, however, we are pleased to announce that we are producing our own annual reports, detailing our activities and the results of the census work conducted throughout the year. This will provide a more thorough account of the island's birds, and a convenient year by year reference comparable to those of other British bird observatories.

The 2011 report is available from the observatory for £5.00, plus £1.50 for postage and packing. To order your copy, please contact NRBO by phone on 01857 633200 or Email: [alison@nrbo.prestel.co.uk](mailto:alison@nrbo.prestel.co.uk) to give us your details. Alternatively send a cheque for £6.50 payable to North Ronaldsay Bird Observatory to North Ronaldsay Bird Observatory, Twingness, North Ronaldsay, Orkney, KW17 2BE. Please remember to include your own name and address, so that we can send your report as soon as possible.

You might like to consider joining the 'Friends of NRBO'. For just £10.00 per annum you will automatically receive a copy of the bird report each year, regular newsletters, a 10% discount on accommodation at the observatory as well as supporting the work of the observatory.

For further details and up-to-date information about sightings and activities at the observatory please go to our website - [www.nrbo.co.uk](http://www.nrbo.co.uk).

## Isle of May

The last six months have seen the upgrade of the observatory progress through several stages:



from the demolition of the existing washroom and tool store (the 'black hole') and wood store to the preparation of ground and installation of the new foundations, and the subsequent erection of the timber frame and outer walls of the new extension. By the time you read this, the roof should also be in place and the whole of the new section should be wind- and waterproof - ready for the internal refurbishment due to take place in March 2013. It is hoped that the Observatory will be ready for "business as usual" from the start of April - check our website for further details ([www.isleofmaybirdobs.org](http://www.isleofmaybirdobs.org))

Despite the disruption caused by the building work at the Low Light, we have managed to continue maintaining the daily census and migration logs thanks to the generosity of SNH in allowing a couple of observatory members to stay at their Fluke Street premises instead. Together with the coverage supplied by SNH warden, Dave Pickett, and his assistant, Jeremy Squire, plus Mark Newell and other researchers from CEH, it has been possible to build on the brilliant set of records from the spring. Highlights have included a number of species not recorded annually on the May such as Mute Swan, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Firecrest, Richard's Pipit, Pechora Pipit (an island first and one of only a handful of sightings away from Shetland and Fair Isle), plus the first House Sparrow for several years.



Plate 288. Low Light rebuild in progress. © Sofia Farinas

# The autumn influx of Pallid Harriers into Western Europe 2011: a Scottish perspective

M.S. CHAPMAN



Plate 289. Northdale, Unst, Shetland, 30 August 2011. © Robbie Brooks

In autumn 2011, Scotland witnessed an unprecedented influx of Pallid Harriers, all juveniles, between the first arriving on 12 August on Fair Isle, and the latest being found at Garnock Floods, Ayrshire on 27 October. This influx was mirrored in England, with a further nine records, and Ireland with five, all linked to incredible numbers on the near-continent, with for example 126 reported in Denmark alone in September 2011 (Gantlett 2012) and successful breeding in Finland. This article details the records in Scotland as part of this wider influx, puts it in historical perspective and looks into origins and possible causes.

## Historical perspective

Pallid Harrier is a stunning, spectacular species, formerly with a mythical status akin to a species like Pallas's Sandpiper, and until recently much rarer, with only three British records prior to 1993, when there were five, in the first mini-influx into the UK. Since then, it has become a little more regular, while remaining high on birders wish-lists. There are few better sights on an autumn day's birding than a fresh, clean juvenile with its striking patterning and bright orange tones dancing buoyantly into view.

Table 1. Scottish records prior to 2011.

1931	Fair Isle	second-summer male, 29 April to 8 May, when shot.
1993	Perth & Kinross	Bolfracks, Aberfeldy second-summer male, 5–7 May.
1993	Shetland	Exnaboe, Mainland, juvenile, 15–16 September.
1995	Orkney	Durkadale area, Mainland, second-summer male, 19 April to 27 June; also 13 September.
2001	Shetland	Brow Marsh, Mainland, 8–15 September.
2002	Shetland	Sumburgh/Brow Marsh, Mainland, 10–14 September.
2003	Shetland	Haroldswick, Unst, first-summer male, 23–25 May.
2003	Shetland	Haroldswick, Unst, juvenile, 2–17 September.
2004	Shetland	Trondra, Mainland, juvenile, 25–26 September.
2005	Shetland	Sumburgh, Mainland, 29 September.
2007	Shetland	Spiggie, Mainland, 23 August to 8 September.

Prior to 2011 there were just 11 accepted records for Scotland, with none during 2008–10. Of these 11 only two had been away from Shetland, on Orkney in 1995 (a male paired in an

unsuccessful breeding attempt with a female Hen Harrier) and the only previous mainland Scotland record, a second-summer male in Perth & Kinross in May 1993 (also displaying to a female Hen Harrier during its stay).

Of the nine previous records from Shetland/Fair Isle, seven were autumn juveniles and two were in spring: a second-summer male on Fair Isle in 1931 (first British record) and a first-summer male on Unst in 2003.

There were 18 English records prior to 2011, but none in Ireland.

### The 2011 influx in Scotland

In Scotland in autumn 2011 there were an incredible 20 accepted individuals: 12 in Shetland, two on Fair Isle, two in Orkney, one on Mull and three from the Scottish mainland.

Initially the influx was only detected on Shetland. A small orange-bellied harrier seen briefly on Foula on 8 August and

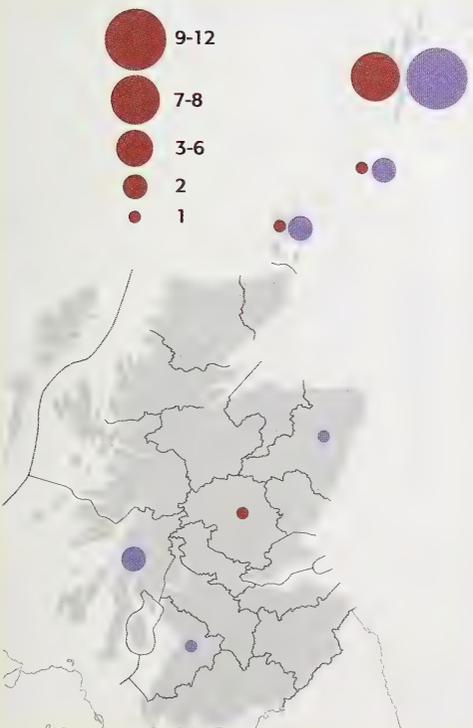


Figure 1. Distribution of Pallid Harrier records by recording area, 1931–2010 (red circles) and 2011 (blue circles).

photographed, but not quite well enough, on 11th, may possibly have been the same as the first definite Pallid that was then found on Fair Isle the following day. There was then a multiple arrival in the last week of August, with new birds being found in quick succession on Noss, Unst and Mainland, with a probable briefly on Out Skerries on 27th. The weather during this period was predominantly fine, with light south-easterly winds, with wetter, more inclement, but still easterly conditions, on 24th, when the Noss bird arrived.

Table 2. 2011 Scottish records of Pallid Harriers

<b>Fair Isle;</b> Malcolm's Head then other areas, juvenile, 12–15 August.
<b>Shetland;</b> Noss then Ander Hill, Bressay, juvenile, 24–26 August.
<b>Shetland;</b> Norwick and other sites, Unst, juvenile female, 25 August to 14 September.
<b>Shetland;</b> Sandgarth and Sand Water, Mainland, juvenile, 31 August.
<b>Shetland;</b> Quendale and other sites, Mainland, juvenile (Fulmar-oiled), 3 September to 17 October.
<b>Shetland;</b> Virkie and other sites, Mainland, juvenile, 10–19 September.
<b>Fair Isle;</b> Gilsetter then other areas, juvenile, 11–14 September.
<b>Shetland;</b> Loch of Hillwell, Mainland, juvenile, 11 September.
<b>Shetland;</b> Arisdale, Yell, juvenile, 12–16 September.
<b>Shetland;</b> East Burrarfirth, Mainland, juvenile, 17 September.
<b>Argyll;</b> Pennyghael, Mull, 20–24 September.
<b>Argyll;</b> Machrihanish, juvenile, flying south, 22 September.
<b>Orkney;</b> Loons RSPB and Marwick, Mainland, 23–28 September.
<b>Orkney;</b> Hooking, North Ronaldsay, 25–28 September.
<b>Shetland;</b> Brake, Mainland, juvenile, 28 September to 1 October.
<b>Shetland;</b> Fetlar, juvenile, 30 September to 5 October.
<b>North-east Scotland;</b> Ythan estuary, juvenile, 1 October (Baxter & Gibbins 2012).
<b>Shetland;</b> Channerwick area and Boddam, Mainland, 4–10 October, presumed same Trondra, 7 October.
<b>Shetland;</b> Bardister, North Roe, Mainland, juvenile, 9 October.
<b>Ayrshire;</b> Garnock Floods, juvenile, 27 October to 7 November (McAdam 2012).

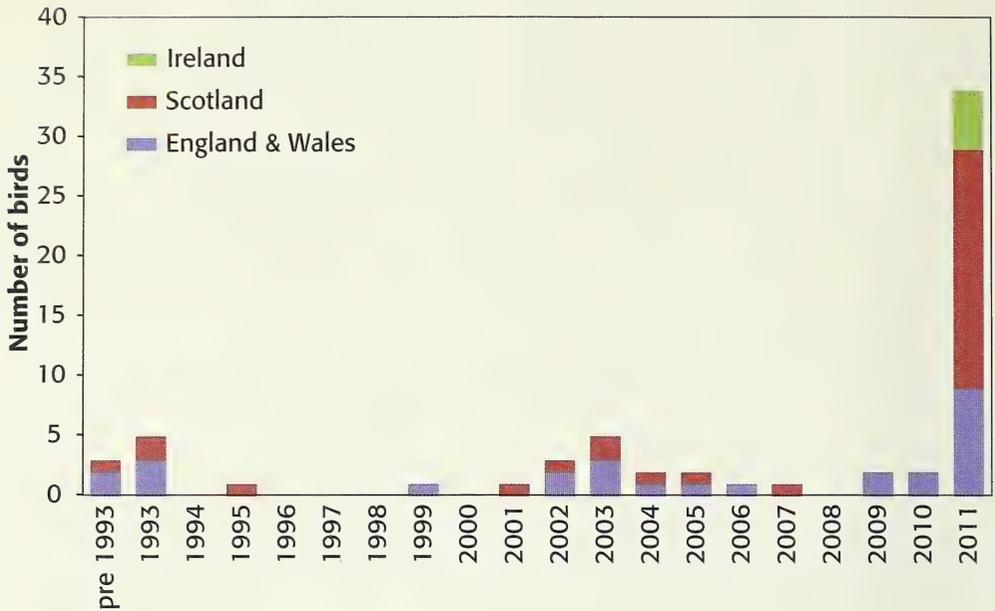


Figure 2. Distribution of Pallid Harrier records in the UK and Ireland by year, pre-1993 to 2011.

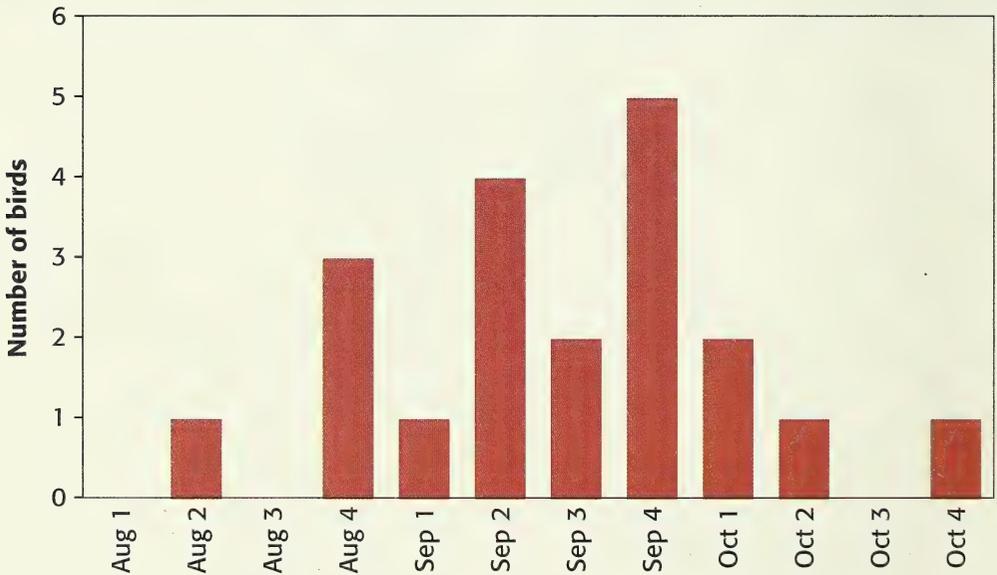


Figure 3. Distribution of Pallid Harrier records by weekly periods, Scotland, 2011.

A Fulmar-oiled bird in south Mainland on 3 September perhaps arrived with the August influx; then there was a pause, then another 'wave', with four birds found during 10–12th (two on south Mainland, one on Fair Isle and one on Yell), with another a few days later in central Mainland.

Argyll then got its first two records, different birds on 20th and 22nd; then another two were on Orkney on 23rd and 25th - on Mainland and North Ronaldsay. Another apparent arrival in late September/early October involved four more birds on Shetland and one in North-east Scotland.



**Plate 290.** *Pallid Harrier*, Yell, Shetland, September 2011. © Dougie Preston

In addition, there were nine records in England in 2011 (Hudson *et al.* 2012) and Ireland had its first five (Fahy *et al.* 2012).

Exceptional numbers were seen in Finland (171 from 12 April to 1 October), Sweden and Holland (see below), Denmark (126 in September) and in September–October, Germany (40), France (25) and Spain/Portugal (10+) (Anon 2011). Birds were also seen in Norway and Belgium.

During autumn 2011 raptor counters at Falsterbo, Sweden, noted a total of 43 Pallid Harriers; quite exceptional given that the mean autumn number for 1973–2010 was two (Nils Kjellén, pers. comm.). They also had five hybrid Pallid x Hen Harriers. The last migrant Pallid there was recorded on 27 September, which perhaps may give a clue as to when the last 'new' bird may have arrived from Scandinavia, at least into the UK. In Holland, 21 were accepted for autumn by the Dutch records committee, nine in spring (Ovaa *et al.* 2012)



**Plate 291.** *Pallid Harrier*, Sandgarth, Voe, Shetland, 31 August 2011. © Tony Gerrard

This year (2012) in autumn they have recorded 25 Pallids so far at Falsterbo; so still exceptional, but only c.50% of last year, and in Holland so far this autumn only three have been reported (though 18 this spring, and 1 summered). In the UK at the time of writing (early October), only one has occurred, in South Yorkshire.



**Plate 292.** *Pallid Harrier*, Sandgarth, Voe, Shetland, 31 August 2011. © Tony Gerrard

### Hen Harriers

Wintering Hen Harriers seem to have favoured areas, perhaps even fairly stable 'territories' which are often in Shetland similar places to where Pallids have turned up, such as Unst and south and central Mainland. This is no doubt mirrored elsewhere in the UK and on the continent. A study I took part in, (for Natural Research, unpublished) in central Mainland of three that regularly roosted during winter 2005/06 at Sandwater, a large loch with a large reed-bed showed that on a daily basis they wandered widely in the surrounding area, up to 15 km, though were actually rarely seen away from the roost. A foraging movement of up to 15–20 km in a day in any direction is probably not unusual for either species, for birds 'off-passage' on stopover, although many appear to patrol smaller areas. Hen Harriers were observed hunting small flocks of Redwing and Blackbirds in small plantations; on at least three occasions very persistently, in repeated attempts. Interestingly, in Shetland, in autumn 2011, as well as the influx of Pallids, we also had the largest recorded autumn

influx of Hen Harriers, with up to 30, also mainly juveniles, though arriving later (from mid-September). These presumably originated mainly in Scandinavia, or even further east, so perhaps the influxes were related?

### Hybrid harriers

In Finland and Sweden, several hybrid Pallid x Hen juveniles were recorded during autumn 2011, and such mixed pairings have occurred before, in Finland and indeed in Britain, and are probably to be expected on the edge of one species range. It typically involves a male Pallid and female Hen Harrier. No hybrids were identified in Britain during the 2011 influx, but at least one presumed individual has occurred previously, on Shetland in winter 2007/08, at Maywick and other sites on south Mainland (Forsman 2009). These may provide identification pitfalls, but mixed Pallid x Montagu's pairings, with offspring, have also occurred, and given the similarity between juveniles of these two species, including structure, these are perhaps more likely to pass unrecognised.



Plate 293. Pallid Harrier, Yell, Shetland, September 2011. © Dougie Preston

### Pallid Harrier ecology

The species breeds primarily in the steppes of Russia, Kazakhstan and north-west China. Small numbers formerly bred in Azerbaijan, and Romania, though probably not recently, and less than 20 pairs occur in Turkey and Ukraine. A small number winter occasionally in south-east and central Europe, more often in North Africa and the Middle East, but most migrate to sub-Saharan Africa or the Indian subcontinent. The global population is estimated at 9,000–15,000 pairs (BirdLife International 2012). There are signs of a decline in the traditional areas, and simultaneously a north-westwards extension of the range, particularly into western Russia (in 2007, six pairs bred in the Moscow region for the first time) and in small numbers into Finland. The European population is estimated at 310 to 1,200 pairs, with almost all pairs in Russia and a few in Turkey (BirdLife International 2012). It has also nested in Sweden and Germany, and in 2012 has had one or two mixed pairings with Montagu's Harrier in France (such a hybrid pairing was also successful in Finland in 1993).

BirdLife International (2012) gives its breeding habitat as semi-desert, steppe and forest-steppe up to 2000 m, where its favoured nesting sites are wet grasslands close to small rivers and lakes, and marshlands. The species has also been found breeding in agricultural areas, where agriculture is non-intensive, in crops and grass. A small minority of the population breeds in the boreal forest and forest-tundra zones, north of its main breeding range, where it nests in clearings and other open areas. In Finland, the few nests found so far are typically in "extensively drained pine mires with quite small pines affected by modern forestry practices where walking is hard and mosquitoes are aplenty and birders rarely visit" with "many hundred thousand, maybe millions hectares of that kind of habitat in Finland" (Ari Rajasärkkä and Ari-Pekka Auvinen, pers. comm.).

Typical winter habitat is semi-desert, scrub, savannah and wetlands, and large communal roosts have been noted in extensive grasslands in India.

In studies in Kazakhstan, breeding success and productivity have been shown to be strongly correlated with vole numbers and densities (Terraube *et al.* 2009). Pallid Harrier has been thought of as a more specialist feeder than Montagu's, especially in the breeding season, yet in Finland (2012) there was a high productivity amongst known pairs (with one male rearing seven chicks from two females/nests) despite a crash in vole populations seriously affecting other breeding raptors, including owls. It has always been a semi-nomadic breeder, moving from one year to the next to areas with high vole/mammal numbers, perhaps the western most recent colonists are also more adaptable in their choice of prey.

In a vagrant context in Shetland, I have seen one Pallid Harrier take a Lapwing, and also one chase a Meadow Pipit, while the oiled bird was seen to feed on carrion (a Rabbit).

### Satellite tagging and migration strategies

Natural Research, together with local ornithologists, trapped six adult breeding Pallid Harriers in north-central Kazakhstan (and one first-year bird in India) for a satellite tracking study (Terraube *et al.* 2009). The mean departure date from the breeding grounds was 28 July  $\pm 6$  days, and the mean arrival to the wintering areas was 29 October  $\pm 11$  days. Therefore, the mean duration of the autumn migration was 83  $\pm 31$  days. Autumn migration was long because most birds (five of six) performed one long stopover (54  $\pm 10$  days) in an area distant 1695  $\pm 610$  km from the breeding area (all in Kazakhstan or Russia). During autumn migration, birds travelled a total of 7340  $\pm 1378$  km. The average migration speed was thus 108  $\pm 67$  km per day or 164  $\pm 45$  km per day, when excluding the time spent in the stopover (Natural Research 2012).

The six birds dispersed on a very broad front, one even straying to southern France during its migration to Africa. The last bird that they were in contact with, whose signal was lost in 2011, initially wintered in Ethiopia, but in its last recorded winter, it left the breeding grounds in southern Russia and set up a winter range in Syria, occasionally wandering south into Iran.

The seven pre-2011 autumn juveniles in Shetland arrived between 23 August and 29 September, with an average length of stay of seven days, and a longest stay 17 days. In the 2011 influx, arrival dates were between 12 August and 27 October, with the average stay again seven days, but with a longest stay of 45 days. Several roamed over areas of several square kilometers, and occasionally ranged daily up to at least 15 km, but none were subsequently relocated further afield. Unlike some other raptor species, there has been no link between Fair Isle and Shetland records, i.e. tracking of individuals between the two recording areas. Orkney had its first autumn records in 2011, so it seems the behaviour in a vagrant situation in Scotland mirrors that of birds on normal passage; some pass straight through, while other adopt small 'territories' for periods of a few days to up to several weeks, over which they may range 15–20 km in any direction. Crossing large water bodies does not seem to deter them, and indeed the Machrihanish bird on 22 September was seen over the sea moving south past the hide there, and they have a broad front migration strategy, not congregating at short sea crossing points as with many other raptor species. Once they leave one stopover, onward passage is often rapid and can involve long distance movements.

Knowledge of this behaviour helped the initial analysis of the possible numbers involved in Shetland. From over 90 reports, it was initially determined that between eight and 12 individuals were possibly involved (see *Shetland Bird Report for 2011*, in prep.). Using all traceable photographs, some very useful overlays were put together with the assistance of Hugh Harrop, which showed that, where it was possible to compare birds that might possibly be different, they tended in fact to indeed be new birds. Twelve individuals were eventually accepted (with provisos; see Hudson *et al.* 2012). It is clear, looking at the list of 2011 records that several records in Orkney and mainland Scotland followed shortly after the last dates of Shetland birds, suggesting some southwards migration and possible duplication of records. But equally, mainland Scottish records could have involved birds arriving from more easterly headings at the same latitude as

Shetland. Also, several English birds arrived at the same time as the peak arrival time in Shetland, indicating a simultaneous arrival across a broad front, as might be expected from the known migration strategies of the species.

The general presumed direction of travel for most of these birds is eventually southerly, (at least four birds of the influx, at Macrahanish, Ythan, Hillwell and North Roe were seen only on one date, fairly briefly and all heading approximately south), but they clearly arrive in Shetland at least on an apparent west or north-westerly heading, so we should perhaps keep an open mind on which direction some may go from there... one was in Iceland on 14–17 September, their first record (Kolbeinsson *et al.* 2012).

### Status in Finland

Data from the Oulu region (almost whole Northern Ostrobothnia, equaling almost 10% of the total area of Finland), the number of Pallid Harriers observed in the 2000s shows a steady increase (Figure 4) (per Ari-Pekka Auvinen).

The first ever verified breeding in Finland was in 1933, followed by records in 2003 and 2008. Since then, maybe five or so more nests or broods have been found (Ari-Pekka Auvinen, pers. comm.), until 2012, with reports of five pairs and at least 13 males.

During 2011 and 2012 there have been 300–400 sightings per year in Finland. Most reports are from August onwards (for instance about 200 from August to early October 2011, the majority juveniles). Spring is also good for Pallid Harriers, but the numbers are usually lower than in the autumn. Very few birds are typically seen in June and July. It looks as if 2012 may possibly be an even better year than 2011 for the species in Finland, even though the populations of small mammals (the main food item for Pallid Harrier) have crashed in large areas of the country especially in the south (Ari-Pekka Auvinen, pers. comm.). A total of 170 Pallids have been recorded in Finland in August and September 2012, so far.

### Origins of the influx

There are undoubtedly undetected pairs in Finland, but numbers are probably still low, and

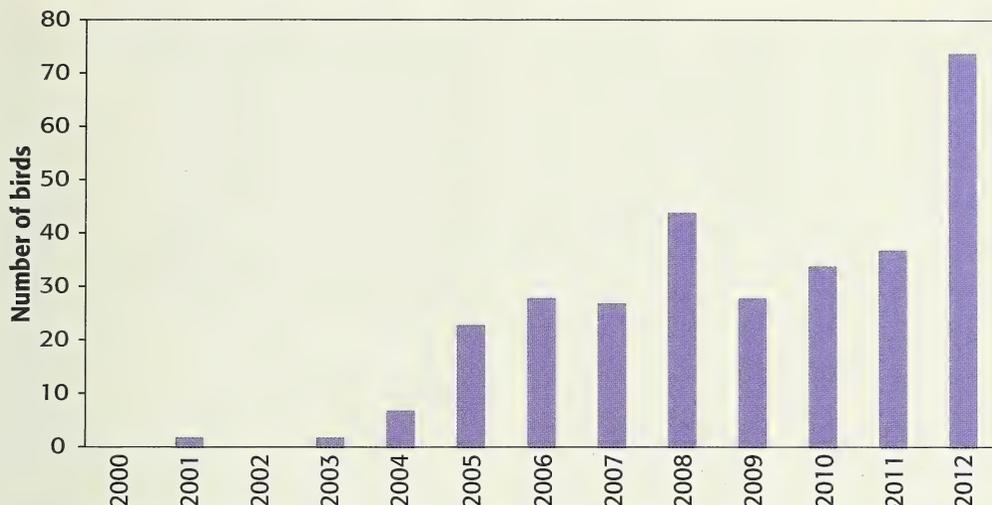


Figure 4. Number of Pallid Harriers recorded in the Oulu region, Finland, 2000–2012.

contacts in Finland felt that the huge influx across Scandinavia and Western Europe in 2011 had most likely originated just across their borders in western Russia.

The species is prone to nomadic breeding behaviour, and probably similar in winter, searching out areas of high prey density. It also has a broad-front migration strategy, and numbers of fledged juveniles are likely to vary widely in different years, perhaps roughly following cycles in vole and lemming populations, so that in a peak year an exceptional number of juveniles may be setting off from the breeding grounds. Add in any environmental factors, and even at local levels extreme or persistent weather patterns, and such an unusual westward incursion of the species could be explained, particularly taking into account the ongoing north-westwards extension of range, and could perhaps even be a natural progression in this expansion of range.

One such environmental factor has been highlighted by John Murphy of *Birdwatch Ireland*, who suggests that in recent years, massive wildfires exacerbated by crippling drought have destroyed millions of hectares of steppe and forest steppe in Russia, which are the primary breeding grounds for the bird, displacing birds and perhaps resulting at least in part in the increased number of sightings of the Pallid Harrier across Western Europe.

Local weather conditions across the near-continent and North Sea clearly need to be taken into account, and in fact in autumn 2011 there were many days with an easterly component in the wind direction, from early August through to early October; more than an average autumn, at least in Shetland. But large numbers were not just displaced to the UK, but across Western Europe, and spread over a two-month arrival period. If we compare the situation with the two recent Honey Buzzard influxes in the UK, in autumn in 2000 and 2008, these were both in September, and both involved several hundred birds (or sightings) over a relatively short time-span (10–14 days) and both were thought to involve birds on normal passage on the continent being displaced westwards by unusual weather systems/events. (Fraser & Rogers 2002, BirdGuides 2008).

Whatever the causes, it is clearly still an exceptional event in Scotland and the UK, but possibly given the factors described one that could reasonably be expected to reoccur in the future.

### Acknowledgements

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Plates 294–296. Pallid Harrier, The Loons RSPB Reserve, Mainland, Orkney, September 2011. © Alan Leitch



Plate 297. Pallid Harrier, Pennyghael, Mull, Argyll, September 2011. © Bryan Rains



Plates 298–299. Pallid Harrier, juvenile, Fair Isle, August. © David Parnaby



Plates 300–301. Pallid Harrier, Machrihanish, Argyll, 22 September 2011. © Eddie Maguire

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# Black-winged Stilt, 30 April–4 May 2012 - the first Isle of May record

M. NEWELL



Plate 302. *Black-winged Stilt, Isle of May, May 2012.* © David Williams

After a fairly quiet morning on 30 April, around lunch time I wandered up to check the Guillemot study plots on the west cliffs and found a few newly arrived migrants including Whinchat, Lesser Whitethroat, Tree Pipit and Grasshopper Warbler. I returned to the house at Fluke Street and, since I was on cook duty, started making some preparations for the evening meal. Mike Harris came in, commented on also seeing several migrants and remarked that it was “almost enough to make someone go bird watching”. With Mike off for a wander I expected something to be turned up and shortly after went north myself. Reaching the Low Light I got a text from Katherine Herborn, one of the other seabird researchers, to say that Mike had seen a Black-winged Stilt feeding on a small pool near Horse Hole and causing much interest to the local Puffins.

Of all the birds to turn up on the May, this would never have been on any list and I hurried

on to view the pools along the Low Road which had been kept topped up by the wet spring. With nothing in sight I then had a call to say erroneously that the stilt had been seen by Mike at Colm’s Hole, back the way I had come and an even more unlikely spot. Confused, I decided the best course of action was to return to Fluke St to get the information from the horse’s mouth. Mike immediately directed me back north confirming where he had left the bird feeding happily and urging me to find it so that he would not have to do the bookwork for such an unlikely rarity. On the top of the island I found Jeremy Squire in an equal state of agitation not having found the bird. We decided to methodically work our way south checking all the areas of fresh water of which there were an unseasonable number. All to no avail until there it was feeding sedately on the north side of High Tarn. Relief engulfed us and we soon gathered the rest of the people present on the isle to admire this visitor from the south.

Later that day, while heading down to meet a boat containing various other returning island residents not content with one excellent find, Mike Harris found a Nightingale near the Chapel. The Black-winged Stilt remained in the same area for the next four days with occasional sorties to Three Tarn Nick about 250m away and allowed excellent views feeding amongst the emergent vegetation. It was seen by about 25 birders visiting on the tourist boat, May Princess, although unfortunately the boat was unable to land its passengers on some days and the Stilt did the typical Friday night bunk. Despite being such an obvious bird this individual was not relocated on the mainland and did not match any of the images of other individuals roaming the UK this spring.

This was the first record for the Isle of May and ninth record for Scotland (10 birds), it heralded probably the most remarkable series of records of rare and scarce birds on the island in a single season including two Greenish Warblers, two

Marsh Warblers, several Icterine Warblers, a Melodious Warbler, two Thrush Nightingales, a Common Nightingale, a Red-breasted Flycatcher, a Wryneck and at least six Bluethroats.

### Description

Elegant wader with unfeasibly long legs, standing (in Mike's words) 'about twice the height of a Puffin'. Upperparts: jet black wings with a greenish gloss indicating an adult male. Head: Slightly mottled black extending from behind eyes onto crown (where most mottled), down nape and extending half way round the neck leaving lower neck, lower ear coverts and forehead white. Underparts and tail clean white, though subtle pinkish wash to chest. Bill black and long and fine. Long pink legs extending well beyond tail in flight.

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Plate 303. *Black-winged Stilt, Isle of May, May 2012.* © David Williams



Plate 304. Black-winged Stilt, Isle of May, May 2012.  
© Stuart Rivers

### Black-winged Stilt - its status in Scotland

Black-winged Stilt breeds as close as Northern France, Holland and Belgium, but the main part of its summer range is from Portugal east through the Mediterranean and southern and SE Europe and Turkey into SW and Central Russia. Other resident populations are found in NW Africa, Central & Southern Africa, the Middle East, India, Asia and most of Australasia.

The European population is migratory and winters in southern Spain, and across Northern Africa.

There has been out of a total of 398 accepted individuals in Britain to the end of 2010, with nine of these in Scotland. The last Scottish record was of two seen at Howmore, South Uist, Outer Hebrides on 5 July 1990. Other records are from Dumfries & Galloway (pre-1684 & 17 October 1920), Clyde (1850 & 5 October 1958), Sutherland (20 & 27 April 1953), NE Scotland (14 October & 16th to 3 November 1984), and Borders (26 May 1986). The first two Scottish records do not have details of day or month when found, but the others are spread from April to October, with two in spring, two in summer and three in autumn. This differs from the pattern of records elsewhere in Britain where 75% of birds have been found from April to June, though the Isle of May individual fits well with the latter.

The Isle of May bird is only the tenth individual to be found in Scotland. It was part of a notable influx into Britain and Ireland in spring 2012, involving around 15 wandering birds, recorded between 30 March and 18 June, with sightings from Co. Wexford, Gwent, and Cornwall north to Cumbria and County Durham. The majority (75%) of occurrences in Britain since 1950 have been from SW England, SE England and East Anglia, with fewer than 10% noted north of a line from the Mersey to the Humber.



Plate 305. Black-winged Stilt, Isle of May, May 2012. © Mark Newell

# Magnolia Warbler on Fair Isle - first record for Scotland

J. MOSS & W.T.S. MILES



**Plate 306.** Jason Moss and others at Lerness, Fair Isle, September 2012. The Magnolia Warbler was on the cliff beyond the group. © Tommy Hyndman

At the beginning of the FIBO 2012 season, following a very successful first year at the Observatory, David Parnaby, Will Miles and I spent a fair amount of time discussing the birds we wanted to see on Fair Isle before we eventually leave. Don't get me wrong, 2011 was fantastic, with more highlights than you could shake a stick at, but every birder has dreams of certain mythical species, certain circumstances and certain finds on Fair Isle. During these discussions, various things came up time and time again; a rare eastern thrush, a rare western thrush, an impressive spring fall of scarce migrants, and more besides. However, a small number of scenarios really took the forefront of our musings. Number one was to witness a true East meets West event (and we were thinking big, not just Little Bunting meets *rostrata* Mealy Redpoll!). Another dream we had was of witnessing a bird that really made the birding

world stop in its tracks, mouth agape, totally astonished at something biblical! And, thirdly, was the dream scenario of seeing an American wood-warbler on the isle. We all knew that Fair Isle is capable of producing all of the above scenarios. However, none of us can believe, even now, that on 23 September 2012, the above actually happened...

Sunday 23 September 2012 saw Fair Isle's birding staff and visitors in optimistic mood. A very long spell of unproductive Atlantic weather systems had finally begun to show signs of abating, with very light north-westerly winds from 20th producing the first real migrants for a long time, and with them a number of rarities, including: 'Eastern' Grasshopper Warbler on 20th, Arctic Warbler, Citrine Wagtail and Pectoral Sandpiper on 21st and Blyth's Reed Warbler on 22nd - classic Fair Isle in marginal conditions!



Plate 307. *Magnolia Warbler*, Fair Isle, September 2012. © Steve Arlow

A light east/south-easterly breeze and fine conditions on 23rd saw the morning start slowly, with little in the way of newly arrived migrants being found. However, just after lunch the intrepid 'Suffolk Boys', acting on my recommendation, discovered a small *Locustella* warbler in Da Water. With views being brief, they called my mobile and asked for assistance with the bird. Collecting a mist net and ringing kit on the way out, Will Miles, David Parnaby and I headed down to take a look. Views were poor, with the bird only making short flights and not showing itself on the ground, so it was decided to try to catch the bird to determine its identity, to ring it and leave it in peace. The bird was captured easily, flying straight into the mist-net first time. I carefully extracted the bird and took a look; a superb Lanceolated Warbler! It was an especially pleasing bird, being a very well-marked individual and the first I have seen in the hand; Fair Isle magic! The bird was quickly ringed and measured, then released back into the grasses at Da Water, in the exact same spot where it had been found and trapped.

Now, time was ticking. North census in the morning had been rather quiet, with six Yellow-browed Warblers being the best I could muster (only on Shetland could that be considered quiet!) along with only an extremely light scattering of common migrants on the cliffs. It appeared that most birds favoured the option of coming inland to the crofts today. However, I still fancied my chances with another effort up north. Reaching the Vaadal, I made my way up the stream with the vague intention of working through Sukka Mire for a few hours to perhaps locate a 'Lancy' of my own, or maybe something even better! However something changed my mind. I am very fond of birding along the cliffs of Fair Isle (even on a Sunday afternoon!). Seeing migrant birds in such enormous, rugged and beautiful habitat as the cliffs and geos of Fair Isle is a birding experience unlike anything else in the world, and my short time on the island has shown me that it can be very productive (my finest moments on the cliffs including the discovery of a stunning spring male Collared Flycatcher at Hoini in April 2011,

and a Blyth's Reed Warbler in September of the same year). The west cliffs would be bathed in sunlight at this time of the day; perfect for any small migrants to be active. Maybe I could pick up something new that I had missed in the morning? Decision made, up to Gunnawark I went. However, working north along the cliff-tops from Hill Dyke to North Naaversgill only revealed the same species in the same places as where I had recorded them in the morning! This felt a hard slog for little reward, and I began to think that maybe I should have stuck to Sukka Mire, or taken the easy option and gone south like everyone else! Staying focussed though, I decided to keep on trudging and looking along the cliffs a little further.

At about 4.30 pm I arrived at Lerness, an outcrop on the far west coast of the island, and steadily made my way down to the complex of geos at the base of the slope. Reaching the cliff edge, I stopped to wait for any sign of movement. There, suddenly, I glimpsed a very brief flash of utterly vivid yellow, as something shot out of view, "what the hell was that?!" Mind racing, I waited anxiously for whatever was responsible to reveal itself. Moments later I was confronted by something truly amazing; a stunning American passerine and the most incredible bird I have ever seen! The bird had sulphurous yellow underparts and rump, lightly streaked flanks, white undertail coverts, a moss-green mantle, a grey, unmarked head and whitish eye-ring, grey wings with white wing-bars and a dark tail with square white windows at the bases of the feathers - all so distinctive, but completely unfamiliar to me! With no useful reference books at hand (the *Collins Field Guide* I keep in my scope-carrier didn't quite cut the mustard on this occasion!) I set about fully documenting the bird, taking several digiscoped pictures and videos, before running up the hill to get mobile reception. The following phone conversations I then had, to a whole host of people on and off the island, were no doubt frantic, despite my best attempts to stay calm! However, my description of the bird was obviously clear enough, as a conversation with Deryk Shaw ended in him telling me that the bird sounded a lot like a Magnolia Warbler! Wow! With a lot on my mind at this point, I then returned to the bird and

continued to watch it. It remained very faithful to its chosen stretch of cliff, looking remarkably at home there and, despite its incredible colours and patterns, failed to surpass the beautiful yellows, greens, greys and blacks of this rugged cliff-face and its lichens. Not many locations other than Fair Isle could succeed in absorbing such an unbelievable bird!



Plates 308–311. *Magnolia Warbler*, Fair Isle, September 2012. © Steve Arlow (top), Ian Cowgill (next) & Ian Andrews (lower two)



Plate 312. Lerness, Fair Isle, September 2012. © Tim Loseby

After what felt like an age, Will Miles appeared alone in the distance on the brow of the hill, from where he ran, full pelt, down to where I was sitting. After a brief wait, the bird emerged into view and he was able to get a prolonged look at it, and finally, after an agonising wait, confirmed to me the bird's identity; "Oh my god, it's a Magnolia!" Absolute elation washed over both of us, as we sat soaking-up a sight so completely rare and amazing that it was

difficult at first to comprehend! Soon however, once our senses had been regained, Will went up the hill to get mobile signal and put the news out nationwide.

We then watched as wave after wave of birders and islanders made the journey across the island to the far western cliffs where we sat, watching one of the best birds any of us will ever see in the UK, as it flitted about actively, fly-catching and feeding on a stunning cliff-face as the sun set over the Atlantic Ocean. The bird was watched until darkness fell and it was seen to roost in a tiny rock crevice on the face of the cliff, with the calls of a Yellow-browed Warbler echoing across the geo. A lot of happy people were on Fair Isle that evening, forming a rather elite club of very fortunate birders as, sadly, despite attempts to relocate it from dawn the next day, the bird wasn't seen again.

### Identification, aging and sexing

When the bird first appeared it was side-on and the immediate impression was a small warbler with dazzling yellow underparts and throat, white undertail coverts, greyish upperparts, and a distinct pale eye-ring. This basic initial image presented only two possibilities in my mind



Plate 313. Race to beat the sunset, Lerness, Fair Isle, September 2012. © Tommy Hyndman

(based on field experiences at Rock Point & Long Point Bird Observatories in Canada in 2008): Magnolia Warbler or Canada Warbler. The bird quickly flitted into a position facing away from us and I could then see that it had a rump patch of the same dazzling yellow as the underparts and that the tail was black with long white panels at the feather bases, except on the central pair. These features ruled-out Canada Warbler and perfectly fitted Magnolia. The moss-green mantle, double-white wing bars, weak grey chin strap and faint dark streaking on the flanks were additional good features for Magnolia Warbler, and the bird was soon identified as this species.

The bird could be aged as a first year because the tail feathers were all very sharply pointed, the mantle was relatively plain and uniform green (lacking any prominent dark streaking), and the dark streaking on the flanks was very weak and almost entirely limited to the rear flanks.

The bird could almost certainly be sexed as a male, because the plumage was extremely bright and the colours very rich, pure and saturated. For example, the yellow colouration of the throat, breast, chest and rump was particularly pure, bright and intense (truly luminous!) and the green tone of the mantle was deep and lacking any brown. This appearance would be unusual in a female.

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*This record is subject to acceptance by the British Birds Rarities Committee.*

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## Status of Magnolia Warbler in the Western Palearctic

*This Setophaga warbler breeds in damp conifer forests across northern North America and winters in Central America, crossing the Caribbean on its migration.*

*The name of the Magnolia Warbler is misleading because it is rarely found in Magnolia trees. It was named by Alexander Wilson in 1810, who happened to collect a migrant from a Magnolia tree in Mississippi. He used 'magnolia' as part of the scientific name and coined the English name "Black-and-yellow Warbler", but over time, Magnolia became the common name.*

*There is one previous British record - on St Agnes, Isles of Scilly, on 27–28 September 1981 (Enright 1995) and two from Iceland (29 September to 7 December 1995 and 21–23 October 1995). Outside the Western Palearctic, in mid-Atlantic, there are also records from the Azores on 21–22 September 1999 (not yet assessed), 6 October 2009 and 10 October 2012 ([azoresbs.weebly.com](http://azoresbs.weebly.com), not yet assessed). The Scillies bird was an adult male moving into non-breeding plumage.*

*Norman Elkins has commented on the weather situation and possible arrival scenario: "The most recent transatlantic crossing was probably a rapid one on 14–16 September, when a strong broad WSW flow stretched from north-east North America to Scotland south of an elongated cold front. It is certainly possible that the Magnolia Warbler (and a Swainson's Thrush on Foula the same day) had ended up initially in Norway, only to depart in the correct direction (but on the wrong side of the Atlantic!) in light S–SE winds on the night of 22nd/23rd as high pressure built, which might then have taken them to the Northern Isles."*



## Rollers in North-east Scotland and Orkney, July 2012

D. BROWN, K. MARLEY & A. UPTON

Plate 314. *Roller, Finstown, Orkney, July 2012.* © Morris Rendall

### The New Pitsligo bird

12 July 2012 will stay in my memory for quite some time. It was a normal mid-summer evening, but without the usual prevailing wind. I was accompanying a friend Keith Marley and were on our way to pick up two captive European Eagle Owl chicks, which were to be re-homed at Keith's wildlife rescue centre (The New Arc) at Nether Auquhadlie, near Ellon, Aberdeenshire. As I have kept and flown numerous birds of prey, I volunteered to help separate the four- to five-weeks-old young owlets from their parents - not a job that is without risk!

We had set off from just outside Rosehearty just after 6 p.m. and were heading west, cutting across country to link up with the main Fraserburgh to Banff road (A98), a journey of about ten miles. The short cut takes you across a variety of habitats, mainly agricultural, grazing and some lowland moorland intersected with small conifer belts.

Just as we were within sight of the main Fraserburgh to Banff road, entering a shady area of conifer belt on both sides of the road, I happened to look up at a silhouette of a bird perched on a telephone wire. I should say at this point, I am always scanning for sightings of birds of prey, usually sat on fence posts or telegraph poles. As we drew closer expecting a Kestrel or Buzzard to take flight from the wire, the bird interestingly remained impassive as we passed under it, and as I looked up, I immediately noticed a flash of iridescent blue! For a few seconds I was trying to compute what I had actually just seen. Although I am not really a birder/twitcher, I have, like Keith, always had a keen interest in birds. I can remember saying to Keith "I think that bird was a Roller". He looked at me a bit surprised and said "are you sure?" as he hit the brakes hard! We quickly turned the car around, hoping that the bird had not flown. The bird was still on the wire, Keith fumbled for his binoculars in the glove box, and handed them

to me. We drove up slowly within ten metres or so and viewed through the windscreen, which in the excitement had steamed up, as a last chance to get the identification confirmed. I jumped out with the binoculars to get a good focus on the bird. I was directly underneath the bird and it still made no attempt to fly off. We both started thinking it might be an escaped aviary bird, as we stood amazed at how approachable it was, only metres above us.

After a couple of minutes, we had pushed our luck and it took flight over our heads and flew towards the entrance of Lovie's of Cow Bog Quarry. It was now that we had absolute confirmation that it was a European Roller with its pale blue body and wings, Magpie size, luminous iridescent quality, azure blue with a golden brown back. The carpals and the undersides of the flight feathers were a deep violet-blue, and it flew with quite vigorous wing beats and was silent.

Just when we thought the show was over, it proceeded to turn around and flew back to the original phone wire. Again, we both watched transfixed at this beautiful bird. Once again it took flight and circled a couple of times attracting the attention of a small flock of Chaffinches which mobbed it and drove it off down a narrow track between the trees. We waited expecting it to return, but caught sight of it heading away onto the open moorland. We jumped into the car to see if we could catch another sight of it, but it was not to be.



Plate 315. Roller, New Pitsligo, North-east Scotland, July 2012. © Nick Littlewood



Plates 316–317. Roller, New Pitsligo, North-east Scotland, July 2012. © Paul Baxter

If only we had a camera to record the event, and to prove what we had witnessed. We agreed to phone the sighting into a bird line to share our find, and to see how rare a visitor a Roller was in Scotland. It was seen again on 14–15 July.

As a foot note, we did remember to pick up the two European Eagle Owls and both are now rehomed and doing well.

**Dave Brown, Holland Park, Rosehearty, Aberdeenshire.**

Email: [anthonybrown@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:anthonybrown@tiscali.co.uk)

**Keith Marley, Nether Auquhadlie, Ellon, Aberdeenshire.**

### The Finstown bird

A brief glimpse of a bright blue and chestnut bird on a wire was enough to know that a totally surprising visitor had arrived just half a mile from home. It was after tea on 27 July 2012 and I was on my way to watch elsewhere, but those plans changed rapidly. Heart racing and hands slightly shaking, I pulled in a little way down the hill and got a proper look at a Roller - perched on telegraph wires less than 20 m from the road, and dropping down occasionally into the long vegetation below.

A phone call later, and the word was being put out on the Orkney website. Orkney is not big and Finstown is pretty central, so I was expecting folk to arrive fairly rapidly. But the first were not birders - it was the owner of the neighbouring quarry and his wife. She had nearly run over the bird the previous evening, and today the lorry drivers had been commenting on the blue bird as they drove close past it throughout the afternoon, on their noisy way up and down the hill. Now, having worked out its identity from books, they were back to take pictures.

However, almost predictably, the Roller moved onto the skyline a few hundred metres away, before disappearing completely



Plate 319. Roller, Finstown, Orkney, July 2012. © David Edgar

just before the first birders arrived. Fortunately, it was soon relocated, on a fence just round the slope, where it stayed for the rest of the evening, admired by birders and birders' children, neighbours, relatives and friends and their children. Quite a family atmosphere, with two scopes set up for anyone to have a look. There was a special moment as the Roller flew back along the slopes above us for a couple of hundred metres, accompanied by an involuntary chorus of "oohs", "aahs" and "wows!" as it revealed a stunning underside combination of turquoise and intense blue.

The bird stayed until 31 July, often on the wires by the road, or round on the fence and at times disappearing to somewhere unknown, perhaps among the trees down in the village - but it was usually back within a couple of hours. A fluctuating knot of people, cars and telescopes became a feature of the layby on the hill, and few were disappointed.

*These records are subject to acceptance by the British Birds Rarities Committee.*

**Andrew Upton, Orkney.**

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Plate 318. Roller, Finstown, Orkney, July 2012. © Ian Cunningham



Plates 320–321. Roller, Finstown, Orkney, July 2012.  
© Morris Rendall

### The status of Roller in Scotland

*This species breeds from Portugal, Spain and north Morocco eastwards through the Mediterranean and locally in smaller numbers from easternmost Germany north to Estonia and more commonly from south-eastern Europe and Turkey east through south-west Russia and the Ukraine. Extends eastwards through southern Russia to northern Kazakhstan, south-west Siberia and westernmost Mongolia, and from Iran to northernmost Pakistan and westernmost China. The entire population is migratory and winters in Africa, mostly south-east of the Equator, from Gabon and southern Ethiopia with fewer numbers along a narrow band in West Africa from Mauritania to Cameroon.*

*There have been 311 accepted individuals in Britain to the end of 2011 with 76 of these in Scotland. The only record in Scotland since publication of the most recent Birds of Scotland (Forrester et al. 2007) was of one at Glen Aros, Mull, Argyll on 16 June 2011.*

*There are distinct spring and autumn peaks to the Scottish records (mid-May to end June and late August to early November respectively), with single birds also found in February and mid-April, and seven in July and early August. A similar pattern is seen with records elsewhere in Britain, though with a greater bias towards records in spring. All Scottish records refer to singles, except for two present at Pierowal, Westray Orkney on 10 November 1890. Records are becoming less frequent in Scotland and Britain overall, presumably reflecting a decline in the European breeding population.*

*There is a slight bias in Scottish records towards the Northern Isles, north-east, southern and south-west Scotland, but this may be strongly influenced by levels of observer coverage rather than constitute a true picture of occurrence. Elsewhere in Britain, there is a spread of records across England and into Wales, but with a strong bias towards East Anglia and south-east England in both spring and autumn.*

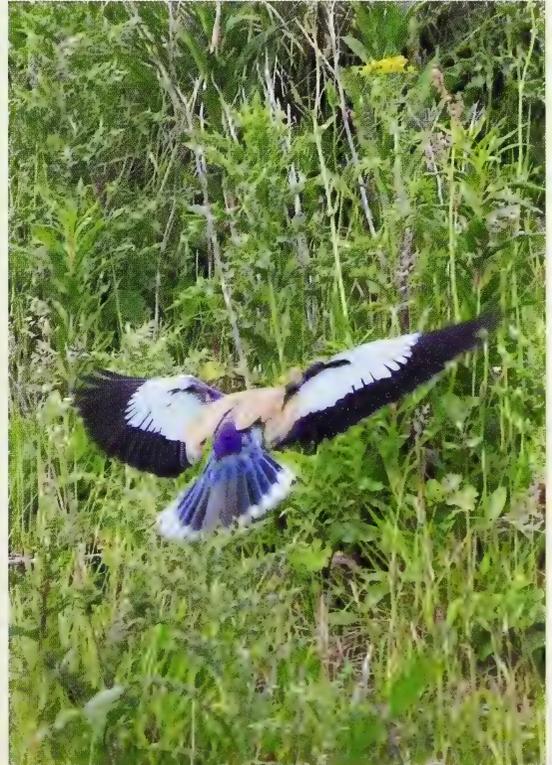


Plate 322. Roller, Finstown, Orkney, July 2012. © Alan Leitch



## Black-winged Pratincole, Loch Stiapavat, Isle of Lewis, August 2012 - the first Outer Hebrides record

B.A.E. MARR

**Plate 323.** *Black-winged Pratincole, Isle of Lewis, August 2012.* © Tony Marr

My first visit to the Butt of Lewis was on 15 April 1955 as an avid 15-year-old member of the RSPB's Junior Bird Recorders Club. I stayed with family friends and met the local birdman, Peter Cunningham, who in 1983 was to publish his concise and comprehensive book *Birds of the Outer Hebrides*. An article I wrote describing my two-week holiday on Lewis was published in *The Junior Bird Watcher*, and records that I saw Gannets and Manx Shearwaters at the Butt.

I returned to Lewis in the springs of 1957 and 1959 on expeditions with birding friends from Sussex and Hampshire, which included camping at the Butt to count the numbers of wildfowl and waders passing through in late April towards Iceland and Greenland. Published in respectively *The Fair Isle Bird Observatory Bulletin* and *Bird Migration*, both expedition reports ended with the recognition of the potential of the Butt for observing bird migration. However, it was to be a further 50 years before I resumed observations there, based in Port of Ness, two miles south-east of the Butt lighthouse.

I was tempted to do so by the knowledge that even with the paucity of observations over many decades, there had been some outstanding records in more recent years from this remote and windswept headland off the north-west tip of Scotland. Europe's first-ever Purple Martin and Scotland's largest day total of Great Shearwaters showed what could be found, with the added knowledge that few birders would be mad enough to want to live in such an outlandish spot. After 15 enjoyable years of flogging out to Blakeney Point in Norfolk, a new local patch beckoned.

From a starting point of the spring of 2009, the first three years of an increasing amount of watching were very satisfying, with an excellent passage of regular, and a good variety of scarcer, Nearctic wildfowl and waders to observe in both spring and autumn. Early spring highlights have included Kildeer and white-morph Gyr Falcon; overshoots such as Alpine Swift, Bee-eater, Red-rumped Swallow and Woodchat Shrike have occurred; White-billed Divers continue to be

regular each April and May; and autumn has produced more than its fair share of unexpected arrivals and vagrants, particularly North American shorebirds. But for rarity value and sheer charisma, few of these can beat the Black-winged Pratincole which graced Loch Stiapavat, a mile and a half south of the Butt, for five days in early August of my fourth year, 2012.

After severe weather conditions on 1 August, with an ESE near-gale and torrential rain, I had high hopes of some early autumn drift migrants appearing on 2nd, when it turned out calm, warm and dry. A Swift along the cliffs near the lighthouse proved to be a Common (which is not so common here), and that was about it. As I returned home for lunch, I called in at Loch Stiapavat to check for any other arrivals. A mixed flock of Golden Plovers and Lapwings was in the field between the road and the hide on the western side of the loch, and I scanned through the 250 or so birds to see if anything was lurking among them.

Three other birds dropped in, and I turned my attention to them. They were juvenile Ruffs, which I checked carefully as they are a regular but scarce visitor here. No, they weren't Buff-breasted Sandpipers. I was about to pack up the 'scope and drive off when a movement caught my eye as another bird dropped in, raising its wings and folding them as it settled in the grass. The wings were jet black underneath, contrasting with very white underparts. It was a similar size to the Ruffs, and for a moment I thought it must be a Green Sandpiper - but in a dry grassy field full of flowers? I could only just make out its shape as it crouched low to the ground, half-hidden by vegetation, and I wondered what it could be. Just then it was chivvied by a Lapwing, it ran out into the open on rather short legs, and revealed long black-tipped wings on a horizontal brown body.

It was a pratincole - but which one of the three on the British List? I have seen all three, but could not remember all the key features. I do



Plate 324. Black-winged Pratincole, Isle of Lewis, August 2012. © Tony Marr

remember identification problems with some of the previous British records, especially Oriental, the rarest. I felt confident that with the contrasting upper and under wings and body, and the lack of a pale trailing edge to the wings, it would have to be a Black-winged.

By now my mind was racing and my hands were shaking. First things first - get some photos. Golden Plovers and Lapwings are notoriously twitchy, and if they all get up I might lose sight of it in the flock. It could fly off and not be seen again. People might not believe me. So as calmly as I could, and after checking the camera setting, I managed to take a few 'insurance' pictures of it on the ground, but at a distance. The bird ran through the flowers, jumping up into the air and catching insects, before disappearing behind a low ridge. What now?

I cautiously entered the field, and tried to get a little closer, but the other birds were getting anxious. Trying not to become tangled up in the straps of my binoculars, 'scope and camera, I fumbled in my pockets for my mobile, and called Angus Murray at Birdline Scotland. I've never been more pleased to hear him answer. I told him the good news that I was watching a pratincole; that I thought it must be a Black-winged; could he please confirm for me the upper- and under-wing patterns of the other two. He was remarkably quick in doing so, telling me that from what I was describing, it had to be Black-winged. And at that moment, something disturbed the flock, they all took off, and were last seen heading fast towards the shore half a mile away. I remembered David Rosair's tip about re-finding rare birds: 'Stay put dear boy, for they often return to the scene of the crime'. And after 17 nail-biting minutes, it did.



Plates 325–328. Black-winged Pratincole, Isle of Lewis, August 2012. © Tony Marr

I quickly obtained some record shots to confirm all the necessary features, and could then begin to relax and watch this elegant and rather glamorous bird as it flew up and down the loch catching insects. Although allegedly a wading bird, it behaved more like a huge hirundine, swooping across the loch at great speed and making sudden twists and turns in pursuit of its prey. The black underwings contrasting with white underparts reminded me of the Fea's Petrels I saw around Madeira in the 1990s, and on other occasions it behaved like a marsh tern as it swooped and soared above the loch.

I watched it for nearly three and a half hours until it disappeared, and then continued on my way home for lunch at 6.30 pm.

The bird stayed for five days around Loch Stiapavat, using the local Lapwing flock as cover between its regular sorties out across the water. It was not seen early on any morning, usually appearing around 10.00 to 11.00 am, presumably to allow the air to warm up and bring out insects. Once airborne, it would spend up to an hour traversing the loch and then return to settle down among the Lapwings. Photographing it was never easy, particularly as access to the loch edge is very limited. Sometimes it would spend hours among the Lapwings out on the machair, and any attempt to get closer would result in the Lapwings lifting off and taking the pratincole away with them. On its last day, I took advantage of the liberal Scottish laws governing access to the countryside to find a secluded spot near the water from where I could anticipate it coming past me, or even over my head, and secured a dozen or so reasonable shots out of the 300 taken.

Surprisingly few birders came to see the bird, despite its rarity, with only around 15 in the five days of its presence. This probably reflects the distance, cost and logistics of travel to reach this most northerly point of the Western Isles. It would doubtless have been a different story had it been a European and British first, as with the Purple Martin in September 2004.

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*This record is subject to acceptance by the British Birds Rarities Committee.*

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## The status of Black-winged Pratincole in Scotland

*This species breeds from eastern Romania eastwards through south Ukraine and Russia to the Caucasus and north-west Caspian Sea and across to northern Kazakhstan and southernmost Russia east to Lake Balkhash. The entire population is migratory and winters mostly in Botswana and South Africa and in smaller numbers along the River Niger and in Cameroon, Gabon and Congo. Western breeding populations have declined markedly in recent decades.*

*There have been 35 previous accepted British records up to the end of 2011, with just three of these in Scotland: a female shot on Fair Isle on 18 May 1927; one at Loch of Strathbeg, North-east Scotland on 11 July 1976, and a juvenile at Monikie Country Park, Angus & Dundee on 14–16 August 1996.*

*Apart from the Fair Isle individual, which has the second earliest ever find date, the Scottish records all fall within the typical July to early September occurrence period for this species in Britain though precede the main peak from 21 August to 10 September. The Lewis individual extends the generally eastern pattern to Scottish records, while elsewhere in Britain there is a strong bias of records to south-east England from East Anglia to Somerset. There are also records from Ireland (2), Iceland and Norway.*



Plate 329. *Semipalmated Plover*, South Uist, September 2012. © Steve Duffield

## Semipalmated Plover, South Uist, September 2012 - the first Outer Hebrides and Scottish record

**J.B. KEMP**

It was on 6 September, while taking an early evening stroll with my wife near my house at South Glendale, South Uist, that I heard a brief, distant strange bird call. I was puzzled by the call which was repeated twice and reminded me of a species of wader. The sound came from a small cluster of islets, known as Rubha na Moine, separated by areas of sand and mud at low water. As it was late in the day and I was not prepared for any serious birding, with no telescope or wellingtons with me, I decided to postpone investigation until the following day.

I didn't commence my quest on 7 September until about 1.45 pm, as much of the morning was spent tracking down and finally locating an extremely elusive Spotted Sandpiper on the west coast at Rubha Ardvule. On arriving at Rubha na Moine I almost immediately heard the

call repeated again close by, and coming from what appeared to be a 'Ringed' Plover on the sand just 40 yards away. The sound can best be described as a plaintive 'chu-wee' reminiscent of a Spotted Redshank. I barely had time to train my telescope on the bird, when it took flight and disappeared eastward around a nearby headland. Pressure was now starting to build as I realised this was probably a Semipalmated Plover, a species I had previously seen, but not heard, on St. Agnes, Isles of Scilly in 1978. It would require close, prolonged views to confirm the diagnostic features and preferably to also obtain images to substantiate my claim.

Fortunately it quickly returned, landed close by and began to feed in typical plover manner. Worries about being able to see tricky identification features were soon dispelled as the bird

approached me, in an unconcerned manner to within 10 yards. I soon managed to get images of the more important details, good enough at least to satisfy any scrutiny. My next step was to get other people to the scene and this first involved a quick hike up an adjacent hillside to a point where there was a phone signal. Within the hour I was joined by five other smiling observers, including local birders Steve Duffield and Andrew Stevenson. Fortunately the bird continued to perform perfectly in front of the gathered throng. It remained for several days and was last seen on 11 September.

Undoubtedly, the easiest starting point with the Semipalmated Plover was the call which immediately drew attention. Unfortunately, this bird did not call very often, so good prolonged views were necessary to also confirm the presence of webbing between all toes and the pattern of loreal feathering. This individual's tameness greatly assisted the process.

Although closely resembling a Ringed Plover, it was marginally smaller, slimmer and darker above, though not as dark as the Arctic race

*tundrae*. This was also the impression in flight with the wing pattern very similar, with the wing-bar possibly a bit narrower, but I had no sustained flight observations to establish any detail. The narrow pale fringes to the feathers of crown, mantle and wing coverts confirmed it to be a juvenile, though in this individual they looked quite worn and were not as clear as on some of the juvenile Ringed Plovers present.

The head pattern was similar to juvenile Ringed Plover but differed from most because of a less well defined whitish supercilium which was short, narrow and drab being broadest behind the eye. The front part of the supercilium was separated from the white forehead by a dirty white area. The sooty black ear-coverts narrowed at the rear, curving up to form the rear border of the crown. The ear-coverts narrowed at the lores and met as a very narrow band above the bill. Crucially, the dark loreal stripe met the bill above the gape line, this producing a small wedge of white feathering extending part way up the base of the bill. Quite close views were necessary to see this feature convincingly on a moving bird.



Plate 330. *Semipalmated Plover*, South Uist, September 2012. © Steve Duffield

Although it can be a variable feature the breast band was the best means of initially isolating this particular individual. It was a complete band, blacker than those on the juvenile Ringed Plovers, quite narrow and of even width. There was some diffuse broadening at either end of the band, but higher up the breast sides than in the juvenile Ringed Plovers present. The short, stubby bill was black with just a suggestion of some paleness at the base of the lower mandible at close range. This showed up better in some images than in the field when the weather conditions were mostly cloudy and dull. A similar situation with the very narrow pale eye-ring which several people, including myself, could not see even at close range though it was just visible in some images. The eye was dark. The legs mostly looked a drab, dirty, greenish with a diffuse yellowish stripe running down their back. They were duller than most Ringed Plovers present though looked brighter in sunshine and on some images.

Although the first record in Britain since 1998 and only the third for the British Isles and a first for Scotland, relatively few birders made the effort to come and see the bird. I suppose the outer islands are just a step too far for most.

*This record is subject to acceptance by the British Birds Rarities Committee.*

**John B. Kemp, South Uist.**

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### The status of Semipalmated Plover in Scotland

This species breeds across North America eastwards from the Aleutian Islands, Alaska and north-west British Columbia through northern Canada to northern Quebec, Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. The entire population is migratory and winters on the Pacific coast of the USA southwards from southern Oregon, and the Atlantic coast southwards from North Carolina, south through the Caribbean and both coasts of Central and South America to the southernmost tip.



**Plate 331.** Semipalmated Plover, South Uist, September 2012. © Steve Duffield

*There have only been two previous accepted British records of Semipalmated Plover, the ecological equivalent of Ringed Plover in North America, despite it being migratory and a common species there. This very much reflects the difficulty in separating it from Ringed Plover.*

*The first was found at Porth Killier on St. Agnes, Isles of Scilly on 9 October 1978, again by virtue of its Spotted Redshank-like call (chu-EEp), and remained until 9 November. In the initial days after its discovery the bird generally associated with Ringed Plovers, despite a level of harassment, but established a feeding territory by the end of October which it vigorously defended (Dukes 1980). The second was present at Dawlish Warren LNR, at the mouth of the Exe Estuary in Devon from mid-April through to 21 September 1997, but its identity was only confirmed in mid-June. This bird was mass-observed, and again its extended stay allowed the critical identification features to be documented and discussed (Lakin & Rylands 1997). Semipalmated Plover has now also been recorded in Ireland, Iceland, Norway, France, Spain, the Cape Verde Islands and the Azores.*

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- Lakin, I. & Rylands, K. 1997. The Semipalmated Plover in Devon: the second British record. *Birding World* 10(6): 212–216.



Plate 332. Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Westray, Orkney, July 2012. © Sandra Otter

## Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Westray, Orkney, 20–23 July 2012 - the first for Orkney and fifth Scottish record

D. & S. OTTER

Loch of Swartmill is one of three good-sized water bodies on the Isle of Westray and is just a couple of miles from our house. During early summer 2012, the water levels at Swartmill had been low enough to leave a margin of mud around most of the loch, attracting good numbers of waders. For example, I was regularly seeing in excess of 300 Dunlin and had recorded a flock of 114 Black-tailed Godwits (an Orkney record).

Needless to say, I was hoping to find something a bit more unusual and was certainly rewarded on the afternoon of 20 July. There were some stunning summer-plumaged Knot present and, whilst enjoying these, I noticed a smaller wader, feeding alongside them, which I did not recognise. The bird looked somewhat like a Pectoral Sandpiper, but wasn't quite right for that species.

The most noticeable feature was a rich, chestnut-brown cap, which was picked out by the afternoon sunlight. I knew this to be a feature of Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, but that was about as far as my knowledge of that species went. However, the bird did not show the clear division between white belly and finely streaked breast, which I would expect to see on a Pectoral Sandpiper. I began to feel pretty excited and called to my wife, Sandra to come and have a look. On looking through the scope, she said "it looks like a Pec Sand". I replied to the effect that I thought it was something even better!

I then concentrated on getting as much detail as possible. As well as the brown cap, the bird showed a strong, pale supercilium. The bill was relatively short, dark and slightly down-curved. I

felt there was a hint of paleness at the base. The dense dark markings on the breast continued onto the belly and flanks, ruling out Pectoral Sandpiper. Especially on the flanks, some of these markings were distinctly V-shaped. There were also streaks on the undertail coverts. The feathers on the back and wings were mostly dark with pale edgings. The bird had olive-green legs. Sandra managed to get a few digiscoped shots (Plates 332–333), which were not totally sharp due to the distance involved, but do show most of the salient features.

Having got all the detail I could, I raced home (a distance of a couple of miles) and consulted the books. Yes, it was an adult Sharp-tailed Sandpiper! I contacted Paul Higson who runs the Orkneybird Yahoo group and he put out the news. Over the next couple of days, a handful of birders travelled to Westray to see this bird. I last saw it briefly on the morning of 23 July. If accepted, this will constitute the fifth record for Scotland and the first for Orkney.

*This record is subject to acceptance by the British Birds Rarities Committee.*

**Don & Sandra Otter, Orkney.**



Plate 333. Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Westray, Orkney, July 2012. © Sandra Otter

### The status of Sharp-tailed Sandpiper in Scotland

*This species breeds along the Arctic coast of Siberia from the Lena delta eastwards to the Kolyma river basin. The entire population is migratory and winters from New Guinea and islands of the south-west Pacific, and mostly in Australia and New Zealand.*

*There have been four previous individuals in Scotland out of a total of 31 accepted British records to the end of 2011. The first Scottish record (fifth British) was on the River Clyde at Hamilton, Clyde on 13–21 October 1956. Although noted as a first-winter at the time, it is now believed that the plumage description indicates the bird is more accurately aged as a juvenile (Hudson et al. 2012). The second was an adult found at Aberlady Bay, Lothian on 17 August 1985, the third was an adult at Scatness, South Mainland, Shetland on 13–15 September 1993, and the fourth, also an adult, at Scatness and Pool of Virkie, South Mainland, Shetland from 27 August to 1 September 2000. This prevalence of adults over juveniles is also seen in Britain overall, where only five (16%) of the aged birds have been juveniles.*

*Apart from a single spring record from Dorset in April 1978, all British records have been found between late July and mid-October, and the five Scottish records all fall within this period. Four of the Scottish occurrences show a northerly and vague easterly bias which would be expected of a Siberian vagrant, and these fit with the general spread of British records which are mainly from east and south coast counties of England. The Clyde bird and other records from Cheshire and north Wales occurred later in the finding period and include most of the juveniles found. These may well have arrived from a westerly origin reflecting the different migration routes adopted by adults and juveniles of this species. There are also records from Ireland, France, Norway, Sweden and Finland.*

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Plate 334. Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler, Collieston, North-east Scotland, September 2012. © Harry Scott

## Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler, Collieston, North-east Scotland, 26 September 2012 - the first record for mainland Scotland

**J.M. WILLS & P.D. BLOOR**

Wednesday 26 September 2012 was calm and mild after the ferocious storm of the night of 24/25th, which blew in from the east. There had been plenty of migrants found the previous afternoon, when the storm had abated and I (JMW) thought that there should still be some around the following day. I got out of the house a bit later than intended and headed to the coast at Newburgh, arriving at 10:30. However, birding was slow and it was apparent that many of yesterday's birds had already moved on, taking advantage of the fine weather.

Foveran bushes held very little, a Lesser Whitethroat at the top of the boardwalk being the best around. A brief stop by the laybys

overlooking the Ythan followed, but with a rapidly rising tide there was not going to be much to be seen there for a good few hours, so on to Collieston. The roadside willows had held a Little Bunting first thing, but now the willows and the adjoining churchyard only boasted a few Robins, a couple of Willow Warblers and numerous busy Goldcrests. It looked like it was going to be a quiet day after all and the best had probably been missed. I moved on to the first small plantation on the Collieston–Whinnyfold backroad which has proved good for warblers, Firecrest, etc in the past. I stopped about 100 m short of the plantation for a quick chat with Phil Bloor, who was also heading for the plantation with his dog, and exchanged news.

I arrived at the plantation about 14:30, parked up and stepped over the fence into the trees. I had taken about two or three steps down the slope, when a small brown bird immediately broke cover about one metre to my left, flew low and straight into the base of a weedy clump of willow about 5 m in front of me and promptly disappeared. First impressions were of a small, streaky dark brown bird with a long, rounded tail and I immediately thought that this could be something good, maybe a 'Lancie'...(though subsequently I realised that the long tail would be wrong for a Lanceolated Warbler).

I thought that I could use some help with this one so instead of chasing after it, I retreated back to the road and shouted for Phil who had now just about reached the plantation. I told him what I had seen and together we approached the willow clump and separated either side to scan the long grass and weeds. Though invisible, a small movement immediately in front of me confirmed that it was still there. It moved away to my right and flew in front of Phil, who managed a good view as it passed. As he turned away from me he called "something grasshopper warbler" and some words along the lines of "it has white tailspots". I had missed his first word and it took a few seconds to realise that the 'something' was 'Pallas's'. A 'PG Tips'!

It proved quite elusive, though never moving more than a few metres at any time and was always on or close to the ground in thick cover. It was difficult to obtain clear views of the whole bird and initially I didn't get a good view of its tail. It was considerably later before I saw those tail spots. We had to leave it temporarily in order to get a phone signal up by the road and get the news out, and then search for it again. However, it remained faithful to the same area though always keeping very low and proving difficult to see clearly. It moved off to a more central part of the plantation and we lost it again. It was quickly found again by Alan Knox, who had now arrived with Nick Picozzi from nearby Collieston. And so the afternoon game went on: brief disappearances and then reappearing again as more of the local birders continued to arrive. It rarely moved higher than about a foot off the ground as it moved from one thick patch of vegetation to another, often walking about within thick tangles of grass, nettles and bramble. Often just a barely discernible movement was the only sign of its continued presence, but very occasionally it moved out into relatively open space and good views of the whole bird could be obtained.

I left the site at 16:30 and it was reported still showing well up to dusk. A brilliant day after all with a bird that I never thought I'd see in the flesh.



Plate 335. Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler, Collieston, North-east Scotland, September 2012. © Harry Scott



Plates 336–339. Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler, Collieston, North-east Scotland, September 2012. © Harry Scott

### Description

**Behaviour:** a skulking warbler, in fact a very skulking warbler! Rarely seen in flight and when doing so only for a very short time as it dived into the next set of thick cover. When landing the bird often lowered and spread its tail before disappearing. When on the ground, it remained low predominantly walking through the undergrowth. Only on a couple of occasions did it briefly hop onto low branches.

**Size and structure:** a medium-sized warbler about the size of a (Common) Grasshopper Warbler with the typical *Locustella* long slim profile, accentuated by its long tail and sloping forehead. The tail was considerably longer than that of Grasshopper Warbler. The very long undertail coverts extended at least two-thirds

down the long tail. When seen briefly in flight, the wings appeared short compared to the overall length of its body and tail giving an impression of whirring rapid wing-beats.

**Upperparts:** forehead and crown distinctly greyish-brown, with dark streaks thickening on top of the crown giving a slightly capped appearance in contrast to hind neck and mantle which were a rich, dark rufous-brown, with dark blackish feather centres giving a very streaky appearance to the upperparts. It had a distinct buff supercilium and a marked dark grey eye-stripe. The supercilium was clearly visible in front of the eye and broadened and faded behind the eye - much stronger and broader than any seen on Grasshopper Warblers. Bill fine and fairly prominent, dark upper mandible, pale lower mandible.

**Wings:** these were predominantly brown-black, darker than the general upperpart colouration, with paler buffy-brown fringes to the tertials. The wing coverts had dark centres and paler fringes. Although difficult to see most of the time, when showing well the bird had amazingly striking pale white spots to the inner corners of the tertials, a feature not found on any other *Locustella*. When seen in flight and landing the warm, the buff-brown rump was obvious, contrasting strongly with the duller and darker upperparts. Although this feature was less distinct when on the ground, the streaking on the rump could then be seen.

**Tail:** compared to other *Locustella* warblers, this bird had long, dark grey-black tail feathers, with elongated central feathers giving a very rounded appearance. This bird had quite stunning, neat white tips to the outer tail feathers. In the field, there appeared to be no abrasion to them and although difficult, but far from impossible, to see when on the ground, they were when the bird flew and landed quite blindingly obvious. The tips to the undertail feathers had pale crescents, which were seen once as the bird tail-ended it into a thicket.

**Underparts:** yellow-buff throat and breast with fine dark spots on throat and upper breast giving appearance of fine streaks. Plain unstreaked yellow-buff belly, flanks and undertail coverts.

**Call:** it was not heard to call while I was present, but Ian Broadbent and Harry Scott did note a flight call late in the afternoon which they described as "quite a sharp, almost explosive *chink*" - quite unlike any noise they'd ever heard emerge from a Grasshopper Warbler.

**Age:** the fine dark spots on the throat and upper breast, the streaking of the rump and the yellowish underparts indicate an immature bird. The bird was in very fresh plumage, with broad white tips to the tail feathers, which would most likely have been abraded in an adult bird.

The bird remained in the area for the rest of the afternoon and evening. Although characteristically elusive it was seen well enough by all those who managed to get there. An estimated 20 or so local birders saw it and, with patience, the bird occasionally showed well. After having spent the best part of three hours skulking and providing all but the briefest of views, the bird decided to



Plate 340. Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler, Collieston, North-east Scotland, September 2012. © Harry Scott

perform. It slowly proceeded to hop gradually up one branch at a time out of the tangle. In front of a totally silent crowd of about 15 birders, it moved out onto an open branch about two metres or so above the ground, in full view of some very appreciative birders for 5–6 seconds before flying off some distance to dive into the heart of another dense clump of vegetation.

The Collieston bird was one of three Pallas's Grasshopper Warblers found on mainland UK that day which was quite remarkable. It was also accompanied in the small plantation by two Yellow-browed Warblers and a brief visit of another Little Bunting, which hardly got a look in.

Although initially reported at first light the following morning, this was subsequently found to be erroneous and even after much searching the bird was not seen again.

*This record is subject to acceptance by the British Birds Rarities Committee.*

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### **The status of Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler in Scotland**

*This species breeds in the Eastern Palearctic from south-west Siberia, north-east Kazakhstan and westernmost China eastward through Mongolia and northern China to the south-western shore of the Sea of Okhotsk and the Sea of Japan. The entire population is migratory and it winters in southern India and Sri Lanka, and from north-east India south into Myanmar, Thailand, and Malaysia and Indonesia as far as Borneo and Java.*

*There have been 47 accepted individuals in Britain to the end of 2011 with 40 (85%) of these in Scotland. This is one of a number of Eastern Palearctic breeding species where the Northern Isles of Scotland have dominated records. The species account in the latest Birds of*

*Scotland (Forrester et al. 2007) indicated that 28 birds had been recorded in Scotland to the end of 2004, with 10 on Shetland, 17 on Fair Isle and one on Orkney, and just five elsewhere in Britain. Since then there has been one retrospectively accepted record from Shetland in 1998 plus further individuals there in 2006, 2007, 2008 and two in 2010. On Fair Isle, there was one in 2007, two in 2008, one in 2010 and one in 2011. Perhaps more significantly, the first Scottish record away from the Northern Isles occurred - one on Hirta, St. Kilda, Outer Hebrides on 4 October 2009. Similarly, the 2012 Collieston individual finally breaks the remaining barrier of a mainland Scotland record.*

*All Scottish records have been found within a mile or so of the sea, and the seven British records outside Scotland have also all been at coastal locations: Norfolk (1976, 2001), Northumberland (1985, 2001 & 2010) and Dorset (1996). The find dates for Scottish records all fall between 20 September and 19 October, with a distinct peak in late September/early October. By contrast, three of the English records occurred before this period: singles on 13 September at Cley, Norfolk in 1976 and at Portland, Dorset in 1996 and one ringed at Spurn, Yorkshire on 14 September 2008.*

*Typically birds are only seen on their day of discovery, and the Collieston individual conforms to this, though one on Whalsay, Shetland in 2003 was present for a week and four others have remained at their find location for five days. The greatest number found in a year now rises to five in 1998, with four in 1997 and 2004 and this total was matched in 2008 and 2010. The increase in number of birds found in recent decades continues and appears to reflect a westward expansion of the breeding range rather than increased observer coverage or awareness.*

*Individuals have also been recorded in Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Latvia, Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France and Israel.*

# BIRDCUIDES REVIEW

## 1 July to 30 September 2012

### S.L. RIVERS & S. MENZIE (BIRDCUIDES)

All records refer to the period 1 July to 30 September 2012 unless otherwise stated.

Records in BirdGuides Reviews are published for interest only. All records are subject to acceptance by the relevant records committee.

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Recent bird news can be viewed at [www.birdguides.com](http://www.birdguides.com) (free registration is required), with a valued-added service available on subscription.

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

Scotland fared very well for rare and scarce waders during the period, with record totals of several species and culminating in a Scottish first. A terrific autumn of rarities and scarce passerine migrants started in August and gained momentum in September, particularly on the

Northern and Western Isles, but with several notable finds on the mainland. The end of September saw a marked influx of seabirds into the Firth of Forth resulting in several new record day and site counts for several species.

**Snow Goose:** On Orkney two adults and a juvenile were seen at Mull Head (Ork) on 8 September, and one at Bay of Suckquoy on 26 September. One was on Lewis (OH) also on 8th, and two were on Islay (Arg) on 21 September. **Ruddy Shelduck:** two were reported flying past Browhouses (D&G) on 14 September, with one there on 15th. **American Wigeon:** one was at Graemeshall Loch, (Ork) on 7 July. **Blue-winged Teal:** an eclipse drake was present on the River Clyde/Baron's Haugh RSPB Reserve (Clyde) from 25 August to 16 September. **Ring-necked Duck:** single drakes were at Loch Leven (P&K) on 20 August and Loch of Kinord (NES) on 17 September. **Lesser Scaup:** a drake was at Vane Farm RSPB Reserve, Loch Leven (P&K) on 15 September. **King Eider:** the drake at Blackdog (NES) was last seen on 1 July, and a possible first-summer drake was off Kingsbarns (Fife) on 1 September. **Black Scoter:** the first-summer drake was last seen off Blackdog (NES) on 6 July. **Surf Scoter:** up to five were present off Murcar/Blackdog (NES) in the first half of July, though numbers declined by the latter half of the month, and three were present through August; one remained at Monifieth (A&D) to 6 July, with it or another at Lunan Bay (A&D) on 23 July. A drake was seen off Muckle Roe and Brae, Central Mainland (Shet) from 23 September.

**Fea's/Zino's Petrel:** one flew south past Fraserburgh (NES) on 26 September. **Balearic Shearwater:** one was at Scapa Flow (Ork) on 9 July, one was seen off Kinghorn (Fife) on 13 August, one off Fishtown of Usan (A&D) on 25 August, another passed there on 16 September, and one flew south at Rubha Ardvule, South Uist (OH) on 28 August. **Sooty Shearwater:** passage was noted on the west coast from mid-July with one south past Griminish, North Uist (OH) on 14th, through to 14 September, with peak counts of 90 from Griminish Point, North Uist (OH) on 4 September and 42 off Butt of Lewis, Lewis (OH) on 5th. **Leach's Petrel:** an unprecedented influx of birds into the Firth of Forth on 24–25 September resulted in 12 individuals being noted in Lothian, including five off Musselburgh - the latter equalling the previous number of county records alone. At least nine were seen in Fife, with seven of those noted well up river at Dalgety Bay. **Night Heron:** a first-summer was at Sand Voe, Northmavine, Central Mainland on 28 June, with it or another on Fair Isle on 28 July. **Cattle Egret:** one was at Corpach (High) on 23 September, with it or another then at Kilmuir Church/Balranald, North Uist (OH) on 26–30 September. **Little Egret:** up to three were present at Tynningame (Loth) in July and August, and two in September. Outside Lothian one was at Finstown Ouse (Ork) on 17 July, one at Montrose Basin (A&D) from 31 July throughout August, one on the Eden Estuary (Fife) on 5 August, one at the Inner Solway (D&G) in September, and a new

Scottish record count of 10 at Kirkcudbright Bay (D&G) on 28 September. **Black Stork:** an adult was reported on the east side of Loch Fleet (High) on 6 July. **White Stork:** one was over West Loch Tarbert (Arg) on 5 August. **Spoonbill:** an adult and immature were at Kinneil Lagoons (UF) from 29 July to 15 August, with the immature present to 17th, and one again on 25 August; one was at Loch Leven (P&K) on 7 August.

**Black Kite:** one was seen at Montrose Basin (A&D) on 19 August. **Rough-legged Buzzard:** one was noted on Unst, Shetland on 27 September. **Hobby:** birds were reported from as far apart as the Outer Hebrides, Shetland, Upper Forth and Lothian in July, and Aberdeenshire, Islay (Arg), Dumfries & Galloway and Lothian in August, including five sites in Angus, and in D&G in September. **Common Crane:** one (or more) was seen at four different locations on Orkney from 1–14 July; it or another at Loch of Banks on 8 August, and Swannay Loch (both Ork) on 25 August; an adult was at Montrose Basin (A&D) on 28 August, three at New Pitsligo (NES) on 5 September, and one over Octofad, Islay (Arg) on 21 September.



Plate 341. *Cattle Egret, Corpach, Highland, September 2012.*  
© Jim Dickson

**Avocet:** one was at West Haven (A&D) on 5–11 July, with it or another at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (NES) on 13 July. **Black-winged Pratincole:** one was at Loch Stiapabhat, Lewis from 2–6 August – a first for the Outer Hebrides and only the fifth record for Scotland. **Little Ringed Plover:** singles at Kingston (M&N) on 9 July, and at Tugnet (M&N) on 16 August were notable. **Semipalmated Plover:** a juvenile present on the shore between South Glendale and the Eriskay causeway, South Uist from 7–11 September is the first record for Scotland and third for Britain. **American Golden Plover:** about 11 birds could have been present on the Outer Hebrides in September. On Shetland one was at Veensgarth, Central Mainland on 29–30 September, and three were on Orkney in September. **White-rumped Sandpiper:** an adult was at Tynninghame Bay (Loth) on 1–4 August; an adult was at Gott Bay, Tiree (Arg) on 6–7 August; one was at Bargarva, South Uist (OH) on 17 September, with two adults at Ardvachar, South Uist on 18th, one at Carnan and South Ford, South Uist on 22nd, and two there on 23rd. **Baird's Sandpiper:** one was at Birsay (Ork) on 8–9 September, and one at Eshaness, North Mainland (Shet) on 16 September. **Sharp-tailed Sandpiper:** an adult was at Swartmill Loch, Westray (Ork) on 20–23 July. **Pectoral Sandpiper:** up to eight birds were on Shetland in September; one was on Fair Isle on 19–21 September; and up to 11 on Orkney during September. On the Outer Hebrides sightings in September involved at least 15 different birds. Elsewhere sightings included one at Loch of Strathbeg (NES) on 26 July; one at Findhorn Bay (M&N) on 8 September; three on Slains Pools (NES) on 9 September; three at Kirkapol, Tiree (Arg) on 2 September and Loch à Phuill, Tiree on 8th, with one at The Reef, Tiree on 20 September; one was at Loch Gruinart, Islay in September and at Killinallan, Islay on 18 September.

Individuals were seen at Tynninghame (Loth) on 16th and 20 September. **Buff-breasted Sandpiper:** up to five were on Shetland in September, one was present on Fair Isle on 7–9 September, and up to six on Orkney during the month. On the Outer Hebrides up to 13 were present in September. Elsewhere, single juveniles were at Sandaig, Tiree (Arg) on 10–12 September and Loch à Phuill, Tiree on 19th; two at Loch of Strathbeg RSPB Reserve (NES) from 16–30 September; and two juveniles at Tynninghame (Loth) on 16–27 September. **Great Snipe:** one was seen at Quarff, South Mainland (Shet) on 23 September.

**Temminck's Stint:** one was watched at the Ythan Estuary, (NES) on 20 July. **Semipalmated Sandpiper:** a record-breaking showing saw an adult at Tynninghame (Loth) from 29–31 July; with a juvenile there on 13–20 September; a juvenile briefly at Butt of Lewis, Lewis (OH) on 3 September, one there on 4–5 September with another at Bargarva, South Uist (OH) also on 4–6th, and one at Carnan, South Uist on 9 September. One was at Gott Bay, Tiree (Arg) on 2–7 September; one at Loch Ryan (D&G) on 8 September. One was present again at Bargarva on 17 September, though considered possibly a Western Sandpiper by some observers. A juvenile was at Broadford Bay, Skye (High) on 7–12 September. **Spotted Sandpiper:** one was at Rubha Ardvule, South Uist (OH) on 6–7 September, and again on 15–19th; a juvenile was at Lower Voe, Central Mainland (Shet) on 30 September. **Greater Yellowlegs:** what is presumably the long-staying bird first seen in 2011 was seen again at St. John's Loch (Caith) on 25 July and 1 August, then at Montrose Basin (A&D) on 9 September, and again at Loch of Strathbeg RSPB Reserve (NES) on 26–29 September. **Lesser Yellowlegs:** one was at Bay of Carness (Ork) on

31 July. **Marsh Sandpiper:** one was at Pool of Virkie/Hillwell, South Mainland (Shet) on 7 July - the first on the islands since May 1969. **Red-necked Phalarope:** away from breeding areas, one was seen at Caerlaverock (D&G) on 28 August. **Grey Phalarope:** early singles were seen off Labost, Lewis (OH) on 4 September, at Traigh Sgurabhal, Barra (OH) on 5 September, with 27 noted from the Outer Hebrides during the month including a peak count of 10 at Stinky Bay, Benbecula. Elsewhere one was at Virkie, South Mainland (Shet) on 14 September, one off Turnberry Point (Ayr) on 17th, one off Musselburgh (Loth) on 25th, and one on Orkney.

**Sabine's Gull:** at least two adults and two immatures were seen in Skye waters (High) during July and August, and singles were seen off Rubha Ardvule, South Uist (OH) on 4th and 14 September. Three passed St. Abbs Head (Bord) on 26 September, with others noted off Barns Ness, Dunbar, Ferny Ness and Cockenzie, and at least three logged past Hound Point/South Queensferry on 25–27th, while up to five different birds were noted in Fife at this time. **Bonaparte's Gull:** an adult was present on the Add Estuary (Arg) on 1–12 August, and a first-winter was at Burrarfirth, Unst (Shet) on 30 September. **Mediterranean Gull:** most reports came from the Firth of Forth, with up to six birds at Buckhaven (Fife) in July and up to seven in August, and up to six at Seton Sands (Loth) in September, with singles at five other sites. Elsewhere one was at Arbroath (A&D) on 13 July, one at Loch Ryan (D&G) on 17th, and at Inner Solway (D&G) on 24th. A second-year bird flew north at Stinky Bay, Benbecula (OH) on 8th September, one was on Tiree (Arg) on 5–10th, one at Barassie Beach (Ayr) on 10th, and one again at Loch Ryan in September. **Ring-billed Gull:** an adult was present intermittently at Kinneil Lagoon (UF) from 16 August. **Yellow-legged**

**Gull:** an adult was at Cumnock (Ayr) on 11 July, and a fourth-summer was noted at Loch Ryan (D&G) on 17 July to 8 September. **Glaucous Gull:** individual sightings occurred throughout the period from Shetland to Dumfries & Galloway, with most from the Outer Hebrides. **Iceland Gull:** individuals were noted at several west coast sites throughout the period. **Gull-billed Tern:** one was reported briefly at Frobost, South Uist (OH) on 25 July - continuing the run of recent records on the islands. **Black Tern:** a number of singles from July to mid-September included birds at Tugnet (M&N) on 6–7 July, and Findhorn Bay (M&N) on 30 August and 10 September. A notable movement occurred in the Firth of Forth in late September with up to 10 recorded off Hound Point (Loth).

**Snowy Owl:** one was seen on St Kilda (OH) from 22 July (one still there 10 Sept), with another reported at Northbay, Barra (OH) on 26 July. **Nightjar:** one was on North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 28 July. **Alpine Swift:** one was present near Edinburgh Zoo, Corstorphine (Loth) on 17–18 August. **Roller:** one was found at New Pitsligo, Aberdeenshire (NES) on 13–15 Jul and then relocated at Finstown, Mainland Orkney on 26–30 July. This bird seems almost certain to have been the individual first seen in Yorkshire in May and June. **Hoopoe:** reports included one at North Tolsta, Isle of Lewis (OH) on 14 July, and one at Tresta, West

Mainland (Shet) on 24 August. **Wryneck:** at least seven were seen on Shetland in August, but only one, on Foula on 22nd, reported in September; maxima were two on Fair Isle on 15 August and two on North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 29 August; one was trapped on the Isle of May on 14 August; and singles at Barns Ness (Loth) and Balgowan (P&K) on 26 September. **Golden Oriole:** one was at Sandness, West Mainland (Shet) on 18–20 August, one on North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 20 August, with another at Ollaberry, North Mainland (Shet) on 10 September.

**Red-eyed Vireo:** one at Valyie, Norwick, Unst on 12–15 September is the first Shetland record. **Isabelline Shrike:** one was near Toab, South Mainland (Shet) on 27–30 September. **Red-backed Shrike:** singles were on Fair Isle on 16th, 24th and 26 August, two on South Ronaldsay (Ork) on 17 August, one on the Isle of May on 17–20 August, at least seven on Shetland in August, but with just two reported there in September, and one on Fair Isle on 22–29 September. **Lesser Grey Shrike:** a male was at Aithbank, Fetlar (Shet) on 14 September.

**Greenish Warbler:** one was on Out Skerries (Shet) on 18 August, and one at Norwick, Unst (Shet) on 23–24 September; one was on North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 14–15 August. **Arctic Warbler:** singles were on Fair Isle on 19th, 21st and



Plate 342. Arctic Warbler, Fair Isle, September 2012. © Ian Andrews

29 August to 4 September, one was at Halligarth, Unst (Shet) on 1–2 September, then singles were on Fair Isle on 21–23 September and 27–30th. **Yellow-browed Warbler:** a strong passage from 22 September included remarkable day counts of 24 individuals on Foula (Shet) on 22nd and 28 on Fair Isle on 24th. Away from the Northern Isles birds were also recorded in Aberdeenshire, Fife, Lothian, Borders, and on South Uist and Barra (both OH). **Western Bonelli's Warbler:** one was on North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 1–2 July, with it or another there on 24th and 30 July. **Lanceolated Warbler:** one was on Out Skerries (Shet) on 21 September, singles on Fair Isle on 23rd and 25th, one at Skaw, Unst (Shet) also on 25 September, and one near Huxter, West Mainland (Shet) on 27 September. One was on North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 26 September. **Booted Warbler:** one was at Sumburgh Hotel Gardens, South Mainland (Shet) on 18–20 August, one on Fair Isle on 22 September, one at Clibberswick, Unst (Shet) on 27 September, and one at at Gunnista, Bressay on 29th. One was on North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 16 August. **Sykes's Warbler:** one was on Foula (Shet) on 23–29 September. **Icterine Warbler:** one was still present at Sumburgh Hotel Gardens (Shet) on 1 July; an unusual record involved a singing male at Cockmuir Bridge (Loth) on 4–8 July, singles were on Fair Isle on 13th and 24–26 August, and at least eight were on Shetland in August, though none in September. Elsewhere singles were seen on South Ronaldsay and North Ronaldsay on 16–17th (both Ork), and at Mains of Slains (NES) on 15–16 August.

**Paddyfield Warbler:** one remained on Fair Isle from 29 June to 11 July, with another there on 24–30 September; one was trapped at Kirkton of Logie Buchan



Plate 343. Paddyfield Warbler, Fair Isle, September 2012. © Ian Andrews

(NES) on 8 September. **Blyth's Reed Warbler:** on Shetland one was at Hillsgarth, Unst on 21 September, with it or another at Baltasound, Unst on 23rd, one at Skaw, Whalsay on 24 September, one on Foula also on 24th, with two there on 25th, and one to 30th, one at Halligarth, Unst on 26–30th, and one at Collafirth, North Mainland on 29–30th. On Fair Isle one was present on 22–30 September, with two on 29th when a second bird flew into the observatory lounge. One was on Sanday (Ork) on 21 September; one in a garden at Bornish, South Uist (OH) on 27–29 September, and one at Barns Ness (Loth) on 28 September. **Marsh Warbler:** two were present on Fair Isle on 1–2 July, with one there on 12 September, and singles on Foula (Shet) on 5 July and 22 September. Others were seen on North Ronaldsay and Sanday (both Ork). **Great Reed Warbler:** one was at Norwick, Unst (Shet) on 22 September. **River Warbler:** one remained on Fair Isle from 11 June to 15 July, with another found there on 11 September. One was at Burwick, South Ronaldsay (Ork) on 24 September. **Barred Warbler:** at least 10 were seen in Shetland in August, and up to 40 in September; at least 10 were on Fair

Isle in August, with about 12 there in September; up to four on North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 14th and 29 August, four on the Isle of May in August, and others in August and September right down the east Mainland coast, plus one on Barra (OH) on 27–30 September. **Subalpine Warbler:** a male was on Foula (Shet) on 2 July.

**Nuthatch:** records outside the normal 'core' area included one at Pitlochry (P&K) on 30 July, two regularly at feeders in Aberfoyle (UF) during August, and one at Camperdown Park (A&D) on 7–20 September. **Rose-coloured Starling:** an adult was at Marvig, Lewis (OH) on 6 August, an adult was at Hillswick, North Mainland (Shet) the same day, presumably the same bird was at Urafirth (Shet) on 11 August, with a second adult at Gulberwick, South Mainland (Shet) the same day. One was at Wick (Caith) on 10 August, and a juvenile was at Cunningsburgh, South Mainland (Shet) on 22 September. **White's Thrush:** one at Hope golf course, South Ronaldsay (Ork) on 27 September was the third record for the islands. **Swainson's Thrush:** one was on Foula (Shet) on 23 September. **Thrush Nightingale:** one was trapped on Fair Isle on 24 August, and lingered to 26th.

**Bluethroat:** one was at Montrose Basin (A&D) on 23 August; two were on Fair Isle on 22 September, with one lingering to 30th, one was on Sanday (Ork) also on 22nd, one was at Quendale, South Mainland (Shet) on 24th, with one at Balcomie (Fife) on 27 September.

**Red-flanked Bluetail:** one was at Skaw, Whalsay (Shet) on 27 September.

**Red-breasted Flycatcher:** up to nine were present on Shetland in September, plus one on Fair Isle on 22 September. Elsewhere birds were found at Holm (Ork) on 26th, Loch of Strathbeg on 25–26 September and Newtonhill (both NES), Balcomie on 22nd and Kilminning on 26th (both Fife), and on Barra (OH) on 27th. **Siberian Stonechat:** a first-winter male was at Hoswick, South Mainland (Shet) on 27–30 September, and one at Wester Quarff (Shet) on 28th.

**Citrine Wagtail:** on Shetland one was at Haroldswick, Unst on 17 August, one at Ham, Foula on 31 August to 3 September, and one at Muckle Roe, Central Mainland (Shet) on 23 September. On Fair Isle two were seen on 14–15 August, with one still present on 16th, another was found there on 25 August, and one on 21 September. Singles were found at

The Hope (Ork) on 8 September and North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 23–24 September. One was at Barns Ness (Loth) on 21–22 September, and one at Loch á Phuill, Tiree (Arg) on 27–29 September. **Richard's Pipit:** on Shetland one was on Foula on 25–30 September, with two on 28th, and one was at Quendale, South Mainland on 29th. One was on Fair Isle on 25 September, two on 26–27th, one still on 28th and then two on 30th. One was at Smerdate, South Uist (OH) on 24 September. **Blyth's Pipit:** one flew over on Foula (Shet) on 24 September. **Olive-backed Pipit:** on Shetland singles were on Foula on 24th, 26th and 29 September, with one on Yell also on 26th, three individuals on South Mainland on 27th, one at Voe, Central Mainland on 28th, and one near Toab, South Mainland on 29th. On Fair Isle one was present from 24–29 September, with two there on 27–28th. **Buff-bellied Pipit:** one was at Ardvule, South Uist (OH) on 19 September; one was at Smerdate, South Uist on 21–30 September, with two present on 25th; one was at Ruaig, Tiree (Arg) on 27 September; one was on Fair Isle on 29th, and one was at Rerwick Beach, South Mainland (Shet) on 30 September, with it or

another nearby at Scousburgh Beach the same day. **Pechora Pipit:** one was on Out Skerries (Shet) on 21 September, and one at Norwick, Unst (Shet) on 30th.

**Hornemann's Arctic Redpoll:** one was at Norwick, Unst (Shet) on 28–30 September. **Coues's Arctic Redpoll:** one was trapped and ringed on Fair Isle on 14 July.

**Common Rosefinch:** at least six were seen on Shetland in August, and up to 20 were noted there in September. Four were on Fair Isle in August, with at least 10 there in September. Orkney had smaller numbers, peaking at three on Copinsay on 22 September. Elsewhere one was on Tiree (Arg) on 5 September, with two juveniles there on 7–8th, one at Auchmithie (A&D) on 21st, and one on the Isle of May on 21–22 September.

**Lapland Bunting:** earliest reports were of one North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 31 August, at Aird an Runair, North Uist (OH) on 2 September, one at Butt of Lewis, Lewis (OH) on 3rd, one at Scatness, South Mainland (Shet) on 4th, and two on Fair Isle on 5th. Moderate numbers were reported from then on.

**Ortolan Bunting:** one was on North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 20–24 August. **Little Bunting:** on Shetland one was at Quendale, South Mainland on 26 September, with another at Sumburgh on 26–30th, one at Burrafirth, Unst on 26th, and singles at Kergord, Central Mainland on 27th and Clibberswick, Unst on 27–29th. On Fair Isle one was found on 24 September, with three noted on 25th, four on 26–27th, three on 28th and one still on 29–30th. Two were on North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 27 September and one at Collieston (NES) on 26th. **Black-headed Bunting:** a male was on North Ronaldsay (Ork) on 5–14 August. **Magnolia Warbler:** a first-winter bird found at Lerness, Fair Isle on 23 September constitutes the first Scottish record (second British).



Plate 344. Buff-bellied Pipit, Rerwick, Shetland, September 2012. © Hugh Harrop

# Scottish Birds

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## 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.



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# PhotoSP©T

**Plate 345.** On 11 July 2012, whilst on a short break in Argyll, I visited the busy port of Oban. I was intent on capturing primarily landscape and transport shots. Thankfully, intermittent drizzle turned to fine sunny conditions - ideal for photography. Whilst walking north along Corran Esplanade from the North Pier, my attention was drawn to the numerous Black Guillemots perched on the edge of the sea wall, on slipways, pipes and one was even content underneath a bench. During the time I walked along the Esplanade taking some shots, a couple of tourists were taking photographs on their mobile 'phones and pocket cameras - the red legs and apparent tameness of the birds proving irresistible!

This particular image was captured whilst leaning over the railings at the edge of the sea wall looking down at the birds. A number of individuals were tucked into what appeared to be drainage gaps in the masonry and concrete. In this instance, these two Tysties were in the region of three metres from the camera; they appeared totally unfazed by my presence looming over them. Additional shots were taken from the shoreline and slipway looking across at the birds in the sea wall. However, I was particularly pleased with the results from the 'aerial' viewpoint.

**Equipment used:** Panasonic Lumix DMC-G3 camera with 45-200mm lens, ISO 160, Focal length 147mm, F/5.6.

*James T.M. Towill*

*Featuring the best images posted on the SOC website each quarter, PhotoSpot will present stunning portraits as well as record shots of something unique, accompanied by the story behind the photograph and the equipment used. Send in your photos now - it's open to all.*