

Fife SOC

Newsletter No. 189

Compiled by Elizabeth Irwin

February 2018



Dunnock in the Golf Museum car park, St Andrews; Andrew Riches

Our next Newsletter will be Issue No. 190 for April 2018. Articles, letters, reports and photographs in *jpeg* or *tiff* format for publication should be sent, by Tuesday 3rd April at the latest, to Elizabeth Irwin at Drumcarrow Cottage, Pettycruik, Strathkinness KY16 9XP or email: elizabethjirwin@hotmail.com

FROM THE CHAIR

Welcome to the first newsletter of 2018, where we look back to the Fife SOC events at the end of last year and forward to what is planned for 2018. We are firmly in the grip of winter weather as I write this, but already there are glimpses of spring. The catkins, snowdrops and aconites are in flower, and many of our garden birds have beautiful plumage ready for the breeding season.

Having just seen big numbers of 'our' European Barn Swallows feeding and resting in the trees in Botswana, it is amazing to think that soon they will choose to leave the hot sunshine (and plentiful insects!) and commence the long journey back to breed in Europe. It is exciting to look forward to the arrival of these spring migrants.

If you are inside with time to spare, have you looked at the new SOC website that is up and running? You will find a wealth of useful information there about 'Scotland's Bird Club'.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed articles and photographs for this newsletter and I do hope to see you at some of our events.

Elizabeth Irwin

Forthcoming meetings at the Town Hall:-

Wed 14th February Ian Poxton – ***Merlins in the Lammermuir Hills 1984 – 2014***: how birds and fieldworkers get by on heavily kept grouse moors.
Wed 14th March Ian Perks – ***Abernethy: Restoring the lost forest***.
Wed 11th April ***AGM and members' night***.

Forthcoming outings:-

Members wishing to go on outings must let the leader know that they intend to attend by the Thursday before the outing at the very latest.



Red Kite at Argaty: Paul Taylor

Sat 17th Feb **Rhynd and Carsebreck Lochs + Argaty** for waterfowl and Red Kites: Elizabeth and John Irwin jirwin735@gmail.com. NB There is a £6/5 charge (exact cash) payable to Argaty
Sunday 18th Mar **Tayport** (to watch the estuary as the tide comes in and see what's about): Andrew Riches riches54@btinternet.com
Sunday 22nd April **Inversnaid and RSPB Loch Lomond** (hoping for Pied Flycatcher and other breeding birds): Dave Heeley dw.heeley@btinternet.com

NB Thursday May 31st - Tuesday June 5th **trip to Norfolk/Suffolk**: Dave Heeley. Please give early expressions of interest to Dave at dw.heeley@btinternet.com. The idea is for members to arrange their own travel and accommodation to suit personal preferences. The visits will provisionally include Strumpshaw Fen, Hickling Broad, Minsmere and other sites in Norfolk/Suffolk with bases around Norwich and Lakenheath. At this stage an indication of numbers is helpful.

Members are reminded that neither the Club nor its branches or individual leaders of outings can accept any responsibility for any injury suffered by individuals taking part in these outings, or any loss or damage to their property.

Christmas dinner and branch raffle

Once again branch members enjoyed a sociable festive meal at The Fairways Restaurant, Elmwood Golf Course, Cupar. Our guests this year were Professor Will Cresswell and David Steel. Both guests make a tremendous contribution to SOC aims and activities in Fife. Will Cresswell is known for his work at the St Andrews University, his accounts of birding in Fife, and his support for Fife branch meetings – especially of course the student contributions in September. David Steel is currently the warden on the Isle of May and we hope will be coming to talk to us later this year.

The branch raffle was drawn, and congratulations to the winner– Professor Jeremy Greenwood. I can't think of a more appropriate person to receive the silver bookmark prize – who reads more books than Jeremy?

Although the dinner was enjoyed by all who attended, we did note that numbers were slightly reduced on previous years. We would welcome views on how to proceed next year: is the timing suitable? Would members prefer a lunch time? The venue gives excellent service, quality and value, but would members prefer a different location?

Next committee meeting

The committee will meet again in March, so if you have any suggestions for the agenda, or for ideas for meetings, outings or activities, please contact me or any of our current committee members who are Elizabeth Adams, Rob Armstrong, Norman Elkins, Caroline Gordon (Secretary), John Irwin (Treasurer), Andrew Riches and Paul Taylor (Representative on Council).

Your Fife Branch needs you! If you feel you can contribute in any way to your local branch we would love to hear your ideas. We welcome photographs and contributions for the newsletter, or could you offer to lead an outing, or give a short presentation at a members' evening? Would you put yourself forward for the committee? If you are not sure about any of these but would like more information, please contact any committee member.

GOSHAWKS IN FIFE 2017 & 2018

Ken Shaw, Harry Bell, Tom Ross, Graham Sparshott (Recorder), Malcolm Ware

As many of you may know there has been considerable progress on the Goshawk work in Fife. An informal group was set up to study this species in 2016 led by Harry Bell and myself (Ken Shaw).

Last year we visited suitable woodlands and forest during the display time and found a min of 8 pairs and a max of 12 pairs. The exact figure is more likely to be closer to the max figure. However, we also know we did not get them all. The work continues in 2018 and ALL birdwatchers in Fife can contribute. There are THREE levels of contribution. Firstly, if you see a Goshawk (especially in the breeding season) please report it to the county recorder and / or Harry or Ken Shaw. If you want to look for Goshawks locally choose a nice day in the second half of March, find a good overview of 'your' wood and give it as long as you can, preferably all day. Thirdly, if you are very keen contact the group.

The pairs we have are fairly well distributed with strongholds in the SW and NE. The area which requires the most work is the centre of the county. Birdwatchers always ask me for very specific tips when looking for this species. Here is a VERY specific tip; display was noted at most sites on 24 March 2017, mostly in the mid to late morning. It was a good day, 5% cloud cover, SW2.

We are taking a very different approach to this species than most counties where the work is 'top secret'. There are two very good reasons for this; we believe this secretive species is more common than once believed and, secondly, we trust our observers.

Fife Branch SOC talk: *Tool-use behaviour in New Caledonian and Hawaiian Crows* by Professor Christian Rutz

Members of the Fife SOC branch were treated to an excellent talk by Professor Christian Rutz on 10th January 2018.

It was clear from the start that Christian was at the top of his research field and was also able to communicate effectively to our group. His enthusiasm for his subject enlivened the presentation.

Christian works on tool use by crows found in New Caledonia and by Hawaiian Crows, which are now only present in captivity. In order to undertake field studies in such distant and remote areas, it is essential to enlist the co-operation and approval of local people. Christian explained the problems of working under these conditions. Several videos illustrated the remarkable ability of these birds to utilise tools to winkle larvae from holes in decaying trees. They were highly skilled in presenting the tool to the larvae, which promptly grabbed the tool with their mouthparts and were whisked out of their hiding place. Indeed, the crows were more skillful than one of Christian's previous mentors who tried unsuccessfully to mimic their actions.

The crows not only use tools for collecting food but also shape the tools for more efficient use. Christian explained that the shape of the crow's head and eye position enabled these birds to use tools grasped in their beaks effectively. The crows in New Caledonia have evolved in a closed environment without predators or the presence of any woodpeckers, which might present a competition for food. Studying the Hawaiian Crows in captivity, Christian was able to show that juveniles developed tool-using skills without being trained. Although the New Caledonian islands were distant from St. Andrews, we were transported there and the remarkable world of the crow population.

Further information:

Christian Rutz et al.

Discovery of species - wide tool use in the Hawaiian crow.

Nature 537 no.7620 pp 493-407

(Free access to the article on Christian's page at the School of Biology website)

Andrew Riches

My Favourite Patch: George Evans Hide, Balgove Bay, St. Andrews



The George Evans hide is a Fife Coast and Countryside Trust hide and is part of the Eden Estuary Local Nature Reserve.

It is positioned on the most southerly shoreline of Balgove Bay, which forms the larger outer estuary of the Eden. The hide is accessed from the car park at the Golf Driving Range and the Eden Club House. Follow the tarmac track past the bungalow, which houses the starters box for the Balgove course. The track crosses the Strathtyrum course and shortly follows by the side

of the 14th fairway of the Eden course to the hide, which is at the end of an avenue of trees on the seawall overlooking the bay. The walk takes about 15 – 20 minutes. As it crosses the golf courses in several places be aware of golfers driving across the track.

The bay is fantastic for both waders and wildfowl including species such as Pintail, Teal, Wigeon, Shelduck, Light-bellied Brent, Dunlin, Knot, Redshank, Curlew, Ruff and the occasional Curlew Sandpiper, Spotted Redshank, Red-throated Diver and Bar-tailed Godwit. Otters are also seen from the hide on occasions. You might also be surprised by the appearance of a golfer looking for their ball after an errant shot.

The hide is best visited as the tide pushes the feeding birds right up under the hide's view, so 2hrs before high tide is ideal. Over the next hour the birds will be pushed closer to you giving spectacular close-up views at this time.

Ranald Strachan informed me that the hide is named after a local expert birder who died back in 2010. George was an experienced and keen ornithologist who had wardened at Gibraltar Point and even taught Bill Oddie to birdwatch! He spent many days at a time in the hide at Guardbridge and his knowledge was freely passed out to all visitors interested to ask. He helped many novice birders get the hang of waders and wildfowl; no easy task.

The hide is entered by a combination padlock, the number is available from Ranald the local ranger on 07985 707593. It is open 7 days per week. Just remember to lock it after you leave.

Andrew Riches



Brent Geese from the George Evan Hide: Andrew Riches

Trip reports:-

Loch of Kinnordy and Loch of Lintrathen 11th November 2017

Nine hardy souls met at the Tay Bridge car park on a sunny but cold day with a chilly breeze. We rationalised cars and headed first to Loch of Kinnordy.

Here there was no sign of the Red-head Smew that had been reported the previous day (and has since reappeared!), but there were several of its larger relative the Goosander, including some nice drakes. From Gullery Hide a Kingfisher was the highlight and some Snipe were found hiding among the bogbean. East Hide gave some good views of a very mobile Greylag Goose flock and some

Whooper Swans but I failed to confirm the presence of a Barn Owl in its nest box (too many reed heads in the way!). Swamp Hide produced an excellent selection of duck including Gadwall, Shoveler, Teal, Wigeon and Goldeneye. Greylags were present here too, both on the loch and feeding in the fields behind. A few Pinkfeet were in amongst them together with a Barnacle x Greylag hybrid and a bizarre bird with a white girdle – presumably containing some domestic goose! A male Stonechat provided some passerine interest.

From Kinnordy we drove a few miles west to Loch of Lintrathen. From the new hide, more wildfowl were added to the list, with Pochard and Canada Goose, together with large numbers of Wigeon. Both Little and Great Crested Grebes were seen and Anne picked up a distant Red Kite which sadly vanished from view.



Greylag geese at Loch of Kinnordy: Allister Todd

I found an interesting finch flock feeding in loch side larches which contained Goldfinches, Siskins and Lesser Redpolls. In order to get a better view of the flock we returned to the cars and had lunch. A distant Red Kite flew past, enabling more of us to add the species to our growing list. Our final halt was at the old hide on the north shore, driving past the unusual sight of a Buzzard and a Sparrowhawk sitting in the same tree. The walk to the hide produced plenty of Jay activity and a nice flock of Bullfinches, though another finch flock was probably Chaffinch rather than the hoped for Crossbills. It had been a productive day with a good range of species.

Rob Armstrong

Eden Estuary and St Andrews Bay, 14th January 2018

We stayed close to home for our first outing of the year, working our way downstream from Guardbridge to St Andrews Bay.

It was a dry and bright start to the day. 12 of us met at the Guardbridge hide. The tide was starting to come in but most of the birds were still fairly distant. The waders we saw included Black-tailed Godwit, Lapwing, Curlew, Redshank, Knot, Oystercatcher and Grey Plover while on the duck front, there were Goldeneye, Teal, Shelduck and Mallard. A Grey Heron flew past and a group of Pink-footed Geese flew over. The trees held Blue and Coal Tits, Tree Sparrow and Blackbird. We also picked out a distant Whooper Swan.

We didn't stay long at Guardbridge as we wanted to get to Balgove Bay in good time for the incoming tide. It's not possible to get 11 people (one down after Guardbridge) into the hide *and* for all of them to be able to see out so 4 or 5 people braved the elements outside where it was getting increasingly windy and cold. As the tide pushed the birds towards us, we had good views of Grey Plovers with a group of at least 31, many hundreds of Dunlin, Pintail, Wigeon, Shelduck and Oystercatcher and a solitary Turnstone. A Buzzard and a Kestrel flew over the golf courses and a Mistle Thrush fed on one of the fairways. After an hour, the tide was almost fully in and we moved on.

Our next stop was the Bruce Embankment car park in St Andrews. There were big waves rolling in to the West Sands so it was very much a case of 'now you see them, now you don't' as far as finding the birds was concerned. But we got good numbers of Common Scoter along with Scaup, Eider, Cormorant, a Red-throated Diver and a couple of Great Crested Grebes. We met Les Hatton who was doing a WeBS count and he pointed us in the direction of a small group of Purple Sandpipers – up to 6 birds – tucked onto a ledge on the cliffs which they were sharing with a few Redshank. Fulmar and Rock Pipit were also added to the list for the day. In the car park, we were joined by some hungry looking Rooks and Carrion Crows as well as a Pied Wagtail.

It was a much reduced party of just 4 who headed along to Outhead. A flock of 23 Ringed Plovers with 3 Sanderling flew in while at the edge of the dunes, there was a small group of Linnets feeding with a couple of Stonechats, a Reed Bunting and a Greenfinch. We met Les again who had finished his count and told us there was at least one Velvet Scoter that he'd picked out among the 1500+ Common Scoters in the Bay. We missed that one! At that point, we called it a day and headed to the warmth of home.

Caroline Gordon



Pintail: Andrew Riches

Fife Bird Sightings:

November 2017

Whooper Swans were at Clatto (63 on 2nd), Lindores Loch (six on 9th), Craigluscar (20 on 9th, 33 on 19th) and Wilderness (16 on 29th). A Tundra Bean Goose was over Ardross Farm on 11th, Pale-bellied Brent Geese continued in the Eden Estuary and one was at Cocklemill Burn on 8th. The Greater Scaup flock took up residence again in St Andrews Bay with 53 logged on 3rd, rising to 70 by 9th; two females were noted on Kilconquhar Loch (14th) and a drake was at Loch Gelly on 7th. Numbers of Common Scoters built with Ruddons Point logging 250 on 14th, Tentsmuir 750 on the same date and an astonishing c5000 off Kinshaldy beach on 15th. Velvet Scoters were at Seafield, Ruddons Point (105 on 14th) and Tentsmuir (120 on 14th) with a count of 410 at Kinshaldy on 15th. The drake Surf Scoter was frequent from Ruddons Point. A flock of 40+ Long-tailed Ducks were off Kinshaldy; 45 Red-breasted Mergansers were noted in Dalgety Bay and Birnie Loch held a group of 11 Goosanders (9th). Increasingly scarce Grey Partridges showed at Kirkton Barns (five on 18th) and Dunbog (three on 27th). Red-throated Divers were overwintering in Largo Bay, off Ruddons Point (27 on 2nd) and Tentsmuir; Black-throated Divers were off Ruddons Point; Great Northern Divers were in Largo Bay and off Ruddons Point, Elie Ness and Ferry Hills; Slavonian Grebes were in Largo Bay and off Tentsmuir; a Great Crested Grebe was seen at Tentsmuir and Red-necked Grebes were in Largo Bay. Little Egrets were at the Eden Estuary, Tayport, Kincardine (first record), Tentsmuir and Cameron Reservoir. Merlins were seen at Pittenweem and Tentsmuir. Kilrenny held a flock of 50 Golden Plovers on 12th, with a fine flock of 300+ residing at the Eden Estuary from 8th. Purple Sandpipers provided interest at Dysart (five on 19th), Seafield (32 on 29th), Ruddons Point (14th) and Anstruther (22 on 16th). A Spotted Redshank was at the Eden Estuary 1st – 3rd. A lucky observer noted a Woodcock come in off the sea at Anstruther on 8th. Valleyfield Lagoons logged 42 Common Snipe on 4th. Mediterranean Gulls continued at West Wemyss, Dysart, Buckhaven and Burntisland. Seafield recorded two lingering migrants with a Sandwich Tern there on 14th, and a Barn Swallow on 19th. Little Auk were past Fife Ness (two on 10th) and Ruddons Point (12 on 14th). A Black Guillemot was there also. A Barn Owl showed at Auchtermuchty (1st) and a Long-eared Owl at Fordell (11th). A group of eight Northern race Bullfinches was an excellent find at Ferry Hills staying until at least 18th. Ferry Hills also logged Hawfinches on 5th and 18th. Bramblings visited Kirkcaldy, St Andrews and Ferry Hills (49 on 11th). Twite came to the coast at Dysart, Elie Ness, Kingsbarns (50 on 13th) and Inverkeithing. Snow Buntings were at Outhead and Ruddons Point, and nine Corn Buntings were noted at Pittenweem (26th).

December 2017

Twelve Pale-bellied Brent Geese continued in the Eden Estuary (logged from Outhead), Scaup were at Kilconquhar Loch (three on 26th), drake Surf Scoters were off Ruddons Point, Kinshaldy and in Largo Bay (16th), Long-tailed Ducks were noted off Seafield (36 on 3rd) and in Largo Bay, and Goldeneyes were at Angle Park (23 on 7th), Newton Sandpit (eight on 8th) and Birnie and Gaddon Lochs (12 on 20th). A redheaded Smew visited Lochore Meadows from 4th – 27th, and a flock of 13 Goosanders returned to Birnie and Gaddon Lochs. Red-throated Divers were in Largo Bay as were Black-throated Divers with a Great Northern Diver noted off Seafield (30th). Slavonian Grebes were at Dalgety Bay and a notable 26 were logged at Kinshaldy on 4th. Little Egrets continued in the Eden Estuary and at Tayport (three again on 17th). The two resident White-tailed Eagles were noted in the Eden Estuary. A Hen Harrier was at Pittenweem (15th) and a Merlin was at Wormiston (26th). Purple Sandpipers were at a number of coastal sites including Seafield (35 on 2nd), Kinghorn (8 on 10th), Kirkcaldy (16th), Balcomie Bay (24 on 17th), St Andrews (both the West Sands and Harbour areas) and Anstruther (28 on 30th). Two Woodcock were found in Moss Plantation (26th). A singleton Little Gull was past Kinghorn. The spread of Mediterranean Gulls continued with sightings from Abden, Kinghorn, Buckhaven, Kilconquhar Loch, Ruddons Point, Kirkcaldy, Seafield, Thornton Pond and Loch Gelly. The first report of returning Northern Fulmars was from St Andrews on 21st. Two Little Auks were past Ruddons Point (12th) and a Black Guillemot was at Inverkeithing (11th). Barn Owls were seen at Wormit (4th) and Den of Lindores (13th) with a Short-eared Owl at Halbeath (13th).

Waxwings were at Crossford (17th – 18th), a possible pair of Nuthatches were in Dunfermline Glen on 20th. Bramblings and Snow Buntings were over Ferryhills on 9th. Twite were logged at Cocklemill Marsh (20 on 1st) and Balcomie Beach (nine on 17th, 50 on 31st); Snow Buntings were at Tentsmuir (13th – 17th) with possibly the same flock on the other side of the Eden at Outhead (21st, 22nd). Seven+ Lapland Buntings remained at Wormiston (19th – 31st) and a good count of 28 Corn Buntings was made at Coal Farm on 17th.



Lapland Bunting at Wormiston: Andrew Riches

January 2018

Highlights: A Great White Egret was at Rossie Bog from 12th.

Whooper Swans were at Lochore Meadows throughout with a Greenland race White-fronted Goose there also on 17th. Two Brent Geese were past Seafield, Pintails were in the Eden Estuary and two Scaup visited Kilconquhar Loch on 3rd. Largo Bay held Common Scoters, Velvet Scoters, a drake Surf Scoter (from Ruddons Point), Long-tailed Ducks, Red-throated Divers, Slavonian Grebes and Purple Sandpipers. A notable 91 Goldeneye were in Kirkcaldy harbour on 27th. A redheaded Smew was at Lochore Meadows 1st – 15th, three Red Grouse were noted at Craigmead (7th). Black-throated Divers were off Pathhead and Seafield. A Little Egret continued at Tayport, White Tailed Eagles were at the Eden Estuary, and two Merlins were logged at Balcomie (21st). Twenty-Five Purple Sandpipers were counted at Anstruther on 15th, a Greenshank was at Culross and the overwintering Whimbrel stayed at Ruddons Point. Little Gulls were at Pathhead and Burntisland, Mediterranean Gulls were at Anstruther, Balcomie, Buckhaven, Burntisland, Kirkcaldy, Levenmouth and Pittenweem. Iceland Gulls visited Anstruther and West Wemyss. A Black Guillemot was off Seafield (13th). A Barn Owl was seen at Auchtermuchty (27th) and a Short-eared Owl at Norman's Law (17th). Two Waxwings were at St Andrews on 13th, Twite were noted at Wormiston 1st – 8th, Kingsbarns and Balcomie. Nine Crossbills were a good record for Craigmead on 7th. Snow Buntings visited Tentsmuir (6th) and Outhead (9th 10th), nine Lapland Buntings were at Wormiston (1st) and there was a fine record of 43 Corn Buntings at Boghall Farm on 17th.

Kinghorn logged Common Scoters, Velvet Scoters, Long-tailed Ducks, Red-breasted Mergansers, Red-throated Divers (23 on 4th), Black-throated Divers, a Great Northern Diver, Great Crested Grebes, a Peregrine, Purple Sandpipers, a Great Skua, Little Gulls and Mediterranean Gulls.

*(Records of bird sightings for February to March, for inclusion in the April Newsletter should be sent by **Monday 2nd April 2018 at the latest** to David Heeley at dw.heeley@btinternet.com or 50 High Street, Newburgh, Fife KY14 6AQ)*



Dipper at Glen Esk: David Heeley

The SOC is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation Reg. No SC009859