

Fife SOC

Newsletter No. 202

Compiled by Elizabeth Irwin

June 2021



Ring Ouzel: Andrew Riches

Our next Newsletter will be Issue No. 203 for September 2021. Articles, letters, reports, and photographs in jpeg or tiff format for publication should be sent, by Monday 6th September at the latest, to Elizabeth Irwin at Drumcarrow Cottage, Pettycruik, Strathkinness KY16 9XP or email: fifechair@the-soc.org.uk

FROM THE CHAIR

The focus for this issue is looking forward to new horizons and travel, as possibilities start to open. Norman Elkins challenges us to think about the wider implications of our bird watching journeys with a fascinating perspective (p6). I hope you will also enjoy hearing about some of the things that have been going on with SOC nationally (p3). There are some interesting developments and a clear focus on building for the future. If you are heading to the Highlands, the local branch there is appealing for your records (p3). Whatever your plans for summer, happy birding.

Elizabeth Irwin

Planned meetings:

Wed 08 Sep *Presentations from St Andrews University PhD students on their research projects*

Our season of talks will resume in September, and it is impossible to say with any certainty exactly how they will take place – especially as St Andrews Town Hall is still firmly shut.

Our aim is for Fife's talks to return to the second Wednesday of each month in the Supper Room at the Town Hall in St Andrews. Of course, at this stage, who knows what will be possible or advisable! We are also exploring ways of recording or streaming meetings so that we can combine the best of face-to-face and virtual meetings.

If we do return to talks via *Zoom*, we plan to join up with Tayside again, and alternate between second Wednesdays, and Tayside's preferred day of the first Thursday in the month. That will be no real hardship as the virtual talks so far have been excellent, and we have enjoyed the company of Tayside members. We will keep you all up to date with what is happening via mailchimps and in the next newsletter. Do get in touch if you have any thoughts about how we run the meetings.

Planned Outings:

At the time of writing, outings are cancelled because of continued concerns about safety. We hope to be able to start up again in September (or earlier if possible), and we will let you know when this happens, via mailchimp. If you want guidance about what is permitted in terms of more formal bird surveys, there is information on the SOC website and on the BTO and Scottish Government websites.

SOC annual conference: 19th-21st November 2021 at the *Atholl Palace Hotel*, Pitlochry. Planning is underway, with a back-up plan of a virtual conference if needed. The theme this year is '*Conservation*'.



Nuthatch in the garden: Nigel Duncan

Are you planning a holiday in the Highlands this summer?

[Highland SOC](#) are asking for help with their Species Focus this year – a citizen science project for a ‘stay at home’ summer. If you're birdwatching in the region, the branch would be particularly keen to hear of any sightings of two resident bird species: Red-breasted Merganser and Crested Tit. Both species are on Rare Breeding Birds Panel (RBBP) list and Highland holds important breeding populations, but surprisingly few actual breeding records. Please [click here](#) for more information on the branch's appeal and to find out how you can help. Thank you very much! (*per Jane Allison*)



Crested Tit: Laurie Campbell

SOC News:

New Birding Officer: The SOC has taken the very exciting step of appointing a full-time birding officer. Council approved the necessary expenditure and agreed that given the key focus of the SOC is on survey and science, the post should be on a full-time permanent basis. The post was advertised widely and a very strong field of applicants emerged. Following interviews in early May, **Mark Lewis** was appointed and starts work as I write this on 14th June. Mark comes to the SOC from JNCC where he was an offshore monitoring ornithologist. He is based in Aberdeen and is well known to the birding community. He has a particular interest in nocturnal migration, is a member of the Scottish Rarities Group, developed the ‘*Patchwork Challenge*’ – and so on! Part of his remit will be to support and work with Local Bird Recorders and with Branches. I hope we will be able to welcome him in Fife soon.

New Treasurer: Andrew Thorpe has moved south to live in England, so the SOC has been on the hunt for a new treasurer. At the Council meeting on Sunday 13th June we were able to welcome Richard Kerr, who has

agreed to take on this role. He lives in Pencaitland and was an accountant until he retired recently. We look forward to working with him.

Scottish Birds goes online: I wondered if you have had time to look at the digital flipbook version of *Scottish Birds*? I thought it was excellent. This is the first time that the digital version has been tried in this way, and everyone at Waterston House is keen to get feedback. As we look to the future, digital versions are more environmentally friendly (and cheaper) than printing and posting out so much paper. If the digital version is well received by members, the club hopes to offer the choice of a digital or paper copy of *Scottish Birds* and the website would allow members to log in rather than need to use a password each time. There is a cost to updating the website so that this can happen – hence the use of a password system this time.

Bird Watching for Beginners on the SOC website: this has proved very popular. If you haven't looked at it yet, why not take a peek – even if you are not a beginner!

SOC App: Also at Sunday's Council meeting, Dr Alan Knox updated us on usage of this popular app. He broke it down as follows:

The number of site accounts viewed in the SOC app, per month as we come out of lockdown ...

| | |
|-----|--------|
| Feb | 10,908 |
| Mar | 14,910 |
| Apr | 22,666 |
| May | 39,654 |

It's also interesting to see the top 10 sites in May (below), shifting to the Highlands & Speyside in particular and away from the Central Belt/built up areas. Aviemore alone clocked up 495 views, and Grantown 429.

Aviemore
Grantown on Spey
Boat of Garten
Musselburgh Lagoons
Strathdearn (Findhorn Valley)
Insh Marshes
Dell Woods, Abernethy NNR
Cairngorm and Northern Corries
Ythan Estuary
Inshriach Forest

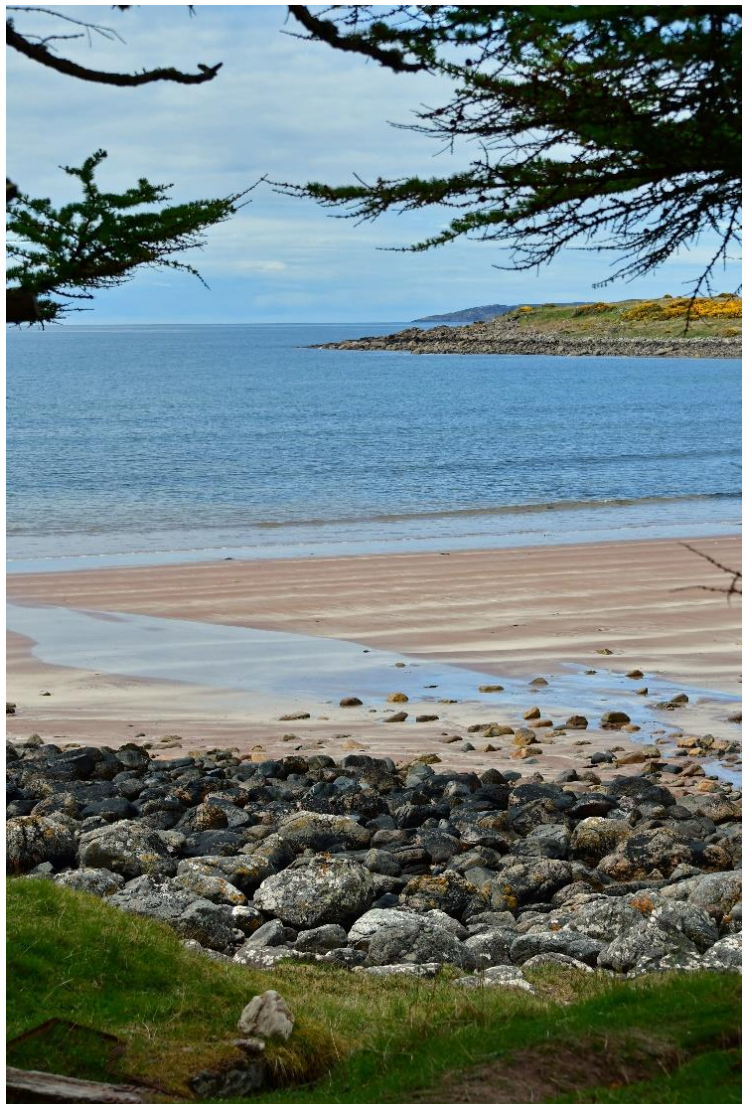


Linnet: Andrew Riches



Golden Plover hiding on Mungasdale Beach Wester Ross: Elizabeth Irwin

I can speak personally about the usefulness of the *SOC App*. On a recent week's holiday in Wester Ross, John and I made full use of the App to explore nearby bird watching sites. We would never have found Mungasdale Beach (let alone where to park to reach it) without the App. As you can see, it was a beautiful place and we were lucky enough to spot a party of Golden Plovers who had just arrived and were enjoying a bath. We also saw Great Northern Diver just off the beach there, to add to the Golden Eagles, White-tailed Eagles, Ravens, Great Northern Divers, and Red-throated Divers that we were able to see from the windows of our house as we looked out over Gruinard and the Summer Isles.



Elizabeth Irwin

Birding behaviour – a personal perspective

A talk by Jonathan Dean at a Zoom meeting of the Fife Bird Club in February of this year highlighted some interesting thoughts regarding the changing habits of birders. Long-standing Fife SOC members will remember Jonathan as a young and very keen local birder in the early 1990s, who now lives in England.

Jonathan spoke about 'Birding after COVID', beginning with the propensity of some birders to break COVID-19 rules by travelling long distances to 'twitch' a rarity. I am sure that some readers may have surreptitiously done so over short distances in the past year. I do not claim to be a twitcher, although in my younger days I would perhaps have driven locally to see a species new to me. I have avoided this during the pandemic, no matter how rare the species was. Proximity to others at a 'twitch' was not an option, being in a 'vulnerable' category and therefore trying to obey the rules by staying at home.

An associated practice (and one of the most pressing current issues) discussed by Jonathan concerned the need to curb our carbon footprint, particularly in relation to travel to distant parts of the world, often in pursuit of new species for one's life list. He also drew attention to a website devoted to 'low carbon birding' (<https://lowcarbonbirding.net/>) which is worth visiting and absorbing, even if you may not agree with all the topics or be able to practice all the ideas. Nothing in life is straightforward!

Wildlife tourism is a lucrative business nowadays, and many birders take the opportunity to travel widely across the globe. This kind of tourism is not something I have ever undertaken – my overseas birding has been limited to employment abroad and family holidays. I always enjoy watching species never seen at home but are all birders on a guided tour able to actually '*watch*' the species shown to them, rather than just ticking them off on a list? And how many report their observations to the relevant authorities? For example, the latest Balearic Bird Report (for 2019), which has an English language edition that I receive annually, showed only two British names in the list of contributors, despite the islands being a well-known, relatively short-haul, birding destination for many UK (and northern European) birders. Admittedly, such contributions may not be realistic if on a guided tour (never having been on one, I cannot claim to know the viability of this), but some effort could be made if notes are kept. It is so easy these days to find an outlet for one's records such as BirdTrack and eBird. These two online schemes accept global records, although I understand that not all national organisations access these as routine. However, all BirdTrack records feed into the EuroBirdPortal every night, so that one can see progress of migrant species across Europe at <https://www.eurobirdportal.org/>. BirdTrack also acts as an easily accessible repository for all one's records.

The provision of information directly to recording schemes overseas (if indeed there is that option) is a practice I feel strongly about. In many cases, reporting a local rarity will prompt a request for a description. I remember watching Royal and Lesser Crested Terns side by side in southern Spain, and was able to substantiate a vagrant adult Glaucous Gull record along the same coast with the photo shown. All were accepted by the Spanish rarities committee – these days so many birders have images that can be used to corroborate their descriptions. Any ringed birds can also be reported *via* the Euring website (which lists links to global schemes). In most countries the concentration of birders is much lower than in our own and visitors' records are accepted with gratitude. Added to all this is the value of keeping one's own notes, perhaps to look back on and relive the moment in years to come (I have done this during the pandemic with great enjoyment).

Of course, there are many other reasons for travel abroad, not least for employment and research, and there are aspects of wildlife tourism other than the problem of all the air miles stacked up. The joy of experiencing new countries, beautiful scenery and other climates and cultures is uplifting and provides different perspectives. Also important is the provision of income and employment for local businesses and people in tourist destinations, although recent global travel restrictions must have impacted on many local economies.



Adult Glaucous Gull with immature Yellow-legged Gulls, Huelva, S. Spain, May 2010: Norman Elkins

In less well-developed countries, this vital source of revenue cannot be underestimated, however one might decry overseas travel. The provision of records and the exchange of knowledge with locals are additional bonuses and have doubtless increased wildlife awareness across the world. The remit of some organisations (for example, the World Land Trust) is to save habitats and their wildlife in many underdeveloped countries, where local employment is an important outcome; I often wonder if donations to these bodies would be worthier than spending money on one's own distant travel (not half as exciting, though!).

I found Jonathan's remarks rather salutary and it is perhaps worth reflecting on the approaches we take. There are many views on this subject and we birders have to weigh up the pros and cons. Time and motivation are often barriers, and perhaps I am way behind the times. One could argue that a great deal of my own past birding was carried out before we worried about climate change so I am somewhat biased. I was also fortunate that my career took me to many locations throughout the UK and abroad, often allowing me easy access to prime birding sites.

On a related note, BTO members will have seen the spring issue of *BTO News* which explored the effects of the pandemic on birding and recording in 2020. Local and garden birding rocketed and our carbon footprint plummeted! Let's hope that 2021 is a more fruitful year. Keep safe!



Norman Elkins

Fife Bird Sightings:

March 2021

An Alpine Swift was photographed over Fife Ness on 25th. Two Common Cranes were over Pathhead on 18th and three were over Crail on 21st. There was a northerly passage of Whooper Swans on 21st including 43 noted over Kincaig, 58 over Outhead and 64 over Dunfermline. Reports of smaller numbers came from another seven sites. Seven White-fronted Geese were over Kilmany (1st), a Bean Goose was over Birnie Loch, a Barnacle Goose was at Newburgh, and Brent Geese were logged in the Eden Estuary at Balgove Bay (21) and Outhead (44). The drake Ring-necked Duck remained at Kinghorn Loch. A Pochard was an unusual record for Valleyfield Lagoons; Scaup were at Ravenscraig, the Eden Estuary (88 on 12th), Cameron Reservoir, Lower Largo and Craigluscar; Velvet and Common Scoters continued in numbers in St Andrews Bay. Lower Largo held 296 Velvet Scoters on 7th. The drake Smew remained at Cameron Reservoir. Red-throated Divers were at six coastal sites including 63 at Tentsmuir and 29 at Lower Largo. Black-throated Divers were seen at Leven and Fife Ness; Great Northern Divers were at Seafield, Pathhead, Ruddons Point (eight) and Burntisland. Kinshaldy held 135 Slavonian Grebes on 21st, with others noted at Ruddons Point (32 on 19th) and Lower Largo (27 on 31st). Red-necked Grebes stopped off at Outhead and Ruddons Point. The first Ospreys of the season were recorded over West Lomond and Newburgh (both 30th). Red Kites flew past Lindores, Coaltown of Balgonie, Kincaig Head, Dunfermline and Barns Farm; the juvenile Marsh Harrier continued at Newburgh. A Goshawk was displaying over Kemback Woods on 12th and Merlins were seen at Dunino Wood, Boarhills and Kilminning. A flock of c100 Golden Plovers dropped in at Caipie Dovecot, a Green Sandpiper remained at Lochore Meadows, a Whimbrel remained at Ruddons Point, and Grey Partridges were again noted at Braefoot. Kilconquhar Loch held a Mediterranean Gull. Iceland Gulls were at Newburgh (11th), Letham Pools and Lower Melville tip. A Glaucous Gull was at Burntisland. The first records of a Sand Martin came from Balcomie 25th and that for a Barn Swallow from Kirkcaldy and Lochore Meadows (both 30th). Wheatears appeared on the 31st at Outhead, Kilrenny Mill (five) and Crail. There were widespread reports of singing Chiffchaffs from the 7th onwards. Dunnikier Woods and Ballencrieff Park again logged Nuthatches. Twite continued at Kilrenny (105 on 9th), Crossbills at Burntisland (seven) and Bath Plantation, and Snow Buntings at Outhead (seven on 23rd). Kingsbarns held Snow Buntings, a Lapland Bunting and Corn Buntings.

April 2021

Letham Pools held Pochards, Little Ringed Plovers, Little Gulls, Mediterranean Gulls and Grasshopper Warblers. Brent Geese continued in Eden Estuary with others in Dalgety Bay; Pintails were in the Eden Estuary, Dalgety Bay and The Wilderness; Ring-necked Ducks remained at Beveridge Park, and Cameron Reservoir, and Scaup were noted at Cameron Reservoir, the Eden Estuary and Craigluscar. Lower Largo and Pathhead held good numbers of Common Scoters, Velvet Scoters and Long-tailed Ducks. Burntisland held c90 Red-breasted Mergansers on 14th. Red-throated Divers were logged at Leven (25 on 2nd), Lower Largo, Fife Ness, Ruddons Point (20 on 25th) and Braefoot Point, with Great Northern Divers noted off Ruddons Point, Lower Largo, Burntisland, Fife Ness and Leven; Slavonian Grebes noted at Leven, Outhead, Lower Largo (25 on 10th), Ruddons Point and Tentsmuir (many in summer plumage). Leven and Ruddons Point had records of Red-necked Grebes. Manx Shearwaters passed Boarhills (12th) and Fife Ness. A White Tailed Eagle was at Newburgh and two were at Cameron Reservoir (10th). Returning Ospreys were sighted over Kirkcaldy, Kilmany, Outhead, Anstruther, Eden Estuary and Cameron Reservoir. Red Kites visited Cameron Reservoir and Kingsbarns, and a Marsh Harrier showed again at Newburgh. There were records of Goshawks in the Lomond Hills and at Kinglassie and of Water Rails at Birnie Loch, and Cameron Reservoir. Passages of Golden Plovers included a good record of 100 on the Lomond Hills. Green Sandpipers continued at Lochore Meadows with an additional record at Rossie Bog. There were Common Sandpipers at Luthrie, Wilderness, Letham Pools, Eden Estuary, Cameron Reservoir and Loch Gelly. A summer plumaged Spotted Redshank was a noted bird in the Eden Estuary which also held Greenshanks and Black-tailed Godwits. The spring passage of Whimbrels saw birds stopping off at Kingsbarns, Ruddons Point, Fife Ness (eight), Balcomie (five), Kilminning, Eden Estuary, Ferry Hills, Loch Gelly (four), Dalgety Bay and Kirkcaldy, and there were

records of Grey Partridges from six sites. An Iceland Gull was at Anstruther (13th), Glaucous Gulls were at Ruddons Point (17th) and Craigluscar, and what appeared to be a Glaucous x Herring Gull hybrid ('Nelson's' or 'Viking' Gull) was seen at Tayport on 17th although a pale Herring Gull could not be ruled out. Cuckoos were calling in the Lomond Hills (28th) and at Blebo Craigs (23rd). Green Woodpeckers showed at Falkland, Luthrie, Glenrothes, Gask Park, Tentsmuir and Kilminning, and early Tree Pipits went over St Andrews and Dunfermline. A Scandinavian Rock Pipit (*ssp. littoralis*) was spotted at Elie (3rd). Kilmany held a Redstart, and there were widespread reports of Common Wheatears and Whitethroats. Ring Ouzels were at Dunnikier and Glen Vale; a Garden Warbler was singing at Burntisland, and Grasshopper Warblers reeled at Kilmany, Earlsferry and Letham Pools. Nuthatches seem established in Balbirnie and Pittencrieff Parks, with another noted briefly at Kilminning. A Hooded Crow re-appeared at Kingsbarns; Ravens were at eight sites across the county. Late departing Bramblings were noted at Cameron Reservoir and Dalgety Bay, Twite remained at Boghall (c100), Kincaig Point and Elie Ness, and there were a few Crossbills logged at Rosyth and Kilmany. A summer plumaged Lapland Bunting was notable at Kingsbarns (18th) and Beveridge Park now hosts two Ring-necked Parakeets.

May 2021

Largo Bay held Great Northern Divers, Black-throated Divers, and good numbers of Red-throated Divers, Common Scoters and Velvet Scoters. A Caspian Gull was at Leven on 10th. An Egyptian Goose of unknown origin was at Letham Pools (28th) with a Green-winged Teal and a drake Gargeny there also. Brent Geese continued in the Eden Estuary. Morton Lochs held a drake Garganey on 31st. A Red-throated Diver was unusual for Otterston Loch (21st); two Manx Shearwaters passed Anstruther. Little Egrets continued in Eden Estuary; a Great White Egret was briefly at Wilderness (10th) and a Spoonbill was a good record for the Eden Estuary (17th - 22nd). Ospreys were at five locations. Hobbys were noted at Kilminning and Kinghorn Loch; three Avocets were a surprising flypast at Fife Ness (16th). A trip of eight Dotterel stopped over at Pittenweem (10th - 11th); Wood Sandpipers were at Luthrie and Wilderness. Reports of Whimbrels included six at Guardbridge, five at Cameron Reservoir and 18 at the Eden Estuary. A male Ruff in breeding plumage was found at Drumcarrow on 24th. Arctic Skuas passed Outhead, Tayport and Ferry Hills; Little Gulls were at the Eden Estuary and Letham Pools; an Iceland Gull was noted at Saline; and Glaucous Gulls were at Anstruther (past on 16th) and Outh Muir. Pathhead held two Little Terns on 10th. A Black Guillemot remained off



Snow Bunting: Andrew Riches

Ruddons Point. The early part of the month saw Short-eared Owls hunting at Crail, Kilminning and Ruddons Point. Yellow Wagtails (sp) were logged at Boghall and Boarhills. Whinchats continued in Glen Vale, with others passing through Kilminning. Lesser Whitethroats were at coastal sites including Seafeld (two), Balcomie and Kilminning, with Grasshopper Warblers reeling at Seafeld, Kilmany, Cameron Reservoir, Fife Ness (two), Outhead, Kilminning and Cullaloe. Two Icterine Warblers provided excitement at Kilminning (22nd - 24th) as did a Red-backed Shrike (21st). Boghall Farm continued to hold a flock of Twite. A Common Redpoll at Thornton was an unusual May record, as was two Snow Buntings at Outhead showing on 31st.

(Records of bird sightings for June to August for inclusion in the September newsletter, should be sent by Monday 6th September at the latest to David Heeley at dw.heeley@btinternet.com or 50 High Street, Newburgh, Fife KY14 6AQ.)



Great Spotted Woodpecker: Nigel Duncan

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