

North-East Scotland Branch Newsletter

Autumn 2017



Welcome to your autumn newsletter from your local SOC branch.

A local newsletter to all our members with an update of where we are with the current programme of talks, plus a few more articles. Please do contact me if you have anything you would like to include in a future edition, or with any other comments. Other ways to keep up to date with branch news are through our page on the SOC website (<http://www.the-soc.org.uk/local-branches/grampian/>) and by email.

If you'd like to receive email updates about branch news and events, it would be great to have your email address. If you think that we might not have your correct (or preferred) address, please send an email to me at grampian.secretary@the-soc.org.uk.

John Wills, Branch Secretary

This winter's talks programme

Monday 2nd October – Emma Rawling - Scottish Wildcat Action

Monday 6th November – Mike Daniels - Rewilding in Scotland. Are we ready?

Mike is Head of Land Management at John Muir Trust and a trustee for Rewilding Britain. Rewilding is a term often mentioned in passing, but Mike will explore what it really means for Scotland.

Monday 4th December – Rab "Skitts" Rae - Broad-billed Sandpipers in Norway

Local ornithologist Skitts will update us on his latest novel work in the Arctic which includes finding out where these secretive waders spend their winters.

Also we will have our Christmas raffle.

Monday 8th January – Mark Lewis - Birds of Sanday

Monday 5th February – Norman Elkins - The Fife Bird Atlas

Monday 5th March – Owen Selly - Sea Eagles in East Scotland

Ten years ago sea eagles were brought back to the East Coast of Scotland after a 100 year absence. Owen will update us on how our largest bird of prey has fared on the east.

Monday 9th April – Branch AGM, followed by Grampian Ringing Group local projects

A popular regular session at the North East branch with interesting updates on siskin movements, eider monitoring and other projects from Grampian Ringing Group.

The meetings venue is the The Sportsman's Club, 11 Queen's Rd, Aberdeen, AB15 4YL at 7.30 pm.

To cover the hire of the room a small donation is requested - £2 for members and £3 for non-members.

North East Scotland Bird Report – update on production schedule

The North East Scotland Bird Report has been produced annually since 1974, with an aim of being both a readable summary of the main avian events in the region and also a document that forms part of the historical archive. Over recent years, the production schedule has slipped considerably. We are now very far behind publishing each report in the year following the year to which it relates, which should be a realistic aim. Several folks queried the status of the report and we know that the delays have put some people off from submitting bird records. This statement lays out recent developments regarding plans for improving the production schedule of the report.

Editorship of the Bird Report has recently been taken on by Mark Sullivan. Although new to the Bird Report team, Mark will be known to many as a long standing local birder and also as Chair of the local RSPB group. A meeting of those associated with production of the report was held in early August, chaired by Mark, and issues and ideas for bringing it back on track were discussed. The main points from this to report are:

- The 2014 Bird Report has been printed and distributed to those on the mailing list. Copies can be ordered from Dave Gill, address: Quarmby, Nethermuir Road, Maud, Peterhead AB42 4 ND. Email: davidgill1928@john-lewis.com Price £5 including postage & packing.
- Mark's Editorship will commence with the 2015 report. Quite a bit of work on this has already been completed but there is much remaining to be done. The aim is to publish this report by very early in 2018.
- Work is also now starting on the 2016 report, and this will also follow at some stage during 2018.
- As things get back on track, we will aim to publish each year's report before the end of the following year.
- We are actively investigating the production of an electronic version of the report as a PDF in addition to the print version. We will continue to produce a print version for the time being but this may be reviewed in the future.
- To assist with the production schedule, the cut-off for records being received by the Recorder will be 31 January. This has been the deadline for some time but, in recent years, late records have generally been incorporated into the dataset. We now ask contributors to make every effort to meet this deadline (either through records sent to the Recorder or entered to BirdTrack).

All involved in writing and producing the Bird Report do so in a voluntary capacity, so we ask for your patience in this transition period. Nonetheless, we recognise the need to considerably improve the publication schedule and feel confident that, with everyone's support, this can be achieved.

If you have any questions, please contact the Bird Recorder (Nick Littlewood - nesrecorder@yahoo.co.uk) or Report Editor (Mark Sullivan - geolbird_abz@btinternet.com).

Siberian Chiffchaffs at Nigg Bay

During January and February 2017, a group of chiffchaffs was present around the sewage works and associated shelter belts in Nigg bay, Aberdeen. Since the cover here reached a certain level of maturity, Chiffchaffs have occasionally wintered at this site, but to have a group of birds, some of which looked and sounded good for 'Siberian chiffchaff' (*Phylloscopus collybita tristis*) in mid-winter in Aberdeen was particularly unusual.

'Siberian chiffchaffs' are generally scarce late autumn visitors to Scotland, and due to plumage variations across the whole chiffchaff complex can potentially pose observers a bit of an ID conundrum. Calling birds are a lot easier to identify, but even then, there is scope for confusion. Adding to these difficulties was the fact that due to the thick cover in Nigg Bay, it was often impossible to work out how many birds were present, and whether the call you were hearing had come from the bird you were watching! As such, Alex Penn and Mark Lewis decided that trapping the birds (as part of a wider migrant trapping effort at the site) might allow at least some of the birds to be identified to subspecific level.

To aid this, trapped birds had their plumage assessed, and were sound recorded during processing, and where birds shed any feathers, (it's not unusual for birds to shed small numbers of feathers during ringing) these were collected and sent off to Martin Collinson for genetic analysis.

The results were quite surprising. Firstly, the ringing effort highlighted that at the very least, seven birds were present compared to the estimate of four that had been made from field observations! What's more, the majority of them looked good for *tristis*. Those that called backed this assessment up. Four of the six birds that were trapped called, and three of them gave the standard *tristis* calls – the other giving a call that is likely to be part of *tristis* repertoire. An unringed bird also gave *tristis* calls in the field, and a bird likely to be the same one was observed singing *tristis* song at the site later in the year.

Five of the trapped birds also shed feathers suitable for genetic analysis. The results of this were that one bird was a *collybita* (as suspected based on plumage) and the rest were *tristis* – or at least their mothers were *tristis*, as the sampling utilised mitochondrial DNA.

As such it was concluded that of the seven birds assessed, six were safely attributable to *tristis*, and only one was *collybita*. This is one of the largest flocks of chiffchaff recorded wintering in Scotland, and is also possibly the biggest gathering of confirmed *tristis* birds anywhere in the UK.

Mark Lewis

Nightjars in the North-East in 2017

After the amazing showing in 2014 when about 10 Nightjars were found inland across the NE, a group of midge-resistant birders conducted systematic searches in 2015 and 2016 with some notable success, although reduced from 2014 levels -

2015: a bird on two dates at one site in early/mid-June, and another (outside the survey) in Upper Deeside in late June

2016: two different birds on separate dates in late-May and mid-June at one site, and another (again, outside the survey) in mid-Deeside in mid-July

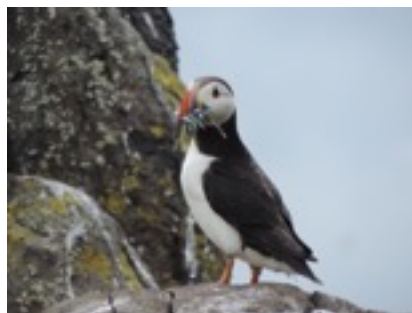
Following the poorer showing in 2015 and 2016, the survey was scaled back in 2017, but a bird was again recorded at one site over 3 days (2 nights) in mid-June. This is now an unprecedented four years in a row that the species has been present in suitable breeding habitat in the NE, although we appear to be no closer to proving breeding. Maybe 2018?

Alan Knox

Branch Excursion to the Isle of May

On 15 June this year, five of us left Aberdeen for a day trip to the Isle of May. For some it was a first-time visit. As it was a 9.30am sailing, an early morning start was essential and we arrived at Anstruther harbour in time for boarding. The weather was kind, though breezy, and the boat, the *May Princess*, was full to capacity (100 persons) with some passengers in shorts. Sailing time was about 50 minutes across a calm sea, with the seabird activity steadily increasing as we neared the May. First a few Puffins and the occasional Guillemot on the sea, interspersed by passing Gannets travelling to and from the Bass Rock clearly visible to the south. The skipper took us round past the high cliffs on the south side of the island first before docking at the landing jetty in a small rocky inlet. On the cliffs we admired the hundreds of Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills, Shags, Kittiwakes, Fulmars and gulls milling around, on the sea, and entering and leaving their nest sites on the narrow ledges. Onshore we were greeted by hundreds of noisy Arctic Terns, some determined to beat us off their sites along side the path up to the visitor's reception area. A quick briefing from the resident warden before our allotted two and half hours on the island to wander at will over the well-marked paths - plenty of time to walk up to the top of the cliffs and view the seabird colonies and take lots of pictures. It is not permitted to leave the paths because of the damage it might cause to the hundreds of Puffin burrows all over the slopes, and there were hundreds of puffins all over the place, many with beaks full of sand eels. There were also plenty of gulls, eiders, a few starlings and rock pipits and the occasional butterfly - the first Painted Lady of the year. However, there were no scarce migrants - it had all happened the week before! With time up all too soon, it was back to the *Princess* or get left behind overnight. We were back in Anstruther by early afternoon for a late fish lunch at the famous Anstruther Fish Bar before the drive home.

A few photos from the trip:



John Wills

Notable birds of the year, contd. (May to August 2017)

The end of April saw Great White Egret at Loch of Strathbeg and Little Egret on the Ythan Estuary, still a few Waxwings around the region, and White-billed Divers off the north-east coast, but no mega-rarities to herald the start of the spring passage. Indeed the weather was very cool with persistent northerly winds which held up the spring migration. By the start of May the weather improved and things were beginning to pick up at last. June, July and August had mixed weather, some very fine and warm days interspersed with wet and windy, and cool, days. Some good birds turned up.

Swans, geese & ducks : A pair of Scaup were accompanied by a handsome drake **Lesser Scaup** on Loch of Skene 23-24 May, only the second occurrence of this North American duck in the region following a female at the same location back in January 2012.

'Elvis', our annual King Eider visitor, last seen on the Ythan in mid-April, turned up sporadically throughout May but seem to disappear for days at a time, much to the frustration of year-listers trying to get him on their 2017 list, necessitating repeat visits to the Ythan shore. He seemed to settle eventually at his usual spot on the far shore (where the terns nest) from late May to 19 June, then decided to relocate to the moulting Eider flock at Blackdog-Murcar from 20 June until last seen on 13 July.

Drake Garganeys were recorded at Loch of Skene on 12 May and Loch of Strathbeg 22-24 May, and 'Mac' the popular Mandarin was seen again in Aberdeen on 31 May and 25 July and seemed to have taken up permanent residence at Walker Dam over the summer. A tentative female American Wigeon was seen at Loch of Strathbeg on 18 August.

Meanwhile, the ever regular moulting scoter flock was building offshore Murcar, and was graced again by American rarities a drake **Black Scoter** 31 May to 4 June, 2-3 Surf Scoters from early July, and then a mega-rarity drake **White-winged Scoter** (race *deglandi*) on 2 July. The latter is likely the returning bird from 2011 and last year - is he going to be as regular as 'Elvis'? Incidentally, 2011 was when the first Black Scoter occurred in the region. The White-winged Scoter was last recorded on 19 August, but the Surf Scoters were still around at the end of the month, possibly even venturing down as far as Beach Boulevard.

An apparent Tundra Bean Goose was seen distantly at Strathbeg on 8 July, an unusually late date.

Quails : Singing Quails were heard (but not seen!) at Lumsden 16-21 June, Longside 11 July, Meikle Loch 17 July, Rora 30 July to 1 August, Strathbeg 1 August, and near Petculter on 9 August.

Divers & Grebes : White-billed Divers continued to be seen off the coast between Portsoy and Sandend into early May.

Shearwaters, Petrels : July saw the first occurrences of the summer-autumn passage Manx and Sooty Shearwaters, Storm Petrels and skuas. Passing traffic picked up in early August, including a **Cory's Shearwater** at Girdle Ness on 23 August, an occasional Pomarine Skua and a single **Long-tailed Skua** off old Slains Castle on 23 August.

Seawatching at St.Cyrus also turned up a Humpback Whale 7 - 25 August.

Hérons, Storks & Ibises : A Little Egret frequented Loirston Loch on the outskirts of Aberdeen 2nd to 9th May. Singles were also seen at Loch of Strathbeg on 13th and 21-22 May, accompanying a couple of Great White Egrets regularly seen until the 22nd May. Another Great White frequented Strathbeg 15 June-16 July, and again from 25 July to 1 August, and presumably the same bird reappearing on 18 August. Single Little Egrets were seen on the Ythan on 27 June and 13 July, increasing to three individuals in early August, and four seen on 15 August. The single Glossy Ibis seen at Strathbeg at the end of April was last reported on 17 May.

Three Spoonbills graced the Strathbeg Lower Ground briefly on 21-22 May and were observed flying away early the next day. Another turned up at the same location 8-9 July.

Raptors : A single **Black Kite** (a rare visitor to the north-east) was seen flying south over Strathbeg on 25 May. Single Hobby's were noted at Westhill on 12 June and Logie Buchan on 14 June.

Rails, Crakes : A **Spotted Crake** was reported at Strathbeg on 9 May.

Cranes & Waders : The three Common Cranes on the ploughed fields at Strathbeg at the end of April were joined by a fourth on 2 May, but all disappeared shortly after. A pair of Cranes briefly frequented a recently cut field near Rora 1 to 3 August.

A few of the scarcer migrant waders were noted: three Dotterel at Coralhill on 1st May, Little Ringed Plover and several Wood Sandpipers at Strathbeg, Spotted Redshank on the Ythan, all in early May, and Curlew Sandpiper and two Little Stints also on the Ythan 27-28 May. In June, Little Stints were seen at Cairnbulg and Strathbeg. A Wood Sandpiper was at Strathbeg 5 July, heralding the start of the autumn passage, and thereafter Greenshanks, Wood and Green Sandpipers, a Spotted Redshank, Ruff and occasional summer-plumage Knot were noted passing through the various coastal sites.

A Red-necked Phalarope was briefly seen, and photographed, at Strathbeg on the evening of 7 July.

Gulls & Terns : What looked like a promising start seems to have petered out as the Little Gulls at Strathbeg appeared not to have settled to breed, though occasional singles were noted still hanging around through June. Single Mediterranean Gulls were seen on the Ythan on 7 June, at Murcar on 13 July, then Inverallochy or nearby Strathbeg lagoon 25-27 July and Cairnbulg on 5 August, possibly all pertaining to the same individual. A first summer, ringed Iceland Gull was on the Ugie Estuary on 17 June.

Single Roseate Terns were seen at Strathbeg 4th, and 18-19 June, and on the Ythan Estuary on 13 July. A juvenile Black Tern was noted at Strathbeg on 18 August.

Pigeons & Doves : A Turtle Dove was at Muchalls on 16 June.

Swifts : A **Pacific Swift**, a first for Scotland and needless to say for the North East, was seen over the Longhaven Quarry by Phil Bloor working his adopted patch (where little of real note normally occurs). It stuck around for all of 40 minutes, seen by only two other lucky people, and just about long enough for a couple of photographs.

Larks : A Shore Lark seen at Rattray on 1 May.

Hirundines : An odd-looking hybrid Swallow x House Martin was frequenting the visitor centre area at Strathbeg 9-11 May.

Pipits & wagtails : A Yellow Wagtail, presumably of the British *flavissima* race, an increasingly less common visitor in recent times, was seen at Strathbeg on 2 May.

A Richard's Pipit was at Rattray on 30 May.

Waxwings : There were still a handful around in early May with ten recorded at Danestone on the 2nd and 19 at Donside on 3rd., and a late bird photographed in a Fraserburgh garden On 10 June.

Chats : Black Redstarts were recorded at Collieston on 1st May and at Strathbeg 1-3 May. A female at Inverallochy on 18 August heralded the start of the autumn passage.

A handsome red-spotted Bluethroat proved elusive but photographed nevertheless as it flitted between the dunes and shore at Cairnbulg harbour on 22 May.

Warblers : Lesser Whitethroats were noted at Girdle Ness 1-2 May, at Donmouth and Troup Head on the 3rd, and Rattray on the 4th. A Wood Warbler surprised one birder at Castle Fraser on 17 July. Once a breeding bird, albeit local, in the region, it is now an increasingly scarce bird even on passage these days.

Flycatchers : A single Pied Flycatcher was in the mist at Rattray on 14 May.

Nuthatches & Shrikes : A male Red-backed Shrike was noted close to the Forvie visitors centre on 25 May.

Finches : An occasionally singing immature male Common Rosefinch (a non-pink one!) frequented the railway embankment bushes behind the playing fields at Nigg Bay on 27 May.

Hope you all had equally good birding through the summer and are looking forward to an eventful autumn migration. Get out there and happy hunting.

John Wills

Colour-ringed Whooper Swans

Many birdwatchers travelling along the Kemnay to Alford roads will be familiar with the large Whooper Swan flock that gathers every winter on the fields alongside the River Don, along with a good number of Mute Swans. Numbering often over a hundred individuals, as many as 140, they have become a winter fixture as they feed on the stubble and brassicas, and roost on the river over night. This year it was noted that at least two birds bore colour rings and I made a successful effort to approach close enough to read the number-letter combination to determine their history. The records were submitted to Kane Brides at the Wildlife and Wetland Trust and this is the history I received back:

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Yellow ring left leg X3H | ringed 5 February 2009 as a first-winter at Welney, Norfolk (ie. a 2008 cygnet). Recorded again at Welney in 2010 and 2011, and at Monymusk 7 March 2017. |
|--------------------------|---|

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Orange ring right leg ZUV | ringed as an adult 10 August 2016 at Svartarvatn, Bardardalur, Iceland. Recorded again at Monymusk 7 March 2017. |
|---------------------------|--|

So keep an eye out for the returning flock this coming winter and for any colour rings they may be wearing. I will be interesting to see if these birds return to us again. And look for any other colour-ringed swans elsewhere too.

John Wills

Please note your Whinchats & Stonechats - and Chiffchaffs too!

In the spring newsletter we asked you for all records of Whinchats and Stonechats that you could find this year, as well as continuing to record all singing Chiffchaffs. This is a reminder that we are asking that you make a note of all the breeding or potentially breeding (singing) Chiffchaffs you came across this year and submit these either to BirdTrack (<https://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack/bird-recording>) or include them along with your annual returns to Nick Littlewood as our Local Recorder. Grid references will add greatly to the usefulness of the records.

Alan Knox & John Wills

Changes

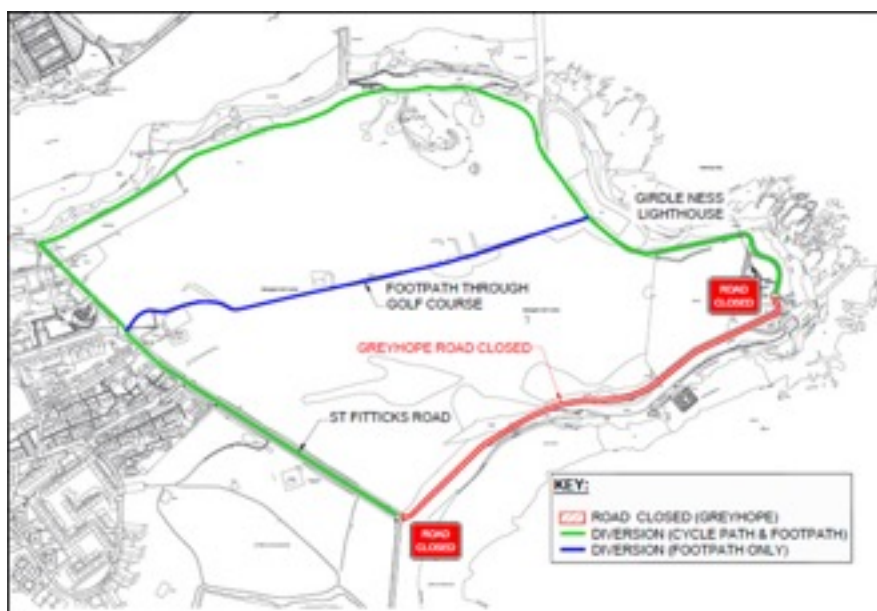
Many of our readers will already be aware of this but in case you have not been around to a couple of familiar birding hotspots you may be surprised at some ongoing changes:

First, at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg, the familiar plantation on the back bar, visible from the visitor's centre and the hides, and often visited by birders looking for migrant passerines particularly in autumn, is gradually being reduced and finally removed altogether over a period of time. The plantation at the Loch of Strathbeg was planted in the late 1970's as a trial and a wind break for stock grazing the dunes. The lodgepole pines (with a few Scots pine) have grown very slowly and poorly, and quite large numbers of them are now dead. The sand dunes are a designated SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) for their geomorphology, as well as an SPA and Ramsar site as part of a larger area used by many birds, particularly wintering wildfowl. Either way the trees are a completely alien feature and under advice from SNH should be removed to restore the geomorphology and ecology of the site. Work started 15 or so years ago to remove the trees with a ride being cut through the dense plantation. This had the bonus effect of making some of the visiting migrants easier to spot. The work has always been carried out at a very slow rate by staff and volunteers of the RSPB. This hasn't changed, and up to a hundred or so trees are removed every year, under a felling licence from the Forestry Commission. At current rate of removal it will take a decade or two to remove all of these trees, there being about 2500 left on site. There are, presently, no plans to speed this up. The recent works are part of this long-term program and do not mark a change in the speed of removal.

Site staff at the RSPB reserve recognise the benefit these trees have to local birders looking for migrant birds.

OK, a policy decision but an opportunity to create an alternative habitat (and Heligoland trap?) nearby in mitigation for tired migrants having made it across the North Sea perhaps?

The second ongoing change is access to Nigg Bay and Girdle Ness from the St.Fitticks side. Work has started on the new harbour development in Nigg Bay (see <http://www.aberdeen-harbour.co.uk/news/news-and-events/expansion-project-website-launched-by-dragados/> for details, plans and timescale) which has necessitated closing Greyhope Road from the junction at the bottom of St.Fitticks Road up the 'south bank' to close by the 'Torry Coo' foghorn. The road will remain closed until completion of the harbour works scheduled for June 2020. Access to the Battery and Dolpinwatch at Girdle Ness can still be obtained from the north via Sinclair Road and Greyhope Road. In the meantime, to cross the peninsula, walkers can use the footpath across the golf course (watch out for flying balls. Fore!).



Branch Committee and Contact details

Details for the current North-East Scotland Branch Committee are given below.

We welcome nominations or suggestions for new members of the committee at any time.

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|---|--|
| Jenny Weston (Chair & Programme Coordinator) | Tel: 01224 749915 Email: jenny.weston@rspb.org.uk |
| John Wills (Secretary) | Tel: 01467 651296 Email: grampian.secretary@the-soc.org.uk |
| Paddy Grant (Treasurer) | Tel: 01224 861757 Email: patrick.grant5@btinternet.com |
| Alan Knox (Council Representative) | Tel: 01224 861185 Email: a.g.knox@abdn.ac.uk |
| Hugh Addlesee | Tel: 01330 820949 Email: hugh@addlesee.co.uk |
| Graham Cooper | Tel: 01339 882706 Email: grm.cooper@btinternet.com |
| Brian Pirie | Tel: 01224 713516 Email: bpirie8910@btinternet.com |
| Nick Littlewood | Tel: 01224 395209 Email: nesrecorder@yahoo.co.uk |

The Atlas Fund - a reminder

As a result of the publication of our local atlas, "The Breeding Birds of North-East Scotland" in 2011, we have a sum of money that is currently held on account. While we're not looking to spend it in a hurry (some, for instance, may be used to support a future atlas), the editors (Ian Francis and Martin Cook) along with the North-East Scotland Branch Committee have decided that money can be made available to support birds and ornithology in the region. For the purposes of the fund, this region comprises of Moray, Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City, in accordance with the published atlas. In order to ensure transparent distribution of any of the money, the following rules have been drawn up:

- Applicants must be able to demonstrate that their project will benefit ornithology in North-east Scotland (including Moray).
- Grants are available only for amateur projects.
- Applicants are expected to be existing members of, or to join, the SOC.
- Where applicable, it is expected that recipients will disseminate the results of their project to local birdwatchers. This may be by a talk to the local SOC branch(es) or through publication in the North-east Scotland or Moray Bird Reports, or Scottish Birds.
- Any publications relating to the project results should state that a contribution towards costs was received from The North-East Scotland Atlas Fund.
- The fund is administered by the North-East Scotland SOC Committee or by an alternative committee or subcommittee that they entrust with this role. Awards are entirely at the discretion of the awarding body.
- Applicants must state whether or not they have applied for, or intend to apply for or have received, grant aid from other sources.
- Where appropriate, applicants are expected to have applied for an SOC Research Grant and to be aware of other funding sources.
- The grant must be used for the purpose stated in the application unless otherwise approved in writing by the awarding body. The grant must be returned to the awarding body if it is not used by the recipient as agreed by the awarding body.

Applications may be made at any time by writing to the Secretary of the North-East Scotland SOC Branch (grampian.secretary@the-soc.org.uk).