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North Ayrshire RSPB Local Group Newsletter

Edition 114

Autumn 2010



Albatrosses and seals fighting for food, by Wendy Tedd

Birding Down Under

Wendy Tedd

John and I visited Tasmania and New Zealand in March and April. The main purpose of the trip was to see as much scenery and wildlife as possible. There were some memorable moments.

The first memorable sight in Tasmania was when we went to Bruny Island off the south east coast. The area where we stayed was well populated with wallabies. The unusual feature was that as well as the common Bennett's wallabies this included a healthy population of white wallabies. They are found in a small area, but we easily saw them as we walked around, and they seem happy to mingle with the Bennett's wallabies. They are a proper species, they are not albinos.

We visited the Tasman Peninsula on the east coast. We were told that the boat trips were excellent, and indeed the boat ride we took was the highlight of our trip. The men running the trip were

very knowledgeable, and were happy to divert to see anything of interest. The first diversion was to see a group of fur seals which were resting in the sea. From a distance it just looked like a raft of floating wood, but as we got closer we could see that the "wood" was their flippers sticking into the air, the rest of their bodies were submerged.

The second diversion was the most spectacular event of our whole trip. We saw a feeding frenzy. All we could see at first was a lot of activity as a group of seals swam round in circles. They had found a shoal of fish and were driving them to the surface. Once they got the fish to the surface, everything joined in to get the easy pickings. There were silver gulls, black faced cormorants, and no less than three species of albatross – yellow nosed, shy and Buller's. It was a sight we won't forget.

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www.narspb.org.uk

Editorial

Laura Montgomerie

Welcome to the Autumn 2010 edition of the North Ayrshire RSPB Local Group newsletter. Hope you have all had a fun and relaxing summer (weather not included!), and are looking forward to the beginning of a new season.

This newsletter is packed full of great articles this time, going from our doorsteps here in Ayrshire all the way round the globe to the wonders of Tasmania and New Zealand. There are also a few other bits and pieces that will have to be saved until the next newsletter.

Thinking to the future I'm getting quite excited about the prospect of the newsletter redesign. Work has already started and will continue over the next few months to fine tune the design. I would like to hear from those who receive the newsletter - what do you like, what is getting boring, what would you like to see? This way I can feature as much of the things you really want to hear about.

Email me at laura@narspb.org.uk or phone 0141 551 0460.

The RSPB

UK Headquarters

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
The Lodge,
Sandy,
Bedfordshire
SG19 2DL
Tel: 01767 680551

Scotland Headquarters

RSPB Scotland
Dunedin House
25 Ravelston Terrace
Edinburgh,
EH4 3TP
Tel: 0131 311 6500

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds is a registered charity: England and Wales No. 207076, Scotland No. SC037654.

The RSPB speaks out for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment. Nature is amazing - help us keep it that way.

The RSPB is part of Birdlife International, the global partnership of bird conservation organisations.

Forthcoming Events

Black = Indoor meetings held at Argyle Community Centre, Donaldson Avenue, Saltcoats. 7pm for 7.30pm start.

Blue = Field trips. For more details about outdoor trips contact Marco McGinty nearer the time, on 01475 674695

Green = For more information about these events contact Lochwinnoch RSPB Reserve on 01505 842 663. For some events there will be a small fee.

Fri 10 September

Duncan Watt: Sky Dancer

Sun 12 September

Fairlie and Hunterston. Meet at Fairlie car park at 10am

Sat 11 - Sun 19 September

Second-hand Natural History Book and Optics Sale

Sat 18 - Sun 19 September

Amazing Autumn

Sat 25 - Sun 26 September

Optics Weekend

Sun 26 September

Loch Ryan, Dumfries and Galloway

Fri 8 October

Edmund Fellowes: Birds of the North

Mon 11 October

Wildlife Fun Day

Fri 15 October

Lochwinnoch Holiday Club

Thurs 21 October

Coffee Morning (11am-1pm) and Annual Quiz Night (7.30pm+)

Sun 24 October

Wigtown Bay and possibly red deer rut, Dumfries and Galloway

Fri 29 October

Fright Night

Sun 31 October

Feed the Birds Day

Fri 12 November

Ian Thomson: RSPB Investigations and Wildlife Crime

Sat 20 November

Tynninghame, East Lothian

Sat 20 November

RSPB Art Workshop

Tues 23 November

RSPB Wildlife Film Show

Thurs 25 November

Coffee Morning (11am-1pm)

Sat 27 - Sun 28 November

Optics Weekend

Fri 10 December

Geoff Shepherd: The Lives of Barn Owls

Sat 11 December

Irvine and Troon, Ayrshire

Sat 11 December

Festive Fun!

Wed 15 December

Twilight Talk: Wildlife of Tanzania, by Zul Bhatia

Sun 19 December

Wildlife Wander: Wonderful Winter

Thurs 23 December

Coffee Morning (11am-1pm)

Sun 2 January 2011

Saltcoats Harbour, Ayrshire

Fri 14 January

John and Wendy Tedd:
The Florida Birding Trail

Sun 16 January

Castle Loch and Gretna, Dumfries and Galloway

Fri 11 February

Andy Christie: Hessilhead - 30 Years On

Sat 19 February

Mersehead, Dumfries and Galloway

Fri 11 March

Neil Grubb: Nuthatches

Sun 13 March

To be confirmed

Sat 16 April

Roslin Glen, Midlothian

Fri 29 April

AGM with Brian Morrell:
Red-breasted Geese

Sat 14 May

Glen Fruin and Ross Park, Argyll

Sun 19 June

Mystery Trip

We have had a fair summer in Dalry. The star bird was the leucistic Willow Warbler that Liz and I found on our local patch. More of that elsewhere, but it confirmed for me the importance of watching a local patch of landscape. That was the nice bit.

The proposal by Ayrshire Power to build a coal-fired power station at Hunterston is the bad bit. The RSPB have been in the forefront of opposition to this proposal. I have also been in discussion with RSPB Scottish Director Stuart Housden and with Anne McCall (Southwest RSPB Director) on this matter. We all must do what we can to raise objections. The closing date for objections with the Scottish Office was 20th August, but you can still write to our local councillors, as they have had an extension to consider their stance.

Our continuing presence on board the CalMac Arran Ferry has become legend! Year after year our volunteers ply the Arran

route. RSPB members and other Arranophiles greet us with fond Hellos. We have introduced a few new volunteers this year to this very valuable work and I know that they enjoyed the experience. Stuart McMahon, who initiated this project over a decade ago deserves some accolade from RSPB.

More good news from the Irvine Maritime Museum. In March this year, we collaborated with the Ayrshire branches of the SWT and Scottish Ornithologists' Club to have a public birdwatching event outside and in the "Ship Inn" at Irvine Harbour. We ran an article in this newsletter at the time. The Maritime Museum hosted a little event in May this year. Some interpretative material on birds were given to the museum by the RSPB SW Director Anne McCall. We create these small events, but oh, how these acorns can grow. Thanks to Neil O'Donnell for initiating this one.

A leucistic what...?

Liz Leyden

On the late evening of 27th May 2010, Duncan and I were (unsuccessfully) looking for common sandpipers on the Garnock River near Dalry, when I saw a small white bird fly up from just in front of the car. We got out of the car to see if we could see it again. It flew around the area a couple of times, then wasn't seen again. We both noticed that it had insects in its beak and surmised that it might be feeding young close by. Overnight, not having had great views of the bird, we came to different conclusions. Duncan thought it might be a leucistic robin, but I thought it was probably an escaped very pale canary.

The following day, we returned. Soon after our arrival, the bird showed itself again. It didn't take long for us to discover that it was a leucistic male willow warbler (*phylloscopus trochilus*) which had paired with a 'normal' female and was taking food into a nest about 10m from where we had originally parked the night before! As the nest site was on a river bank right next to a busy bridge, the birds were very unafraid, and the click of two cameras didn't disturb them a bit.

We visited the site almost daily until the chicks (presumably) fledged. We never saw the chicks and only saw our 'white' male a couple more times.

The only other leucistic willow warbler was in Mull, reported by Alan Spellman, who spoke to those members of the group who went over to the island in May. The Mull bird returned to exactly the same place the following year, so we'll be keeping our eyes peeled.



Arran Wildlife Festival

Susan Montgomerie

As usual, we had two teams of volunteers on board the ferry "Caledonian Isles", over the weekend in the middle of Arran Wildlife Week. The weather was good and there were lots of people on board keeping the teams busy. On the Saturday, 33 species were seen and on Sunday, 34 species, including red-breasted merganser, Manx shearwater, black guillemot, sandwich tern, kittiwake, swallow, house martin, chaffinch, grey heron, buzzard and raven on both days. Saturday's team also saw red-throated diver, shelduck and mute swan, while Sunday's spotted mallard, blackbird and greenfinch. Neil had provided us with a new selection of pinbadges that proved very popular, raising £112.90 on Saturday and £50.90 on Sunday, while £32 was taken in book donations.



Bell bird

We did see quite a lot of birds in Tasmania including some of the endemic species, but found it surprising that some of the most common birds were house sparrows and blackbirds – imports from Europe.

We had hoped to see a Tasmanian devil in the wild, but only managed to see them in captivity. Sadly the natural population is declining rapidly. It has been discovered that they are suffering from a deadly disease known as Devil Facial Tumour Disease. It is a form of cancer which has the unusual characteristic of being infectious, and is easily spread when they fight and bite each other. They are now breeding healthy ones in captivity in the hope that these can be released in the wild at some time in the future.

We went out one night to see one particular nocturnal animal – a wombat. They were easy to find, the first one we saw ambled straight across the path in front of us, and we weren't even looking for them at the time. Seeing them was easy, taking a good photo was not. When a wombat senses danger (a busload of tourists), it turns away and tries to hide, ideally in a convenient hole. John has got a lot of photos of the back end of a wombat! We discovered it was easy to find evidence of them in the daytime; they leave their droppings in obvious places. They are the only animal we know that leaves cube-shaped droppings. (And yes, we have got a photo.)

As well as birds and wildlife we saw a lot of wonderful scenery. There are a lot of wonderful trees, Tasmania is heavily forested on the west side. Because of the wet conditions there are a lot of fungi which look very impressive, particularly the bracket fungi.

We went to New Zealand for a short visit to see some of the places we had missed on our previous trip. This time we had a good demonstration that the easiest place to see birds is in a car park. We stopped on the mountain road which crosses from the east to the west of South Island via Arthurs Pass. Sitting by the notice "Do not feed the kea" was a kea, a form of parrot. They don't look very pretty, but when they lift their wings they have beautiful orange feathers. They live in the mountain areas. They are extremely curious, and also have the reputation for being destructive, particularly to cars, and boot laces. Another time we found a weka in a car park, but sadly it had learnt to beg.



Kea

One ambition we had was to see the gannets at the tip of Farewell Spit, which is the most northerly point on the South Island. We managed to get on the last trip for the season, but it was worth it. There were still a lot of gannets left. The most unusual feature of the area is that the gannets do not nest on a cliff, but instead on a spit of sand.

We also took a boat trip up the Charlotte Sound on the north coast of the South Island. It was great. We stopped on Motuara Island. We just sat and watched a very small water hole which was a magnet for birds, including bell birds and the kakariki (yellow-crowned parakeet). One interesting sight was a saddle back with an enormous bill. On the way to the island we saw a lot of Hector's dolphins, which is a small athletic dolphin, then on the return trip we were accompanied by bottle-nosed dolphins.



Hector's Dolphin

Our next bird-watching trip was to Kapiti Island which is off the west coast of North Island. It is a highly recommended place as it has many species which cannot be easily seen on the mainland. It is strictly controlled, you have to apply for a visitor's permit, and there are only a limited number of these issued each day. It was well worth the visit, we spent our time walking slowly round getting good views of birds. We came across the fearless North Island robin. They are very confident little birds who obligingly pose and allow their photos to be taken. We got good views of North Island saddlebacks, stitch birds, and New Zealand pigeons. We also got close up views of more wekas and kakas. A kaka is a forest parrot, which, like the kea, is inquisitive. Like the wekas they are adept at begging. Other people on the island had to give up eating at the picnic table because of the persistent attentions from the kakas.

Finally we visited Miranda on the east side of the North Island, not far from Auckland. We managed to arrive at high tide, which was perfect. At other times the birds are too far away to be easily seen. We were rewarded with large numbers of wrybill, bartailed godwits, pied stilt, Caspian terns and pied oystercatchers. It made a perfect ending to our trip.

Baltic Birding Bonanza!

Neil O'Donnell
Photos by Pardeep Chand

It's official – when I retire I want to move to Lithuania, build a wee house next to Kintai Fish Ponds, and live out the rest of my years watching birds from the comfort of my porch, beer in hand, with Rocket From The Crypt playing softly on the stereo. Here's the reason why...

In June I travelled to Lithuania to spend ten days kicking around the wetlands which form the Nemunas Delta. This is the area where the Neman River reaches the Baltic Sea and consists of river branches, canals, and other large wetlands. It is also the most important flyover for migrating birds in Lithuania. Millions of birds and hundreds of species travel through this area each year, including some internationally endangered species such as aquatic warbler, corncrake and great snipe.



It didn't take long on our first day's birdwatching for someone to shout "stop the car!" The reason being we'd just passed around a dozen stunning white winged black terns feeding over a marsh. These were soon followed by a colony of black terns and a few little terns at one of many canals we were to pass that day. Top ternage!

By this point I was hearing birds everywhere and before long we'd spotted reed, marsh, and great reed warblers, lesser whitethroats and common rosefinches. Not to mention loads of yellow wagtails and whinchats.

The town of Kintu was up next for a walk through a large forest that eventually opened up into a very large reed bed. It was here we encountered a brilliant male citrine wagtail and as we approached the edge of the reed bed four white-tailed eagles burst out no more than 20 metres away!

Next up were the Kintai Fish Ponds, a series of stocked fish ponds and natural pools. What a place... nightingales, penduline tits, white-tailed eagles, black kites, lesser spotted eagles, garganey, whiskered and common terns, tree sparrows, black-tailed godwits in all their summer finery, marsh harriers and last but by no means least around 500 little gulls. As soon as any raptor appeared in the vicinity they would all take to the air, giving out their lovely alarm calls.

Another top place we visited a few times was the King Wilhelm Canal and surrounding forests near a wee town called Priekule. After setting up our stall at a clearing in the forest it wasn't long



Yellow Wagtail

before we were hearing the call of our target species... a series of hard cat-like screeches followed by a lovely fluty whistle. We could hear the birds getting closer and closer but still obscured by the forest canopy. Then quick as a flash, five golden orioles flew across the clearing. Two males and three females, their plumage shining bright in the sunshine – definitely a memorable experience!

Chuck into the mix montagu's harrier, common crane, white stork, black and common redstarts, icterine warbler, pied flycatcher, crested and willow tits, red-backed shrikes, serin, tree sparrow, and hawfinches to name but few, and you can see why this country is bird watching heaven! Can't wait to go back!

Brave Brucie Beeblebum

Laura Montgomerie

For my mum's birthday, Hazel and I bought tickets for the family to see comedian Bill Bailey, who was playing a gig in the Pavillion in Rothesay. Hazel and I jumped on a train from Glasgow down to Wemyss Bay where we met up with mum and dad before getting the CalMac ferry over to Rothesay.

The weather was pretty awful, overcast and almost constant rain. Still, despite the weather we ventured out onto deck to look for birds!! Not much could be seen birdwise, most sane birds were probably still at home. At front of the boat, I noticed a white tailed bumble bee on the ground saturated in water. I believed the poor bee to be dead. After getting mum we decided to move the drowned little bug and to our surprise it moved one of its legs by itself. Using an old receipt we picked him up and went round the back of the boat to shelter. We used a tissue to soak up some of the water that had waterlogged his fuzzy body and took him inside where it was much warmer.

We left the ferry, including the bee who we had decided to name Brucie. Slowly his spiky hair turned fluffy and started to wave his legs about more as he dried off. By the time we had reached Kilchatten Bay to the south of the island he had started to stretch his wings. Hazel and I sat in the car with him (by now in a covered container to stop him crawling or flying away) for a little while longer, until sunlight finally broke through the clouds. His buzzing was quite loud now and once mum had found a suitable patch of wild flowers, sheltered from the wind we let him go. He headed for the nearest flower and settled in nicely.

After all our nurturing and caring I guess it was time to let our little baby venture back into the wild all by himself!



The Mull Diaries

by Laura and
Hazel Montgomerie



Friday

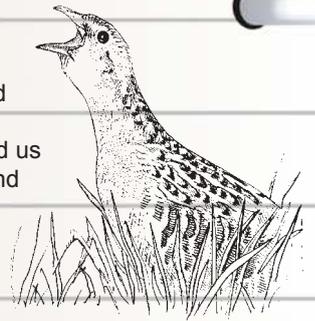
We started off from Saltcoats in good time, picking up the others in the group along the way, ending in Beith. From there we headed towards Glasgow and the Erskine Bridge. Up until now, a lot of the usuals had been spotted including eider, mallard, cormorant, moorhen, oystercatcher, black-headed, herring, lesser and greater black-backed gulls, buzzard, swift, house martin, blackbird, magpie, jackdaw, rook, carrion crow, house sparrow and starling.

the other side of the loch. Once everyone had seen it through the scopes we set off to see if it was possible to get a better view of the magnificent bird. As we manoeuvred the minibus up, down and round the single-track road, an eagle soared through the clear sky next to us, giving most people on the bus good views of the 'barn door'.

Due to the 'single-track-roadiness' we had to keep moving, eventually stopping in a small lay-by in the road. Once again, the scopes were set up on the eagle still sitting in the same tree. The other stars of this stop were the blonde highland cows who wandered the road in and out of their fields with their frolicking calves!

On the last part of the journey to Fionnphort, we stopped at Bunessan where we saw common sandpipers along the water's edge and whitethroats were heard. Whinchats were seen sitting on the walls by the roadside further on.

We just made the ferry in time and headed out across the channel to Iona. On the other side we ventured towards the south, along the small road beside the beach. Sources told us that we would see corncrakes behind the fire station, but no luck. There was a lot of building work going on, with a few new empty houses. It was here along the edge of a field behind one of these houses that we saw a corncrake. Razorbills swam in the water and arctic terns flew about above.



Before we headed back to the hotel for food, we stopped in a lay-by in search for a golden eagle nest. It was quickly pointed out, along with the eagle soaring along the hillside.

That evening we had a guest speaker after dinner, from the local bird club, Alan Spellman. He presented a slideshow that rounded up the birdlife on Mull.

Sunday

Sunday was the day we toured the top half of the island. Our first stop was just outside Craignure, where the group spotted a white-tailed eagle sitting in a distant tree. Various Canada and greylag geese flew through across the landscape. Along the shore were common sandpipers, turnstones and eiders. Both common and arctic terns were also seen at this viewpoint.

Next we stopped at Aros Bridge, near Salen, and jumped

We stopped at Ardgarten for lunch, where swallows weaved around the tables and across the flat grassed area around the visitor centre. After everyone had finished we took a wander

through the wooded valley. Robin, greenfinch, chaffinch, siskin and more swallows were spotted.

We had a quick stop at Inverary where we saw pied wagtail, wood warbler, black guillemot, common sandpipers, grey heron, Canada goose and goosander. Then we were off to Oban to get the ferry, a short wait let most of the group take a quick wander. On the island we drove straight to the Isle of Mull hotel and unpacked.

Once everyone was settled into their rooms (easier for some than others – what with the 20 mile trek to the last rooms!) most took a walk to campsite on the other side of the bay at Craignure. Bats were out in abundance and after a long wait one otter crossed the water and was lost amongst the seaweed as the sky darkened.

Hazel was finally able to join us, getting off the ferry at 11.15pm. The weather was fair and we walked back to the hotel, saving a toad from a flat and sticky ending by ushering it from the middle of the road.

Saturday

Today it was decided we would head out to Iona. On the way, we stopped at Loch Don and Grasspoint, a deliberate attempt to search for the iconic white-tailed eagle. None jumped out immediately but we were able to see red-breasted merganser, bar-tailed godwit and dunlin out on the loch and sedge warblers in the grasses close by. Behind us in the fields a skylark displayed and a stately red deer stood on the horizon.

Eventually, a white-tailed eagle was spotted. It sat in one of the trees across



out to get a quick view over a river and small bay. Dipper was added to the list quickly and stood and watched as a pair of coal tits flitted in and out of a nest on the bridge feeding young.



After that the bus took off towards Loch na Keal. We (Hazel, Alan and Laura) headed a different way – off to the Mull Island

On our way to Tobermory we also stopped at Lochan na Gualine duibhe and saw common sandpiper and a possible diver. We stopped to have lunch at Tobermory, only to find that the famous Tobermory chocolate shop was closed!

Railway. As we reached the point where the railway begins, locals told us about a family of otters that were out in the water, however by the time we scrambled round the rocks and boggy bits, they were nowhere to be seen. It wasn't a complete loss though, whitethroats sang loudly from the gorse and swallows swooped around us.

We headed south out of Tobermory towards the Mishnish lochs. We stopped in a large lay-by close to one of the lochs to have a look around the landscape. A cuckoo was spotted on a telephone wire, surrounded by tree pipits. A curlew was also seen flying overhead.

On the first train of the day, we took the 20 minute journey up to Torosay station. Before getting the train straight back in time for the ferry, we took a brisk walk up the path to look out over the bay. The tide was reasonably far out and there were no birds close enough to see. However looking even closer – to the trees around us – we could see the wild dance of a spotted flycatcher between the branches as it collected food.

The viewpoint above Dervaig was our next destination. The three of us (Laura, Hazel and Alan) walked into the woods to find the Kilmore standing stones while the rest of the group scanned the horizon for other birds like buzzard. A few others eventually joined us in the sheltered woodland. There weren't many birds, however the place was abundant with butterflies and dor beetles.

Then had to move back even further to allow the treecreeper to get back into its nest.

After making our way through Dervaig, Calgary bay was our final stop for the day. Sand martins flew back and forth across the field whilst a wheatear casually found food on the surface. A raven was also spotted flying along the crest of the hill behind the car park. Smaller birds that were spotted included rock pipits, wrens, dunnocks and a redstart. We headed back to the hotel via Glen Aros.

As we watched mesmerised, the whistle of the train blew, letting us know it was leaving without us! Having more time to spend at this end of the station, we

After the meal at the hotel, a few of us walked down to bay, which was out the front of the hotel. Whilst looking for the elusive otter, a woodcock flew past behind us. Our chances of spotting an otter were dwindling with the fading light but eventually, someone pointed out one on a rock on the shoreline.

wandered up the path spotting various song thrushes darting across in front of us. We eventually made it back to the train station and got back to the ferry terminal.

Monday

Monday morning we all packed up and left the hotel for the final time. John felt this was the perfect time for a photo call out in front of the hotel.

On the mainland, we took the south road to Ford. An osprey in the distance caught everyone's attention straightaway. This was even to an extent that a sparrowhawk was seen while everyone else watched the osprey! We were told about an osprey nest site, but we couldn't find it through a lot of winding roads!

We stopped at Cruachan Hydroelectric Visitor Centre, only to find that it was closed. However, that did not stop us climbing over fence to reach our destination! We were rewarded with views of a red-throated diver and an osprey in the distance (which was being mobbed by gulls). Even better was a black-throated diver that flew very close to where we were bird-watching. Long tailed tits were also spotted in trees.

Our final spot before we headed home was Inverary, where we had fish and chips. The wind was beginning to pick up so we ate quickly to avoid any spillage. We made it back home late that evening.

Photos by John and Hazel Montgomerie

Illustration by Mike Langman



Hawfinches at Scone

Susan Montgomerie

6 February: Starting off a very cold day with house sparrows, starlings, wood pigeon, magpie and carrion crow in Saltcoats, we spotted mallard, tufted duck and a kestrel near Ardrossan. Jackdaws perched on the chimney tops in Dalry getting heat from the fires inside the houses, and the first of many buzzards was seen just before Beith.

Over the course of the day, we saw many buzzards near the roadside, seeming to find it hard in the prolonged winter weather. A heron was spotted near Stepps and pink-footed geese were seen in the fields near Blackford. A sparrowhawk zipped past the minibus near Perth, while collared doves were seen in the town. A rest stop in Dobbie's Garden Centre prepared us for the next step.

Once in the grounds of Scone Palace, it didn't take us long to find a group of eight hawfinches. Over the next quarter of an hour, this gradually grew to a group of around 24. A pheasant walked along the fence line showing off his fine plumage. As we strolled through the woodland paths, we picked up several more species including song and mistle thrush, goldcrest, long-tailed tit, treecreeper, great spotted woodpecker and a raucous jay. We were delighted to see even more hawfinches eventually seeing a group of up to 40. We also saw two roe deer.

Paying Vane Farm the second visit in three weeks, we found more open water had brought in more birds, including pintail, great-crested and slavian grebe, Canada geese, pochard, goldeneye, goosander, red-breasted merganser, and 2 male smew. Waders were in short supply as the ground was still deep-frozen, but we managed to see lapwing and curlew. Small birds round the feeders included dunnock, coal tit, greenfinch, goldfinch and siskin, bringing the final total to 55 species.

Guillemots Galore

Stuart McMahon

Whilst visiting Greenock to view Cunard's Queen Victoria cruise liner in July, there was a small group of Black Guillemots just off the Esplanade. These lovely birds nest in and around the seawalls of the many docks and seawalls around the Clyde. This adult and young bird were quite oblivious to the people watching them some 12 feet above! The youngster was food calling and they were spinning round in wonderful circles.



From Kites to Ken Dee

Isabel Passway

March: A dull sky over Saltcoats as the minibus finished the pick-ups and headed south. Those whose eyes were open spotted the usual mix of bird life on the way to New Galloway. Our first goose of the day was spotted at St John's Town of Dalry, along with a song thrush.

Arriving at the car park in New Galloway, some sampling breakfast at the scrumptious tea room, the scope was set up to view the nuthatch which had been heard calling. Something strange was marching about in the field across the road. Not an army, but a pair of guinea fowl. I found these birds very odd to look at but I was told they are now bred in estates for the kitchens of hotels.

Back to the scope, where the nuthatches were performing beautifully. We were fortunate to see and hear more of them throughout the day. Reluctantly we left New Galloway and headed south. All Loch Ken had to offer was a black headed gull.

Woodhalloch was better. Great crested grebe, mute swan, goldeneye and also meadow pipit, lapwing and linnet. A distant red kite had been spotted at New Galloway but as we climbed higher up the road shouts were coming from all parts of the bus, "Red Kite, Red Kite."

We parked by the road side and were treated to the glorious spectacle of several red kites soaring lazily above the hills. Their gently drifting style is so distinctive and beautiful to watch. It would have been tempting to spend all day at this spot. However the Ken Dee marshes were next on the programme.

Arriving at Ken Dee we were able to drive down to a parking place between the two hides. Both hides are by the waters edge and the feeders are very well placed for close viewing. My own highlights were seeing a willow tit, with a coal tit readily to hand for comparison, and a really clear sighting of a bullfinch.

Around us were curlews, goosanders, teal, wigeon, shoveler, grey heron, Canada and pink footed geese. In the surrounding woods and fields we saw and heard chiffchaff, fieldfare, dunnock, wren, skylark and pheasant. Even a distant rook. To complete this scene a great spotted woodpecker perched on the large nut feeder just in front of the hide. At the feeder right next to us red squirrels were constantly eating or doing acrobatics.

As we drove back up the track from the hide we stopped to walk over to the geese viewing platform. From there I saw my first white fronted goose. I had imagined a full fronted white goose but the white is only on the front of his head. What a lot you learn on trips with NA RSPB group!

On to Castle Douglas where the first sighting was of a fish and chip shop. The taste is so much better sitting outside on a park bench. Carlingwark Loch provided little grebe, tufted duck, coot, mistle thrush and treecreeper.

I'm told we saw 63 species, plus guinea fowl, roe deer, red squirrel and hare. A great day.

Have you checked your hedges?

RSPB Media Release

Unable to ignore the straggly foliage or unruly tree branches seemingly taking over your garden at the moment? You are among the millions of gardeners who will be thinking about trimming them ready for winter in the next few weeks.

But the RSPB is appealing to people to wait a while until cutting their hedges if possible. If you cut them this early you could be starving birds and mammals of a vital fruit supply, as many plants will still have an abundance of berries which could see the birds through the winter.

Last year's winter larder of berries on shrubs and hedges meant the difference between life and death for many resident birds and winter visitors. You could also disturb late nesting birds as you hack away at greenery as they may still be resident in shrubs and hedges.

Peak breeding season has ended but garden birds like pigeons and collared doves have extended breeding periods and may still be nesting. Most garden birds breed between March and August but some species will be on their nests until late into September. All bird's nests and eggs are protected by law and it is illegal to deliberately destroy nests in your garden and the wider countryside.

The RSPB is also urging local authorities to hold back on cutting hedges for a few weeks yet where possible. Many have to cut hedges for path access or horticultural reasons for example, but where there is flexibility, the wildlife charity suggests waiting until the end of summer. If maintenance is unavoidable at this time, the RSPB asks that gardeners, local authorities and contractors consider nesting birds and do preliminary inspections.

The RSPB's Val Osborne, says: "Many calls to the RSPB's Wildlife Enquiries line at the moment are from people that have started hedge trimming and discovered a nest.

"It is very disturbing for gardeners to think they have upset their garden birds and they worry that they may fly the nest and the young won't survive.

"Save yourself a job and avoid it for a few weeks yet, ideally until late September at the earliest. But if you do need to do it sooner for safety reasons perhaps, try and replace any greenery as much as possible so as not to deter the birds."

For more information on gardening for wildlife, [visit www.rspb.org.uk/hfw](http://www.rspb.org.uk/hfw)

The RSPB's Newest Scottish Reserve

RSPB Media Release

The Crook of Baldoon is a strip of unspoilt land on the westerly coast of Wigtown Bay, Dumfries and Galloway, that teems with wildlife throughout the year.

In spring, you'll find waves of curlews, golden plovers and dunlins mixing with whimbrels and black-tailed godwits to feast on the mudflats and saltmarsh that crawl with worms, molluscs and crustaceans, while in winter, thousands of geese, ducks and whooper swans (nearly 200 at the last count) stop off to refuel after long journeys from Iceland, Scandinavia, Northern Russia and Greenland.

Ospreys and peregrines also regularly patrol over Baldoon, while otters play in the bay, and Atlantic salmon, sea trout and lamprey migrate to the estuary as they have done for thousands of years. This really is a vital haven for wildlife.

What do we hope to achieve?

We will be conserving and enhancing the rich landscapes and habitats that already exist, helping provide a rich food source for exhausted migrating birds, and boosting breeding opportunities for waders.

Across the UK, estuary development has greatly reduced the number of places where wading birds can breed, so any chance we have to reverse this trend is precious. Two small nature reserves that neighbour our purchase have already been successful in attracting breeding waders and ducks back to the area - we will be looking to reproduce and complement this achievement on a much bigger scale.

We'll also be working closely with the local community to improve access to the site, and hope that by bringing more visitors to the area, our reserve will benefit the local economy.

Photo by Alan Cairns.



Lochwinnoch Update

Paula Baker

Hello all! I'm writing this at the end of the summer holidays and can't believe we are at that stage already! It's been a great summer for us here, with both interesting sightings and great events.

Wildlife wise, we have enjoyed some good sightings. Starting back in April, we had a greenshank on the 6th and then our first migrant sightings of swallow on the 7th, sand martin on the 9th, house martin on the 25th (along with 30 sedge warblers) and swift on the 26th. In May we were getting regular visits from an osprey, on the 8th it was seen four times fishing over the Aird Meadow loch and then intermittently for several days before and after that and into June as well. Other May highlights include a merlin on the 1st, a jay on the 3rd, the first cuckoo on the 4th along with nine grasshopper warblers and 84 sedge warblers around the Barr Loch. On the 17th of May a little ringed plover was seen in the nearby pond. We also had daily sightings of the great spotted woodpecker family with up to five individuals being seen at any one time!

Into June we had up to seven great crested grebes on the Barr Loch, more sightings of the osprey, water rail calling regularly and the first spotted flycatchers on the 5th June. In July, our main attraction was sandwich terns, with seven seen on the 21st, one on the 23rd and then twelve on the 3rd August (our largest number on the reserve to date!), and a lesser whitethroat very briefly seen at the feeding station on the 9th. We had up to ten great crested grebes on the Barr Loch, two little grebes, one shelduck, one gadwall, one scaup, almost daily visits from a sparrowhawk to the feeding station and two barn owls flying over the Aird Meadow at midnight (on my way home from the pub!) Phew! Other wildlife highlights have included a mole and a shrew feeding in broad daylight just outside the office, a four-spotted chaser dragonfly, lots of moths including the ever popular garden tiger and elephant hawkmoths and meadow brown, small heath and ringlet butterflies.

Our summer events have also proved to be very popular, with all of the school

holiday clubs and mini-beast Mondays being very well attended. We also held a very successful Summer Solstice Guided walk, mostly promoted through Facebook, on which thirty people turned up when we only expected five! We had a gorgeous evening for it and went out to see the greater butterfly orchids on the Aird Meadow – of which we had over 50 this year, the best year for a long time! Other flower highlights included green heleborine growing along the Aird Meadow trail, we counted over 20 plants one evening, and I was taken for a very nice walk by local botanist Elizabeth Connacher who introduced me to over 30 plants in 30 minutes! Amazing!

We have lots of exciting events coming up, including our second hand natural history book sale (please send us your donations now or we can sell books on your behalf), Amazing Autumn, Wildlife Quiz Night and of course the ever popular Fright Night.

We hope to see you at the reserve soon!

Bugs and beasties swarm to Mersehead

RSPB Media Release

RSPB Mersehead may be famous for its birds, but it's the bugs that have been causing excitement at the nature reserve in the last few months with two unusual discoveries.

A water ladybird rarely seen before in Scotland was found last autumn in the reserve's wildlife garden. Now a group of equally unusual wool-carder bees have been uncovered in the same location.

The reserve's garden, which is specifically managed to encourage a diverse range of insects, will be the site of family fun days running every Friday at Mersehead throughout August, allowing visitors to come along and see if they can spot the unusual bugs for themselves.

Dave Fairlamb, RSPB Scotland reserve manager at Mersehead, said: "We were all really surprised when we found the ladybird, as it was something none of us had ever seen before. With just a few of them here, it's impossible to say whether environmental factors or climate change are responsible for their appearance, or

whether it's just a rare event. Now we know there are wool-carder bees as well, it's just fantastic! Wildlife at the reserve has certainly increased dramatically since we started our habitat creation programme, and the new species are very welcome indeed."

The water ladybird is a very small, orangey beetle marked with 19 black spots, and, as its name suggests, a love of damp habitats. It can change colour at different times of the year, sporting dull brown camouflage in the winter, and turning orangey red in the summer.

Mark Pollitt from the Dumfries and Galloway Environmental Resources Centre, who helped to identify the ladybird, said: "We've uncovered some really old records from the 1800s of these in the east of Scotland, but we've found no published records of the ladybird from recent times, so it's certainly an exciting find. Insects are often under-recorded across Scotland, and I'd really encourage anyone who finds something unusual like this, even if they don't know what it is, to

report it to their local records centre or to Buglife (info@buglife.org.uk)."

Wool-carder bees are another rarity for Scotland. They're a type of solitary bee that displays particularly aggressive territorial behaviour towards other bees and insects. As they seek to attract a mate, the males will defend feeding areas ferociously, occasionally wrestling other insects to the ground and even killing them.

Once attracted into the male's area, the females will start to build a nest from plant hairs, which they comb from leaves and stems rather like carding wool, hence the name.

To find out more about Mersehead's wonderful bugs, or the family fun days, contact 01387780579 or email mersehead@rspb.org.uk. You can also keep up to date with the reserve's blog and other news at www.rspb.org.uk/mersehead