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# "THE OYSTERCATCHER"

*The Isle of Mull Bird Club Newsletter*

[www.mullbirdclub.org.uk](http://www.mullbirdclub.org.uk)

September 2007

## *THE OYSTERCATCHER The Bird Club Logo*



**W**hen the bird club was initiated we chose the Oystercatcher as our club logo and I wondered just how much we know about this, our most numerous wader?

Many years ago it was known as the 'sea pie' (from 'pied' as in black and white) and our birds don't eat Oysters, they depend mainly on mussels and cockles. With their strong red beaks they are able to pull razor shells from the sand and even limpets from rocks and these also form part of their diet. Oystercatchers are very sociable and are rarely seen on their own and they can gather in huge flocks in autumn and winter. It is estimated that there is a resident population of 115000 pairs in the UK and these numbers can be doubled by other European birds in winter. Most of them remain along the coastline feeding on tidal estuaries where there is a good supply of food but increasingly many are now found inland on good farmland.

In springtime they breed along our shores, not bothering to build a nest but using a simple scrape often on a shingle beach, they lay two to three eggs. Unlike other waders the Oystercatcher will feed its chicks rather than expect the youngsters to find their own food. Chicks are very vulnerable until they can fly and have evolved an excellent camouflage, keeping perfectly still and looking for all its worth just like a lichen covered rock. They are amongst one of our longest living birds and several are known to have reached 30 years old.

*Alan Spellman*

## DIARY OF A FIRST VISIT TO MULL

By Peter Hobbs  
Bird Club Member from Essex

**M**y first visit to Mull began in planning in early 2006 when I started to browse the internet searching for self catering accommodation on the island. There was plenty to choose from and I finally decided on Glen cottage in Dervaig. I booked early in order to get the two weeks I wanted and then waited impatiently for the months to pass by. Why Mull? Well, blame Springwatch 2005, Gordon Buchanan's Eagle Island, Bill Oddie and Chris Packham, they were all involved in showing to me what Mull offered in terms of majestic scenery and wonderful wildlife. In the early months of 2007 I began to finalise my plans booking 5 guided wildlife tours and most essentially my ferry crossing to Mull. I decided to make the journey to Mull in two stages and make Leighton Moss RSPB reserve in Lancashire the ideal spot to end the first half of the journey. Setting out at 6.0am on 24th May I arrived at Leighton Moss at 11.15am and opened my holiday record with a carrion crow. Highlights included a female wren feeding her four fledglings, good views of a Marsh Harrier and the booming of a bittern (sadly not seen) however, whilst at the reserve I was told of a nearby quarry where there were Peregrines. At the end of the day I made the short journey and witnessed a male catching a Jackdaw and making a mid air transfer to the female who then took the victim to feed her two chicks. 52 birds seen, not a bad start. The final leg of the journey was made with a minor delay around Glasgow's M8 but I reached Oban sooner than hoped and managed to get an earlier ferry, arriving on Mull for my first time at 12.45pm. I headed for Dervaig but obviously was a little early for the cottage so made my way to the Mishnish Lochs to start my Mull bird count whilst eating a late lunch. I returned to Dervaig and moved into the property that was to be my home for the next two weeks. After unpacking I explored the area local to my accommodation. At the end of my first day on Mull I recorded 27 birds. **Day 2** - I headed down to Lochdon seeing my first Red Deer and Hare and parked at the end of the road to Gorsten, I then moved to Garmony and walked to Fishnish and back. Amongst the birds seen today there was Arctic Tern, Canada goose, Reed Bunting, Redpoll, Gold Crest. **Day 3**. My first destination today was Grasspoint, a very busy area for birders where I encountered two of the local wildlife tour operators with whom I was later to spend some great days. I also went to Loch Ba that day. Amongst the birds seen today were, cuckoo, Lapwing, Spotted Flycatcher, Grey Wagtail, Golden Eagle. **Day 4**. I was booked in to the RSPB Eagle Watchpoint today. After discovering the problems with the nest about 2 to 3 weeks before I arrived on Mull, I was glad I went spotting my first ever White Tailed Sea Eagle as it left its perch chased by two hoodies. I left there and went for a walk around Aros Park which brought me a long tailed tit and later on in the day I went to Ardmore Forest where I spotted a Hen Harrier. **Day 5**. My first wildlife tour—a brilliant day, Otters, common and Atlantic seals. An easy way to see birds and wildlife with an expert who knows where to go and how to see it, also being driven around gives you more opportunity to look out of the windows without the fear of driving over the edge of the road or into an on-coming vehicle. Birds of note seen this day, Red Throated Diver, Gannet, Cormorant, Goosander, Snipe, Rock Dove. **Day 6**. An early start for a long drive to Iona with the hope of a Corncrake. I thought my first Sparrowhawk on the journey was a good sign but the clouds came in and the rain was soon coming down. No corncrakes seen or heard but not all was lost. I had sighting of Mink on the way back. The day ended with an evening walk around Dervaig. Birds of note seen today. Linnet, Kestrel, Ringed Plover, Turnstone, Sandering, Shelduck, Arctic Skua. **Day 7**. Walked from Glen Aros forestry Commission car park up to Loch Frisa. No new birds but a good walk. **Day 8**. My second wildlife tour, this one was with Island Encounters, another successful day seeing the big three. It is quite amazing that the guides, whilst driving, can spot distant pinpricks in the sky or rocks on the crest of hills that transform into Golden Eagles and lighter coloured sea weed that suddenly becomes an Otter at rest. **Day 9**. I went to Glengorm having been told that Corncrake have sometimes been heard there. Needless to say no Corncrake for me this day. **Day 10**. This proved to be the wettest day of my holiday, I look back now with disbelief that I only had one really wet day and two wet afternoons during the fortnight in Scotland. Despite the rain, this day was one to remember starting off with my first ever Grasshopper Warbler seen whilst walking from my cottage on my way to meet Pam and Arthur Brown for my Third Guided tour. We later had good views of sea Eagle, Otter, Fallow Deer and Porpoise. **Day 11**. The sun shone today and it stayed like this for the rest of the week. I drove down to Aros Bridge looking for Dippers with no luck but did get a Bullfinch. Three Otters in Salen Bay will always stay a memory with me along with the following incident. Whilst watching two Red throated Divers on Loch na Keel a Sea Eagle made its way over the small camp site where it started to get mobbed by various gulls. It decided to return to the Gruline area when a large raptor, I can only guess that it was a Golden Eagle came plunging down from a great height to bomb the Sea Eagle. Later on that day I moved to Caliach Point to do some sea watching and was rewarded with the large dorsal fin of a Basking Shark. **Day 12**. Another wildlife trip, we had great views of Golden Eagle, in Glen More, this time it was its turn to be mobbed by a Kestrel that was until its mate appeared to give support and the Kestrel decided, rather wisely, to back off. Later on two buzzards were seen soaring above two sea eagles all within my binocular vision and at the same time. **Day 13**. My last wildlife tour of the holiday, Twite seen today. **Day 14**. I took a trip to the Treshnish Isles today with Turus Mara. A cloudless sky and calm sea made this my last full day on Mull. Very pleasurable. The excursion is very similar to a trip to the Farne Islands that I made last year but the scenery is far better. This was capped off with the spectacular Fingal's cave on Staffa. One slight downer of the day, whilst returning to Ulva Ferry I got chatting to another couple on the boat who said that they had both heard and seen a Corncrake on Staffa, that's just not fair!!! **Day 15**. I caught the first ferry back to Oban for the long, long, long journey back to Essex, arriving home just before 8.00pm, and 1,737 miles later, the end of my first holiday to Mull. I saw a total of 94 birds on Mull plus the 18 additional birds at Leighton Moss making a final total of 112 for the holiday. Two weeks I will never forget, brilliant weather, beautiful scenery and wonderful wildlife. However my lasting impression is Willow Warbler, they seemed to be everywhere. When they fly south in the autumn Mull must become a very quiet island.

Peter Hobbs

## LOCH FRISA UPDATE

Dave Sexton

I wanted to bring all the Mull Eagle Watch volunteers up to date after the sad events of 17 April at Loch Frisa. The discovery of the dead chicks obviously brought the whole watch to a very abrupt end. I was then away in York at the RSPB Member's Weekend and have been catching up with the other pairs ever since. So I've not had a chance to first of all thank you all again for all your time and effort during incubation. I know everyone will have felt very flat after all that time and with the anticipation of the hatch. It's not much consolation I know but there was an overwhelming sympathetic reaction from the 1000+ RSPB members in York to the news and following the subsequent media coverage. Everyone was just in awe and inspired by the effort that everyone puts in each year for these amazing birds. The message in the media coverage and in any contacts about the loss of the chicks has been that whilst it was sad, it was a natural event and that Frisa & Skye have been very productive in recent years and they would be back next year to try again.

Meanwhile, we urge people still to book onto trips as the birds are still about on a regular basis along with a wide range of other species such as golden eagle and hen harrier. So far, visitors to the hide are still having good experiences so please still encourage people to visit. Apart from anything else, the sea eagle fund which last year donated £6000 to local island good causes needs to have another good year and if people don't see sea eagles at Loch Frisa they may be tempted to go looking elsewhere and potentially cause disturbance problems.

Last week, FCS staff climbed the Loch Frisa nest tree and we can confirm that the nest had slipped sufficiently to cause the chicks to roll out. Perhaps, after the hatch both adults landed or perched together on the same outer edge of the nest with prey and that extra weight caused the new nest to slip. There was not much of a rim on the nest to hold them back once the nest was at that angle. Unfortunately, watching from the hide, the first sign something was wrong was when both adults flew out together and began soaring. By this time, the chicks had already died, either from the fall itself or from hypothermia. They will be sent away for a post mortem in due course.

Elsewhere on the island, the picture so far is much more positive with 7 sites still on the go, 4 of which have now hatched.

Thank you again for watching Frisa & Skye, the Loch Don pair and the others so carefully again this year. I'll keep you posted as the season progresses.

Best wishes  
David Sexton  
Mull Officer  
RSPB Scotland

RSPB Scotland is part of the RSPB - the UK charity working to secure a healthy environment for birds and all wildlife, helping to create a better world for everyone. We depend on the goodwill and financial support of people like you. Click here to join today [www.rspb.org.uk/join](http://www.rspb.org.uk/join)

## NOTE FROM THE TREASURER

Sorry to have to mention the subject - but it's money again!!! Many of you have already paid your annual subscription, due on 1st April, and some of you have paid for the following year too. However, 63 members have still not paid for this year. The subscription remains at £5 per person; and if you have not yet paid for the current year, would you please remedy this a.s.a.p. Thank you very much.

Peter T Hall ACIB  
Treasurer - Isle of Mull Bird Club

## MY PATCH

Alan Spellman  
President

My patch is Lochdon which in gaelic means Black Loch or Dark Loch, because, being a shallow tidal loch it is dangerous to shipping. It is a shallow tidal loch (NM7332 - NM7431) It's a very interesting habitat for birds because of the influence of the tides which bring in rich food pickings twice a day for any wader prepared to wait. The loch changes dramatically from summer to winter and different species arrive to feed whilst en route either north or south in the spring time and autumn and it also has its resident population of Mallard, Red breasted Merganser and Mute Swan and Waders include Snipe, Oystercatcher and Lapwing which nest along its shores. There is a problem with Mink in the Lochdon area and now the population of nesting Common Gulls is all but decimated, this in spite of the regular trapping I have been doing. The loch is used as part of the British Trust for Ornithology bird species counts in winter and it was here on one of my monthly counts that the highest ever count on Mull of Whimbrel peaked at 145 birds in September of 2004 was made. Other passage Waders include: Bar tailed Godwit, Golden Plover, Ringed Plover, Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin, Ruddy Turnstone and Black tailed Godwit, which all stop over at Lochdon to feed frantically and build up reserves before continuing their journeys. Whooper Swans drop in but usually stop only a day or two before continuing their journey. Resident winter Teal (c200) and Wigeon about the same number, can start arriving as early as September, to escape the cold north and spend winter here, they stay until end of March. Goldeneye and Shelduck in smaller numbers also use Lochdon as their wintering quarters. The Bridge pool over the Grasspoint road is a favourite haunt for Little Grebe and Goosanders in winter and it was here that we had our long staying Kingfisher which spent three months here in 2005 Thousands of Redwing and Fieldfare arrive from Scandinavia in the autumn to feed on the rowan and hawthorn berries around the loch. Looking directly across the loch I can watch Sea Eagles, Ravens and Buzzards every day, indeed when the Sea Eagle used a different eyrie, I could watch the birds on the nest, using my telescope, from my own front porch. In Spring the loch side becomes bright yellow with the coconut smelling flowers of the

gorse and newly arrived warblers proclaim their territories along the shore line and in the scrub. On any evening in spring, the air is filled with the song of Blackbirds and Song Thrushes singing from the tops of shrubs and trees, and this year, especially in the evenings there were more reeling Grasshopper Warblers that I have heard before. Common Sandpiper bob along the shore and Sedge Warbler, Whitethroat and Willow Warbler can all be found along the shores of the loch. In the oak woodland along the Grasspoint road you can find nesting Wood Warbler and Redstart. It was along here that our Mull Canary (Leucistic Willow Warbler) was found. Tree Creepers and Greater Spotted Woodpeckers also use the oak woodland. In June of this year 2007, a rare Red backed Shrike was found along the Grasspoint road and earlier, a Purple Sandpiper at the mouth of the loch. The mixed habitat of Lochdon is such that almost anything could turn up. Most of the Lochdon residents feed the birds and encourage all the finches and Siskins plus Great, Blue, Coal and Long tailed tits into their gardens. In early Spring Yellowhammers arrive and feed on seed scattered on the ground before dispersing across the island. Lochdon is constantly changing; daily as the tides do their work and seasonally when different species arrive or depart from its shores. It's a great place to live.

Alan Spellman.

**DID YOU KNOW!!!**

**FIRE & GOLD**



The smallest British resident bird is the **Goldcrest** it is closely linked to coniferous forest of which we have plenty here on Mull, and its range extends to the Himalayas, Japan and China. It is about 9 cm in length and weighs about 7 grams. The Goldcrest forages in trees, feeding on spiders & other tiny insects. Pale green above and a dirty

white below, its most obvious feature is its yellow crown stripe with black borders. There is another small bird that visits the UK each spring and this is the **Firecrest**, it vies with the Goldcrest for the title of smallest British bird.

The Firecrest is a migrant, arriving in spring and small numbers breed in the south of the UK, it's only very slightly smaller and weighs only 6 grams. It differs from the Goldcrest by having brighter green upper parts and whiter underparts but most striking is a broad white eye stripe and fiery yellow -orange crown stripe.

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Image Firecrest Peter Simpson ©

**BIRD CLUB BBQ**

Every year for the past few years we have held a Bird Club BBQ. This year was no exception. Every year it rains, this year was no exception. We decided to change venue this year and Shaun and Liz McCulloch very kindly said we could hold it at their house in Dervaig. Sausages and beefburgers were bought along with rolls, dips and puddings were made. All 19 of us



**Start Cooking!!!!**

turned up to have a jolly BBQ and, yes you guessed it, it rained and so we hastily had to bring the BBQ indoors, fortunately they have an Aga and a big conservatory so all was not lost, we spent an extremely pleasant

evening in good company and with good food. The purpose was to raise money for Wings over Mull, which we did. I would like to thank Shaun and Liz for the use of their house and their hospitality.



**Stop Cooking!!!!**



**Jolly Good Food**

**RSPB MEMEBRS WEEK-END**

Imagine if you can a room of like minded people. A room of smiling welcoming faces. A room full of engaged thought provoking images and messages. A room full of pictures, books and gadgets you would just love to buy. Where is this I hear you ask, welcome to RSPB world or the Annual Members Weekend to give it its proper title. The event is very well organised, if you arrive by train there is a free bus from York station to take you to your designated accommodation block at the University of York campus. On arrival you are given a welcome pack, the keys to your room and a name badge which is to be worn at all times mainly to aid campus security. All the RSPB staff on duty also wear name badges which also includes their job title. The staff make you feel very welcome and engage you in conversation in a friendly but non pushy manner.

The University of York campus is an excellent venue for the weekend, mainly

due to its resident wildfowl population and its very attractive setting around the central lake. I was reliably informed that the campus contains more wildlife per head of student population than any other campus in England. The weekend is an annual event to inform and educate us the members with the work that has been carried out by the RSPB over the past 12 months. The whole weekend is full of interesting lectures both updating the members on the progress of the ongoing projects and outlining future proposals. All meals are taken in the dining hall of your designated accommodation block. with the Saturday evening meal being waitress service. The main feature presentations take place in the Central Hall, which is a large modern Lecture Hall situated in the middle of the central lake. On the Friday evening we were treated to the premier of the inspirational RSPB film Waterlands. The film as you would expect contained stunning photography and is a must see when it makes its way on to our television screens. Saturday afternoon is reserved for excursions to various nature reserves or stately homes within the vicinity of York. We chose a trip to Fairburn Ings and were blessed with a lovely sunny afternoon guided stroll with one of the reserve wardens. Saturday evening's presentation was entitled "Eagle Island - the magic of Mull " and 'behind the scenes' Springwatch exclusive. The talk was presented by Dave Sexton RSPB Mull Officer. Having lived on Mull for the past 12 months I decided that it would be nice to give Dave a little support and hence we chose to attend this year's members weekend.

The presentation was excellent and gave us an insight into all the work and the sleepless nights and stress that goes with a live wildlife broadcast. Unfortunately Dave had to report the sad news that the featured pair of Sea Eagles, Skye and Frisa, had that very week just lost their two day old chicks when they fell from the nest that had apparently slipped, but as we all know nature has its downs as well as its ups. Sunday saw yet another hearty cooked breakfast and today's programme included talks on Coquet Island, Sky dancing for beginners - the Marsh Harrier story. The weekend finished with a presentation by the Chief Executive Graham Wynne about the partnership the RSPB have established with Birdlife International and Burung Indonesia. This initiative is Harapan Rainforest, named after the Indonesian word for hope. This is home to the endangered Sumatran Tiger, at least 235 species of birds. The objective is to protect, restore and sustain this important rainforest for future generations and hopefully provide learning for restoration the world over.

In summary it was a highly informative and enjoyable weekend and I can not put a few faces to the articles I read in Bird magazine. I would recommend any RSPB member to attend the members weekend at least once in their lifetime and would guess that it may not be their last.

*Ian and Monica, Creagorry, Tobermory*

## PROFILE

*By Len White*

### Why an interest in birds

**M**y interest in birds grew out of my love for nature in general. It seems strange to say this now at that time I was about 12 years old, it was 1944 and of course nearing the end of the war.

Both my parents encouraged me in a 12 year olds love of collecting caterpillars, moths and butterflies. I kept mice, rabbits, guinea pigs, and insects also lizards, as well as newts in our garden pond. Near where we lived we had plenty of open common land and a golf course where I spent a lot of my early days collecting my menagerie together. You may remember the article in an earlier Oystercatcher when a number of friends and myself reared an abandoned cuckoo and released it on the golf course. So birds were and are my number one interest.

### Who do I admire in the Bird World

As a youngster it was James Fisher and Eric Hoskins. As the years passed new faces and names gradually enter the scene. High profile names and faces appear on television such as

David Attenborough and Simon King. There are also those I follow and read their articles on a regular basis in Birding magazines, Mike Weeden, Dominic Couzens, Mike Raven and David Doherty. I am going to add two more names with no intention to embarrass them in any way. Firstly to Stuart, Gibson for his extensive knowledge, and his ability in communicating his enthusiasm to members of the club. To David Sexton for his untiring dedication to conservation not only of bird life here on Mull but to all wild life in general. Without doubt he deserves our appreciation for all he does on our behalf.

### What do I like about birding

Simple, wherever you go you meet like minded people, there is usually a bond there in swapping information and new sightings, very much so here on Mull. Recently three members of the Northern Ireland Ornithological Society phoned me introduced themselves and requesting the best way to make the most of a three day stay on Mull. I arranged to meet them when they arrived and as luck would have it David Sexton was there with me as well. We gave them a few tips and trust they enjoyed their first visit to Mull. I hope to eventually to receive an e:mail letting me how they got on.

### What do I dislike

Any form of cruelty, anywhere in any shape or form.

### Why Mull

Pam and I fell in love with Mull when we stayed here in 1998. We moved here the following year. Mull has so much to offer, scenery and wildlife, by enlarge it is a peaceful island. The ever changing face of Mull, daily and through the seasons means we can both enjoy our bird watching followed closely by photography and exploring the island throughout the year. There is easy access to other islands and indeed the mainland where the range of interests widen greatly. On a personal level having lived here for eight years we have developed a large circle of friends coupled with a good social life. **That's Why Mull**

### Favourite Reserve

Minsmere

### Which was my favourite foreign holiday

We never have been ones for foreign holidays. So there is not a lot of experience in this area.

### What is my favourite Bird

I don't have a favourite bird as such. As a youngster in my early days I saw the Rook and the Lapwing as two birds that gained most of my interest mainly because during scout camping era their habitat was always close to hand in the vicinity with ample opportunity to study them. Now all birds have a place as far as I am concerned from the LBJ to the White tailed sea eagle

### How do I see the future

Providing the policy of any Government or Local Council put in place and continue to respect and maintain the need to retain areas designated to the preservation of all forms of wildlife and its habitat. The future will then be safe. We must at all costs protect the ever growing list of endangered species so that future generations can continue to enjoy our natural heritage. Thankfully it is now proposed that stronger penalties are put in place for those who endanger wildlife in any way. Many acts are deliberate and create suffering. Those who kill, maim, capture or steal eggs must pay a high price for their deeds.

### What do I see in the future for the bird club

The past year has shown that a new committee under the leadership of Arthur Brown has been able to introduce a stronger bond between members both in the interest in bird watching and in the social aspect of the club. New innovations have been introduced and I am sure will continue for instance, forming the informal circle after the main meeting has in my opinion removed the barrier of talking to the back of some ones head. Now you can see their face and have an easier exchange of views and ideas and introduces a measure of humour. Far more than ever the club now belongs to the members and they will be the ones to take the club into the future. **The future of the club is I feel strong and in good hands.**

Len White

## ONE TO WATCH

By Stuart Gibson

**T**he Red-breasted Merganser is a real character among the clan of diving ducks, and has a distinct north and west maritime distribution in the British Isles. A significant number of the 2,300 pairs that breed around the British coast do so in Western Scotland and the N. W. Highlands, where it is a feature of many sea lochs and sheltered bays. Although comparatively few reside in Scotland, the Red-breasted Merganser is a hugely successful species in the Northern Hemisphere. It enjoys a complete circumpolar distribution, with birds breeding from Alaska and Canada, east to Siberia and the Bering Straits. Unlike other ducks, including its closest relation, the Goosander, the Red-breasted Merganser does not have a dependence on trees for nesting purposes, so has been able to colonise open ground that is unsuitable for other species.

Red-breasted Mergansers are often confused with their larger congener, the Goosander. Although the general rule that the Red-breasted Merganser is the coastal equivalent of the freshwater-loving Goosander normally applies, there are exceptions to this 'rule'. Red-breasted Mergansers nest predominantly around the coast, but some pairs breed far inland on freshwater lochs. Goosanders breed along tree-fringed rivers, but may be seen outwith the breeding season on some sea lochs. The attractively-plumaged drakes are not so readily mistaken as the 'red-headed' females. The shape of the duck's head can give you an important clue as to the bird's identity. The smaller-headed Red-breasted Merganser has a very distinctive 'punk hairstyle' (very late 1970's !), with two peaks of spiky 'hair', at the rear of the crown and on its nape. The 'hair' of the female Goosander lacks this spiky feathering, hanging at the back of the neck 'in a bob'.

Game fish, such as Salmon and Trout, are important prey items in the diet of Red-breasted Mergansers. Because of their depredations on fish, Red-breasted Mergansers have come into conflict with fishermen and have been both legally and illegally persecuted as a result. Red-breasted Mergansers possess long, thin and highly-serrated bills, armed with teeth-like protrusions, superbly adapted for gripping slippery prey like fish. Although they dive for fish, Red-breasted Mergansers spend much of the time above the surface with only their head submersed. This 'snorkelling' behaviour allows them to search for likely prey, and is akin to a Kestrel hovering above ground on the lookout for small mammals.

Once identified, Red-breasted Mergansers dive in pursuit of their next meal in a somewhat unique way for ducks, as they use both their wings and feet for underwater propulsion. It could be said that they are, indeed, 'flying underwater'. Much of their diet consists of small fish, which are eaten underwater, with only larger items being brought to the surface to subdue.

Most fish are caught in relatively shallow water (< 5 metres) and although birds can be underwater for up to two minutes, the duration of most dives is around 30 seconds. Red-breasted Mergansers are accomplished solo feeders, but they will also hunt in pairs or small groups, in order to drive a shoal of small fish into the shallows where they are easier to catch.

Red-breasted Mergansers breed throughout the coastline of Mull, and may also be seen on some freshwater lochs, e.g. Loch Ba. The Isle of Mull Bird Club would like to hear of any pairs of this attractive 'sea duck' seen on local freshwater lochs during the breeding season. In late Winter and early Spring watch for displaying males in breeding areas : birds will posture by jerking their heads and necks into a forward-pointing 'salute', as well as appearing to bow or 'curtsey', by elevating their rear ends, while depressing the front of their bodies. At such times, the drake's shaggy crest is either raised or lowered as part of the display ritual.

Nests are difficult to locate and breeding is best confirmed by watching for the presence of ducklings once the eggs hatch. Merganser chicks are taken to water almost immediately after they have hatched and dried in the nest. Once there, they may be joined by other families and creched in the same manner as the Eider. There is a record of one female baby-sitting no fewer than 51 chicks, the probable result of around six or seven nests ! The survival chances

of young mergansers is very poor, with most falling prey to local gulls, otters and, where young are escorted on to freshwater, pike, whenever this aquatic predator is present. Moulting migrations of Red-breasted Mergansers occur in the sea lochs of Western Scotland, when males temporarily assume the same 'red-headed' appearance of females. A late Summer flock of moulting birds previously gathered in Scallastle Bay, in the Sound of Mull, but it is not known if this is still the case. A visit to this area in July - August by local birdwatchers would be helpful in ascertaining the post-breeding status of this sawbill on the island. Likewise, the possibility exists that other moulting groups of 'Snorky' and his friends may be going undetected elsewhere on the island at this time.

Stuart Gibson



## 2007 FLEDGE PARTY



A fledge party was held at Loch Frisa on Sunday 2nd September as a "Thank you" for all those who had worked so hard on this year's Eagle Watch. Here are the intrepid group enjoying a moment in the sunshine at the hide.

## NORTHERN GOSHAWKS IN ARGYLL: A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

*Article courtesy of The Eider*

It may come as a surprise to most birdwatchers in Argyll that the Goshawk has the highest non acceptance rate of any species considered by the Argyll Rare Birds Committee. Why is this the case, as surely a medium sized bird of prey should be quite straightforward to identify or is it? The goshawk is certainly not a regular breeder in Argyll, with the last possible breeding record over 20 years ago. Also, Argyll is quite distant from the nearest, largest breeding populations in the Scottish/ English Borders (Petty 2007). Therefore, it is important that all claimed records are critically examined, and not just accepted at face value, in order to build up an accurate picture of its occurrence. Each year there are up to ten claims of Goshawk sightings in our recording area, but only around three or four records are submitted to the records committee for assessment. Since 1993, of 13 records submitted only three have been accepted. On the surface it appears that many of these submitted records are plausible, with several descriptions being based on the birds' size— 'large buzzard sized raptor' that is 'too large for Sparrowhawk'. Other than this, there are often few details about plumage or other characteristics. This is not altogether surprising as views are often brief as a bird disappears into the tree canopy. But, Goshawks do hunt over open ground, and like other raptors they can spend much time soaring when the weather conditions are suitable. Personally I have only seen five or six birds in Britain, one in the USA, two in Greece and six at close range migrating at Gibraltar, southern Spain. Most of these sightings were straightforward. However, separating a male Goshawk from a female Sparrowhawk is reputed to be difficult—but is it? If uncertain, it is best to steer clear of 'firming up' the record from a 'possible' into a 'definite' when you are writing a description! If in doubt, the bird is almost certainly a Sparrowhawk! When examining Goshawk records in a bit more detail, a few things become apparent. A significant number of claims are made by visitors to parts of Argyll, particularly Mull, who often have little if any experience of Goshawks. Could this be similar to inexperienced visitors turning Common Buzzards into Golden Eagles? Recent reports have included photographs of a Buzzard that was claimed as a Goshawk, and another report that was definitely a Hen Harrier. The size of the bird is often the main factor supporting the bird's identification and referred to as 'buzzard sized'. Although some female Goshawks do approach the wing span of a Common Buzzard's, generally they are some 10-15% shorter winged, although average body mass is greater than in Buzzards (Cramp & Simmons 1980, Forsman 1999, Mullarney et al. 2000). What is often difficult in assessing records is that although size is given, often there is nothing else on which to base this 'impression', unless flying alongside a Buzzard or being mobbed by crows. Vinicombe (2003) says that in his experience, flying Goshawks appear to be intermediate in size between Sparrowhawk and Common Buzzard. A distant Goshawk tends to appear big rather than huge. The potential to misidentify a female Sparrowhawk as a Goshawk is always there if for some reason the observer is inexperienced or has misjudged the distance involved. At times, a soaring female Sparrowhawk can appear quite large, particularly when there is nothing else to compare its size with, but if you stick with it until it flaps, its wing action is a giveaway, being very rapid compared to the slower, more powerful flaps of a Goshawk (see below). But, to be able to make these judgements you need to first be very familiar with Sparrowhawks. So, one bit of advice is to spend a lot of time watching soaring Sparrowhawks, and noting their behaviour and wing action. Now is a good time to do this, with birds dispersing from breeding areas and juveniles developing their aerial agility, and often jousting with other raptors high in the sky. Often few details are given about flight action or wing shape, although both are useful to confirm identification. Similar to Sparrowhawk, Goshawk flight typically consists of a few flaps followed by a glide, which is then repeated. However, the flaps are slower and more deliberate in Goshawk and the wings often appear paddle shaped and show more 'tapering hands'. When in a fast glide or stoop they can appear Peregrine like, except for the much longer tail. While soaring they are quite different to Common Buzzard, and in fact are more like Honey buzzard, as neither species raise their wings to gain height as do Common Buzzards.

A rare photo of a male Goshawk brooding chicks, which is mainly done by the female. Note

the contrasting grey upper parts and white, lightly barred under parts, and the broad white supercilium above the eye (©David Whittaker). Structurally Goshawks are quite different from Sparrowhawk. Goshawks are bulky, powerful birds compared with the far more slightly built and agile Sparrowhawk. In fact, the difference between Goshawk and Sparrowhawk is similar to the difference between Peregrine and Merlin, but few would confuse a Peregrine with a Merlin or viceversa! You only have to look at average body weights of Sparrowhawk and Goshawk to realise this. From the largest to the smallest these are; female Goshawk 1414g, male Goshawk 865g, female Sparrowhawk 264g and male Sparrowhawk 144g (Cramp & Simmons 1980). Thus, male Goshawks are more than three times the body mass of female Sparrowhawks—an area where there is reputed to be so much confusion over identification! On top of this the plumage colouration of adult female Sparrowhawks and adult male Goshawks is widely different (see below). In flight, adult Goshawks appear white below, including the underwing, whereas Sparrowhawk look much duller due to broader barring and buffer background tones. Both species have white undertail coverts, but in Goshawks these are exceptionally long. Perched Goshawk when seen from the front can appear as a large white blob in the tree tops, suggesting a Wood Pigeon sunning itself, or even a white morph Gyrfalcon (Vinicombe 2003). The colour of the upper body of adult Goshawks is quite different to that of adult Sparrowhawks. Adult males are grey, only a little darker than Wood Pigeons, and this contrast beautifully with the white, lightly barred under parts, and dark grey (almost black) crown and ear coverts with a broad white band in between (above the eye) (photo on previous page). These differences are accentuated because Scottish Goshawks derive almost entirely from birds introduced from Fennoscandia, which are both larger and greyer than central and southern European clines (Petty 2007, Petty in press). In contrast, juvenile Goshawks have heavily streaked underparts, pale tips to the brown upper body coverts (photo below), and a slightly narrower 'hand' and comparatively longer tail than the adult (Forsman 1999). What is surprising in descriptions sent in for assessment is that most birds are aged as adult, although some are not aged at all. One would expect to receive descriptions of the very distinctive juvenile birds as these tend to wander furthest from their breeding strongholds, and are therefore more likely to occur in Argyll. These notes highlight some of the important features to look out for if you encounter a potential Goshawk in Argyll, which hopefully may lead to more accepted records in the future. Good quality records will help us build up a better picture of the occurrence of this magnificent species in our region. Good luck!

**Jim Dickson**

*References*

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An adult Goshawk showing the white, finely barred underparts. The long, white undertail coverts are just visible to the bottom right of the photo ©Steve Petty

A nestling Goshawk about ready to fledge. Note the heavily marked under parts with a buff background, and the dark brown upper covert feathers with light brown/buff tips. ©Steve Petty



A rare photo of a male Goshawk brooding chicks, which is mainly done by the female. Note the contrasting grey upper parts and white, lightly barred under parts, and the broad white supercilium above the eye. ©David S Whitaker

## BIRD ATLAS 2007 TO 2011

**B**ird Atlas 2007-11 is a partnership between the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), Bird Watch Ireland (BWI) and the Scottish Ornithologists' Club (SOC).

Bird Atlas 2007-2011 aims to produce maps of distribution and relative abundance for all bird species breeding and wintering in Britain and Ireland. It will allow us to assess changes in bird distribution since previous breeding atlases in 1970 and 1990 and the winter atlas of the 1980's. Atlases are immensely important for furthering bird knowledge and conservation. Bird Atlas 2007-2011 is destined to set the agenda of ornithology in Britain and Ireland for the next decades.

### **GETTING INVOLVED**

Fieldwork will span four winters and four breeding seasons, starting on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2007, during which we will cumulatively survey the whole of Britain and Ireland. There are two core methods.

### **ROVING RECORDS – whatever you see, whenever, wherever!**

For distribution maps to be comprehensive we need complete species lists for every 10-km square for the breeding season and winter. Roving records are a means of submitting lists for grid squares of one-off records and hard to find species. They are also a means of accumulating evidence of breeding and for providing records of nocturnal species. Everyone can take part by supplying *Roving Records*.

### **TIMED TETRAD VISITS**

TTV's are principally concerned with discovering the broad patterns of relative abundance by counting birds for fixed periods in tetrads. Tetrads are 2km x 2km squares and labelled A-Z within each 10km square. TTV's do not aim to produce a complete list for the tetrad, but a sample of what you can find during a pair of visits (one early, one late) in winter and/or breeding season. The aim is to cover cumulatively at least 8 tetrads in every 10km square during the four year period. You can take on as many tetrads as you wish. This is a great opportunity to visit those hidden corners of the landscape and find new birds and follow seasonal changes.

### **HOW CAN YOU HELP**

Anyone and everyone can take part by completing a *Roving Records Form*. These are available from your Regional Organiser (Shaun McCullagh - Email – shaun@lizbluehouse.freeserve.co.uk Tel 01688 400338), from BTO HQ or can be printed off directly from the website ([www.birdatlas.net](http://www.birdatlas.net)). If you would like to take part on one or more tetrads for *Timed Tetrad Visits* please contact your Regional Organiser who will be coordinating coverage or BTO HQ. These can also be booked directly from the website once you have registered.

**WWW.BIRDATLAS.NET** – see where you can help, plus up to date local results.

The bird atlas is a huge project and we anticipate millions of individual bird records. We have developed a dedicated online system to allow you to see where the gaps are – you can see which tetrads are available or, for example, look at the distribution for a range of species. So please submit your data directly online. Register at [www.birdatlas.net](http://www.birdatlas.net). This is a very user friendly website. Once you have logged on with a username and password, you can download recording forms, choose your tetrads for timed visits and enter your records.

*Shaun McCullagh*

*(BTO Regional Organiser for Isle of Mull & Morven)*

## CHAIRMAN'S VIEW

**I** have been thinking a lot lately about what being a member of our bird club means and what we as members want from the club. I like to think that the club brings people together in a friendly and social way with members sharing a common liking of nature and the outdoors. This is why we organized an excellent wildflower walk in June for members who want to look at other parts of the tapestry that nature has to offer. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Norma Dowling for her hard work in organizing this event and I am sure there will be another one arranged for next year. The dawn chorus weekend which was to a certain extent spoiled by the weather was enjoyed by all who turned out, I can truthfully say I learned a lot on the weekend and thank Stuart Gibson for his efforts and hope he has not been put off from trying again next spring. Thanks to Len and Pam White for their kind hospitality on the Friday evening before the dawn chorus walk, we were there for much longer than they had anticipated due to the poor weather. To all the hardy souls who turned out despite the appalling weather many thanks, at least we enjoyed a good social evening. The summer Barbeque was also a great social success and enjoyed by us all many thanks to Shaun and Liz McCullach for hosting this event at short notice, your kind hospitality was most appreciated. The first talk of the winter programme will be on Fungi presented by Roger Johns and I for one am thoroughly looking forward to it. So you can see from this programme of events that we are trying to broaden the remit of the club as members have requested and not just stick to birds, and I have no objection this at all in fact I think it makes the club more rounded and inclusive. There is however another side to the club, the birding side and I think that over the next 4 years we at the Isle of Mull bird club could and should get involved helping the B.T.O. with its new breeding bird atlas for Great Britain. I know this sounds grand and many of you probably think you need to be good birdwatchers, but this is not necessarily true. I don't know myself yet what it will involve but Shaun McCullach is the B.T.O. coordinator for Mull and can tell us how we can get involved and what we need to do.

The November meeting will see a representative from the B.T.O. coming and telling us what we as a club could do to help and I am sure that as a club we could go out in groups, do some valuable research and have a lot of fun at the same time. Mull as an Island is vastly under recorded birdwise and this is an area we could as a club put right, it need not be a chore and as individuals you can do as much or as little as you like, but like the Eagle watch programme I think we can as a club rise to the challenge.  
Enjoy your wildlife watching in whatever form it takes.

Arthur Brown  
Chairman

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hi, Jan !

It's great now having letters after my name (Hon. Member of the Isle of Mull Bird Club) !

CONGRATULATIONS ! on yet another FABULOUS newsletter. I've greatly enjoyed reading all the articles and feel that you should be justifiably proud of your efforts and expertise with the newsletter, which is an INTEGRAL part of what the Bird Club is all about. GREAT STUFF and PERSONAL THANKS !

All the best !

Stuart x

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Dear Janet

letter received, thank you. Sorry for my writing and so unclear e mail address.

We have just had a fantastic two weeks at Pennyghael and enjoyed super views of white tails, glimpse of golden, fantastic puffins on lunga, orchids, etc, etc, and most especially periods of absolute silence in brooding glens. So special when we live such noisy lives most of the time!

As a result we felt we had to join the club and support your efforts and great newsletter that we have printed off earlier editions and most enjoyed. We hope to visit again next year.

keep up the sterling work with the club and we look forward to keeping up with news and events through the newsletter.

best regards,

Chris and Rosemary Sargent Leicester.

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS

### INDOOR MEETINGS

- |                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| 19th October 2007  | "Fungi" a talk by Roger John  |
| 23rd November 2007 | BTO Atlas - Jacqui Kaye   |
| 14th December 2007 | An evening with Andy & Diana Oldacre                                |
| 18th January 2008  | Social Evening with lots of eating, drinking and a bit about birds. |

### OUTDOOR MEETINGS

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|--------------------|---|
| 20th October 2007  | Fungi Walk, Aros Park and then to Glengorm for a snack or two.    |
| 24th November 2007 | BTO Atlas Walk  |
| 15th December 2007 | Loch na Keal a possible visit to Inch Kenneth weather permitting. |
| 5th January 2008   | Bird Race and then refreshments at IOM Hotel                      |

For the Outdoor events, if you wish further information or would like to go on any one of the above, please contact Arthur Brown on 01688 400415

## NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

First of all let me say a big thank you to all members who have submitted articles for this edition of the newsletter. As you can see it is a bumper one this time. Can I ask that if members have a B&B, self catering etc., would they be kind enough to put a link to the Bird Club's website, the URL is on the front of this newsletter on the first page, and then let our webmaster know and he will do the same for you. I hope that you have enjoyed your summer birding and we look forward to a busy few months with the club's activities. As always, if you have anything to say or would like to submit a story please do not hesitate to contact me.

Happy birding

