



Leighton Moss Public Hide View, by Laura Montgomerie

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Cross-eyed or Hybrid?

Out on trips we occasionally find the odd duck or goose that just doesn't seem right. Here are a couple of hybrids from our trips over the last year or so.



Greylag/Canada Goose?



Mallard/Pintail?

Lancashire Trip

By Susan Montgomerie

We set off on the Monday morning making our own way down to meet the rest of the Group at the Mill at Conder Green, about ten miles south of Lancaster. A kestrel hovered over a field near Dalry - good start!

Picking up the girls in Glasgow, we stopped off at Annandale Waters to get the nesting swallows and house martins, along with oystercatchers, sand martins and willow warblers, while buzzards soared high above. There was also the usual gaggle of white farmyard geese hissing angrily to protect their beautiful, fluffy goslings. We decided to visit an RSPB reserve we'd always meant to go to - Campfield Marsh. Not maybe the best time of year as its specialities are wintering wildfowl and waders, but we thought we'd give it a go - down to Carlisle and turn right. Driving along the field boundaries towards Bowness-on-Solway, we saw stock doves and pied wagtails. As we approached the reserve along the coast road, we stopped at some of the lay-bys overlooking the Solway Firth, looking towards Annan and Caerlaverock. We found plenty of

herons and cormorants with a chiffchaff in every other windswept tree, while the coastal flowers attracted small tortoiseshell, peacock and orange tip butterflies. Arriving at the reserve centre, we added whitethroat, meadow pipit and sedge warbler as we walked along between the hedgerows. In the tussocky fields either side we spotted several pairs of lapwing and curlew staking out their territories. Entering the hide, we could hear a cuckoo in the distant trees being challenged by another one in the trees to the left of the marsh pool. Neither one seemed prepared to give in! One pink-footed goose sat on the bank with some redshanks watching the greylag geese sailing round the pond chasing the moorhens. Above the hide we could hear a skylark and we watched as it fluttered down into thick grass. We then

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Editorial

By *Laura Montgomerie*

Hello all and welcome to the spring 2015 edition of the Tern. Again I've let myself down and missed out on the winter edition, but I'm back now and hope you enjoy this latest edition. Catch up on all the latest field trips and local news and hope you can join us for the AGM later this month.

On a separate note and a courtesy for field trippers and car sharing duties. Please confirm with your driver if you have any special requirements - home early etc, so that everyone can enjoy trips to their fullest.

In other news, there is a bit of excitement within the ranks of the committee as some of us sneak away into secret meetings and discuss dastardly plans. As Duncan also mentions in his Chairman's Message we are in the midst of arranging our group's 40th birthday plans, and hope you can all get involved (nothing too strenuous before you all throw your arms up in despair!). More news will filter through soon enough with everything being revealed in time for the beginning of the new season.

My Top 5 Sightings of 2014

When pulling this list together I realised I hadn't actually been anywhere spectacular this year so don't have a list of lifers or unusual migrants. It's more just about sightings that gave me that little bit of wonder that birding sometimes does.

- 1 - Red Kites at Argaty
As many know, Argaty has made a name for itself with its daily feeds that attract the agile and beautiful red kites, and to see them again diving and swooping for their dinner amongst the other raptors and corvids is still a special sight.
- 2 - Pink-feet at Aberlady - field trip
It may have taken a while for them to show up but once they started appearing over the hills in the distance and the sound of them calling overhead grew closer, you couldn't help but be impressed by the sheer number of them.
- 3 - Moorhen in tree at Aberlady - field trip
This was an odd one, that gave us a good laugh. It may have been happily munching away on the berries from the branches, but eight feet off the ground! I had certainly never seen anything like that before.
- 4 - Little Egret at Eden Estuary
Although the little egret seems to be getting a bit more common these days (see Fairlie trip - p7), the group of three I saw while visiting the Eden Estuary in Fife was the most impressive - they were wonderfully close and completely unaware of our presence.
- 5 - Grey Partridge at Eden Estuary
This was just a little later after the little egret and slightly further round the estuary, after a bumpy road to a small car park with fields to either side, a family of grey partridge took refuge in one field and with the lovely weather didn't instantly disappear into the growth.

Keep up to date online

Visit the group website at www.narspb.org.uk

Here you will find archived newsletters and the most up-to-date syllabus.

On Facebook?

Like the new 'North Ayrshire RSPB Local Group' page, where it will be updated with photos from the past, meetings and field trips of the upcoming season

Like 'RSPB Lochwinnoch Nature Reserve' to find out what's been seen recently and 'RSPB Scotland' for the whole of Scotland.

On Flickr?

Join the 'North Ayrshire RSPB Local Group' and share your photos and videos.

The Necessary Bit

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The Lodge,
Sandy,
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SG19 2DL
Tel: 01767 680551

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

The RSPB is the country's largest nature conservation charity, inspiring everyone to give nature a home. Together with our partners, we protect threatened birds and wildlife so our towns, coast and countryside will teem with life once again. We play a leading role in BirdLife International, a worldwide partnership of nature conservation organisations.

Black = Indoor meetings held at Argyle Community Centre, Donaldson Avenue, Saltcoats. 7pm for 7.30pm start. Tea and coffee served at interval.

Blue = Field trips. More details available in group syllabus, including meeting points and times. Further info from Duncan Watt - Tel: 01294 832361 / Mob: 07906 336926.

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

Fri 17 April

AGM and Mark Mitchell - A Passion for Wildlife (please note - syllabus changed - original speaker Ian Thomson has been swapped with Mark Mitchell due to scheduling conflicts)

Sun 19 April

Pollok Country Park

Sat 25 April

Birds for Beginners

Sat 2 - Sun 3 May

Binocular and Telescope Open Day

Sun 3 May

Dawn Chorus

Sat 9 May

RSPB Wood of Cree

Sat 16 May

Plant Sale

Sat 25 April

Birds for Beginners

Sat 6 - Sun 7 June

Binocular and Telescope Open Day

Sun 21 June

Summer Solstice Walk

Sat 18 July

Bird Ringing Demonstration

Fri 11 Sept

First meeting of new season - speaker to be confirmed

Chairman's Message from Duncan Watt

The past year has been successful and we remain financially sound, thanks to Susan's careful stewardship. While John's planning of talks produced a wide variety of talks and speakers.

"Giving Nature a Home" was the theme and Hayley Douglas, Ranger at Clyde Muirshiel stole the season with her track-cam videos of badgers, otters and other fauna. I am very concerned, therefore, about the dwindling Renfrewshire Council support of the Ranger Service there.

The May 2014 group trip to Leighton Moss RSPB reserve and WWT at Martin Mere was a great success (see p1, continued on p4), and other field trips included the 'best ever homeward sunset' from Scone Palace and Vane Farm, the 'colours of Hawfinch' in the sky consoling those who hadn't managed to see the bird 'in the feather'.

Next year becomes very important indeed as in January 2016 our RSPB local group will be 40 years in effective existence. Your committee intend to celebrate in best North Ayrshire tradition, not just with a party at which our guest will be Stuart Housden, director of RSPB Scotland to talk and cut the cake, but with a cruise around the Firth of Clyde (details still to be fully confirmed).

In our 25th anniversary, we hired PS Waverley to circumnavigate Ailsa Craig for the first time in decades - we've always been good at 'firsts'. A couple of miles from the Craig, Jack Robertson (Susan's Dad) told me that I'd have to do the commentary from the bridge, so I might do that again, but during this year, I'll be handing group leadership over to my deputy, Andy Shand.

Andy is a native of our area and a good naturalist whose service as an RSPB volunteer is long. We are just waiting for the RSPB to give approval and make the appointment, it's not a post which can be elected.

The big focus next year has to be the RSPB's 'Garnock Valley Futurescape'. We've already had several speakers explaining this visionary concept, but now with the new A737 set to cut across the valley, we can bring a focus onto our heartland for wildlife. What we have in mind is to host an event at Eglinton Country Park in late April or early May 2016 - a 'Garnock Valley Wildlife Day'. We have two RSPB

groups in Ayrshire, plus an SOC branch with whom we've co-operated on major campaigns, Hessilhead Wildlife Rescue Trust with whom we have a long, co-operative relationship and the BTO, SNH and WWT all have made a strong association with our RSPB group, and will be invited to participate in our programme of exhibitions, walks and demonstrations.

If any members know of other like minded groups in the Garnock Valley Area who might be interested, please inform a committee member. Each partner organisation has a part to play in the Garnock Futurescapes. The biggest

aim of course will be to increase local RPSB membership and participation.

Your committee has decided that we should enter into an agreement with the local paper (Ardrossan and Saltcoats / Garnock Valley Herald) to provide weekly articles for a year, at no charge to us. This will provide an opportunity for us to inform the public about seasonal events in nature with appropriate photographs or sketches. 52 seasonal articles is a big ask, but I know that you can answer it. The result should be an invigorated North Ayrshire Branch, and another forty years of Giving Nature a Home!



Sunset at Loch Leven, by Laura Montgomerie

Book Review

By Andy Shand

"THE WORLD OF BIRDS" by JONATHAN ELPHICK

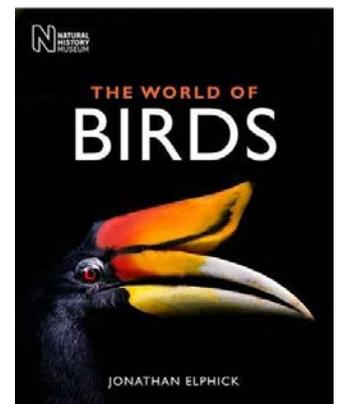
This is a big book; its 600 odd pages weigh 2.5 kgs. So, purchase is not a lightweight matter. Nor is it, always, a lightweight read; I found the chapters on "early birds" and "anatomy & physiology" quite demanding reading. However, for anyone interested in a good, readable introduction to ornithology this is a great place to start.

The first part includes the chapters already mentioned and others such as "breeding" and "migration". I have enjoyed picking a subject and discovering how little I actually know about birds!

The second part (300 pages) is an overview of the various bird families. As the author says you cannot have great detail but there is much interesting material here; I never knew that there are 141 species of Rail or that the Magpie Goose isn't really a goose at all.

This is an excellent book but it cannot be consumed in one sitting. I expect to be dipping into for years to come. Its cover price of £40 is decent value but it is easy to buy for £26 and that is a steal!

Have you bought a product recently and found you can't live without it? Picked up a newly released book and haven't been able to put it down? Think other people should know about it? Well, send us your review to laura@narspb.org.uk to be featured in the next newsletter.



Lancashire Trip (continued from page 1)

had the delightful sight and sound of a snipe, drumming as it went, fly across the pool in front of us, disappearing as it landed. Late afternoon by this time, we left to catch up with the others at the hotel. Others, taking different routes, added marsh harrier, red kite and sparrowhawk to the list along with black-throated diver, common guillemot, great crested grebe, gannet, red-legged partridge, redstart, mistle thrush, wood warbler, willow warbler, reed warbler, sedge warbler, marsh tit, pied flycatcher and yellowhammer. We all tucked into a hearty meal and retired to bed, not before some of us heard the tawny owl calling nearby.

Our first full day saw several members taking an early walk along the canal path picking up herons and mute swans. After a filling breakfast, we set out for Martin Mere (WWT) for the day. Once there, we split into smaller groups to go round the hides overlooking the scrapes and the trails through the woods. We got lovely views of marsh harriers and a sparrowhawk, while the wildfowl included pink-footed, greylag and Canada

geese, shelduck, shoveler, teal, pochard, tufties and eider. From the many hides, we saw avocet, ringed plover, common tern, sand martin, sedge warbler, reed warbler and grey wagtail. In and around the woodland we got stock dove, song thrush, blackbird, robin, wren, dunnoek, great spotted woodpecker, skylark, blackcap, whitethroat, willow warbler, coal tit, long-tailed tit, and lots of tree sparrows at the many feeders. It seemed

to be a little day, because between us we saw little ringed plover, little stint, little gull and little grebe. We also saw other wildlife including brimstone, wall and speckled wood butterflies and rats making the most of the fallen seed under the feeders. Martin Mere is famous for its breeding success with endangered wildfowl and in the pens we also saw (but haven't included in the count) whooper swan, Bewick's swan, white-fronted goose, barnacle goose, Brent goose, mandarin duck, gadwall, pintail, wigeon, garganey, red-crested pochard, goldeneye, smew, goosander, ruddy duck and crane. Near the hotel was a roadside scrape with a small blind



Martin Mere Hide, by John Montgomerie

looking out over the shallow water where we saw a hare nibbling the short grass and small charms of goldfinches and linnetts. As I looked out my bedroom window late on, watching the bats swoop round the gable end, I saw a fox prowling through the patchwork of fields round the hotel. I hoped the farmers had their chickens locked up for the night.

On Wednesday, we started at the blind

and the winding tidal River Conder, seeing mute swan, mallard, moorhen, oystercatcher, woodpigeon, collared dove, pied wagtail, blackbird, starling and tree sparrows. We then went up to Leighton Moss (RSPB) for the day, spreading out round the paths and hides, making sure we stopped in at the café for the famous lemon drizzle cake as drooled over by Chris Packham! As we moved out round the reserve, we had sightings of many different birds including great crested grebe, little egret, heron, greylag geese, Canada geese, shelduck, gadwall, shoveler, pochard, tufties, both male and female marsh harriers, black-tailed godwit, swift, green woodpecker, garden warbler, blackcap, sedge warbler, reed warbler, chiffchaff, marsh tit, long-tailed tit, nuthatch, chaffinch, greenfinch and reed bunting. Some of the group managed to hear the Cetti's warbler at close range, but it proved very elusive! At one point, we had a lovely view of two marsh harriers and a buzzard cautiously circling round each other, which gave us a good chance to compare

wing shapes, colouring, bulkiness and manoeuvrability between the two species. The resident red deer made an appearance and we also saw a short-tailed vole, a weasel, a shrew, common blue and green-veined butterflies and, a speciality of the reserve, a broad-bodied chaser dragonfly. Apart from the usual waders at the Eric Morecambe hides, we were privileged to see some nice pintail and a hen harrier quartering the



Warton Crag, by Laura Montgomerie



Discussions on flowers (top) and Peregrine spotting (bottom), by Laura Montgomerie

marshes. Moving on to Warton Crag (LNR), we soon found the peregrine that makes its home in the disused quarry and its ready supply of jackdaws. Liz was spotted prone on the damp grass taking pictures of narrow-leaved marsh orchids, another local speciality.

Another hearty breakfast on Thursday, watching the wagtails and herons through the window and we departed for the mud banks of the tidal River Conder not far from the hotel. There were shelduck, mallard, gadwall, wigeon, teal, tufted duck, oystercatchers, redshank, black-tailed godwit, mute swan, greylag geese and little egret to be seen. Suddenly all the waders were up and we looked for the reason - ah yes, there it was - a peregrine. It whizzed past but left without making a kill and the waders settled down again to poke around in the mud. We

went further along the road to Glasson Dock where we saw coot, herring gulls, lesser black-backed gulls, a shag, eider, curlew, swifts, swallows, a wren, a robin, starlings, house sparrows and goldfinches. We also partook of a coffee and cake or two at the Lantern O'er Lune café. We travelled on to Cleveley Woods picnic site where we set out round the path alongside the River Wyre. We saw grey wagtail and dipper, while in the trees we got lots of little birds including blackcap, chiffchaff, greenfinch, spotted flycatcher, treecreeper and a little family of long-tailed tits. The blackcap was in some overhanging branches, singing its heart out, partially obscured by a branch only about six feet away from us. I think he thought we couldn't see him! We were all halted in our tracks by a harsh cackling call and we got great views of a jay up in the tree canopy. A hide a third of the way round the trail overlooked a pond with not much on it, but a wren was using the hide for its nest site and watched us with beady eyes as it popped in and out, obviously used to the visitors. We left it in peace while we completed the trail.

We decided that we still had time to make a return visit to Leighton Moss, as the hides stay open when the centre is closed. So back we went, visiting bits of the reserve we hadn't managed to get to the day before, getting good views of Canada geese, marsh harrier, lapwing and sand martins, with a little group of bullfinches quite near the visitor centre. Some of our members managed to see a water vole. Back at the Eric Morecambe hides, we saw grey heron, shoveler and

avocet, while whitethroats sang from the bushes. Our family decided to try the nearby Stork Inn for our evening meal, which was delicious, and as we left to return to the Mill, a song thrush trilled his evening song

from the top of a fir tree. We were then treated to the glorious sight of a barn owl hunting over the low lands along the riverside, gradually floating further off till we lost it in the gloom.



The Mill at Conder Green, by John Montgomerie

Friday dawned and we packed our bags into the car, saying our goodbyes to the Mill and each other, as we would be travelling in different directions, some to relatives, some extending the holiday and some back home. Our family popped back into Leighton Moss one more time to try to get a bittern, but no joy. We did, however, find the Cetti's warbler, singing loudly from the undergrowth near Lillian's Hide. It taunted us with its loud "plitt-plitt-tichutt-tichutt-tichutt" song, then with a flutter, it moved just as you got your bins on it! Another RSPB reserve that we hadn't visited for years wasn't far off our homeward journey, so we decided to take a detour. Geltsdale (RSPB) was further off the beaten track than we'd thought, but we finally arrived at a tiny car park with signs showing the trail over the moor. The wind was getting stronger, but we set off over the moorland track and saw Canada geese, a kestrel, curlew, stock dove and a little group of linnets. We were also delighted to get a windswept whinchat. Finally the weather broke and the rain came on. We arrived back at the car in time for the sun to reappear, but we headed for home. Our only disappointment of the trip was that, in spite of repeated attempts to find one, no-one saw or heard bittern. Ah well, there's always next year! As we neared the end of the trip, a text message from Wendy reported little owls, bringing the total up to at least 113 bird species.



Red Deer, by John Montgomerie

Birding in South Central Turkey

by Andy Shand

When I sat down to write this report I realised that my geography was rubbish! I was going to call this "Birdwatching in Eastern Turkey" but a look at the map will tell you that we never got as far as the "East". Turkey is a huge country – the size of the UK, France and Texas combined – with a great variety of birds. There are about 480 recorded species (330 breeding) but this will increase as more birdwatchers visit a much under-reported country. It's a race against time though, as they seem hell-bent on destroying their environment. Has no one learnt from our mistakes?

We flew, with Ornitholidays, on a 10 day trip at the beginning of May 2014. As we had friends, on the trip, who stay near London we stayed with them overnight, then we flew to Istanbul and on to Adana before driving "back" for 2 hours to Tasucu. A long day but ended with a very pleasant meal in a harbour restaurant.

Next morning a couple of us went on a pre-breakfast walk around the harbour. Our first bird, a laughing dove, reminded us that Turkey is more Asian than European. To be honest, even after checking the book, we had to confirm this with our guide. Again, a reminder that we were a long way from home! It seems that the laughing dove is moving north and west; will we see them breeding in Ayrshire some day? We also had our first breeding Storks and very vocal, Common Terns. The harbour was a mixture of "Gulets", fishing boats and large ferries to North Cyprus. Very picturesque.

Our first couple of days were in the Goksu Delta with very productive wetland habitats. We had a good mixture of egrets, terns, gulls, shrikes, warblers and waders. In fact there was always something to see, unless you looked out to sea, when there was nothing to see! I won't bore you with a list but highlights included red-throated pipit and Montagu's harrier. The best though was Terek sandpiper, marsh sandpiper, little and Temmink's stint in the one binocular field. Dreadfully backlit so no chance of a decent photo. A single greater sand plover was a lifer for us all.

On the third day we headed for the Taurus Mountains and the village of Curkurbag (Chukurbag). On the way we stopped at several interesting sites. This was a big day for us as we had our first ever corncrake. It was wandering in and out of a patch of reed beside a track. I managed to take some spectacularly bad pictures of it but the video was a little better.

We also met some Turkish boys. They were a mixture of locals and Kurds. Mitko, our excellent guide, had told us that the Kurds

are found, working as migrant labour, all over the coastal areas. Later we saw several Syrian refugee camps and I have to say there didn't seem to be much difference in the living conditions of Syrians or Kurds – all indescribably awful.



Hiding Corncrake, by Andy Shand



We had an 'awfully-long-time-before-dawn!!!' start on the fifth day. This was so that we could be hauled up to a high plateau on a tractor trailer. Definitely an experience – especially as the track was narrow and vertiginous in places.

The aim was to see Caspian snowcock, which we did but, frankly, all the stuff running about our feet was much more interesting. We had white-winged snowfinch, alpine and Radde's accentor darting about within a few feet. Wallcreeper delighted us with superb CLOSE views. Most of the team voted a really obliging golden eagle as bird of the day. For me, strangely, the lasting highlight was seeing house martins that nest on cliffs – no houses! Let's not forget the souslik (think marmot) that darted about.

The next few days produced lots of interesting sites and good views of good birds. We had such close views of alpine swift that you could easily see that they are brown and white, not black and white. We had several birds I had never heard of, including red-fronted serin and crimson-winged finch – both stunners.

An undoubted highlight was a long walk up a gorge with lots of butterflies and wheatears (Kurdish, Finsch's, black-eared and northern – beat that!). At the top we met a shepherd who gave us a row for not getting up early enough and missing all the good birds! We found a dung beetle rolling dung. None of us had seen this before. We watched him, birds forgotten, for ages. I even managed some video footage. We saw several tortoises, many lizards, turtles and terrapins but no snakes.

After a long drive our last couple of days were spent in the Birecik area. Birecik itself is a sizable town on the banks of the Euphrates. Here we picked up Iraq babbler, Menetries's warbler, little swift, pallid scops owl... but my highlight was the cops we watched from our hotel bedroom. In uniform and undoubtedly "working" but fishing the Euphrates! I might also mention the minor road accident where the motorcyclist, who caused it, ran off and jump started his bike with the car's occupants, on foot, in hot pursuit. Nobody called the police; wonder why?

Our homeward flights were Gaziantep to Istanbul and on to Heathrow. A great trip with 200 bird species but a lot of other interesting sights and the Turkish people were friendly and interested in us.



Laughing Dove, by Andy Shand

Field Trip Reports

Fairlie and Hunterston - 28 September 2014

By *Laura Montgomerie*

My travels start a little earlier than most, having to make my way down from the east end of Glasgow. At 8.15am I was out, waiting for the bus into the city centre on a grey muggy day! Two and a bit hours later I finally arrived at Fairlie Bay car park to meet up with a small group for the first trip of the season.

The tide was reasonably far out but luckily on its way in. Along the water's edge there were good numbers of oystercatcher, bar- and black-tailed godwit, redshank, black-headed gulls, wigeon and mallard. Amongst them there was [a single] ruff, hard to spot as it wandered through the redshanks feeding. Grey wagtail and dipper popped up and down the small stream next to the car park too.

After a short while and a shout from Andy, we all turned our scopes from the north side of the car park back to the bay itself. "Little Egret." The single bird continued about its business while we watched from afar. The size shouldn't be surprising - after all it is a 'little' egret - but comparing it to the black-headed gulls still scattered across the muddy bay, there was very little difference and passing by in a car you could easily mistake it for just another gull!



Little Egret, by Andy Shand

Next the group moved round the bay to the point you can see over Dorothy's Lagoon within Clydeport's boundaries. There was the little egret roosting, which had moved round from the bay, on the island along with a large number of grey herons, oystercatchers and a few lapwing. There was a large group of wigeon and mute swan settled on the water and greenshank and lapwing lined the far edge of the lagoon. Six little grebe were counted at the opposite end.

As we headed back to cars we listened to the goldcrest in the trees.

The group split here, taking in the two bays of Hunterston. Together, both groups managed to see large flocks of greylag geese (including some interesting hybrids), wigeon and teal. Pintail was seen on both areas, although we can only be sure of one male and two female at the one time.

Our group headed up to the cliffs however there was no sign of any peregrines (must have been asleep!). Altogether we saw a total of 58 birds during the day and was a great start to this season's field trips.

Musselburgh and Aberlady - 18 October 2014

By *Susan Montgomerie*

Starting off from Saltcoats, we had seen starlings, jackdaws, rooks, carrion crows and magpies by the top of the hill. Continuing on through Dalry, we spotted some collared doves and, picking up Laura in

Riddrie, we added woodpigeon and song thrush to the list. Meeting up with the rest of the group at Dobbies gardening centre (lovely cakes!) on the Edinburgh ring road, we all compared notes and found that the journey over had been sadly lacking in birdlife so far. Hoping for better, we headed to the river mouth at Musselburgh.

Stepping out the cars, we started picking up waders and five species of gull including the not-so-common common gull. A cheeky dunnock sat atop a fence post noisily announcing his presence, while we peered through the scopes and listened to the chirrups of a large assembly of house sparrows in the bushes nearby. As we sheltered from the wind, we saw mute swans, mallard and wigeon on the river, while on the sands we got pied wagtail, black-tailed godwit, redshank, oystercatcher and a scattered flock of 43 ringed plovers. Far out at the river mouth we could see a Canada goose, cormorants, a pair of gadwalls and small rafts of eider. There was also one solitary pink-footed goose there. Hopefully we would see more before the day was done!

Heading out along the shore path, we heard and finally spotted a skylark

high up and a small charm of goldfinch flew twittering past. Out at sea, we added shag, scaup, long-tailed duck and goldeneye to the list. We were fortunate to be able to see and compare common scoter, velvet scoter and surf scoter with its white head markings showing clearly in the sunshine. A winter plumage great crested grebe bobbed up occasionally and we saw a female goosander with her sharply cut neck markings diving up and down. We also added curlew, sandwich tern, guillemot, meadow pipit and red-breasted merganser.



Redshank, by John Montgomerie

Narrowly avoiding the worst of a heavy shower, we set off for Musselburgh lagoons and ate our packed lunches. On the big pond beside the car park, we were delighted to spot four little grebes and a Slavonian grebe. The short woodland path to the roofless concrete hides was empty of birds but once looking out over the scrapes we saw oystercatcher, redshank, lapwing, bar-tailed godwit and a grey heron. Five whooper swans, later joined by another seven, fed on the underwater weed, while teal edged in and out of the reedy water's margin and wigeon grazed on the meadowlands between the ponds. Amongst the bigger waders, we found some golden plover, dunlin and a ruff. In the middle of a few dozen black-headed gulls, a little gull was spotted - identified by its small size and dark underwings. Out over the bay, we could see patrolling gannets. Returning along the wooded paths between the hides and the car park, we managed to add blue tit, wren, blackbird, long-tailed tit and goldcrest to our list.



Musselburgh Lagoons, by John Montgomerie

Leaving for Aberlady bay, we drove along the Gosford Bay road and were thrilled to see a sparrowhawk flying across the road in front of our car, heading out over the gorse bushes. Reaching the headquarters of the SOC, Waterston House, we popped in for a cup of tea and "comfort stop". A super exhibition of paintings by Lisa Hooper was on display and admired and critiqued. Taking advantage of the views over the bay, we relaxed and watched the distant shelduck feeding on the sands. We noticed a big flock of lapwing suddenly rising and scanned the sky for predators. Sure enough - there was a peregrine swooping round trying to catch his afternoon meal! He came close to our comfy seats before leaving empty-handed. A skein of 30 pink-footed geese flew past and, as we left, a coal tit on the feeder near the front door was added to the list.

We drove the short distance to Aberlady Bay and, from the car park, we could see four whooper swans, shelduck, mallard, wigeon and teal along with curlew, grey plover and greenshank. Crossing the raised walkway over the Peffer Burn, we headed out towards the forests of sea buckthorn finding a pheasant, singing robins, a chaffinch and three roe deer grazing on the golf course, unseen by the departing golfers. We got as far as the little Marl Loch, overhung by tall sea buckthorn bushes when a movement in the bushes caught our eyes. We were astonished to see a moorhen sitting eight feet up in the air, gingerly perching between the thorns, eating the buckthorn berries! Something we've never come across before.



Aberlady Bsy, by Laura Montgomerie

We headed back towards the bridge and got a lovely flypast of four little egrets heading to roost in the trees. The light was fading fast and we were beginning to worry that we were going to miss the sight of the pink-footed geese coming

in to roost. Then, at last, we spotted a few small skeins coming in low over the treetops across the bay, 300, 400, 500..... Turning round to look for the source of gradually swelling "wink, wink" calls, we saw more coming in over the low hills, 1000, 2000, 3000..... We reckoned that by the end of the evening, there were about twenty-five to thirty thousand geese at the roost - an amazing sight. It was a lovely end to the day, having seen 73 species.

Saltcoats Harbour New Year - 2 January 2015

By Susan Montgomerie

It was chilly and blustery, with short heavy downpours, but it looked as if we'd get a few birds in before the important part of the day began - the soup! Meeting up at Saltcoats Harbour, we compared notes, with a sparrowhawk having been seen on the trip over. The grass mounds beside the car park had the usual pigeons, jackdaws and crows, and amongst them was a clearly marked hooded crow - probably a hybrid -but over the years, more and more hybrids have been appearing in the Saltcoats area and their colouring has been getting stronger and more defined. We scanned round the harbour spotting cormorant, herring gull and great black-backed gull, with a small raft of eider bobbing on the waves. Sheltering among the huge rocks of the breakwaters, turnstone, pied wagtail and starlings searched for insects. We also saw a couple of rock pipits and a grey wagtail. The wind was really strong by this time, and we chickened out of going along the harbour wall to the tower - we wouldn't be able to hold our bins steady, let alone the scopes. So we walked round the back of the Premier Cinema to the ponds at the playground, walking horizontally into the wind! Once there, we propped ourselves against the fence and scanned round to find a few sheltering birds picking through the washed-up seaweed. A nice little group of purple sandpipers were no more than a few feet from us, more concerned with the feeding possibilities than us, while turnstone and redshank picked up titbits from the shallow water. Shag bobbed up and down further out to sea while black-headed gulls watched for any leftovers. Blown briskly back

to our cars, we set off to Auchenharvie pond beside the Engine House remains, dodging the heavy showers. A small group of scaup watched us approaching and slowly paddled to the middle of the pond without lifting their heads from their resting positions, eyes watching us. Some bread was thrown to attract the wildfowl closer, although it was nearly impossible in the strong wind to throw it further than five feet from the waters' edge. It brought the mute swans, mallards and tufted ducks closer, and the common gulls, black-headed gulls and herring gulls scooped up the remains. The great black-backed gulls ignored us and strolled about on the golf course with the oystercatchers, redshanks and curlews. As we scanned round the pond we also found a few coots, goldeneye and little grebe. Back to the cars to warm up then round to the golf club pond, armed with more bread. However, another heavy squall pinned us inside the car for a while. Once that shower passed we brought the birds towards us and hand fed the whooper swan family, while scattering some more for the black-headed gulls, rooks and mallards. We also spotted a very odd looking mallard/cross bird. Could we see a touch of teal, or pintail, or something else? Meanwhile, back at Owen Kelly Place, Vall had been doing the very important job of stirring the soup, keeping the cat company and greeting any stray birders. She also kept a note of all the garden birds visiting the feeders and the scattered seed. These included dunnock, robin, great tit, blue tit, house sparrow, chaffinch and goldfinch. The four pots of soup quickly warmed our chilled fingers while we sat around and discussed the fact that 38 species wasn't too bad for such a blustery day.

The Hidden Hide

By Susan Montgomerie

The committee realised that we hadn't paid our hide at Clydeport a visit for a long while, so we made arrangements to meet there and have a reccy to see what work needed doing to the hide and the raft. We'd had reports of terns nesting on the raft last summer, so an inspection was in order. It was cold but bright as we crunched through the ice to the hide. The hide has shifted slightly on its foundations, the door needs some work on it and we have water ingress at the

front which will need to be repaired, but overall, it's in fairly good condition. Having done the necessary, we settled down to count the birds. It's a lovely sheltered spot for the birds and they were relaxing in the sunshine, allowing us to get really good views of them. Passerines included greenfinch, chaffinch, 2 song thrushes, blackbird, robin, dunnock and wren. There were lots of waders including 10+ curlews, 30+ bar-tailed godwits, 50+ redshanks, 10 turnstones, 100+ dunlin, 30+ lapwings and 100+ oystercatchers. There was also 1 red-breasted merganser, 2 goldeneye,

2 tufties, 10+ mallard and around 400 wigeon. 11 mute swans preened in the sunshine and 12 grey herons snoozed on Dorothy's Island. Only 1 little grebe this time, but to make up for it, there was also 1 little egret. This seems to be a regular visitor and, who knows, may be the start of a breeding population? The cold wind started biting, so we left with plans to get the work done when the weather warms up this summer. Anyone up for a little bit of slave labour - I mean - voluntary work? See the committee if you do.

Big Garden Birdwatch 2015

RSPB Media Release

More than a million eyes took up the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch challenge of 'seeing things through the eyes of a bird' this year, witnessing some exciting and interesting changes among our most popular garden birds.

In excess of 585,000 people across the country spent an hour during the weekend of 24 and 25 January watching their garden and recording any feathered friends that made a flying visit - close to a 100,000 increase on 2014.

Overall more than eight-and-a-half million birds were spotted, making it another bumper year. Refreshingly, sightings of every bird that featured in this year's top 20 increased on the numbers recorded in 2014, apart from the three finches; chaffinch, goldfinch and greenfinch.

The average number of robins seen visiting gardens was at its highest since 2011, helping it climb three places to number seven, its joint highest-ever position in the Big Garden Birdwatch rankings. Blackbird was another climber, moving to number three and becoming the UK's most widespread garden bird after being spotted in more than 90 per cent of UK gardens.

Despite being the UK's smallest garden bird, twice as many people picked out a wren calling by their garden this year than in 2014, consolidating its place in the top 20 most popular garden birds. However, two species found in this year's Big Garden Birdwatch's top 20 most popular birds remain on either the red of Birds of Conservation Concern, highlighting just how valuable our gardens can be. House sparrow and starling are on the red list, meaning that they are of 'highest conservation priority - species needing urgent action'.

Big Garden Birdwatch results also showed a drop in finch numbers this year, but scientists aren't panicking yet. RSPB Conservation Scientist Dr Daniel Hayhow said: 'Despite the cold weather birds such as; goldfinch, greenfinch and chaffinch may not have been as reliant on food found in our gardens during the cold snap because of a decent natural seed supply found in the wider countryside this winter following a good summer.

'The weather can have varied effects on different groups of birds in terms of behaviour and habitats used. This year, a better seed supply in the countryside for finches means that we saw fewer visiting our gardens. On the other hand during the cold spell, birds like blue tit and robin would still be more reliant on food found in our gardens.'

Black Grouse Safaris at Corrimony

RSPB Media Release

RSPB Scotland has announced that it will be running two special wildlife safaris at its Corrimony nature reserve near Cannich in Strathglass. The safaris should allow visitors to witness one of Britain's most dramatic wildlife spectacles - the breeding display of black grouse. One safari took place on Friday 3rd April and another will follow on Saturday 25th April.

Safari leader Brad Chappell said, "Every year in spring male black grouse come together on a special site, known as a lek, where they display in order to attract the attention of females. The male birds strut around, flutter into the air, and spread their fan-tails. They often face up to each other and things can get quite exciting. This is all combined with the most extraordinary soundtrack as the grouse produce a strange, very evocative, bubbling call.

"The safaris are run in conjunction with the Famous Grouse and each adult participant will be given a complimentary miniature bottle of Black Grouse whisky. After the safaris we will be visiting the Bog Cotton Cafe in Cannich for a full cooked Scottish breakfast.

"The safaris can be very popular and as we are running just two this year I would urge people to book their place as soon as possible! To book you can ring our Inverness office on: **01463 715000** or drop us an email to blackgrousesafaris@rspb.org.uk"

Mr Chappell added that the RSPB is also planning to show visitors black grouse at a special viewing point near CairnGorm Mountain. He said, "All our black grouse activities at Corrimony and at CairnGorm will be posted on our website. For the latest information please check out: www.rspb.org.uk/highlandblackgrouse"

Arran Birding Notes

Below is a short list of sightings on Arran, since the beginning of the year. You will be able to find more information by visiting www.arranbirding.co.uk online.

The highlights of January were reports of snow bunting, ptarmigan and long-tailed duck. There were two reports of snow bunting, two at Clauchlands Point on the 18th January and two at Drumadoon Point on 22nd. There was only one report in the whole of 2014. Six ptarmigan on Beinn Nuis on the 21st was the largest group of this species reported in a number of years and a long-tailed duck between Whitefarland and Pirnmill between later in the month was only the second record of this Arctic breeding duck since 1998.

Winter wildfowl numbers included 250 greylag geese in Shiskine, eight wigeon on Cleats Shore, a brent goose in the Rodden and two male goldeneye in Loch Ranza. Other winter visitors included a greenshank and seven purple sandpiper.

There were some signs of approaching spring with golden eagle displaying over An Tunna, mistle thrush singing in Lamlash and Raven nest building in Catacol at the end of the month.

February started with a cold, dry, settled spell and then the unsettled, wet, stormy weather returned. It didn't keep the wintering wildfowl away though with 300 greylag geese in the Shiskine Valley on the 5th, six common scoter off Machriewaterfoot on 8th, a single brent goose and up to sixteen white-fronted geese on 15th. This is the largest group of white-fronted geese reported to the bird recorder of the Arran Natural History Society in the last thirty-five years. The next largest group was nine on 2 April 2002.

Other flocks in February included 79 golden plover at Machriewaterfoot, 23 curlew at Clauchlands, 76 lapwing at Kilpatrick, 40 chaffinch in Shiskine, 24 turnstone at Silver Sands, 12 woodcock at Clauchlands and 19 skylark and up

to 20 yellowhammer in Sliderry. Some of these flocks may have included birds beginning to migrate north.

Into March and there were further reports of long-tailed duck and common scoter. A surprise visitor was spotted on the 18th, when there was a report of a coot flying over Sliderry. Coot is an occasional visitor to Arran and this unusual record is only the third record in the last fifteen years. The last record was a single bird on 22nd June 2013.

If you are visiting Arran and come across any sightings that you think are worthwhile, you can report them to Jim Cassells via email at jim@arranbirding.co.uk. All contributions are welcome and these don't just include the rare and unusual species. They could be common birds; which may be winter or summer birds arriving and/or departing, large numbers of common birds, or where breeding birds have been seen.

CalMac Ferry Update

It was a funny sort of summer last year. Everyone agrees that it was one of the best we've had for a while with lots of sunshine. However, Saturdays were another matter entirely. Of the nine days we had planned, two were cut short by rain and three were completely rained off! However, our hardy volunteers braved the elements for six of the planned nine and showed the birds to the passengers who came up on deck. We only managed to get two RSPB memberships this year which shows how weather-dependent we are. Pinbadge sales were also down this year, with only £186.47 being raised (we usually raise around £300). We had some nice sightings including the mute swan family, a red-throated diver, herons, sandwich terns and Manx shearwaters. The black guillemots were again very obliging, being seen in both harbours until they left the nests in August. Buzzards were not so easily seen this year and I wondered if it had anything to do with the extensive logging going on at the hills behind Brodick? Little birds are always hard to see in Brodick harbour because the engines drown out a lot of the birdsong, but we managed to see goldfinch, greenfinch, chaffinch, house sparrow and blackbird. Starlings were a regular feature of the Ardrossan stopovers - a pair had discovered the easy pickings and would trot round the upper deck looking for titbits, coming within five feet of our table. The house martins and swallows were easier to see above the houses and we even saw a swift one week. On the last day, a peregrine was seen flying over the ferry while in harbour, heading towards Horse Isle. Other wildlife observations included grey and harbour seals, porpoises and an angle shades moth! Altogether 39 species of bird were seen over the six days.

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