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“THE OYSTERCATCHER”

The Isle of Mull Bird Club Newsletter

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ISLE OF MULL'S AVIAN SUBMARINER

The Dipper is unmistakable, extraordinary and unique. It is a highly fascinating, rotund, but locally rare inhabitant of the island's rivers and streams, something of an amalgamation between a Wren, a thrush and a submarine : a songbird that hunts underwater for its prey, and thinks that it is a Hippopotamus !!! Many birds have evolved highly specialised feeding techniques, yet the Dipper has gone one stage further, in adopting a method of feeding that is far removed from that employed by its closest relations. Despite being Britain's only aquatic passerine (the Dipper is related to both the Wren and Blackbird), it exploits a very different environment to that of its terrestrial cousins. Dippers frequent often fast-flowing, boulder-strewn burns and rivers, where they perch on rocks before plunging beneath the water surface to swim or walk on the river bed in search of insect larvae, small fish, crustaceans and molluscs. Dippers 'dive' enwrapped in a cloak of bubbles, a film of air preventing its feathers from being soaked. The force of the current counteracts the buoyancy of the air bubbles and enables the Dipper to remain submerged. Staying dry is crucial to the Dipper. If its feathers were to become saturated in the cold water of Mull's burns and rivers, then it would most likely die. Dumpy in shape, with a short tail and powerful legs and feet, the Dipper is blackish-brown in colour with a large, white bib, which has a chestnut band at its base. Out of the water (when perched), it has a distinctive, bouncy profile, when it can often be seen bobbing and flicking its tail. It flies low, direct and very fast along the territory of its chosen watercourse, usually emitting a sharp 'dzit' call as it goes. Dippers are very early breeders, with nest-building usually commencing in March. The large, domed nest of moss, grass stems and dead fern fronds is often concealed under an over-hanging rock or bridge, or even behind a waterfall. The song of the Dipper is a strange, loud and rich warbling, with males proclaiming their linear territories from October, a time when there is very little other bird song to be heard.

The success rate of Dippers on some Scottish river systems is being threatened by acid rain. On some upland streams, where the surrounding soils are impoverished, pollution is reducing the ability of trees to take up calcium. Calcium levels in the poorest soils are becoming exhausted, and this acidification is affecting Dipper egg shells, via their leaf-eating aquatic prey, making them thin-shelled and prone to rupturing. Many acidic watercourses in the West Highlands support no Dippers or only sparse numbers, making the relatively few pairs that breed on Mull something of a local rarity. Although Dippers may be seen throughout the island, one or two locations tend to prove more reliable for anyone hoping to catch a glimpse of this truly amazing bird. A walk upriver from Aros bridge will usually reward the patience of the observer with potentially excellent views, as will the stretch of the River Ba at Knock bridge.



Stuart Gibson

BIRD CLUB TRIP ROSS OF MULL

When I pulled back the curtain and saw clear blue skies I realised a beautiful autumn day was unfolding. It was tempting to snuggle down for another half hour and contemplate a day of gentle exercise in the garden, unearthing the deckchairs and perhaps reading a book. However the plan for the trip included a visit to Ardalanish; one of my favourite places, so I threw back the covers and emerged. From the shower I can look out of the

skylight and see Ben Hiant, opposite Tobermory and seeing it in detail confirmed we were going to have a good day!

So I left the house at 9.15am and headed for Salen toilets and my lift with Pam Brown. I certainly didn't regret the decision. The day turned out to be one of those when Mull pulls out all the stops and surrounds one in its own special magic. One of those days when you feel that moving to Mull was one of the best choices you have ever made and you realise how lucky you are to be alive and enjoying the experience. I think we all felt the same.

The birds were perhaps mainly doing their version of 'deck chair in the sun' as our list was shorter than it could have been. The highlights for me were several Hen Harriers and then three moorhens on Harrison's loch, up the track towards Scoor, past Loch Assapol and above the ruin of the 12 century chapel at Kilvickeon. The sun was warm; views achingly beautiful, the company good. It was an opportunity to get to know some newer members, Abbi Paterson, our speaker the previous evening, his wife, Jane and Pam's visitors from Tennessee as well as catching up with friends. Mike was full of interesting information on local walks and snippets of history as well as telling us what he had seen recently! I always enjoy a visit down the Ross as it so different from Salen area. There was a bit of North/ South rivalry but the north won on tree cover if not anything else!

Ardalanish was our lunchtime stop and after watching the Grey Plovers we went down the track to the shore. Soon it was lunch time and I picnicked overlooking the beach. From my rock I could just see a bit of Northern Ireland and of course the Paps of Jura as well as waders scurrying on the shore and stunning Geology. This area is a Geological SSSI. There were still a few flowers in bloom. John Clare pointed out the Sea Holly and I saw Yarrow, tiny pieces of Thyme, Sea Mayweed and Devil's-bit Scabious. This is a rich and varied habitat for plants and I could see the seed cases of many that had been blooming on previous visits. So whether your interest is birds, flowers, geology, local history, photography or beautiful scenery I recommend the area; it has it all. Call in at the Historical Centre on the right, at Millbrae Cottage, as you enter Bunessan to pick up any information you need. (I'm not sure of opening times at this time of year). They have produced for sale a range of booklets on Walks, Local History and Natural History. See their website www.Romhc.org.uk Tea at Mike and Carol's was our last stop. An abundance of delicious home baking with plenty of tea and coffee was enjoyed by 23 of us, 25 if we included the resident Border terriers! Many thanks for your generous hospitality Mike and Carol. A perfect end to the day.

If you didn't come you now know what you missed! See you next time?

Norma Dowling



Janet Hall

Lunch Time



Janet Hall

View whilst we ate our evening

LET'S HAVE A LAUGH

I have been sent a few images and I thought I would put them here as they made me smile, how about you!!!!

REMEMBER WHEN YOU ARE IN DEEP SHIT, LOOK STRAIGHT AHEAD, KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT & SAY NOTHING.



For once in your life, keep your beak shut.



*Bring 'im over here lads
I'm feeling a little peckish*

DID YOU KNOW?

Throughout the winter months birds use nestboxes; not for breeding but for roosting. A nestbox provides a safe and relatively warm place for small birds to see out the long, cold winter nights. Blue Tits generally have the box to themselves but Wrens will congregate inside, sharing body heat. The record number of Wrens huddled into a nestbox is 63. So, put up a box this winter and you could be providing some winter warmth. It might even get used next spring for raising a family.

CAPTION COMPETITION!! And the winner is:-

If you remember in the last issue of the "Oystercatcher" we had a caption competition. All entries were received and typed out without the names on who had submitted them and given to our President, Alan Spellman to pick the winning line. This was:-

"When they suggested an off island field trip, I thought they meant Lochaline"

The winning line was penned by Pam Brown and we say congratulations and a club sweatshirt is winging its way to Pam as we speak.

Jan Hall

JUST A NOTE TO SAY.....

I am still looking for stories, no matter how small or large they are, if there is anyone out there who would like to pen a story, then please send it to me for insertion in the next newsletter. The deadline is September 30th.

Jan Hall

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

The evening meeting last October featured Abbi Patterson and was a great success. His conservation trials and tribulations over the years served to entertain and inspire us. We had a remarkably warm day [for the time of year] for the field trip to the Ross. A good turn out for the day, ably led by Mike Wagemakers and another fine tea with cakes [makes my mouth water just thinking about them!] provided by Carol. Members made a donation [Mike & Carol would not charge us for the food offered] and our hosts were able to send £50 to "Children in Need". The November meeting was well publicised but we suffered from the fact that two other "institutions" decided to move from their historical dates and coincide with ours! Various members chose to attend those rather than ours. They missed an hilariously funny evening! Finlay Christine had improved as a public speaker no end; clearly having to explain the myth and magic of Mull to American tourists in his "Tall Tales of Mull" tour bus has worked wonders! After some confusion the November field trip was led by Arthur Brown in the "Discover Mull" tour bus. A very enjoyable day. After spotting WTSE "white E" in the distance we moved along Loch Cuin and got a closer view. After a while an interaction with a local otter was observed and this set the tone for the day. At a regular stopping place Arthur conjured up a pair of Golden Eagles and we were able to follow them in telescopic closeness; having already viewed another WTSE, "yellow E" along the road to Caliach Point.

The December indoor meeting was of course the Club's Christmas Party! As with the previous meeting in November precious few members turned up. Thankfully our system of each person bringing a plate of food meant we were not over catered. Our President [Alan Spellman] gave us an illustrated talk on some of the more notable species that graced our shores in 2010. Later the "Caption Competition" entries were shown and Pam Brown's entry was judged to be the best. Saturday 11th December was a thankfully milder day than those that had preceded it. Diana and I arrived at the Killiechronan Campsite before everyone else and wondered if we had the correct day! Eventually five more members arrived and we were rewarded with views of two WTSE [the local pair] and a couple of Bar-tailed Godwit before we moved off along the shores of Loch na Keal. After a quiet lunch with a few Goldeneye [there was a single Redshank looking for his lunch too!] we travelled along the shore and stopped occasionally. Here we picked up on several over-wintering Slavonian Grebe and Great Northern Diver. Near Kilfinichen Bay the Glen Seilideir pair of WTSE were spotted and on the northern shore of Loch Scridain no less than four Otters put in an appearance. One of them even managed to surprise a local Grey Heron as it surfaced! A very warm welcome awaited us at the Kinloch Hotel (Charles had an open fire roaring in the grate of the lounge bar!) and we spent the next hour and a half in splendid conversation. Another really good Bird Club outing, sadly only enjoyed by a very few. The indoor meeting for January was to be an illustrated talk by Sam Jones of "Islandscape Photography" but due to an impending operation Sam had to rule herself out for that date. We will see her next season as she is keen to show us what her pho-

tographic business is all about. So instead we decided upon a "Member's Slide Show". Entries trickled in at first and I wondered if we would have enough to keep an audience amused for five minutes, let alone the customary forty five minutes. I need not have worried; in the event over one hundred and thirty pictures were submitted, from Island and off-Island members. I was very pleasantly surprised by the quality and content of the entries. There had been no set content, although most chose to select pictures taken on Mull, and the variety was staggering. Each author present was invited to make a comment or two about their images and this device certainly "engaged" the audience. A thoroughly entertaining evening with over thirty members in attendance. The weather forecast for the following day was particularly dire. The "Big Bird Count" went ahead anyway despite the weather being predominantly wet and decidedly windy for the whole day. Most species we might have expected to see were present but very few in number. Often the landscape seemed bereft of life. However the sixteen participants managed to amass a total of seventy six species for the day; not too short of the best total [for Winter] of eighty nine. Given the weather conditions an admirable effort. Stuart Gibson had devised a "points system" for the day. This gave one point for each species in general and extra points for some "harder to find" species. The "Oystercatcher Trophy" [for the team with the most points] was awarded to Pam & Arthur Brown. But the real reward for the day was enjoyed by everyone, a portion of an amazing Lemon Drizzle cake at the Craignure Inn!

Until next time.
Andy Oldacre
Chairman.

MOTHER NATURE'S MIGRATIONAL MIRACLE

The Swallow is among the most popular of British birds, having long been regarded as a harbinger of Spring in this country. However, prevailing weather conditions at the time of their arrival in March/April are so-often wintry, giving rise to the warning that 'One Swallow does not a Summer make'. Traditionally, Swallows are a sign of good luck among country folk, with farmers reluctant to destroy a Swallow's nest for fear of the misfortune that might befall them. Swallows have been extremely well-studied down through the ages. The migration of Swallows was first recognised as long ago as 700 BC, when the Greek poet, Anacreon recorded the return of these birds to Egypt, and realised that this was one of their winter retreats. Today, it is known that some 220 million Swallows over-winter each year in Africa, of which German birds account for those wintering in Central Africa, while British and Russian birds fly further south, 'leap-frogging' other European breeders to winter in and around Johannesburg, South Africa.

You always know that Autumn's chill and Winter's cold are just around the corner when local Swallows start congregating on overhead wires, as they contemplate the culmination of another breeding season and the onset of their migrational flight south to Africa. Mid-September, traditionally, sees the departure of many Scottish-

breeding Swallows on their travels, a time when many birds on the island may still be feeding late broods in the nest. Consequently, late stragglers may still linger in the area during October-November, with exceptionally tardy individuals being recorded even into December!

None other than the esteemed 18th century naturalist, the Rev. Gilbert White, of Selborne, was sympathetic to the notion that birds, like Swallows, did not migrate at the close of Summer, but hibernated in the mud of marshy pools, in the masonry of churches, in dry stone walls, and behind crumbling cliff faces. Over 200 years later, we know such thoughts to be fanciful, as millions of migrant birds leave this country to seek the warmer climes of the Mediterranean and Africa each Autumn. And, that they fly unaided, too, and not having hitched a ride on the back of another, larger bird!

Bi-annual migrations, to and from the Isle of Mull may offer birds, like the Swallow, a competitive edge when it comes to breeding, yet many pay the ultimate price for such long distance travel. After a long and demanding breeding season, Swallows undertake a quite extraordinary migrational journey halfway across the globe, linking the continents of Europe and Africa, collecting some 6,200 air miles into the bargain! It almost beggars belief that a tiny bird should be capable of travelling such vast distances across the face of our planet. Swallows are diurnal (daytime) migrants, preferring to feed as they go, unlike so many migratory birds that travel by the light

of the stars, having spent several weeks laying down fat reserves to help sustain them on their long haul flights.

Some small migrants will complete their journeys by dint of huge flights encompassing hundreds or thousands of miles at a time, arriving at their intended destination in days. Spring migration tends to be a somewhat rushed affair for Swallows, as birds attempt to get back to their breeding grounds quickly. In Autumn, Swallows flit from place to place in a more relaxed fashion, often taking several weeks or even months to get to where they want to be. Migrating Swallows fly up to 200 miles daily, travelling at an average speed of 20 m.p.h.

Migration is a hazardous business for Swallows and many birds die from starvation, exhaustion and in storms as they cross low over the sands of the Sahara Desert. Swallow populations fluctuate from year to year (British population : 375,000 pairs) and are affected greatly by weather. They require rain to provide wet mud for nest building and for encouraging an abundance of insect prey, but cold, wet weather prevents them from feeding. Large scale mortality is regularly recorded after bad weather, during both breeding and migration. On the other hand, hot and dry weather can result in many deaths through dehydration and heat stress.

Swallows can be great indicators of our weather and, as a result of simply observing the behaviour of local birds, it may be possible to predict the following day's weather (give or take a shower or two!) During fine, dry and settled days, Swallows feed higher in the sky, but during periods of changeable and depressed weather they tend to come lower, following their insect prey, often affording quite spectacular views as they flit or buzz past at eye level.

Research has shown that Swallows are returning to their breeding

areas in poor condition nowadays and are laying fewer eggs than previously. Nest sites are traditional, and provided the food supply has not changed, the same nests or sites are used from one year to the next, often by the same two birds. However, Swallows rarely live longer than four years, but one individual was known to survive until the ripe old age of 16 years.

During its life, this miracle of Mother Nature would have flown over 200,000 miles, simply flying between Britain and Africa during migration!

Stuart Gibson

FIELD TRIP FEBRUARY 19TH

A liberal dose of Mull's Magical Medicine! What could be more efficacious after a grey January and February, mostly spent indoors in my case. It was administered by 'doctor' Stuart Gibson and 'nurse' Ruth Fleming, and willingly taken by all sixteen of us on the trip to Lochbuie on Saturday. We assembled outside Craignure Inn and then fitted into three vehicles, so lessening our carbon footprint and our pressure on roads and stopping places. We all had a comfortable ride and a window seat, ideal for spotting points of interest, from turnstones and fallow deer to Gilbert the postman! Many thanks to our drivers. The dose contained jokes; laughter; shared knowledge, soup and telescopes, mixed with a sprinkling of hand warmers and the sights and sounds of this wonderful island. A very generous slice of meringue-topped lemon drizzle cake completed the dose! We were asked to keep an eye out for waterfowl in particular. First we spotted a group of Shelduck at Lochdon and Stuart drew attention to the way they were feeding. We could see that they were moving their heads from side to side sifting the top layer of sediment in the shallows with specially adapted bills to collect small molluscs. It was explained that other ducks we saw might have a different diet and means of feeding so they are not in competition with one another. As well as various wildfowl, we had excellent views during the day of Golden and White-tailed eagles. When it was pointed out we could clearly distinguish between them from their flight patterns; the slower, laboured flight of the White-tails compared with the elegant gliding of the Goldies. We also watched a Great spotted woodpecker and saw its undulating flight. There were small birds, mainly Chaffinches, singing in a group of beech trees. Incidentally, if you need help with bird song identification you may find it useful to log on to the RSPB site.

I took a short break from birds and went to look at the gravestones in Balure Cemetery. One of these took the form of a lovely Angel sculpture. As I went through the gate I was aware of two bushy trees and at first thought they would be yews but as I approached I realized my mistake. They didn't have needles but they did have cones! After research that evening and some consultation I identified them as Monterey Cypress, which were first brought to Britain from California in 1853. A few other exotics we saw along the way were Turkeys, a Peacock and Muscovy ducks! It was by the cemetery that Stuart had a few surprises for

us! He pointed across Loch Spelve to an area of sediments where a burn enters the loch. It was here he had found some fossilized shells, which he showed us, along with the skull of a sandpiper. During the day we saw a number of mammals including, Red deer and Fallow deer. Some of us saw 4 or 5 otters, also sheep and cattle but perhaps the highlight of the day for me was a group of wild goats browsing below Laggan Deer Forest. Before setting off for tea we gave our legs a good stretch with a short circular walk passing St Kilda's Church, Lochbuie House and Moy Castle. It was a very special day - just what was needed to help me face my sitting room with a gaping hole where the fireplace had been and bedrock instead of floorboards and carpet. Why not try to join us next trip? Support your Bird Club. You don't need to have any expertise in anything; the important thing is turning up; just being there, so that you, too, can have a dose of Magical Mull!

OTTER REFLECTORS

A report by Pam Brown

In June 2009 the Isle of Mull Bird club accessed money from the MICT Eagle Fund to purchase 40 Otter reflectors to be put up on the road verges between Salen village and Aros castle at a cost of £363 after up to 8 Otters had been killed around this stretch of road during the previous year, in the hope of preventing the same happening again. The Otter reflectors were put in place with the help of Argyll & Bute Council during the autumn of 2009.

In July 2010 it was brought to the committee's notice that 'at least 10 of the roadside otter warning reflectors/posts along Salen bay were smashed up by the road side grass cutter'. An email was sent to Kaz Bailey of Argyll & Bute Council who replied that 'the grass/bracken had grown around & was taller than the reflectors which made them difficult to see. Although the flail might have hit & damaged the first reflector accidentally, the operator would not then have continued & demolished the lot! A high number of vehicle drivers will often drive onto the verge rather than use the passing places; it is highly likely that they smashed up the reflectors'. Kaz offered as a gesture of goodwill to pay for the replacement of the damaged reflectors & installation of same.

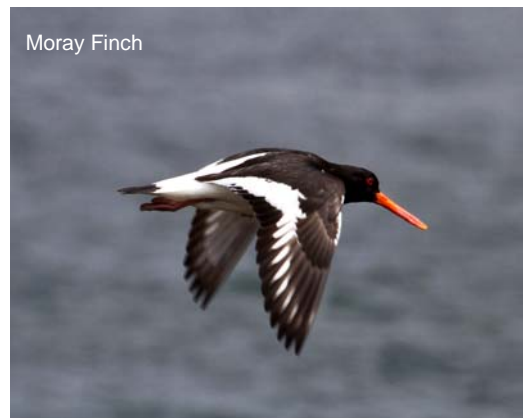
The matter could not be discussed until we had a full committee meeting during September where it was agreed that we would need to walk the road to check how many reflectors have been damaged. In November 2010 Bird Club members Eileen Slorach and Tangye Johns walked the stretch of road where the otter reflectors had been placed and reported back that by this time there were only 7 reflectors left standing and 4 mangled reflectors concluding that during a 12 month period almost all the otter reflectors had gone. The matter was again discussed at the November committee meeting and it was unanimously agreed that as almost all the reflectors had been damaged if we tried to replace them the same thing would almost certainly happen again. During the 12 months that the reflectors were in place no otters were reported killed on this stretch of road but this could be due to the fact that there were no otters there as they had been killed the previous year, wildlife tour operators agreed that otters were rarely seen in Salen Bay this summer also as the reflectors are so small the growing grass and bracken covers them and so it was decided that the efficiency of the reflectors was inconclusive.

TWO PHOTOS FROM A NEW MEMBER

Just thought I would include these two photos from one of our new members Moray Finch and family who live in Dervaig as I thought them appropriate for the newsletter. Thank you Moray for sending them in.



Moray Finch



Moray Finch

AND FINALLY...IT'S THAT TIME AGAIN,

Just a short reminder from your Treasurer that your annual subscription will fall due on the 1st April 2011. Again there has been no change in the amount and it remains at £5 per year per member. Thank you.

Peter T Hall ACIB
Treasurer