

CLUB NEWS

Annual General Meeting 4th January 1995

This A.G.M. will depart from the format of recent years. After the 'business' of the evening has been completed (hopefully fairly quickly) it is intended to devote the rest of the evening to a sort of wine and cheese thing. This is really an excuse to provide club members with an opportunity to 'meet' one another. On normal club evenings the lecture usually runs on until its time to go and we are under strict instructions to be out of the museum by 9.30. A number of members have suggested that it would be a good idea if there was a chance to 'socialise' occasionally - this is it. Don't say the committee is deaf to your requests !

CLUB RULES

NOTICE OF ALTERATION

The club Rules were drawn up when the club was formed thirty years ago and they have not been revised for at least twenty years. The committee feels that some of the rules are no longer relevant and others need to be revised to make them more meaningful. After due consideration and discussion the committee now recommends to the members that the current rules, which are set down on the accompanying "Pink" paper should be revised in line with the accompanying "Blue" paper. Under the present rules (rule 21) members must receive fourteen days notice before the A.G.M. of any proposed rule change and you are therefore receiving such notice by way of this article.

It is proposed to change the following rules as you will see by referring to the two papers:-

2. Objects
3. Constitution
5. Proposal of candidates for election
6. Election of members
8. Honorary Members
13. Management
15. Duties of Honorary Secretary
16. Duties of Honorary Treasurer

Under the rules each of these proposed changes must achieve a four fifths majority of members present at the A.G.M. The proposals are recommended by the committee.

Photographic Competition

There is an error in the Club Programme Entries for the NIOC Work of N.I. Bird Photographers competition sponsored by Anderson McMeekin Photography Ltd. must be with George Gilliland at 51 Kirkliston Park, Belfast BT5 6ED (Tel. 0232 658459 evenings) by 25th January 1995 at the latest. If you need an Entry Form contact Ron Thompson or any of the committee.

Christmas Bird Count

If any members would be interested in a Christmas Bird Count along the lines of the USA. Annual Count please give Gary Wilkinson a call on 0846 639254

LECTURES

18th January 1995.

Gordon D'Arcy.

Birds of Galway and Mayo

A founder member of the N.I.O.C. Gordon D'Arcy last spoke to the club in November 1992. His subject then was the Burren; this time he will concentrate on the birds of Galway.

Gordon's interest in and knowledge of natural history are well illustrated by his books, "The Birds of Ireland" and the "Natural History of the Burren". He was also a contributing author to "Book of the Burren" and "Arran Book", as well as writing regularly for bird and natural history publications.

Presently most of his energies go towards teaching. He runs a summer course for teachers interested in natural history as well as visiting over forty schools to develop and maintain children's interest in the environment, and like many of the best people, he devotes not a little of his time, to growing trees. So don't miss this lecture !!

1st February 1995.

Rene Pop

Birds of North West America

Rene Pop is well known as one of Europe's leading wildlife photographers and, as those

WINTER 1994

COMMENT

After a very successful year for the N.I.O.C. we can only look forward to an exciting 1995, so I wish all members and their families a great Christmas and a Happy New Year and look forward to seeing more of you out and about on the Club Trips in 1995.

Gary Wilkinson

CONTENTS

- CLUB NEWS
- LECTURES
- FIELD TRIPS
- MONAWILKIN A.S.S.I.
- HEN HARRIERS
- F.B.R.I.S.
- BIRD RACE
- RATHLIN ISLAND
- GEESE SURVEY
- WHOOPER SWANS

who are familiar with his work know he regularly contributes to the bird magazines on sale in the U.K. where his fine photography is greatly admired.

He is perhaps best known as Photographic Editor of "Dutch Birding" where his expert knowledge of colour separations (stemming from his profession in colour printing) has made that journal famous for the quality of its illustrations.

Rene has not only visited a great deal of Europe but he has also travelled much more widely abroad. Members are urged to attend his talk when superb pictures from an extremely interesting part of the world can be guaranteed.

15th February 1995.
Ron Bishop
Life Between the Tides

Ron Bishop teaches microbiology at the University of Ulster at Jordanstown and organises an occasional series of extra-mural classes on local natural history (these classes have been highly recommended by several club members). He developed an interest in Bird-Watching from the Field Trips on that course, but he says he still isn't very good at it. He says he will try to cover up his ignorance in his talk on "Life Between the Tides" by concentrating on the animals and plants that live permanently in that region, and which the birds may then exploit for food. We can look forward to an interesting talk.

1st March 1995.
Mervyn Guthrie
Birds of the North Coast

Mervyn has been a member of the Club and a supporter of the Club for many years. Despite living in 'far away' Castlerock he still manages to attend several Club meetings each year and he has given us a number of interesting talks in previous years about birding trips to various parts of the world. He is also a very accomplished bird photographer and has taken the top prize in The Work of Northern Ireland Bird Photographers on several occasions. Until recently Mervyn was Chairman for many years of the Coleraine R.S.P.B. group. So, if you combine an intimate knowledge of the North Coast birds with a talent for producing first class photos you should end up with a very entertaining evening.

FIELD TRIPS

Sunday 22 January 1995
Oxford Island and the Balancing Lakes.
Leader: Tom Ennis 0232 424745
Meet :University Square,
8:00am

This outing is especially for those members who would like some help with the identification of winter ducks, swans, and whatever else may turn up around Lough Neagh. Don't miss this opportunity to have a day in the field with Tom Ennis. If you see yourself as a "beginner" you should make an effort to get along on this trip, I promise you won't be disappointed. If any of the more experienced members wish to come along they are welcome of course but they are asked to take a back seat on this one, Tom is particularly keen to help the novice with field identifica-

Sunday 19 February 1995
Lough Swilly, Inch and Lough Foyle.

David Craig: 0846 661162
Gary Wilkinson 0846 639254
Meet:University Square, 8:00 am

We will head first for Inch or Blanket Nook depending on the tide. **Inch**, as its name suggests is an island, not far from Bunrana, but it is joined to the mainland by a causeway. The different habitats around the island usually turn up most of our winter waterfowl, swans and geese on the pondage area as well as waders on the sandy shore and divers out to sea.

Blanket Nook is near Newtown Cunningham, about halfway between Londonderry and Letterkenny. It is an area of impounded water, which is the drainage runoff from the surrounding agricultural land. It is usually worth a visit.

We plan to finish the day along the **Foyle**, looking for geese, swans and passerines on the reclaimed agricultural land. We should be back in Belfast between 6.00 and 6.30 pm depending on the weather. If you live in the northern part of the province we can arrange to meet you somewhere convenient.

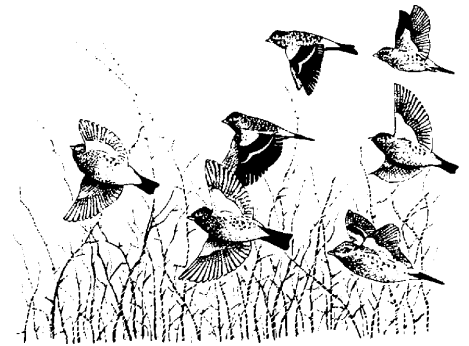
Friday 3rd - Sunday 5th March 1995
Dunfries and Galloway Weekend.

Contact :-
Gary Wilkinson 0846 639254

Depending on Port of departure we will look for Divers and Long-tailed Duck in Belfast Lough or Shearwaters out of Larne Lough. During the crossing we will watch for Pelagic Birds and Cetaceans and in Lough Ryan for Grebes, Divers and Scaup etc. The Wig is our usual first port of call where in the past we have encountered Twite, Hen Harrier, Golden Plover, Brent Geese, Slavonian and Black necked Grebes. From here we usually drive past West Freugh Airfield hoping for early Hen Harriers, Buzzard and Barn Owl. Red Legged Partridge and Grey Partridge are a possibility here too. We will then either take the high road up to New Galloway with Crossbill, Golden Eagle, Short Eared Owl and Goshawk all a possibility. If visibility is poor we will take a coastal route round to Lough Ken where we can expect to see large numbers of Graylag Geese and on Lough Ken, Goosander with possible Smew, Sparrowhawk, Willow Tit and maybe Snow Geese. Afternoon we'll spend in and around Ken Dee Marshes perhaps teaming up with Ray Hawley and encountering Green and

Great Spotted Wookpecker and Greenland Whitefront Geese, in the past we've had Peregrine, Water Rail and Bittern here also. Early evening there is always the chance of encountering Barn and Tawny Owl. Early Saturday we always try to entice John Wykes along to show us Black Grouse and other goodies up on the moors with his unique knowledge of the area. Afternoon and Caerlaverock for Barnacles, Bewicks, Whoopers, Birds of Prey and perhaps Corn Bunting and Red Brested Goose. Last year near Southerness we saw the remnants of a 2000 strong Brambling flock and very impressive it was too.

Sunday: depending on what's about we'll venture towards Stranraer and finish at the Hen Harrier Roost site at West Freugh normally we get over the 100 species for the weekend and we endeavour to keep costs to a minimum.



MONAWILKIN
A.S.S.I.

Monawilkin is an ASSI (an Area of Special Scientific Interest) and lies about 3 miles west of Derrygonnelly, Co.Fermanagh. It lies mainly on carboniferous limestone, and there are a number of characteristic habitat and vegetation types, including dry rocky grassland, cliff and scree, scrub woodland, flushes, damp meadows, rushy pasture, etc. The area is particularly rich in plants of dry limestone areas. These include 11 species of Orchid (Bee, Common Spotted, Early Purple, Fragrant, Frog, Greater Butterfly, Heath Spotted, Lesser Butterfly, Northern Marsh, Small White, Twayblade) making it amongst the richest sites for Orchids in Northern Ireland.

Characteristic plants of limestone grassland include the Mountain Everlasting, Shining Cranesbill, and Hairy Rock-cress, with the two native conifers, Yew and Juniper, on the cliffs. Other plants of interest include some more usually found on the coast such as Wild Thyme, Harebell, Kidney Vetch, etc. In damper areas, Butterwort, Grass of Parnassus, Fleabane, Bog Pimpernell and Marsh Lousewort occur.

As the site faces more or less south and has such a wide range of vegetation, the insect life

is rich. This is especially marked among butterflies and dayflying moths. 20 resident and 3 migrant butterfly species have occurred, with at least 3 others at nearby Correl Glen. The 23 species are: Dinky Skipper; Wood White; *Clouded Yellow; Large White; Green-veined White; Orange Tip; Green Hairstreak; Small Copper; Small Blue; Common Blue; *Red Admiral; *Painted Lady; Small Tortoiseshell; Peacock; Silver-Washed Fritillary; Marsh Fritillary; Speckled Wood; Wall Brown; Grayling; Meadow Brown; Ringlet, and Small Heath (Migrants are asterisked). Purple Hairstreak, Holly Blue and Large Heath have occurred at nearby Correl Glen. The only 2 NI Butterflies which have not been reported in this general area are the Brimstone and Dark Green Fritillary. Although of considerable interest at almost any time from Mid-May to early September, perhaps the best time to visit the site is in mid or late June when the Small Blue is at its best, here at its only site in Northern Ireland. The Dinky Skipper, confined in NI to the Fermanagh limestone, is also usually flying then and may be accompanied by Wood White, Small Copper, Common Blue, Small Heath and various commoner species.

Dayflying moths are also at their best at this time, and include Narrow-bordered Bee Hawk, Small Purple-barred, Wood Tiger, Burnet Companion, Cinnabar, Mother Shipton, Narrow Bordered Five-spot Burnet and the Six-spot Burnet. Night flying moths have been less investigated, but are known to include the following: Pale Eggar, here and at nearby Correl Glen at its only NI sites; Thyme Pug and the Anomalous, both largely coastal in Ireland; and the Muslin Footman, which feeds on Lichens growing on rocks and walls, etc. Certainly a site well worth visiting regularly!

Ian Rippey

There is now grave concern for the future of the Small Blue in Northern Ireland as the maximum numbers recorded at Monawilkin in 1994 was 2 - 3.

HEN HARRIERS

THE RECURRENCE OF WINTER ROOSTING BY A HEN HARRIER IN THE 1993 TREE NEST

For the second winter in a row a Hen Harrier has been discovered Winter Roosting in a Tree- Nest.

On Saturday 26th. March 1994 I paid a visit to the forest in Co. Antrim where Tree-nesting has been recorded annually since 1991, and almost certainly in 1990 as well. This was my first visit to the forest since Sunday 22nd.

August 1993, when the tree nest was photographed and examined in detail.

Firstly, I made my way to the 1991 and 1992 Tree-nests to see if they had been occupied by a Hen Harrier during the winter months.

When I arrived at both sites I found the ground below each nest was relatively clean and free of Harrier excreta, which meant that both nests had not been used this winter. I then visited the first artificial platform to be erected on Saturday 6th. February 1993 and found that it was still undamaged, but also unused.

On arrival at the 1993 Tree-nest I found the ground below the (4.5M) high nest was soiled black in colour, and heavily splattered with fresh white excreta which had hardened into small lumps. Over 40 separate pieces were counted with more clinging to the lower branches near the base of the tree, and was consistent with belonging to a Hen Harrier. Three pellets were also found, as was a large primary feather from a female. The feather was wet but in good condition, unfortunately two of the pellets had disintegrated due to the recent inclement weather. I climbed an adjacent Sitka to examine the nest and found it was still in a good state of repair even though it had been highly exposed to severe weather this winter. The outer branches that supported the nest were also heavily soiled and encrusted with crystallised excreta, as were the surrounding branches of several nearby Sitka's.

As already mentioned the excreta was very white and fresh, which meant that it had probably been deposited quite recently, as it turns brown in colour and then decays rapidly if there for any length of time. The weather during February was poor with heavy snow recorded towards the end of the month which lingered well into March, so that any excreta present during this period would have been washed away when the snow melted.

The evidence was exactly the same as that found below the 1992 Tree-nest on Saturday 6th. February 1993. A small amount of excreta was present below the 1991 Tree-nest during visits in January and February 1992, but it was not envisaged then that Tree-roosting by Hen Harriers was a distinct possibility. There was now no doubt about it, winter roosting by a Hen Harrier had occurred once again, this time in the 1993 Tree-nest. Last winter a grey male was observed using the 1992 Tree-nest, and it would appear from the evidence found this winter that an adult female has been occupying the 1993 Tree-nest. For the record a female was seen hunting to the rear of the forest on Tuesday 8th. March 1994, with a further sighting, in the company of an adult male on the. March 1994.

Final comments

It has always been assumed that all Hen Harrier winter roost sites are to be found on the ground amongst deep heather and rank vegetation, and not specifically in trees. A recent change in the all round behaviour of the species has been noticed in Northern Ireland with the discovery of Tree-nesting, and now Tree-roosting has been discovered for the second winter in succession.

The recent use of trees by Hen Harriers for roosting and even nesting is not considered to be normal behaviour, but this may be due to changing ground conditions and predation by foxes. A transformation may be taking place and would appear to be in its early stages at present!

In the Sperrins during this winter's roost survey (93/94), and on at least one occasion last winter (92/93), Hen Harriers were recorded roosting in the tall conifers when the ground was adjudged to be unsafe due to the presence of a fox. Further instances of Tree-roosting were noted when Foxes were not present at the site, with the birds leaving their pre-roosting posts to take up residence in the trees. On each occasion the Harriers remained in the trees and did not return to roost on the ground.

The real reason for this behaviour is unknown at present, but the trees may provide more shelter, as the high ground is very exposed to the elements, particularly during the winter months. Certainly an adaption to Tree-nesting and Tree-roosting would be much safer, but the ground is still preferred by the majority of these elegant raptors.

Finally, it is fascinating to speculate whether Tree-roosting or even Tree-nesting can persist naturally in the Hen Harrier population. The future of the Hen Harrier in Northern Ireland and elsewhere may depend on whether the birds can adapt successfully to this new style of behaviour.

Footnote

The single pellet found below the nest had deteriorated so badly that the contents (feathers etc.), could not be identified properly. A few pieces of a beetle's outer casing were the only recognisable parts to be clearly identified.



Don Scott.

FBRIS

The Foreign Birdwatching Reports and Information Service (The Harrier No. 6, October 1993) has just published its new August 1994 Catalogue of reports, bird checklists, site guides and maps.

For more information phone Steve Whitehouse on 01905 454541 - on weekdays between 8.30am and 3.00pm (6.30pm to 9.00pm during the winter months).

David Craig

BIRD RACE

The N.I.B.A. are organising a Bird Race called the "Down Dash" on Monday 2nd January 1995. Anyone who wants information on this event should phone Chris Murphy on 0232 693232.



RATHLIN

Lance Turtle Memorial Boat Trip, Rathlin Island

Around thirty people came along to a memorable boat trip round Rathlin on Sunday 3rd July. Richard Green got the "Rathlin Venture" close in to the seabird colonies on the cliffs and we had excellent views of Kittiwake, Fulmar, Razorbill, Guillemot, and Puffin from the seaward side, and also had breath-taking views of Gannet, Manx Shearwater, Merganser, Eider and along the cliff tops around eight Buzzards. Further along we had very good views of Grey seals and their pups, Mr McCurdy met the boat and took us up to the west lighthouse where we 'scoped' Puffin at their burrows and on the way back took in some Marsh and Butterfly Orchids. The island will be opening a small museum shortly and with recent pottery finds from 7000BC this will be another milestone in the island's history. Of interest will be a recent report of Corncrake calling in the Ballycastle area. The seabird population seemed to be doing well and of significance must be the high numbers of Puffin seen nesting and flying. The sad demise of the Chough though,

gives a more sombre reminder of the pressures on bird populations.

Gary Wilkinson

SURVEY

SURVEY OF INTRODUCED GEESE

John O'Halloran from the Department of Zoology in University College Cork has recently been carrying out a survey of introduced geese. He sent us the following information :

Background

The Canada Goose, *Branta canadensis*, and the Greylag goose, *Anser anser*, have introduced populations in Ireland. Canada geese were last surveyed in Ireland in 1969 yet these populations have apparently not exhibited such increases as seen in British and European populations. Greylags have never been systematically surveyed in Ireland and this survey hopes to obtain information on the numbers and distribution of these also. For the past two years we have been involved in an intensive study of the behavioural ecology of the flock of Canada geese at Cork Lough. This particular flock has not shown exponential growth since the last survey and we are interested in determining whether this trend is indicative of the nation-wide situation. If other Irish flocks of introduced geese have not increased exponentially it poses an interesting question as to why not in Ireland when these along with other species of goose have increased to pest proportions in the rest of Europe.

Methods

The survey aims to produce estimates of the total summer populations of introduced Canada and Greylag geese in Ireland. It was timed to coincide with the period when Canada and Greylag geese moult. Adult birds are flightless at this time and congregated at a smaller number of sites than at other times of the year, making them relatively easy to count. Most juveniles are conspicuously smaller than the adults, and so could be counted separately.

John O'Halloran

WHOOPEE SWANS

Information wanted on Whooper Swans

Jim Wells and I understand from John Bowler of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust that this has been an exceptionally successful year for

the ringers in Iceland.

The regular Icelandic team have leg-banded a total of about 290 swans using similar yellow Darvics to before with black lettering. This year, instead of being the usual three letters, the code will start with a 3 or 4 followed by two letters (you should remember that to minimise confusion between similarly shaped letters, only the following are mostly used :- A,B,C,D,F,H,I,J,L,N,P,S,T,U,V,X,Y and Z). In a very few cases, E is also found as the initial letter.

The Danes are also understood to have been busy with a reported 190 neck-collars having been used. At the time of writing we have no details of these except that they are also yellow with black lettering, using three numbers and a letter.

Based on previous experience, we would hope to be able to provide fairly quick feedback on birds banded by the regular Icelandic team, but we are as yet unsure of the link up with the Danish ringers. We would ask for your patience in that regard, at least initially until lines of communication have been fully established.

It has also been our experience in the last couple of winters that overall some 2 or 3 swans in every 100 carry a band. Given the numbers that have been ringed this summer we would be hopeful that this ratio will be significantly enhanced, which should hopefully make our efforts more rewarding.

If you would like to help in this survey, I will provide you with Instruction Sheets and Recording Forms. Please do not hesitate to contact me at the following address or telephone number:

76 Marlborough Park South
Belfast BT9 6HW
0232 667015 (H)
0232 647161 ext 295 (B)

Graham McElwaine

OBITUARY

Stanley Lawther

It was with great sadness that I learned of the death of my friend Stan Lawther. I accompanied Stan on many memorable walks and birdwatching trips, along with George Sheridan, George Gilliland, Pat Buchanon and the late Harry Copeland.

I especially recall our Rathlin outings, watching Buzzards soaring above us as we ate our lunch on the heather, and returning in the early evening to the sound of Corncrakes and Choughs.

I know I speak for all who knew Stanley when I say that he will be greatly missed and I extend the Club's sympathy to Beryl and all of the family members.

Gary Wilkinson