

## ***Paisley Natural History Society outing to Ardeer Dunes on the 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2016***

5 keen members turned up at Stevenston Point car park and we picked up another two Renfrewshire RSPB members who had just happened to be birdwatching there. As we gathered by the point I had a quick look through my telescope at a feeding raft of Manx Shearwaters far off in the distance. Suddenly a spout appeared, followed by a large black body and a huge whale broke the smooth surface, scattering the Manxies in all directions! Sickle shaped dorsal fin two thirds of the way down the body length and no sign of the tail flukes breaching as it dived were good pointers that I was looking at my first ever Minke Whale! Even at distance through the telescope, the whale looked huge as it slipped under the mirror surface. Difficult to predict where it would surface next, the Minke appeared to be feeding on a shoal of fish as it turned back on itself several times. After taking some long distance pictures with Ailsa Craig as a backdrop we eventually tore ourselves away and headed off down towards Ardeer beach – what a start to our outing!

Ardeer dunes is situated on Ardeer peninsula, which is actually part of the biggest brownfield site in Scotland. This was where Alfred Nobel (inventor of dynamite) sited the first explosive factory because of the remote location but more importantly utilising the dune system as containment for any wayward detonations! The site once employed 13,000 people at its peak during the Second World War but now only employs around 300 people, leaving a huge area of land derelict and reverting back to wilderness and colonising wildlife. The huge dune system is well known for its butterflies and in particular the colony of Dark Green Fritillaries. Walking into the grassy dunes everyone was just amazed and suitably impressed by the sheer number of butterflies flying around. Common Blue was the most numerous with over 150 counted and they all appeared fresh looking – as if they had recently emerged that week. Walking down a worn sandy path, we came across a few Grayling, angling their wings into the weak sunlight and in some cases disappearing into the background – so good was the camouflage! Our target species Dark Green Fritillary was up next and the vivid orange males added a touch of exotic glamour – far too stunning for North Ayrshire! They were feeding on the tall flowering thistles and this provided an ideal photographic opportunity. This was too good to miss and with stealth and patience, we managed to obtain face close views, Dave Mellor even managed to stroke one! Small Heath, Meadow Brown, Green-veined White, Small White, Small Tortoiseshell, Ringlet was also seen, as was lots of Six – spot Burnet moths feeding on carpets of Thyme. It really did bring back memories of what our once diverse countryside used to be like, way back in the seventies. Ardeer Dunes is a little gem of a site for butterflies, long may this continue?