

# Orkney Field Club

Founded in 1959

*Aim: To encourage the study and conservation of the natural and cultural heritage of the County.*

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Orkney Field Club is a Registered Scottish Charity No. SCO12459

## OFC Late Winter & Spring Newsletter 2014

By the time you receive this Newsletter the Arctic spell will be over and we will probably be in a run of wet, but mild, south-westerlies. But the bitter winds and icy conditions will have for the moment set many of us dreaming about the spring and summer weather to come and the wonderful wildlife experiences that may be awaiting us – sight of the first swallow, the first marsh marigold and orchid, the first bumblebee and damselfly and so on. We can't promise that any of these will be too much in evidence in the period covered by this Newsletter but we hope that what you find here will help sustain your interest in wildlife until the first shoots of Spring appear in the Orkney countryside.

### OFC Programme

We hold our Club Nights and AGM in the St Magnus Centre, Kirkwall, just uphill from the Cathedral, starting at 7.30pm. Everyone is welcome to attend; the entry fee for members is £1 for members and £2 for non-members and under-19's are admitted free. We hope that everyone will stay for refreshments and a chat after our meetings.

If you would like to take part in any of our outdoor events please get in touch with the named contact a few days beforehand. Please bring warm waterproof clothing and footwear and some refreshment.

We aim to car-share if possible. If you need transport please let the contact or the Secretary know (tel:751426) and we will try to arrange a lift for you from your home (and back after the event).

Last minute changes to the programme will, if possible, be notified on Radio Orkney, on the OFC website and Nature Forum and by phone or email (if we have your email address and you have registered your interest).

### January

**Between Wed 1<sup>st</sup> and Sun 5<sup>th</sup> incl. New Year Ramble.** After all the dreich autumn weather we hope the New Year will bring us a crisp sparkling winter's day for our ramble (believe it or not this **has** happened in the past!). We will choose the day and the venue on Mon 30<sup>th</sup> when we have checked the weather forecast for the period, probably selecting a coastal walk where the going is firm and fairly dry. Please register your interest with Dick Matson on 751426. We will give out the details on the Club website, on the Nature Forum and will contact you by phone or email (if we have your email address).

## February

**Fri 7<sup>th</sup>. OFC “Christmas” Dinner.** By popular request we moved the event until after the festive season. We will meet at the Lynnfield Hotel in Kirkwall at 7.30 for 8pm. The menu will be available from Dick by 25<sup>th</sup> Jan and will include vegetarian choices. Please register your interest with Dick at [r.matson42@btinternet.com](mailto:r.matson42@btinternet.com) or on 751426.

**Fri 28<sup>th</sup>. Club Night. Orkney’s Wild Plants and Places – a botanical exploration.** In an illustrated talk John Crossley (Orkney Botanical Recorder) looks at some of our most attractive plants and where they grow, with some new discoveries.

## March

**Sun 2<sup>nd</sup>. Winter Bird Race.** Joint event with the RSPB Local Group. Looking to see how many different bird species we can find. Teams of four will search the countryside by car between 9am and 5.30pm. Afterwards we will meet up at the Lynnfield Hotel (by 5.45 please) to compare notes. We will team up beginners with more experienced bird-watchers. Book with Dick Matson (as above) by 17<sup>th</sup> Feb. Dick will have a menu available for anyone who would like to stay for a bar meal.

**Fri 14<sup>th</sup>. OFC Annual General Meeting.** We will start off with our essential AGM business which includes the election of a new Committee for the next 12 months (and we would be delighted to see some new faces on the Committee). This will be followed by games, conundrums and quizzes on wildlife and Orkney natural history. There will of course be refreshments and a chance to socialise. All welcome including non-members. Venue: the St Magnus Centre at 7.30pm.

**Fri 21<sup>st</sup>. Club Night. The BSBI Threatened Plants Project Revisited.** *Sixteen days in the Scottish Highlands and only half a day of rain!* Eric Meek describes the work he continues to undertake surveying rare and endangered wildflowers in areas of the Scottish Highlands on behalf of the Botanical Society of the British Isles.

## April

**Sat/Sun 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup>. Bag the Bruck.** Joint event with the RSPB LG. After the winter storms many of Orkney’s beaches are covered in debris discarded by shipping or blown off the land. Much of this such as rope, netting and plastic can be lethal to wildlife. Please come and help us clear up this rubbish. The RSPB LG will clear Waulkmill Bay on Sat 12<sup>th</sup> and OFC will tackle Marwick Bay on Sun 13<sup>th</sup>. Come any time between 10am and 2pm. Gloves and bags will be available at the venue. Contact the RSPB Office on 850176 or Brian Ribbands (OFC) on 751439.

**Sat 19<sup>th</sup> or Sun 20<sup>th</sup>. Harrier Sky-dancing.** Joint event with the RSPB LG. A guided walk in the Birsay Moors to watch the fantastic courtship display of the Hen Harrier. We might also see Short-eared Owls, Merlins, Kestrels and Buzzards. Meet at the Rendall Community Centre at 9.30am. Contacts: Graham or Kathie Brown on 841390. We will decide on the date having looked at the weather forecast on Thurs 17<sup>th</sup>.

**Fri 18<sup>th</sup>. Club Night. Bird song as you have never heard it: the Wrens of Central America – a talk by Professor Peter Slater who says – “Our wren, the only member of its family in Europe, has a wonderfully loud, fast and complicated song. But this is nothing compared with the many wren species in Latin America, which I have been studying with various colleagues for a number of years. Most of them duet, male and female joining to sing together, and in some of them groups of birds sing choruses, with timing often so precise it is hard to tell that more than one bird is involved. I’ll describe some of these songs, how and why we think they produce them but, at least some of the time, let the birds speak for themselves”.**

### **RSPB Local Group Programme**

**Sun 1<sup>st</sup> March. Winter Bird Race.** See OFC programme above.

**A Date in March. RSPB LG Spring Meeting. A Talk on the North Ronaldsay Bird Observatory** (Details to be confirmed) .

**Sat/Sun 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> April. Bag the Bruck.** See OFC programme above.

**Sat 19<sup>th</sup> or Sun 20<sup>th</sup> April. Harrier Sky-dancing.** See OFC programme above.

### **Scottish Ornithologists Club Programme**

**Thurs 6<sup>th</sup> Feb.** Speaker and Topic to be advised.

**Thurs 6<sup>th</sup> March. East Scotland Sea Eagles.** An illustrated talk by Rhian Evans.

Venue: St Magnus Centre, Kirkwall. Time: 7.30pm.

For details of these talks or information about the SOC please contact Colin Corse on 874484.

### **November Seal Watch – a recent Club outing to S Ronaldsay**

We were so lucky with the weather! After the storms of Friday/Saturday (and before the start of a ferocious Northerly gale on Tuesday), Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> November dawned bright, and way down south at Burwick the sun was shining.

A small group of walkers set out to take a peek at Grey Seal pupping beaches, and it wasn't long before we were rewarded with some excellent views. We sat or lay down near the cliff edges so as to not disturb the scene and watched mothers with pups of all ages just "doing their thing" down on the shore.

We were also being watched, and as we walked further; Selkie heads popped up from the sea and some kept pace with us – obviously taking notes and oohing and aaahing over us cute humans!

We were also scrutinised by hefty bull seals, which were cruising around the shore searching for receptive (and unguarded) females to mate with.

No matter how many seals you see – or how many times you see them – they remain endlessly fascinating creatures. From the higher cliffs further along it was often difficult to pick out the bodies of seals on their beaches as they are so well camouflaged. The sleek, wet, grey-black skin of mothers looked like smooth boulders, whilst their white or dappled furry offspring blended into the pebbles.

Tally for our short walk to Green Head was 63 pups – including the one right adjacent to the Burwick car park.

It wasn't all about seals. We found several interesting fungi species, waved to the *Pentalina* on her way, had fun identifying other parts of Orkney from unfamiliar (to some) viewpoints and, of course enjoyed a good blether. For those of us who had made the l-o-n-g journey from Birsay it seemed like a world apart, and perhaps we should explore the South parish a bit more?

### **Seasearch Courses 2013**

Calum Duncan, MCS Scottish Conservation Manager and Seasearch Scotland co-ordinator, George Brown and Joanne Porter, Associate professor in Marine biology at Heriot Watt University were in Orkney on November 8/9th to run Seasearch observer and surveyor courses. 10 folk were on the observer and 4 on the surveyor course. The theory sessions were held on the ICIT campus in Stromness with practical diving sessions from the dive boat, The Halton, skipper Bob Anderson. Snorkellers will be doing their practical sessions in shore dives over the next few weeks.

Seasearch is a National project for volunteer sports divers who have an interest in what they're seeing under water, want to learn more and want to help protect the marine environment around the coasts of Britain and Ireland. The main aim is to map out the various types of sea bed found in the near-shore zone around the whole of the Britain and Ireland. In addition we are recording what lives in each area, establishing the richest sites for marine life, the sites where there are problems and the sites which need protection.

Further seasearch weekends are planned in the near future and a co-ordinated plan for 2014 is to survey various different habitats at different times of year involving local divers and snorkellers.



One exciting and unusual find recently in Scapa Flow was a Feather star shrimp - *Hippolyte prideauxiana* measuring 15mm by Rachel Shucksmith, a frequently visiting diver from Shetland. These were first recorded in Scotland in 1997. In 2010 and 2013 *Hippolyte prideauxiana* was recorded in the Orkney Islands and the Shetland Islands. These observations widen the known geographic distribution of this species by

400km north. Whilst it is possible that these new records are the result of a range expansion due to climate change it could also be that this cryptic species is overlooked due to its low natural abundance and limited awareness of the species.

## **Climate Change: Challenges and Solutions**

**Would you like to know more about Climate Change? Would you be interested in joining a small local group to discuss the issues that will be taught in this free online course hosted by University of Exeter?**

**8 week course starting on 13th Jan, commitment approx 3 hours per week**

The course will set contemporary human-caused climate change within the context of past nature climate variability. Then it will take a risk communication approach, balancing the 'bad news' about climate change impacts on natural and human systems with the 'good news' about potential solutions. These solutions can help avoid the most dangerous climate changes and increase the resilience of societies and ecosystems to those climate changes that cannot be avoided.

**<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/climate-change-challenges-and-solutions> to register for the course**

Contact Penny on [physiopenny@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:physiopenny@hotmail.co.uk) if you would be interested to meet up locally to discuss the issues while doing the course.

### **The Velvet Shank (*Flammulina velutipes*)**

Most fungi only produce their fruitbodies in autumn - the first frosts turn them into a wilted mess. There is an exception though, and it is found in Orkney.

It always grows in tufts from the trunks of trees and can be found throughout the winter. Look for warm brown to honey-coloured caps, often shiny and slimy in texture. The gills beneath are pale, and the tough stalk steadily darkens from yellowish just below the cap to a velvety dark brown below.

It is very distinctive-looking, easily recognised even in autumn when there are lots of other fungi around - but by mid-winter it is absolutely unmistakable as there's nothing left it can be confused with. It survives through the winter as it has an amazing capacity to survive being frozen.

It is known from the trunks and stumps of elm in the south of its range - has anyone seen it on the elms at Binscarth Wood or around Kirkwall? The recent Orkney records all come from sycamore though. Keep an eye out for it on gorse too.

Julian Branscombe would be very keen to receive any records of Velvet Shank, or indeed any other fungi seen around Orkney. Please send details of any sightings to him at Greens, Toab KW17 2QG or email him on [julianbranscombe@yahoo.com](mailto:julianbranscombe@yahoo.com). There's also now an Orkney Fungi and Lichens facebook group, for those who are that way inclined - there have been good discussions about some beautiful fungi there over recent weeks. Julian is happy to be emailed photos of fungi to see if he can tentatively suggest an identity, but - Velvet Shank apart - it is very hard to identify fungi in the flesh let alone from a photo!

### **Wildlife Records**

As we approach the year's end it is time to think about submitting our year's wildlife records to the Orkney Biodiversity Records Centre (OBRC).

Why? – you may ask.

The OBRC is building up a huge database of records of flora and fauna from all over the County. When developers consider an area of land (or water) for development they and the planners are able to consult the OBRC to ensure that their project has minimal adverse impact on its wildlife. Additionally, monitoring OBRC records for a particular species can alert us to any downward trend in the population of that species so that remedial measures can be undertaken. Thus the OBRC database is a vital planning and conservation resource but its data will only be of value if it contains sufficient records to give a wide overall picture of species populations.

While it is encouraging to see wildlife records on the Orkney Nature Forum, the OFC website, Orkbird and social media sites please be aware that there is no mechanism for getting these records to the OBRC. Neither the OBRC nor the County Recorders have the resources to trawl through these sites and extract and validate the records. So please either submit your records to the relevant Recorder or direct to the OBRC (email: [biodiversity@orkneylibrary.org.uk](mailto:biodiversity@orkneylibrary.org.uk)). Pages 66-68 of the 2013 OFC Bulletin (The Orkney Naturalist) give the procedure for recording and the list of Recorders. A list of Recorders can also be found on the Club website at [www.orkneycommunities.co.uk/fieldclub](http://www.orkneycommunities.co.uk/fieldclub)

Please report any potentially interesting wildlife records you see on social media sites; don't assume that someone else has made the vital link.

## Orkney Biodiversity Records Centre Courses and Workshop 2014

The OBRC is looking to run two courses and a workshop during 2014. The courses being looked at are 'Small fresh water creatures' 'Bumblebees' and a workshop on microscope use. At this stage there is no confirmation of dates for any of the courses or the workshop, so please watch for more information in the press and on the OBRC website <http://www.orkneylibrary.org.uk/OBRC/html/whatson.htm> during 2014.

### Invasion of the Woodpeckers

There has occurred this autumn the biggest invasion (technical term – irruption) of Great Spotted Woodpeckers to the North of Scotland for very many years. Although all the sightings have not yet been collated it seems that the birds started to appear in the Northern Isles in October with at least a dozen in Shetland, a few on Fair Isle and a dozen or more in Orkney; and they are still being seen in the County.

It is thought that irruptions occur when either the birds have had a particularly good breeding year so that local food resources have to be shared by an excessive number of birds or there is an actual food shortage or perhaps a combination of both factors. It is believed that those we have been seeing in the North Isles have come from Northern Europe and perhaps Western Russia; most are young birds. Naturally it will not be possible to tell whether these northern birds have arrived in numbers in the rest of Scotland and UK where there are resident birds unless DNA samples and biometric measurements have been obtained by trapping.



Twenty years ago these birds would probably have been doomed because the Islands do not have the insect populations to sustain them and there was little done in the way of feeding garden birds. Now many people put out peanut feeders and other food items and G S Woodpeckers have learnt to take advantage of them. As well as taking peanuts the birds have been seen on feeders containing commercial bird seed and fat balls.

The G S Woodpecker experience shows how bird behaviour, bird survival and potentially the modification of bird populations can be influenced by the recently adopted practice of feeding garden birds. (Photo Brian Ribbands)

### STOP PRESS

The beautiful Flame Shell *Limaria hians* has been found in Fara Sound, Scapa Flow, depth 16 m on 7th Dec 2013 by George Brown during a Seasearch Survey. This is the first record of *Limaria* in Orkney since 2 records in the 1950's!



