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North Ayrshire RSPB Local Group Newsletter

Edition 115

March 2011



Ynys-hir RSPB Nature Reserve, by John Montgomerie

A Welsh Adventure

Susan Montgomerie. Photos, by John Montgomerie.

The weather was fair as we left on the Friday morning to pick up Hazel in Glasgow and, on the way there, John and I spotted around 20 greylag geese in v formation at Castle Semple Loch. Driving down to Annandale Water, we saw buzzards and a kestrel, and on the lake at the services, we spotted swallows, house martins, a grey heron, little grebes, tufted ducks and mute swans. Later we saw a large flock of lapwings over the moorland near Shap. We got held up on the motorway between Stoke and Birmingham, at one point taking half an hour to travel a mile! Dusk was falling as we had a snack at Telford services and we drove the last 45 miles in the dark through winding lanes, managing to see a

fox and a barn owl. Bats circled the holiday house, called Talarwen, as we arrived.

On Saturday, the first bird to be seen was a red kite out the kitchen window! We were very excited by this, and it proved to be the first of many, soaring over the fields round the back of house and at the nearby Cors Caron Nature Reserve. We visited the Tregaron Red Kite Centre in the old school house and enjoyed a DVD presentation, while picking up a few souvenirs. After lunch, we went to Cors Caron and did the boardwalk trail. The feeders at the entrance attracted finches, tits, siskin, great spotted woodpeckers and nuthatches. Willow warblers

continued on page 4

Contents

Editorial	2
Barmy Bramblings	2
Forthcoming Events	2
Chairman's Message	3
Strathspey Trip Details	3
A Welsh Adventure	4
H-owl-lo there!	5
Hunterston Power Station	6
Field Trips	7
RSPB Releases	9
Arran Birding Notes	10

**Visit our website at
www.narspb.org.uk**

Welcome to the March 2011 edition of the North Ayrshire RSPB Local Group newsletter. Everybody thawing out now after that frozen winter? And now spring has sprung according to the blooming flowers and singing birds.

In addition to this newsletter, you will find a membership survey which we have put together to help us gain some feedback from you. We would really appreciate your comments and hope that everybody can take 5-10 minutes to fill out and send it back.

In the meantime, have a flick through our first March edition, the first of three newsletters this year, to find out what adventures happened in Wales, what was discovered on a rooftop and many more stories.

Remember if you have any short stories, photos, etc then send them on so we can feature them in a future edition of the newsletter. Email me at laura@narspb.org.uk or phone 0141 770 4920.

Barmy Bramblings

I do the Garden Bird Watch for the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). This involves counting the birds seen in my garden every week. In December we visited Lochwinnoch, and Zul pointed out a brambling. A few days later, when I was using the binoculars to count the number of chaffinches, I spotted a brambling. It took me a couple of sightings to be sure I was right. It was the first time I had ever seen a brambling in December, and the first that I had seen in the garden since January 2000. At the time of writing this (February 24th) I have seen

bramblings in the garden for every week I have done the survey. I had a look at the BTO web site to see if there have been more bramblings this winter, and found that there has been a significant increase, apparently due to the hard weather. The information is very clearly shown at www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/gbw/results/2010/national-winners This webpage gives you access to a lot of information about which birds are seen in gardens. It gives you a lot of insight into what is happening with UK garden birds.

The RSPB

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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 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.

Wendy Tedd

Brambling photo, by John Tedd



Forthcoming Events

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

Blue = Outdoor 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.

Sat 16 April
Roslin Glen, Midlothian

Fri 29 April
AGM and Red-breasted Geese,
by Brian Morrell

Sun 1 May
Dawn Chorus Walk with breakfast roll and tea/coffee. £5

Sat 7 May
Young Volunteers Group. Booking essential

Sat 14 May
Glen Fruin and Ross Park, Argyll

Sat 14 May
Plant Sale

Mon 16 - Fri 20 May
Week trip to the Speyside Area (More information can be found on page 3)

Fri 27 (late) - Sat 28 May (early)
Moth and Bat night

Sat 28 - Sun 29 May
Optics Weekend

Sat 4 June
Young Volunteers Group. Booking essential

Sun 5 June
Springwatch: Family Discovery Day

Sun 19 June
Mystery Trip

Tues 21 June
Summer Solstice Guided Walk

Sun 3 July
Fantastic Frogs: The Great Frog Hunt

Fri 8, 15, 22, 29 July
Lochwinnoch Holiday Club. Booking essential. £4 WEx / £6 Non-WEx

Sat 16 July
Bird Ringing Demonstration. Booking

Fri 9 September
First meeting of new season. More details to be confirmed

Chairman's Message

Duncan Watt

With the Group's AGM approaching on April 29th, and spring now well under way, your committee has been at work preparing our meetings programme for 2011-12. I wish to thank all members for your support during the current session and especially the committee members who work so hard throughout the year, volunteering for the benefits of the RSPB. Thanks also to our group members who for various reason cannot attend the meetings. We value your continuing support.

We have had good numbers at indoor meetings, although fewer than in past years and participation in field trips has been seriously reduced: perhaps the weather and time are taking their toll? Could we be doing some things differently? Please let me or any committee members know your thoughts in increasing group membership and engagement, so that improvements can be made.

What we need are new faces to swell the throng... could you bring a friend? If there is interest in an introductory course to birdwatching on a local basis, let me know, as such an activity could be arranged.

On Saturday 7th May, the Ayrshire SOC bird Race will take place, and the RSPB and SWT will again have a presence at Irvine Harbour opposite the Ship Inn from 10am until the racers arrive. Our role is to show the wildlife to the public, and hopefully also to recruit people to the cause.

At our February meeting, we had Michael McHugh, the RSPB Scotland Membership Development Officer in our midst, to offer a course in the techniques of recruitment in spring or summer. Michael has offered to join a couple of our Calmac ferry services to demonstrate appropriate methods on that unique location.

Finally, a sneak preview of next year's syllabus. Not to be missed on 10th February 2012, Ken Shaw, former reserve manager at RSPB Vane Farm reserve, and old friend of the group will be speaking. As he is now retired, his talk may be somewhat 'unplugged'.

Enjoy the rites of spring. Good Birding.

Five Days in Strathspey

Following on from last summer's successful trip to the Isle of Mull, the committee accepted that it was time to pay another visit to the Highlands of Scotland this summer, and it was decided we would head back to Strathspey. We, as a group, last visited this area in the summer of 2007 as a weekend trip but this year we are extending the trip to a five-day trip from Monday 16 to Friday 20 May.

The additional few days will allow us to cover a wider area and visit the major hotspots for highland specialities such as slavonian grebe, capercaillie, ptarmigan, dotterel, crested tit and Scottish crossbill, not to mention osprey and golden eagle. Throughout the course of the trip, we will cover a diverse range of habitats including seabird cliffs, native pine forests, mountain and moorland and various lochs and lochans. We will also be planning a trip to the Moray Firth for views of the resident bottlenose dolphin population.

We have made a provisional booking at the 3-star Nethybridge Hotel and have secured a £149 per person

deal for four nights dinner, bed and breakfast. We are sure you will find this a reasonable and affordable price and hope this will tempt you to join us this summer - especially if you've never visited this area before.

There are a few extra options planned, including early morning visits for capercaillie at RSPB Loch Garten and evening visits for badgers or pine martens, as well as a visit to the high tops of the Cairngorms.

If you would like to accompany us on this Highland extravaganza and would

like more information, then please contact Marco McGinty on 01475 674695 or marcomcginty@yahoo.co.uk

In addition to the Strathspey trip, we are also planning a weekend trip later in the year, from Friday 21 to Sunday 23 October. On this occasion we will be heading to the northeast of Scotland and this trip will be centred on the RSPB's Loch of Strathbeg Reserve, where a wealth of wildfowl await the visiting birder. Further details will be available in the next newsletter.





sang and spotted flycatchers flew out and back to their perches along the trail and, from the hide, we saw stock doves, skylarks, ravens and snipe. On Sunday, we visited Cilgerren Castle (CADW) and while exploring the ruins, we found a wren, grey wagtails, willow warblers and chiffchaffs. After an enjoyable pub lunch in the Cardiff Arms, we headed to St David's Bishop's Palace (CADW), then round the headland through to Merry Vale. Regarded as a good birdwatching site, the rain was too heavy for us to explore, but it looked an interesting place for summer visitors. Strumble Head was our next port of call, and as we stood in a large brick shelter looking north over Cardigan Bay, we spotted gannets, kittiwakes, gulls, Manx shearwaters, fulmars, shags, redshanks, grey seals and porpoises. A welcome surprise was to see migrating swifts and sand martins flying towards us over the sea, heading south. A stonechat perched atop the scrub as we went back to the car.

The next day, we stopped at the nearby Pont Enion, where we saw red kites, a reed bunting, sedge warblers and a tinkling charm of goldfinches. As we headed to Aberystwyth, the rain began and we had heavy showers all day. Leaving the car in the Park+Ride, we bussed into the town centre and explored the shops. Finding the castle on a promontory, we wandered through the ruins and spotted wheatears on the battlements and willow warblers and dunlocks in the shrubbery. Going back to the bus stop, we passed the pier, where in winter, huge flocks of starlings roost after

doing their intricate swirling displays. Back near Tregaron, we revisited Cors Caron and walked in the rain to the pond, seeing tits, finches, warblers, a buzzard, nuthatches, great spotted woodpeckers, moorhen and coots.

On Tuesday, we took packed lunches to Devil's Bridge where we managed to find seats on the extremely busy Rheidol Valley Steam Railway. This old mining railway snakes down a steep-sided valley, with hanging oak woods, into a broad river valley and we had great views of jays and buzzards flying through the trees on the same level as us, and a pair of red-breasted mergansers in the meandering river. In the afternoon, we drove through

or so red kites strolling round a harvested field in the sunshine, like buzzards, looking for worms and beetles.

On Wednesday, we went to Ynys-hir (RSPB) for the day. Arriving at the visitor centre, we were delighted to see greenfinches, goldfinches, chaffinches and siskin, with blue, great and coal tits at the feeders, and a tame grey squirrel gobbling up all the fallen seed. During the long walk to the Marian Mawr hide we saw goldcrest, chiffchaff and jays. Arriving at the hide we could see little grebe, grey heron and Canada geese.

We walked to the Domen Las hide overlooking the river and saw red-



Cors Caron Hide

the same valley, seeing a different view of it, and went to the "Magic of Life" butterfly world. There we found a wonderfully eccentric lady who was as passionate about bugs and creepy-crawlies as we are about birds – probably more so! She gave the 2" glossy beetles names and talked to them. As you would expect, it was very hot and humid in the butterfly house, and it was fantastic to have the butterflies coming to feed from the nectar-filled flowers we were given to hold. Coming back out into the contrastingly cold air, we saw tits and a blackcap in the trees as we acclimatised. Returning to Tregaron, we had the unusual sight of a dozen

breasted merganser, bar-tailed godwits, shelduck, little egrets, common sandpipers and sand martins, with long-tailed tits in the trees outside.

As we approached the Saltings hide, a heavy shower began, so we sheltered in the hide and had our sandwiches as we watched the birds, including a reed bunting, black-tailed godwit, teal, wigeon and more little egrets. Leaving the hide, we saw a whinchat and passed by an old wooden gate, where John spotted a common lizard. We stopped to watch and found that there were at least

H-owl-lo there!

Wendy Tedd

five of them, sunning themselves on the dry wood. We continued on to the Ynys-hir hide, high up in the treetops, where we had lovely views over the trees and scrub, with jays, ravens and a hen harrier quartering the ground. On the way home, we picked up a Chinese meal in Aberystwyth and took it back to Talarwen – it was really delicious!

The next day, we headed down to the Dolaucothi Gold Mine (NT) and, on the climb to the cave tour, we discovered more great spotted woodpeckers, nuthatches and willow warblers. After the interesting tour, we did some gold panning, and although we didn't find any gold, we had fun perfecting the technique of swirling the water round and sorting out the iron pyrites (fool's gold). We had a lovely pub lunch in the Red Lion in Llangadog, before going further south to Drysilwyn Castle (CADW). On the way to the top of the huge mound, we saw long-tailed tits, great spotted woodpecker and nuthatch. From the ruins at the top, we could see up and down a wide valley and the many loops of the meandering River Teifi. We spotted wigeon, teal, goosanders, mute swans, greylag geese, sand martins and a sparrowhawk swooping over the river. Then in the gathering twilight, a lifer for all three of us, a great white egret! Hazel managed to scope some images before the light went completely and it settled in the far off trees to roost.

Leaving Talarwen on Friday for the last time, we went up to Strata Florida Abbey (CADW) and quickly looked round the ruins as the rain started, then picked up the last of the holiday presents in the gift shop. A robin sang loudly in the rain from a bush in the car park. As it continued to pour down, we drove more or less continuously till we reached Leighton Moss (RSPB) at 5pm. Although the Centre was closed, we were able to visit the hides and saw teal, shoveler, wigeon, pintail, coot and moorhen. As we approached the Eric Morecambe hides, a kestrel hovered over the railway embankment, keeping a few yards ahead of us all the time. From the hides, we could see lots of shelduck, greylag geese, redshank and greenshank, and as a special treat, we heard a piping call and a kingfisher flew across the front of the hide. We left the reserve and drove a short distance to the old quarry, where, in the failing light, we scoured the cliffs and, delightedly, found a peregrine perched on the rockface. As darkness fell, we resumed our homeward journey, only stopping at Annandale Water for refreshments, but as we ate, we could see movement in the darkened courtyard. Pressing our faces to the window, we could see a dozen or more bats fluttering and swooping over the ornamental pool, scooping up insects. Finally dropping Hazel back off in Glasgow, we returned home, tired but happy. Altogether, we saw 94 species.

One Saturday morning in February our neighbour knocked on the door. "Come and see", he said, "there's a long eared owl across the road." Sure enough across the road, perched on a roof, was this BIG beautiful-looking owl, with large orange eyes. John managed to get a couple of photos, which we then used to try and identify the bird. That proved to be beyond our capabilities, it didn't tie up with any UK owl, it was too big. We came to the conclusion that it was a captive bird that had escaped.



Seeking advice we emailed a copy of the picture to Duncan (Isn't the internet wonderful?), he came back with the answer, "It's an eagle owl". By this time the bird had flown away, but John rang Kelburn, and asked if they had got their full complement of birds. They had, but were very interested, as large escaped birds will attack small dogs and cats when hungry. The falconer from Kelburn came down, found the owl and tried to entice it with day old chicks. He had no success, the bird just looked at him.

It was seen for the next 3 days in the next road, but no-one caught it. After then it disappeared, but was seen at Ardrossan. Andy Christie, from Hessilhead told us that it actually belonged to someone in West Kilbride, and it had escaped when there was a bad gale. Since then we haven't heard anything else, but, who knows, it may still be around. So if you see a large owl, it may be an eagle owl. In case you happen to see it the owner is Cameron on 0779 0120452.



As many of you will now know, Ayrshire Power are proposing to build a new coal-fired power station at Hunterston in North Ayrshire. If this damaging proposal is given consent it will have devastating environmental impacts, including destroying around 30 hectares of vulnerable intertidal habitat, important for rare plants and a wide range of bird species, and cause a huge increase in greenhouse gas emissions. It has been suggested that the proposal is probably the single biggest threat to the climate from a development anywhere in the UK right now.

The proposed development would see the destruction of Southannan Sands, a significant section of the Portencross Coast SSSI and one of the few remaining intertidal habitats on the Firth of Clyde. Intertidal mudflats and sandflats, such as at Southannan Sands, are scarce habitats and hold national importance for many species of wildfowl and wader and as well as acting as a feeding ground for summering and wintering birds they also acts as a vital stopover for many thousands of migratory birds each year. In fact it could be argued that due to the migratory behaviour of many of the species using the site throughout the year, Southannan Sands is of international importance.

The proposed power station was designated as one of 14 'National Developments' in Scotland's National Planning Framework 2 (NPF2). These developments still require planning permission (or in Hunterston's case an Energy Consent, which is similar to planning permission) but, once a development has been designated as a 'national development', only issues of detailed design and siting can be influenced. The 'need' for the development has been established. In other words, the development will happen in some form at this location and local people (or other concerned individuals and organisations) can only influence the detail of what it will look like – and painting the fence a different colour won't make much difference to a building like this.

The vast majority of local people didn't even know about this proposal until it was designated as a national development and therefore too late for the electorate to comment or object. Given the massive scale and

potential environmental damage this power station would cause, it's incredible that more wasn't done to advertise it and to take on board the views of local people. The fact that more than 16,000 people have now objected to the application just shows how many are worried about these plans now they know about them.

Unfortunately, the only available option to try and remove Hunterston's 'national development' status was through a legal challenge in the courts. I therefore took forward a legal challenge to the inclusion of Hunterston in NPF2, despite being faced with legal costs exceeding £80,000 if I lost.

I didn't (and still don't) have £80,000 to spare and I was not entitled to Legal Aid, so my case was helped financially by a group of charities and faith organisations, namely Planning Democracy, RSPB Scotland, WWF Scotland, Scottish Wildlife Trust, Friends of the Earth Scotland, Christian Aid, World Development Movement Scotland, Church of Scotland and Oxfam. They recognised just how important this case was and joined together to help contribute as much as they could.



At the Court of Session in December 2009, under the instruction of Lady Dorrian,

I was successful in obtaining a protective expenses order, the first PEO to be granted in Scotland. This placed a cap of £30,000 for the opposition's costs should the judicial review be unsuccessful. I must add that this is on top of my own legal expenses. The Judicial Review itself was held in November 2010, this time heard by Lord Brailsford, but I have yet to hear the outcome of this. Fundraising efforts so far have been relatively successful, but are still short of the total that may be required, especially if I lose and have to lodge an appeal.

Further donations to the campaign can be made at www.justgiving.com/Hunterston

There is also an online petition which we need to get as many people to sign as possible, find it here www.rspb.org.uk/stophunterston

Wigton Bay - 24 October 2010

Dawn broke as we left the house and travelling along, we saw the usual magpies, jackdaws, rooks, carrion crows and starlings. Near Irvine, we saw collared doves and a kestrel, while nearer Ayr, another kestrel and a blackbird were spotted. Close to Dalmellington, we saw a grey heron and our third kestrel! As we approached New Galloway, a flock of mixed redwings and fieldfares flew over.

We continued our way to the visitor centre at Clatteringshaws Loch and met up with the others in the group. A goldeneye was seen on the loch and a buzzard soared over the hills. From the car park we saw meadow pipit, wren, dunnoek, robin, and a male stonechat. The feeders and the trees by the centre were host to great tits, blue tits, coal tits, chaffinches, greenfinches, goldcrest and siskin. Leaving the centre, we continued along the Queen's Way to the red deer viewing platform where a herd of red deer obligingly rested in the sunshine, while two ravens looked for beetles or worms among the rocks. In the surrounding woodland we spotted a reed bunting, goldfinches, crossbills, bullfinches and long-tailed tits. Wild goats were spotted from the car as we passed the rugged outcrop on the A712.

At our next stop, we walked down to the hide at Wigton harbour, which overlooked both the River Bladnoch and flooded meadow. In the ponds we saw little grebes, grey herons, mute swans, mallard, shovelers, wigeon, teal, moorhens, while the islands had redshanks and several well-camouflaged snipe on them. Out the river-view windows we could see cormorants, eight whooper swans, greylag geese, shelduck, red-breasted mergansers, oystercatchers, golden plovers, lapwings, turnstones, curlews, common gulls, lesser black-backed gulls and great black-backed gulls.

Overhead, we could hear a skylark singing and the sharp-eyed among us managed to see it too! While we munched our sandwiches, we noticed a peregrine sitting on a tumbledown stone wall across the river. We hadn't seen it flying in and we decided that it had been eating some prey behind the wall and had come to the top of the wall while it digested its meal. It sat there for quite a long time and we all got good views of it through the telescopes.

Back in Wigtown, we added black-headed gull and pied wagtail to the list. As we passed Newton Stewart, we saw two buzzards and a woodpigeon, and when approaching Ringford, a sparrowhawk zipped across the road in front of us. Near Laurieston, we spotted our first red kite and not long afterwards, four red-legged partridges ran across the road beside Loch Ken. Several pheasants zigzagged along the road and crashed through the hedges to escape.

We arrived at Ken-Dee Marshes RSPB reserve, where house sparrows looked for crumbs in the car park, white-fronted geese gathered in the fields and buzzards and red kites soared over the hills. We headed up to the hides where mute swan, Canada geese, wigeon, teal, goosanders and lapwings could be seen on the ponds and loch. In the woods, we got a great spotted woodpecker, while mistle thrush, redwings and fieldfares settled down for the night. As we began to drive home, three roe deer bounded out of our way and a little further on, a badger scuttled up the grass verge and disappeared.

Finally as we drove past Earlston Loch, we were rewarded with a barn owl flying across the road in front of us. It was a long, but interesting day with 71 bird species being seen.

Tynninghame - 20 November 2010

We started well with a flyover of four mute swans in Ardrossan, but the weather wasn't very kind and the only interesting bird we saw along the M8 was a buzzard. We met the others at the car park at the John Muir Park, near Tynninghame, had a quick swig of coffee and ventured out into the cold rain.

From the hillock beside the welcome toilets, we walked through the woodland until we reached a bank of sea buckthorn and used them as shelter to look for the birds we had come to see. It took a while but eventually we picked out the well-camouflaged shorelarks, 10 of them, and watched as they came closer. We had really good views of these rare visitors. We then moved on and the bay gave us good views of grey heron, whooper swan, shelduck, wigeon, eider, bar-tailed godwit, grey plover, lapwing, knot, turnstone, dunlin and curlew. Every thing suddenly rose up and wheeled round, and looking for the predator, we saw a peregrine hurtling through their midst. A great spotted woodpecker flew through the pine trees and we also found pied wagtail, wren, robin, goldcrest, blue tit, linnet, twite and goldfinch.

We left the cars in the car park at Thorntonloch, where a song thrush pulled up worms in the rain, and walked along the country road round the back of Torness power station. At the breakwater we saw a red-throated diver, goldeneye, red-breasted mergansers, oystercatchers, sanderling, turnstones, redshanks, kittiwakes and guillemots. Skylarks and rock pipits sheltered from the wind in the field behind us.

As we walked back through the rain, we saw a merlin swooping and swirling, chasing a meadow pipit, which dived from side to side to escape the merlin's talons, eventually dashing into the tangled bramble bushes. We didn't know who to cheer on – the meadow pipit who escaped with his life or the merlin who had lost a meal.

In spite of the cold wind and frequent showers, we had a good day, seeing 53 species altogether.

Another Field Trip

Loch Maben and Gretna - 16 January 2011

As we left Saltcoats, oystercatchers made an early morning flypast to catch the ebb tide. Collecting the usual corvids on the way across, we saw wood pigeons in the fields and a pair of mallard in a roadside pond near Strathaven. At Stonehouse, a Blackbird crossed the road chasing the early worm, and as we travelled along the M74, through the Lowther Hills, we saw a kestrel, a raven and our first buzzard.

We drove on to Annandale Water services and enjoyed cake, while looking over the partially frozen pond. Among the black-headed gulls, we picked out a tufted duck, a goosander and a moorhen. A skein of greylag geese flew over and collared doves, chaffinches and house sparrows stayed near the buildings. A streak of blue turned out to be a kingfisher, following the goosanders along the water's edge as they disturbed the fish in the water and we got lovely views of the kingfisher as it moved among the trees, diving in to catch a couple of fish. As we left, a bullfinch was seen. The M74 gave us great views of the River Annan, spilling into the surrounding fields, where lapwings picked off the emerging insects.

We pulled into the car park beside Castle Loch, just before Lochmaben and set up the scopes in the chilly breeze. On the far side of the loch, a line of goldeneye stretched east and west, with pairs of goosanders in among them. Whooper swans flew west over the hilly countryside, while a Canada goose sheltered in the lee of the island. In the trees beside us a wren sang its loud song and a dunnock crept through the undergrowth less than six feet away. Behind it, frozen slivers of ice like piled up slates at the shore's edge, tinkling in the movement of the waves like winter wind chimes.

Passing through Lochmaben, we parked in the car park by Kirk Loch, where we saw wigeon, pochards, tufted ducks, a goldeneye, moorhen, coot, common gulls and a pair of gadwall. Hearing and seeing a large flock of jackdaws rising up from the rooftops, we looked for what had disturbed them and a sparrowhawk sailed over our heads, giving us lovely views.

Moving on to Loch Maben Castle, we ventured out to the hide. We saw a grey heron, a skein of pink-footed geese, teal, great black-backed gulls and a mute swan. Back on dry land, a stock dove flew over the farmland with great spotted woodpecker, robin, greenfinches, great tits, blue tits, coal tits and 4 redwings in the treetops. We heard some calls, and found a pair of squabbling or possibly courting nuthatches, which chased each other through a long line of trees, even going right down to the ground in their explorations. After that, we saw a tree creeper.

Travelling on to the River Esk, near Gretna, we saw barnacle geese, redshanks and curlew amongst the black-headed and lesser black-backed gulls on the sandbanks, with possible sightings of greenshank and bar-tailed godwit, but we haven't counted those as the light was fading fast and we couldn't be sure. We moved to the lay-by on the A7076, hoping to see the huge flocks of starlings doing their marvellous flying display, but wildlife is unpredictable and we got no spectacular starling flights. However, we did see a small flock heading due south passing over the filling station at Gretna services. I guess they had had enough of the cold Scottish weather!

In spite of missing the starling displays, we had a good day and altogether, we saw 56 species.

RSPB Volunteer and Farmer Alliance

Would you like to make the most of your bird ID skills and take part in one of the UK's most important conservation projects?

RSPB's Volunteer & Farmer Alliance Project (V&FA) is a UK wide project which offers farmers and crofters free farmland bird surveys. Since it first started more than 10 years ago, over 5000 farms have been surveyed across the UK. Over 500 farms have been surveyed in Scotland, and we look to survey approximately 120 farms in Scotland each year.

We have only been able to offer and carry out these surveys due to the invaluable contribution of more than 2000 volunteers across the UK and over 200 in Scotland, but as demand for surveys grows we require more volunteers!

Volunteers are matched to a farm within 20 miles and they undertake an initial visit to meet the farmer and go over any health and safety issues. They then visit the farm to carry out three or four early morning surveys between April and July. The area surveyed is usually a maximum of 80 hectares and visits take between 3 or 4 hours. Please note that not all volunteers are asked to carry out surveys every year, as there may not be a farm within the 20 mile radius.

Volunteer observations allow project staff to construct a picture of the birds of conservation concern on the farm. The farmer receives an A3, laminated colour map with these findings, a report, full species list and the latest advisory information on how to help farmland birds. Volunteers also receive a copy of the farm map and a report.

For more information and/or to become a volunteer please visit our website:
www.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/farming/vandfa/index.aspx

Alternatively, please contact your local V&FA Project Officer:

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Did you take part? Big Garden Birdwatch

RSPB Scotland asked everybody to join in its annual garden bird survey, to help shed some light on how Scotland's wildlife has fared during the worst winter for almost half a century. The Big Garden Birdwatch returned on the 29th and 30th of January 2011 and the charity is hoping this year's numbers will break last year's record numbers of participants, to help document responses to the Big Freeze.

For almost all of December, Scotland faced sub-zero temperatures. The bitter conditions raised fears that many of our well-known species were at risk of starvation as natural food sources succumbed to the snow and ice. During the harsh conditions many of our garden birds were forced to rely on food and water kindly provided by humans, but there is little clue as to how many survived the cold spell.

Now in its 32nd year, the Big Garden Birdwatch provides RSPB Scotland with a 'snapshot' picture of garden bird numbers in each region of the country and can help highlight any worrying declines. 2010 saw a record breaking 37,000 Scots count the birds feeding in their gardens. Each spent just an hour of their time noting which species could be spotted.

Dr Paul Walton, RSPB Scotland's Head of Habitats and Species, said: "We cannot be certain of the prolonged cold spell's impacts on Scotland's birdlife. We do know December was one of the coldest on record and that many species exhibited stressed behaviour, struggling to find food during the freezing temperatures. It's likely small bodied birds will have been hard hit. These birds all have high metabolic rates and therefore need to feed constantly to ensure they have enough energy to survive the bitter nights. Fortunately, these populations

can bounce back during the breeding season if habitat and feeding conditions are good.

"We're hoping the Big Garden Birdwatch 2011 has been another record breaking year. The more results we have, the better chance we have of spotting any worrying trends. Everyone can contribute to gathering this information - while at the same time having fun and enjoying the wildlife that visits their gardens."

Across the UK, record numbers of people submitted their results over the weekend of the wildlife charity's 2011 Big Garden Birdwatch, with over 100,000 forms received. There was almost a 20 per cent increase in results submitted on the weekend of the survey since last year. You can find out the results of the survey in a future issue, or by visiting www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch when they have been published.

Fun Fundraising

Looking for ideas on how to help your favourite conservation charity to raise those much needed funds? Then look no further, there are plenty of ways in which the group members, friends, family and colleagues can get involved:

- Use a tombola kit or "name the species game" at a stand or at your event. It's a simple and fun way to raise funds. All resources for these games can be ordered from Scotland Headquarters.
- Take a pin badge display board out to events. These boards display the badges and you will find that they encourage people to flock to your stand to look and "buy".

- Organise and run a fundraising event such as a plant sale, coffee morning or fundraising dinner.

- Take part in the Love Nature Week collections that are running from 28th May until 5th June. For more details visit www.rspb.org.uk/lovenatureweek

- Take part in an event and ask friends and family to sponsor you.

As you know, in order to do the amazing conservation work that we do, RSPB relies heavily on the donations from members, corporates, trusts, foundations, volunteers and other supporters. These contributions help projects worldwide, from supporting the Albatross Task Team reduce the deaths of albatrosses around the southern oceans, to managing wetland reserves, such as Vane Farm near Kinross, for breeding birds. We are proud to say that 91p from every £1 donations goes directly towards our conservation work.

So if you are feeling inspired to get involved with fundraising and would like more information about how to organise an event, or simply where to get the tombola kits and name games please call Nicki Wilde on 0131 317 4174 or nicki.wilde@rspb.org.uk. Alternatively Nicki is offering to hold a fundraising workshop for each Local Group to show case the resources and help with ideas for events and activities.

Every penny raised for RSPB makes a huge difference to wildlife and conservation.



Arran Birding Notes

Jim Cassels. For complete birding notes and more photos from Arran please visit www.arranbirding.co.uk

December was one of the coldest on record for the UK. This is reflected in the following bird notes.

For example throughout the month there were widespread reports of brambling, the northern relative of chaffinch, from Pirnmill to Shannochie and from Blackwaterfoot to Whiting Bay. There were more reports of this irruptive winter visitor than there had been in the previous three winters combined. Jack snipe were reported from Port-na-Lochan on 18th, High Kildonan on 20th, Auchengallon on 24th, Drumadoon on 25th and East Bennan on 28th December.

A wide variety of winter visitors were reported including: one hundred fieldfare at Lochranza on 6th, a male black redstart at Margnaheglish on 11th, eight redwing at Lamlash on 28th, a purple sandpiper at Kildonan on 28th, and on 30th seven rooks and six goldeneye at Blackwaterfoot. There were 34 barnacle geese at Clauchlands on 2nd December, which is the largest group recorded on Arran in the last thirty years. A white-tailed eagle, a rare vagrant to Arran, was seen being mobbed by buzzards over Kingscross on 1st. There were two unusual records from Lamlash, water rail on 14th and Moorhen on 30th December.

Also, there was a wide range of other interesting species reported including: three male goosanders in Loch Ranza on 5th, a kingfisher in the Rosa burn on 8th, fifteen long-tailed tits in Lamlash on 11th, Crossbill at Fallen Rocks on 12th, fifty reed buntings by Machrie standing stones on 12th, two little grebe in Loch Ranza on 19th, four dipper at Glenashdalewaterfoot on 21st, a female yellowhammer in Corriecravie on 27th, a male stonechat at Kildonan on 29th and two great northern divers off Kilpatrick on 30th.

January was cold and predominantly dry with the exception of a few days of rain in the middle of the month. As in December, there were further reports of: brambling including four in Glenloig on 3rd, redwing including three in Shiskine on 8th, waxwing including ten in Brodick on 19th and fieldfare including twenty on the Ross Road on the 29th. A long staying female pintail was seen between 11th to 28th on the shore between Blackwaterfoot and Kilpatrick. This is only the second record of this species in the last seventeen years.

Other winter visitors included: a grey plover at Kildonan on 1st, four purple sandpipers also at Kildonan on 4th, a pair of goldeneye at Catacol on 13th, the long staying greenshank still at Clauchlands on 21st and seven whooper swans including three juveniles at Sandbraes on 21st January. There was a wide range of other interesting species reported including: a merlin at Imachar on 1st, four dunlin at Kildonan on 2nd, five twite at Machrie on 5th, sixteen common crossbills above Grouse Lodge on 17th and twelve bullfinches at Tormusk on 26th. There were some signs of approaching Spring with gannet off Sandbraes on 30th and twelve fulmars on the cliff at Drumadoon on 16th.

February was warmer and wetter than January. Other more unusual garden birds included a brambling in Whiting Bay on 2nd, twenty six siskin in Blackwaterfoot on 9th, a great spotted woodpecker in Lochranza on 15th, a pair of blackcaps in Whiting Bay on 17th, a lesser redpoll in Pirnmill on 18th and yellowhammers on 23rd.

It was a good month for seeing wildfowl with forty six mallard at Sliderrywaterfoot on 1st, three goldeneye in Whiting Bay on 7th, forty seven teal and eleven red-breasted mergansers at Machrie on 12th and the long staying female pintail at Kilpatrick on 28th. There was a male shoveler on the pond at Shiskine on 20th, which is only the second record in the last fifteen years. All three divers were reported, including three red-throats in Lamlash Bay on 10th, two black-throats off Blackwaterfoot on 11th and three great northern in Machrie Bay on 12th.

Other sightings included four little grebe in Lochranza on 2nd, a kingfisher on the Rosa Burn on 8th and eighteen lapwing at Kilpatrick on 12th. Finally, there were a pair of golden eagles displaying over Lochranza on 8th and a buzzard carrying nest material in Shiskine on 28th.



Above: Lesser Redpoll.
Right: Jack Snipe.

