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nature
a home

Newsletter
of the
Central Ayrshire
Local Group



40th year
Autumn 2016



'Art on the Wing' wildlife art exhibition - Rozelle House Galleries, Ayr

For all local birding details - log on to: www.ayrshire-birding.org.uk

Leader's Lines

Hi everyone,

Yet another year has passed and it is nearly time for the next session of indoor meetings and outings in which I hope you will take part and enjoy. The "summer" wasn't much to crow about, but I hope you managed to get out and about and see some interesting birds. I hope you enjoyed the selection of speakers, who were kind enough to spare their leisure time to come and talk to our group last session. I am very grateful to all. The outings were as popular as ever and I have to thank **Jim** for leading these.

Tony organised a successful day trip to Mussleburgh and a superb week in the North of Scotland and the Orkney Islands, where many excellent bird reserves were interspersed with visits to interesting historical sites, most of which also offered good birding on the walks to and from the sites.

Thanks, also, to John Cairns, our faithful efficient driver from Dodds of Troon. Tony also puts his expertise to work in designing all the artwork for the event posters and produces the "Gannet".

Gerda has worked her socks off organising **Art on the Wing 2016** which I hope you visited. Over 40 people exhibited wildlife themed items in a wide variety of mediums, paintings and prints, pottery, basketwork and metalwork. Lots of model birds in various mediums and an excellent selection of jewellery. **Paul Walton**, Head of Habitats and Species at RSPB Scotland, opened the exhibition and also gave a very interesting talk on "Art and Birds" later in the afternoon.

The Preview was VERY busy as was the Sunday when several of the people returned and bought things they had seen the day before. Sales continued well over the next few days and we can only hope it carries on in the same way.

Evening talks are to be given by **Gordon Riddle, Angus Hogg and Chris Rollie** during the exhibition and Jim will lead a couple of bird walks round Rozelle parkland. **Susan Montgomerie** will hold a jewellery-making demonstration.

Unfortunately **Duncan Watt** was unable to do his usual informative walk around the exhibits. You may know Duncan was taken ill whilst on holiday and has been having treatment following a lengthy operation over the past couple of months. I sent a card from the group to wish him all the very best for a speedy improvement.

Thanks to all who volunteered to staff the exhibition and shop during its run, and especially to **Kenneth**, who organised the rota to ensure a presence at all times. Thanks as well to **Ian** for looking after the daily collection of our cash sales, a huge commitment over a six week timespan. I hope a good number of the exhibits will have sold and that we will have raised a large amount of monies for RSPB's work in Scotland. An update should be available at the first meeting. **P.S.Waverley** had only four trips scheduled for 2016 and the June trip, which would have been the best for the breeding birds, was cancelled due to some imaginary bad weather which had been forecast several days earlier. Again many disappointed people arrived at Ayr harbour (including Ian, Eleanora and I, who were supposed to be on duty) for the trip. The next trip was also cancelled - no reason given. We can only hope that at least one of the other two actually happen.

I hope to see as many of you as possible at the first meeting on **Monday 19th September 2016** when **Tom Byars** will be talking on **Birdwatching in the three towns** (Ardrossan, Saltcoats & Stevenston).

If you need transport to this or any other meeting, please let me know.

Anne

Anne Dick, Group Leader

Dr. Paul Walton officially opens the exhibition



Preview crowds at 'Art on the Wing' - Rozelle House Galleries



The birds, landscapes and history of Orkney

An RSPB Central Ayrshire and SOC Ayrshire group holiday from Friday 27 May to Sunday 05 June 2016

Report by Tony Scott



The day dawned fair and sunny as at 07.10, Gerda and I, Geoff and Jean were unloading the car at Dodds coach depot. John Cairns was waiting to drive us on this ten-day trip to the Orkney Islands. Our group of 16 were onboard as we pulled out of the depot at 07.55 to collect Ingrid in Kilmarnock. Clouds gathered as we drove through Glasgow and the weather turned murky and wet on arrival at Stirling Services at 09.15. Breakfast, snacks, a cortado at Costa; stock up on sandwiches and drinks at M&S and away again at 10.00. Our next stop and final pick-up of our 18th guest was at Birnam, where Molly had spent the night at 'Jessie Mac's' guest house. Our group was complete and we rolled on through Dunkeld and up to SWT's Loch of the Lowes reserve for 11.15 - and fortunately, the weather was improving. The osprey pair had three fledged chicks and we could watch their progress on the monitors from the live camera at the nest. We also had some excellent 'real' views of the adult birds from the two hides. The feeding station was buzzing, with great-spotted woodpeckers, yellowhammers, siskins, blue, great and coal tits and bullfinches - all constantly flitting from one feeder to another. A Mandarin duck appeared and amazed us all by hanging on to one of the feeders, an unusual sight! We had great views of red squirrels too - always a source of pleasure. From the hides we also enjoyed views of great crested grebes on their nest, mallard families sailing by, tufted ducks and sand martins zooming low over the waters of the loch. Not a bad place to enjoy lunch!



Moving on at 13.00 hrs, we were back on the A9 to Kingussie and RSPB's Insh Marshes reserve, arriving in warm sunshine, as ranger Pete Moore was waiting to greet us. This is one of the most important wetlands in Europe, and we enjoyed expansive views across the marshes to the Monadhiliath mountains beyond. Pete was giving us a running commentary on the birds and other wildlife to be seen here at various times of the year. Curlew, snipe, lapwing, greylag, and redshank were spotted, as were a number of roe deer too.

Ranger Pete Moore



RSPB Insh Marshes with Ruthven Barracks



Ben Wyvis Hotel



Pete then did two 40 minute walks past Invertromie hide, to one of the best stands of aspen in Scotland. The Gordonhall hide was also visited, but apart from the striking views to Ruthven Barracks and beyond, we heard blackcap and willow warbler, but only catching fleeting glimpses of each. Following a convenience stop at Kingussie, it was a straight run north to Inverness and on through Dingwall to the old Victorian spa town of Strathpeffer. We arrived spot on time (18.30) at the Ben Wyvis Hotel for one night only. Time to find our rooms in this labyrinthine hotel and a quick change before drinks in the bar and dinner at 20.00 hrs. Welcomed by the friendly staff, we enjoyed smoked salmon and crayfish roulade (and the cream of vegetable soup was excellent). Those who had the slow-cooked blade of Scotch beef with wild mushroom juice praised it. The loin of pork with garlic and rosemary crushed potatoes with apples and shallots was also good - I can vouch for that! Desserts followed, with coffee and tea in the huge, high-ceilinged lounge - together with Jim calling the bird species list. Day one had been most enjoyable.

Saturday 28 May 2016

A bright, sunny morning with temperatures eventually reaching 16C. Breakfast from 07.30 and a full Scottish breakfast for those who wanted it(!) John brought the coach around to the front of the hotel and expertly loaded the relatively small boot of this Toyota Coaster coach. Leaving at 09.00, we called briefly at Dingwall for a few items before heading north to the Black Isle, Dornoch and the Loch Fleet National Nature reserve. The hills were aglow with yellow gorse and broom. Seals were lazing on the rocks in the calm waters of Loch Fleet and shelduck, teal, eider and mallard were about. At our second stop at The Mound (where a branch railway line used to run alongside Loch Fleet to Dornoch), we watched an osprey bringing food to its partner on a distant nest. Great crested grebe and grey herons were seen, as were oystercatcher, lapwing, common sandpiper, greenshank and redshank. Swifts, swallows and house martins were also seen swooping low over the water and the land. Earlier in the day, I had a 'phone call from the friendly owner of the 'Thyme and Plaice' café in Helmsdale, just to confirm our order and to say everything would be waiting for us on arrival at 12.15.



Watching wildlife on Loch Fleet



View of the gorse-covered hills from The Mound

We arrived at 12.10 to find a huge selection of attractively presented sandwiches, salads and tortilla chips awaiting us. Two home-made soups were also on offer (Lentil or carrot and coriander) - then tea and coffee, all for an inclusive price of £6.95pp. We were most impressed with both quality and service. After lunch we spent a short while admiring the views from the bridge on the edge of this small town. At 13.15 we drove on along the A897 north to RSPB Forsinard Flows reserve and the visitor centre in the old waiting room on Abellio-Scotrail's Forsinard station. Ranger Marina was on hand to welcome us and give us an introduction to the reserve and surroundings. She then took us on a guided walk across the Flows to the brilliant new viewing tower standing sentinel amongst the bogs and the cotton grass. The sun was splitting the sky as we enjoyed the board walk across the Dubh Lochan pool system.



Photos clockwise from top left: Helmsdale; Flows viewing tower; Marina; All of the ladies in the group; On the board walk.

Following a most enjoyable two-hour visit, we said goodbye to Marina (originally from Spain). It is so good to see European exchanges working well, long may it continue! We then drove on our way to Thurso, filled up the coach with diesel and drove around to Scrabster harbour to check in for the Northlink Ferry to Stromness on Orkney. We were here in good time and eventually boarded MV "Hamnavoe" at 18.25 for the 19.00 hrs sailing. After a couple of drinks in the lounge before departure (Gerda discovered Rock Rose gin, produced at a small distillery in nearby Dunnet. I, along with Hugh, tried a pint of Orkney Brewery's Puffin golden ale. They also brew one called corncrake - ideal refreshments for birders I would say!) Out on the deck, we then enjoyed some excellent views and bird sightings in the bright sunshine. Fulmars appeared to be everywhere, as well as large numbers of common guillemots, a few black guillemots, razorbills, terns, gannets and also puffins. There were a large variety of gulls as well of course. The light was perfect to obtain some excellent views (and photographs) of the imposing stack known as the Old Man of Hoy, on the island of the same name. We arrived in a sun-bathed Stromness on time at 20.30, a mere ten minute drive to our home for seven nights, the Standing Stones Hotel on the shores of the Loch of



Photos clockwise from top left: Jim and company; plus John, John and Tony on board the Orkney ferry; Hoy coastline.

On arrival at the hotel, the car park was full with minibuses, taxis and private cars. People in evening dress and ball gowns were mingling, standing chatting, drinking, smoking and generally in high spirits. Yes, we did know there was a wedding on tonight, but never imagined such a swinging, all-dancing, all-singing party as it turned out to be. We had heard the wedding was in a marquee. Well it was, officially, but many of the guests had spilled over into the bar (where we were due to eat at 21.30). However, we squeezed our way into reception, and were welcomed and quickly and efficiently given our room keys. The rooms were well appointed and we had a great view over the loch. We met as agreed in the bar and were shown our tables. The place was jumping! After making our order we were served around 22.15 and the atmosphere was still, shall we say - challenging? What to do... well one of our group decided to go to bed. A few more ate with their pain threshold reached. Others - well I think this was the best course of action, ordered plenty of drinks and became almost oblivious to the party going on around them! The food was well cookedwith fresh scallops, calamari, monkfish, seabass, steaks. Verdict: food excellent. Conversation limited. Surrounding music and chat - no escape! John and Sue, Brian and Maureen, found solace in the products of a local winery. Great idea - wine of almost fortified strength, giving adequate fortification to the challenges around us! We lived to see a new dawn....and the sun was still shining!

Sunday 29 May 2016

Another beautiful sunny morning and we did wonder what we may find as we descended to the dining room for breakfast. After a night of carousing, would there still be bodies lying around? No, they all left around 01.30 we were told. Our waiting staff knew - as last night, they were there until the bitter end. How on earth did they manage to be so smiley and chatty at 07.30 this morning? All was well in the kitchen too, as full Orkney breakfasts were delivered promptly. Well done I say!

At 09.15 we boarded the coach. John didn't have far to drive this morning; first to the Ring of Brodgar and the surrounding RSPB Brodgar reserve (all visible across the loch from the hotel). As we alighted from the coach ten minutes later, the air was filled with birdsong. The glorious bubbling calls of curlew and redshank, the drumming of snipe, the 'peewit' calls of lapwing and the evocative warbles of skylark, meadow pipit and the shrill, insistent tones of oystercatchers. All blending into a melodic and wonderful natural symphony of sound, creating a true feeling of awe and beauty as we wandered amongst the ancient, neolithic stones at the centre of this reserve. As the RSPB site notes suggest, "Could there be a more spellbinding and mystical setting?" We say most certainly not and we were happy to be here this fine, sunny morning.

The sun continued to shine as we called at the nearby Stones of Stenness, one of the oldest stone circles in the country and raised about 5,000 years ago. The site of Barnhouse Village is also just a short walk away, and both lie between the Lochs of Stenness and Harray. All of these sites were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1999. World Heritage status places them alongside such globally iconic sites as the Pyramids of Egypt and the Taj Mahal. After this, our wish to visit nearby Maes Howe was dashed, as all tours were booked for today and quite a few days hence. However, we did manage to book our group in for the 11.00 hrs tour on Friday. Instead, we visited the centre and harbour of nearby Stromness, finding the Pier Arts Centre a great place to spend an hour, with a wonderful exhibition of local arts and crafts amongst many other things. The Orkney Folk Festival was coming to a close today, and a special shop selling musical souvenirs, Cd's, DVD's and branded clothing hinted at a well organised event.

After an over-long lunch at our hotel (due, not to an extended three-course feast I have to say), but to an overworked staff and orders stacking up in the kitchen, we were off once again. We drove through Kirkwall and on into the swirling mists enveloping RSPB's Hobbister reserve. Not far away - but this half of Mainland was a different world weather-wise! Nevertheless, undaunted, we trekked a narrow path towards the sea cliffs - almost invisible in the Brigadoon-like qualities of the haar rolling in from Scapa Flow. RSPB notes suggest that "This reserve is a magical mixture of land and sea, from sea cliffs to saltmarsh, from moorland to sandflats. Stroll through the moorland and you may well see hen harrier, short-eared owl and red-throated diver, all of which nest on Orkney's moorland." We did glimpse a hen harrier, had good views of great skua, ravens and heard red grouse cackling amongst the heather. We also enjoyed great views of meadow pipits, twite and stonechat.



The Ring of Brodgar



Curlew and wild flowers



Meadow pipit at Brodgar

Later in the afternoon we drove to nearby Waukmill Bay where the weather was a touch clearer. From an impressive vantage point we could look down on this, one of Orkney's iconic beauty spots and watch various bird species on and above the water. We also noted a few seals popping up to watch us, as we watched them! Great northern divers, red-throated divers, gannets, Arctic and great skuas, kittiwake, black guillemot, fulmar, cormorants, shags, grey herons, common and Arctic terns as well as a variety of gulls, kept us entertained for quite a while. We returned to our hotel for 18.00 hrs, then drinks and dinner at 19.30 - today in the dining room at a nicely set table with candles burning to add a touch of atmosphere.



The Stones of Stenness



Our coach at the Loch of Stenness



In the mists of RSPB Hobbister



Jim and Co. Enjoying seabirds at Waukmill Bay

Monday 30 May 2016

The day dawned slightly misty, but the sun broke through eventually - even though the temperature gauge didn't rise to more than 12C. After breakfast we drove north to Dounby and Twatt, then a minor road leading to RSPB's The Loons reserve. There are two viewing areas overlooking a vast area of marsh. The first one has a unique 'Listening Wall' which increases the sounds, songs and calls of nearby birds. It does actually work! The Loons in Birsay is a waterlogged basin with reed and sedge beds, located at the Loch of Isbister. The spectacular natural symphony of sound created by breeding birds was truly impressive. Of special interest and delight were the many displaying common snipe, drumming as they soared high to drop down to the ground dramatically. The beautiful bubbling calls of curlew added even more magic. We could enjoy tranquillity of this vast wetland with its myriad of pools interspersed with yellow flag iris. From the hide at the second viewing area, we had families of greylag geese, mallards with rakes of ducklings in tow, shoveler, gadwall, tufted duck, little grebe, wigeon and black-tailed godwits. In addition, both willow and sedge warblers were seen and heard from the hide.

Moving on to Marwick Bay, we spent around 90 minutes walking up to the RSPB Marwick Head cliffs where puffin, common guillemot and razorbill were nesting. Impressive views south to the Old Man of Hoy could be enjoyed from this most scenic spot. In the marshy, reedy ground surrounding the bay, Jim heard a corncrake which most of us also caught up with. Quite a find!

In addition, golden plover, sanderling, dunlin and great skua were seen at various points, as well as skylark, wheatear and cuckoo. Lunch had been booked at the nearby Birsay Bay tearoom and, on arrival at 13.15, everything was waiting for us. Tomato and lentil soup with home-baked cheese scones, followed by fruit scones and a selection of home baked cakes including lemon drizzle, coffee sponge and chocolate brownies. A delight for those who love sweet things and these aficionados were delighted to know we would be back on Friday for a second time. After lunch we had a drive around the north end of Mainland, passing the Loch of Swannay (and the adjacent Swannay Brewery who produce some excellent ales). Then on to Evie and the ascent to Birsay Moors where we caught a brief glimpse of a short-eared owl by the roadside. We decided to return here later in the day, but now we were heading west to Skara Brae Neolithic Village. This really was a 'must see' site, right on the edge of the sea at the Bay of Skail. It consists of a group of 'Stone Age' huts built from unmortared stone, linked together by passages. It's survival into modern times is the fortunate result of quick burial by advancing sand dunes which 'mothballed' it for about forty centuries. The story of Skara Brae's re-discovery is remarkable. In about 1850, storms began to move the Skail Bay sand dunes inland, which uncovered the previously buried structures. From 1927 onwards, Professor Gordon Childe, one of the most distinguished archaeologists of his day, made a full scientific study on the site. His findings revealed that Skara Brae was Neolithic, not medieval, an astounding discovery because of the rarity of any such sites anywhere in Europe at anything like this state of preservation. It is now possible to say that people began to live here in the Skara Brae huts as early as 3200 BC and that they continued to do so for between six and ten centuries. The visitor centre interprets the findings very well indeed and there is an excellent audio-visual presentation which most of us enjoyed.

Finally at about 17.00 hrs, we drove back to the summit of Birsay Moors. As we arrived at the small car park, a short-eared owl flew in front of the coach, leading us into our stopping point. We were lucky enough to have sightings of three short-eared owls today, four hen harriers and some ravens. Well satisfied with a most exciting and varied day, we returned to the Standing Stones Hotel for dinner. Amongst the good things on offer tonight were crabs claws (they call them toes here!); deliciously tender filet steaks and a variety of Orkney cheeses and oatcakes to round things off. After dinner, Jim called the bird sightings list and some of us sampled a dram of the renowned local 16-year old malt - Scapa. A perfect end to a great day!



The Loons - listening wall



Drumming snipe



Mallard family, The Loons



Razorbill, Marwick Head



Puffin



Old Man of Hoy

Skara Brae



Doing the bird list at the Standing Stones Hotel



Tuesday 31 May 2016

After another good breakfast we drove first to Kirkwall, stopping at Tesco to buy a few items for lunch. This was a big day in Kirkwall, with the arrival of our own First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, the German President Joachim Gauck, David Cameron and Princess Anne (standing in for the Duke of Edinburgh). In addition - representatives of the UK and German navies to commemorate the Battle of Jutland during the First World War. Needless to say, traffic and general access into the centre was strictly curtailed. We had originally planned to spend a couple of hours visiting St. Magnus Cathedral and other Kirkwall attractions this morning, but had to change our schedule. Instead, we stopped for a while at St. Mary's looking for wildlife - divers, sea ducks and otters (no sign of the latter). We drove on over the Churchill Barriers which connect Mainland with Lamb Holm and the island of South Ronaldsay. We took the road to the most southerly point of South Ronaldsay at Burwick, where a seasonal passenger ferry connects with John O' Groats on the Scottish mainland. Our destination today was The Tomb of the Eagles. Perched above the dramatic Ronaldsay cliffs, the Tomb is one of Orkney's top archaeological sites. Discovered by chance by local farmer Ronnie Simmison in the 1950's, the Stone Age tomb revealed an amazing collection of bones and other artefacts, placed here some 5,000 years ago. On arrival at 11.00 hrs, we were welcomed by the staff including Kathleen, the daughter of Ronnie Simmison. She and colleague Jo gave us an in depth and fascinating talk about the Tomb and its contents, as well as the Bronze Age site which can also be viewed.

The passageway into the Tomb is 70 cm wide and 85 cm high. The quickest option is to crawl along the three metre passage from the entrance. The Tomb of the Eagles itself is three metres high with skylights providing illumination. Almost all of our group made the journey - some using the trolley to slide in. After the visit, a pathway along the clifftop gave us impressive views and a wonderful example of maritime heath. Bird highlights of the day included shelduck, eider, red-breasted merganser, red-throated diver, fulmar, gannet, white-tailed eagle, kestrel, great skua, kittiwake, sandwich, common and Arctic terns, common and black guillemots, razorbill and short-eared owl. Back at the visitor centre we were offered seats to enjoy our picnic lunches and tea, coffee, soft drinks (and Orkney ices) were available to purchase here. Leaving again at 14.30. we drove back across the island to visit the Italian Chapel on Lamb Holm.

The Tomb of the Eagles



The Italian Chapel



The 'Weeping Window'

We arrived at the chapel for 15.00 hrs and spent a good 30 minutes here. Between 1942 and 1945, Italian prisoners of war helped build the Churchill Barriers, but also converted two Nissen huts into this amazing chapel we see today. The frescoes and murals are quite breathtaking, especially considering the limited materials available at the time. One of many highlights is the painted Madonna and Child behind the altar, based on a 19th century painting by Nicolo Barabino from a postcard given to Dominico Chiochetti (the talented artist responsible for this work) by his mother when he left his home in Moena for the war. We also had time to call at the nearby Orkney Wine company on Lamb Holm, where samples of their wide range of fruit wines were on offer. It was then time to head for Kirkwall, where all the commemorations and festivities were over. We were in the capital from 15.50 to 18.00 hrs. Many of us wanted to see the 'weeping window' of St. Magnus Cathedral, where thousands of bright red ceramic poppies 'poured' out of the window to the street below. This was where the commemoration services had taken place. We returned to the hotel for dinner. The bar was exceptionally busy, as a band of the Deutsche Marine were dining here tonight. The bar staff told us they drank their whole supply of Swannay Brewery's 'Scapa Special' ale and wanted to purchase the bar runners advertising the beer. Why? Because the slogan on the runners read "Scapa Special Ale - goes down better than the German fleet!"



Wednesday 01 June 2016

A fine sunny day on the whole, but still low temperatures (13C) with a sharp, northerly wind. Our first port of call this morning was the harbour at Houton, where we waited to board the 10.15 Orkney Ferries service to the Island of Hoy. A fine crossing and we were hoping to get a view of the vessel MS "Schleswig Holstein" which was anchored in Scapa Flow. Unfortunately she left before we got close enough to take photographs! Arriving at Lyness on Hoy for 11.00, we made our way to the Scapa Flow Visitor Centre. Lunch was arranged in the Pumphouse Café for 11.30. The owner, Emily, had everything ready for us to save time. The café has been re-created to give a 1940's feel. Even Emily and her partner were dressed in 40's style - with a hairdo to match! Music was courtesy of the Andrews Sisters and other contemporaries. We had to time to look around the museum briefly, but there would be enough to keep everyone occupied for a whole day - the area was vast. We left at 12.40 for the north of the island. As we passed the cemetery, all the marquees and other paraphernalia was being dismantled. Yesterday was Hoy's 'big day' of commemorations with all the dignitaries here again. We drove on through impressive scenery, with views from the coast road to the islands of Fara, Rysa Little, Cava and Graemsay. We took the high road over to Rackwick Bay, stopping for a while at the parking area near the Dwarfie Stane. Two RSPB wardens were keeping a watch over the white-tailed eagle nest in a crevice of the rocky cliff face. The male had been spotted leaving for food a little earlier. We waited for a while, but no luck. On then to Rackwick Bay, where the coastline and cliffs are truly breathtaking. Arctic skua, great skua, stonechat, and wheatear were seen. In fact we saw so many great skuas on the island that we were not surprised by the fact that this is one of the biggest strongholds of the species anywhere in Scotland.



As we returned, we stopped once again at the Dwarfie Stane (still no eagles!), but were told to look for nesting red-throated diver on Hoy Water near the Lyrawa Hill viewpoint. We did and got close-up views of a beautiful male with a bright red throat. A walk up to the viewpoint was also rewarding with even more 'Bonxies' to be seen here. Back at Lyness we had time for refreshments at the Pumphouse Café before embarking on the last ferry of the day to Houton at 16.40. The light effects were beautiful as we crossed Scapa Flow where the bird sightings were also good. Highlights of the day included: 15 red-throated and two great northern divers; fulmar everywhere; 1 white-tailed eagle; 60+ sanderling; 6 Arctic and 150+ great skuas; snipe, curlew, ringed plover; lapwing; 6 sandwich, 6 common and 100+ Arctic terns; 20 black guillemot; common guillemot; razorbill; skylark; sand and house martins; swallow; meadow pipit; rock pipit; stonechat; wheatear; raven and twite. From Houton, we had a short visit to Orphir Round Church, which was built by Earl Hakon, the slayer of Magnus, after his penitential journey to Jerusalem. The church dates from Norse times and there is a well preserved apse which is modelled on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. We then returned to our hotel for around 18.30 hrs.

Thursday 02 June 2016

Weather-wise, this was the worst day of the holiday. Stormy, high winds, later mist and rain and temperatures barely reaching 10C. The itinerary had already been rearranged to accommodate the uncertain weather conditions. We were due to visit the island of Shapinsay for a walk to an RSPB reserve at Mill Dam, but just as well we didn't! Instead we re-visited the Loons reserve (in the hide) before returning to Dounby and driving over the Birsay Moors road (where great skua and raven were seen) to Evie and the nearby Broch of Gurness. The sea was a wonderful shade of turquoise as we approached this historic site, with shafts of sunlight illuminating the stormy waters. One red-throated diver was spotted by Molly, and both Arctic and Great skua were about too. Fulmars were everywhere again, and 20+ Arctic terns plus a few common terns were noted. Following a torrential rain shower, some of us ventured into the stormy blast to visit the Broch of Gurness. This is one of the most outstanding surviving examples of an Iron Age settlement that is unique to Scotland and Orkney. Gurness is huge and is also excessively complicated in layout. In essence it consists of the original broch, a massive structure dating from the first century AD, plus an untidy collection of later domestic buildings - many of the latter being of Norse origin. From here - on to Finstown and Kirkwall for 12.15 for a three-hour stay. It rained for the duration of the visit, but allowed us to see the interior of St. Magnus Cathedral, founded in 1137. The style is predominantly Romanesque and it took roughly three-and-a-half centuries to complete. In 1968, the five-hundredth anniversary of Orkney's union with Scotland was celebrated here. Some of the group visited the nearby museum and many headed for lunch in Judith Glue's 'Real Food Café' - a pleasantly warm and satisfying destination! Other notable places visited included the two ruined palaces, once residences and strongholds of both bishops and Orkney's last earls. After a day of historic buildings we decided (possibly foolishly) to have one more shot at a birding site - RSPB's Cottasgarth reserve. On arrival the rain was so dense and the wind so strong that those who ventured the walk to the hide were pretty wet! One consolation - a distant view of hen harrier was obtained - but little else. We decided to call it a day and head back to the warmth of the hotel.

The Broch of Gurness



Friday 03 June 2016

A much brighter sunny day today, but still that nagging northerly wind. We started the day down in Stromness, visiting the town, harbour and a wildlife art gallery. We were booked into a Maes Howe tour at 11.00, so made sure we were there in time to pay for tickets. Most of the group joined the tour of this dry-stone buried cairn, covered by turf and surrounded by a circular ditch. The building began around 2900 - 2800BC. The size of the cairn, the elaborate method of construction and its location near the centre of Orkney's largest land area suggest that this was the burial place of a prominent family group. It is very unusual to be able to go inside a monument of this great age, but Maes Howe is an exception. The entrance is through a long, low passage beneath enormous slabs of flagstone. Inside is a roomy chamber about four metres high. The walls are inscribed with runes, which remind us of the immense antiquity of Maes Howe. Some of the runic writing is carved with an axe brought from Iceland, which tells us that some of the scribes (Norsemen) had lately returned from a crusade to the Holy Land. A fascinating place, but we had to leave and head north to Birsay once again, calling again at The Loons reserve where we had sightings of two barnacle geese - most unusual at this time. This was only a brief stop, as lunch was booked for 13.15 at the Birsay Bay tearoom once again. After lunch we did another loop over Birsay Moors, but this time paid a visit to the RSPB Loch of Hundland reserve in Durkadale, where nesting redshank were busy and very vocal, so we kept our distance lest we disturbed them. Our next port of call was at Yesnaby Cliffs where we enjoyed a most pleasant walk to the Point of Lyregeo and back. Quite a number of nesting auks were seen as well as families of eider on the sea. Finally, we made it back to RSPB Cottasgarth reserve in better weather. We all got to see the excellent farmhouse hide with its superb murals. No hen harriers today, but we had seen short-eared owls, red grouse, little grebe, kestrel, great and Arctic skuas, and once again over 100 Arctic terns. So now it was back to the hotel and our final dinner of the holiday. Time marches on and tomorrow we would leave again for the south.

Saturday 04 June 2016

It had to be the full Orkney breakfast today - our last chance! After checking out of the hotel, we were on our way to Stromness at 09.30 and lined up our coach in the ferry queue. We had some time for a walk about town before boarding MV "Hamnavoe" at 10.50 for an 11.00 hrs departure. The sun was shining as we left the picturesque harbour, sweeping grandly out towards the Island of Hoy with its rugged coastline. Plenty of seabirds about, but not quite the variety we had on the outward trip. Lunch for some was a sandwich bought in Stromness, or a bar snack on board. Arriving a little behind time in Scrabster, we drove out to Dunnet Head - the most northerly point of the Scottish mainland. Extensive views from the outlook near the lighthouse gave us grandstand views of over 300 puffins mainly in flight over the water - plus black and common guillemots, razorbills, 50 or more Arctic terns, 500+ kittiwakes, fulmar, great skua and a variety of gulls. Leaving Dunnet Head at 14.20, we headed south along the beautiful coastline to stop once again in Helmsdale - a comfort stop and a chance to buy a drink, newspaper or an ice cream.



Maes Howe



Redshank at Loch of Hundland



Yesnaby Cliffs



Mural at Cottasgarth

It was then on via Brora to Evanton Services where John topped up the coach with diesel and we all had time for a drink and snack at the on-site café. Our destination this evening was the Nethybridge Hotel, south of Inverness. The sun was still shining as we arrived and we were soon checked in and had time for a shower and a quick change before dinner. The service in the dining room was impressive and the choice of food very good too. The locally smoked salmon came in generous quantities, and the roast leg of lamb was done to perfection. Time for the bird list and a late walk through the hotel gardens before bed.

Sunday 05 June 2016

A fine start to the day with light mists which would clear to give blue skies, sunshine and temperatures around 24C. Quite a change. Following a hearty breakfast (and a pre-breakfast bird walk for some), John loaded up the coach for the last time and we were on our way by 09.15. From Nethybridge it is only a short drive to RSPB Abernethy Reserve at Loch Garten, where we arrived at 09.30. The heat was rising as we stepped out of the coach, and less welcome - the midges were out and about! We looked around in the woodland for the iconic crested tits but none were to be seen. We had good views of siskin, common crossbill, bullfinch, blue, coal and great tits, treecreeper and jay. At the visitor centre we were welcomed by RSPB warden Nimrod, a passionate defender of birds in his native Malta, a dedicated ornithologist and an all-round wildlife expert. We talked to him about migration and the dangers faced by so many species as they pass through or over North African and Mediterranean territories. The main reason for being here of course, was to see the nesting ospreys and in this we were successful. It was great to see the birds in reality as well as in close-up on the TV monitors. Leaving the centre, a party of five led by Jim, spent more time birding and walking the forest trails. The rest of us joined the coach and drove to Broomhill railway station on the Strathspey Railway line. We were taking the 11.35 steam service to Aviemore, which allowed us to marvel at the grandeur of the Grampian range of mountains from the comfort of our railway coach. Arriving in Aviemore for 12.15, we had time to buy some drinks and snacks before boarding the 12.40 vintage diesel multiple-unit railcar (built by the Pressed Steel company) back to Broomhill for 13.15, where John and the rest of the group awaited our arrival. So now - on with the journey south. Molly left us in Aviemore where she joined the mainline rail service home to Edinburgh. Our next stop was Pitlochry where we had time to saunter around in the heat of the day, have a drink, a cake, an ice cream.....and on to Stirling for dinner at the River House Restaurant. We arrived somewhat earlier than planned - around 17.30 and were able to have a totally relaxed meal, leaving again at 19.30. A delicious choice awaited us: Poached baby pear and Dunsyre Blue cheese with candied walnuts and endive; or pork, apricot and chestnut terrine, Arran mature apple and ale chutney with Arran oaties: Mains included herb-crust cod fillet, saffron pearl barley, crayfish and pea risotto; or pan-fried chicken supreme, Dauphinoise potatoes, buttered beans and shallots, tarragon and tomato jus. For desserts - Drambuie and Scottish berries Eton Mess with crushed pistachios; or warm sticky-toffee pudding with butterscotch sauce and vanilla Arran dairy ice cream. I have to say that this was one of the best meals of the whole trip! So onwards to Ayr after another great Ayrshire Birders holiday and some superb driving by John who really is part of the group - the only difference being that he has to work while we enjoy the scenery! So here's to 2017 and our planned trip to the northern part of Ireland in May. Thanks to everyone for their good company - we thoroughly enjoyed it all!



Suddenly, last summer.....

Eleanora Forrester writes from her diary of birding memories



In mid-summery September, I was totally puzzled one morning when I was unable to identify a sound in my garden. All was quiet, except for a barely audible plaintive and pathetic cry. The movement among the leaves was near but hardly perceptible. The bird was tantalisingly out of identifying view. Only when it fell out of the leafage and landed clumsily on top of the feeding station, I realised it was a fluffy, baby wren. The fledgling looked at the other garden birds there and cried at them to no avail. It then flopped onto the ground and nibbled at the crumbs discarded by the birds on the feeding station. Such a wee waif, I wished I could take it under my wing!

I was peeved at not recognising its call but I associate wrens with Rock & Roll high volume yelling - not the frail sound this baby wren uttered. But then my garden has never been so quiet before. Although I'd had masses of young birds all summer, all was now quiet. Presumably they were keeping a low profile while in moulting mode. During the remainder of the month, the frail young wren stayed faithful to the feeding station area. Its behaviour was like a woodland wren foraging so much on the ground, just as if it was in a rainforest style habitat. Back to the drawing board! Due to being unable to identify the call of a baby wren, I purchased Simon Barnes book for beginners: "Birdwatch with your eyes closed." Amusingly, in his chapter on tits - he complained about his nature articles for The Times that he had sent by e-mail and had never got there. Eventually, the technicians discovered that the computers were rejecting the stories due to a pornography barrier having been set up!

This reminded me how I would teach the school kids birding identification before their nature walks around Culzean Country Park. Whenever I mentioned blue tits and great tits, the young lads would bow their heads and absolutely cringe with embarrassment. How could their lovely lady teacher mention such disgusting words!?! However, they wouldn't want to disappoint me that they weren't interested in birding, so on our jaunts to Culzean, the boys would inform me....."There's that bird calling you, Miss. Teacher, teacher!" If only we called them Chickadees as in the USA, it would save a lot of red faces!

No need to crow about it

A young fallow deer turns to face the jackdaw on his back in Bushy Park, Richmond upon Thames, south-west London.

*From The Guardian, 25.11.15.
Photo: Val Saxby/HotSpot Media*



Tuk-Tuk

Memories of
Sri Lanka

Ian Thomson

White-throated
silverbill



When in strange bars and with large strangers,
We tourists often land in danger.
As hours go by we purchase Cola
For some old tart whose name is Lola
We pay as if it were champagne
(I'll never go back there again)

But tourists have strong constitutions,
Survive the Runs (and revolutions).
Sunburn and long, long flight delays.
(I once lost ten hours in a daze)
But in Sri Lanka, near to Galle
I took a Tuk-Tuk to the Mall....

We both piled in, behind the driver,
Agreed the fare (less than a Fiver)
But then I made the fateful error
Which led to half an hour of terror.
I merely asked, wanted to know,
"And just how fast does this thing go?"

As those words spread upon the breeze,
Giant fruit bats dropped down dead from trees.
And from a chipmunk's nest was heard
Acts three and four - Richard the Third.
With chipmunk dressed as Prince of Wales!
But I digress - back to my tale

Our driver prayed, down on one knee,
To access Hell's machinery
Those mighty engines, fuelled by Sin,
Could never be surpassed by men.
So as the Tuk-Tuk left hotel,
The engine howled; a note from HELL

That day we dived with death, I guess
But Lady Luck had done Her best
Our Tuk-Tuk slid through two - foot gaps
'Tween trucks and buses, bikes and carts.
This was the Tuk-Tuk's greatest trick
Because it measured three foot six!

Returning to Lighthouse Hotel
The traffic like Bats out of Hell
Our Tuk-Tuk driver was no worse
Than any other, all are cursed.
The Lighthouse, though, a quiet oasis,
While outside it's the Wacky Races !



Birds and landscapes of the North of Ireland

Monday 15 May to Monday 22 May 2017



Leader: Jim Thomson
Organisers: Tony & Gerda Scott

Join us for seven nights as we tour the most interesting birding sites and places of natural beauty throughout the North of Ireland. We will travel by small luxury coach from Ayr and cross from Cairnryan to Belfast with Stena Lines Ferries. For the first two nights, we plan to stay close to Belfast to allow us to visit places such as the magnificent WWT Castle Espie Wildlife Reserve on the shores of Strangford Lough. We also plan to visit Oxford Island Nature Reserve and Shanes' Castle Park on Lough Neagh. Moving on for five nights to the area around Derry/Londonderry, we will radiate from here to visit such places as RSPB's reserve on Rathlin Island and also Fair Head for more nesting seabirds. Nearby is the Giant's Causeway - also worth a visit. Inch Levels Wildfowl Reserve in County Donegal is well worth a trip - being one of Ireland's premier wildlife sites. Other places will be RSPB reserves at Lough Foyle, Portmore Loch and Lower Lough Erne. Pettigo Plateau is also good for raptors. We will be staying at comfortable three or four star hotels on a dinner, bed and breakfast basis. **We would appreciate early booking if possible, as hotels can be booked up quite early for this time of year. We expect the cost to be in the region of £890.00 for the eight days/seven nights trip - inclusive of all travel and hotel accommodation.**

The cost of the trip will be around £820.00 - 890.00 depending on the number of participants.

It will include all coach and ferry costs and dbb accommodation in en-suite rooms in a three or four star hotel.

If you would like to join this tour, please request an itinerary from Tony & Gerda Scott, 4 Hilltop Place, Ayr KA7 3PB or f please telephone us on 01292 281 085 or e-mail Tony Scott on: da.scott@tiscali.co.uk



giving nature a home

Central Ayrshire Local Group

Scotland's Bird Club
The SOC



Committee

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Please note: talks subject to alteration

Indoor Meetings 2016

Monday 19 September
BIRDWATCHING IN THE THREE TOWNS (Ardrossan, Saltcoats & Stevenston). A talk by **TOM BYERS**. Membership registration precedes the talk.

Monday 17 October
THE BATS OF CULZEAN COUNTRY PARK An illustrated talk by **IAN CORNFORTH**.

Monday 21 November
ALDOURAN WETLAND GARDEN & BIRDING AROUND STRANRAER. An illustrated talk by **GEOFF & JEAN SHEPPARD**

Monday 19 December
BACK GARDEN BIRDING. An illustrated talk by **ANGUS HOGG**

Indoor Meetings 2017

Monday 16 January **GOLDEN EAGLES IN SOUTH WEST SCOTLAND**. An illustrated talk by **CHRIS ROLLIE**

Monday 20 February
TO BE ANNOUNCED

Monday 20 March
TO BE ANNOUNCED

Monday 17 April
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING followed by **AYRSHIRE ROUND-UP** - the year's highlights told by **JIM THOMSON**



RSPB LOCH LEVEN AND LARGO BAY (FIFE)

Saturday 19 November 2016

by **COACH**

Leader: **Jim Thomson** Tickets **£25.00**

A joint SOC Ayrshire and RSPB Central Ayrshire Local Group day trip. **Leaving Dodds coach depot, East Road, AYR at 07.30**. We will be driving via Glasgow with the first comfort stop at **DOBBIE'S GARDEN CENTRE - LIVINGSTON (09.00 - 09.40)**. On over the Forth Road Bridge to the **M90 and RSPB LOCH LEVEN for 10.30**. Here until 14.30 (Café on site). Time to visit all the hides and possibly the hill and woodland walk where we have fantastic views across the whole reserve. On via Leslie and Glenrothes to **LARGO BAY** - where we can view seabirds from **LOWER LARGO and LEVEN**. At around 16.30 we will We return via Kirkcaldy and the Forth Bridge to **SOUTH QUEENSFERRY** where we will book dinner at the **BREWER'S FAYRE** for around 17.30. Leave again at 19.30 and return to AYR via the M8 / M77. Back about 21.00 hrs. **Tickets will be available from September onwards or register by e-mailing Tony Scott on : da.scott@tiscali.co.uk or telephone 01292 281 085.**

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654.

The Gannet

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Registered charity
no. SC037654

All indoor meetings take place on Monday evenings at 19.30 hrs - in Hall B of the Newton-Wallacetown Church, 60 Main Street, AYR. Parking available on Main Street or Garden St.

The meetings are open to everyone interested in birds and wildlife. Please come along and join us. If you enjoy our meetings and field trips - local membership costs only £6 single or £10 double. There are eight indoor meetings and nine field trips.

We will be repeating our annual bird walks in Rozelle & Belleisle Parks during the Spring of 2016. Please look out for details to be advised at a later date.

All field trips are held jointly with the Ayrshire branch of the SOC (Scottish Ornithologists' Club). The meetings are open to everyone interested in birds and wildlife. Please come along and join us on any of these outings.

We generally car share and if anyone requires a lift or is willing to share their car, please telephone any of the committee mentioned inside, also if you require further information about any activity.

Central Ayrshire Local Group Meetings, Outings & Holidays Season 2016-2017

Field Trips 2016

Saturday 24 September

WWT CAERLAVEROCK RESERVE

Meet in the reserve car park at 11.00 hrs. Whole day birding trip until 16.00 hrs. Café on site or bring a picnic lunch.

Saturday 15 October

BALLANTRAE, LOCH RYAN & WIG BAY

Meet at Ballantrae waterfront car park (toilets) for 10.30 hrs. On to Loch Ryan, Stranraer and Wig Bay. Café at Soleburn Garden Centre or bring a picnic lunch. All day trip - until c.16.00 hrs.

Saturday 19 November **by COACH**

RSPB LOCH LEVEN RESERVE & LARGO BAY (FIFE)

Meet 07.30 at Dodd's coach depot, East Road, Ayr. Whole day trip returning around 21.30. Dinner will be arranged. Coach tickets: £25.00.

Saturday 17 December

IRVINE HARBOUR & BEACH PARK

Meet at 10.30 hrs at Irvine Harbour Point car park (toilets). Whole day birding trip until c.15.30 hrs. Food available at the Harbour Arts Centre and the Ship Inn, or bring a packed lunch.

2017

Saturday 21 January

MAIDENS & NTS CULZEAN

Meet 10.30 hrs at Maidens Harbour car park (toilets). On to Culzean later. Café at Culzean or bring packed lunch. Finish c.15.30 hrs.

Saturday 18 February

GREENAN SHORE AND DOONFOOT.

Meet at 10.00hrs Greenan Castle car park. Trip lasts until 12.00 hrs.

Saturday 18 March

RSPB KEN-DEE MARSHES RESERVE

Meet at New Galloway High Street (toilets) for 10.30 hrs. On to Ken-Dee Reserve for around 11.15. Please bring picnic lunch. Finish c.16.00 hrs.

Saturday 22 April

DUMFRIES HOUSE ESTATE & GARDENS

Meet 10.00 hrs at Dumfries House car park (toilets). Walk and birdwatch the riverbank, woodlands and gardens. Café on site or bring a picnic lunch. All day trip until c.16.00 hrs.

Monday 15 May - Monday 22 May.

An eight-day coach holiday

BIRDS & LANDSCAPES OF THE NORTH OF IRELAND

Coach travel from Ayr. Staying at three or four-star hotels on a DBB basis. Visiting WWT's Castle Espie Reserve and Strangford Loch (C.Down); RSPB reserves at Rathlin Island, Belfast Lough, Portmores Lough and Lough Foyle; also Fair Head (Antrim), The Bann Estuary (Derry), Inch Levels Wildfowl Reserve - Ireland's premier wildlife site (County Donegal), Rathmullen Wood, Sheskinmore NR, Pettigo Plateau Nature Reserve (all Donegal), Lough Neagh (Shane's Castle Park), Donegal, Killbegs and Blue Stack Mountains, and also the Giant's Causeway and Benbane Head. Price will include dinner, bed & breakfast, coach travel and ferry crossings. Estimated cost around £890.00 inclusive.