



**41st year**  
Autumn 2017



Common guillemots at West Light Seabird Centre, Rathlin Island, NI.

## Leader's Lines

For all local birding details - log on to: [www.ayrshire-birding.org.uk](http://www.ayrshire-birding.org.uk)

Hello friends,

That's another year gone and it will shortly be time for the new session of indoor meetings and outings. I hope you will come along and enjoy the company and, hopefully see some interesting birds on the outings. Last session we had a good selection of speakers, who were kind enough to come and talk to our group. I am extremely grateful to them. It is very difficult to find different people to talk on interesting topics. Suggestions (or volunteers) are always welcome. The outings' attendances were a bit variable, with some well attended (and some not)! Very successful "Dawn Chorus" walks were held in Rozelle and Belleisle at the beginning of May. I must thank **Jim Thomson** for leading these and other walks in the parks, for Holmston Primary School and at Ayr Hospital.

**Tony Scott** organised an away-day to Loch Leven and a superb week in Northern Ireland, where visits to bird reserves were interspersed with tourist attractions. Thanks are due to John Cairns from Dodds of Troon, who drove on both trips. Tony also produces "The Gannet" and designs the event posters. Next session, he is proposing to arrange a weekend trip to RSPB Leighton Moss & WWT Martin Mere and a 10-day holiday to RSPB Arne in Dorset (the home of "Springwatch" for the last couple of years), plus other reserves and places of interest on the Dorset coast and inland. Full details soon.

**Gerda Scott** worked extremely hard to organise **Art on the Wing 2016** which I hope you visited. We managed to raise £4,500.00 for RSPB, which we donated to the Mersehead reedbed appeal. We presented a cheque for £4,000.00 to Paul Walton in February, and sent a further £500.00 after the end of last session. Colin Bartholomew, Mersehead reserve manager, will give us a flavour of the changes afoot on the reserve, when he comes to talk in October, followed by a visit to see for ourselves what changes have been made when we visit Mersehead on Saturday, October 21st.

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Ian Clark, our treasurer, keeps our accounts in excellent order and Anne Thomson, our secretary, produces the minutes of the committee meetings promptly. Ronnie Coombes organises the use of this hall, laying out the chairs and clearing up afterwards. He also continues to host the committee meetings at his home. We welcomed two new committee members last season, Jean Anthony and Morven Cumming, who have been ably assisting at events since they joined us.

PS Waverley had five trips from Ayr harbour to Ailsa Craig scheduled for 2017, but the June cruise, the best for breeding auks, was cancelled due to supposedly high winds?? Again, many disappointed people arrived at Ayr Harbour, including Tony, Gerda, Eleanora and I, intending to go on the trip. We can only hope that some of the four scheduled Monday sailings actually happen.

I must thank you, the members, for attending the meetings, and for buying raffle tickets and refreshments which helps us to raise funds for RSPB Scotland, and I hope you will continue to do so. If I can do anything to make the experience better in any way, please do tell me.

I hope to see as many of you as possible at the first meeting on **Monday 18th September 2017**, when **Liz Leyden** will be talking on **Birding in India and Sri Lanka**.

If you need transport to this or any other meeting, please do tell me.

Anne

Anne M. Dick, Group Leader

*The well attended 'Dawn Chorus' bird walks in Rozelle and Bellisle Parks in May 2017*



# The birds and landscapes of Ulster

**An RSPB Central Ayrshire and SOC Ayrshire group holiday from Monday 15 May to Monday 22 May 2017**

Report by Tony Scott

Day 1 Monday 15 May 2017

**Ayr to Stranraer and Stena Line ferry to Belfast and a visit to RSPB Belfast Lough Reserve, and our first hotel, the Clandeboye Lodge, near Bangor.**

Our group met at Dodds coach depot in Ayr as usual, around 07.50. John Cairns, our driver and good friend, was waiting for us - ready to load our usual 22-seat Salvator Caetano Toyota Coaster coach. 18 of us were on board as we departed at 08.15 for a drive south along the A77 into an increasingly wet and windy morning. Gusts of up to 45 miles per hour battered us as we headed through Girvan and on to Ballantrae where a toilet stop and short birdwatch was scheduled. The weather dashed any hope of birding and the toilet was locked! John suggested calling at the Stena terminal before collecting our last two passengers (Jean and Geoff Sheppard) in Stranraer. This all worked to perfection and Jean and Geoff were waiting for us as planned, so back to the ferry terminal at Cairnryan to board MV "Superfast VIII" at 11.00 hrs. (Why don't these companies have proper names for ships anymore?). Our full complement of 20 passengers were now safely onboard. The vessel was full to capacity with a large number of touring coaches as well as trucks and cars. An amazingly large number of visitors from China and the far east were on their way to the north of Ireland and we met up with some of them again later in the week, at tourist honey-pots such as the Giant's Causeway.

Despite the crowds on board, all was calm weather-wise before heading out of Loch Ryan, and then we did have a little rock and roll! Having found a comfortable corner in one of the lounges, we could relax with a bite of lunch and even have a stroll on deck to brave the winds before we slipped into Belfast Lough - and back to calm conditions. We arrived on time for 14.00 hrs. Traffic was heavy as we drove through the port area, but we had only a short distance to drive until we reached our next stop - RSPB's wonderful Belfast Lough Reserve - the "Window on Wildlife"(WOW) visitor centre. The Northern Ireland Ornithologists' Club chairman, Garry Wilkinson, was joining us Thursday and Friday, but kept in touch from the start, suggesting places to visit and birds to look out for. He had told us that we would have spectacular close-up views of black-tailed godwits here. He was right - the views were amazing. We have never been so close to black-tailed godwits before! So no excuses for not getting some great images of these birds. The staff at the centre were extremely helpful and friendly and we had many great sightings during our time here from 14.30 to 17.15 hrs. These included shelduck, shoveler, teal, little grebe, ringed plover, lapwing, coot, knot and a distant view of a male ruff in summer plumage. This was a really good find! But there was more.....



Black-tailed godwit



Inside the WOW visitor centre hide



Black-tailed godwit



Our ferry from the hide

There were dunlin too, redshank, Mediterranean gulls, little tern, common tern, cormorant, swallows and house martins. From the ferry, sightings had included Manx shearwater, gannet, shag, fulmar, black guillemot, kittiwakes and more. Our list for the day gave us a total of 66 species. At WOW we counted over 200 black-tailed godwits and also enjoyed views of the Konik ponies and later, after a coffee, we walked to the nearby Hollywood Bank and Whitehouse Lagoon hides.

At 17.15 it was time to drive to our home for the next three nights, the beautifully situated 'Clandeboyne Lodge'. Only a short drive again and we arrived for 17.50. The hotel is surrounded by woodland and has a spacious and verdant feel to the grounds. The original building was a schoolhouse, and this now serves as a function suite for large and small groups. We had been allocated a private dining room complete with its own fully stocked bar in this building. Our rooms were in the new building, which was designed and built to match the style of the original. The public restaurant, bar and lounges were well designed and tastefully furnished and our bedrooms also beautifully laid out, well equipped and spacious. We all thoroughly enjoyed our stay here and were more than satisfied with the amenities, friendly service and good food. Dinner tonight was at 19.30, so we met for drinks in our own private bar at 19.00hrs. The table settings with starched white linen and crystal glasses matched the perfection of both food and service. Our menu was innovative and tonight, included a Thai carrot soup with coriander and lemongrass and was accompanied by black Irish wheaten bread. The main (there was a vegetarian option which no-one chose) was pan-fried cod fillet with mustard lentils and a balsamic glaze. A panache of seasonal vegetables was accompanied by Hamilton's country mash as well as roast potatoes. Apple crumble with custard and Glastry Farm vanilla ice cream was a traditional dessert. The wine list had some interesting bottles and the Argentinian Finca del Alfa Malbec/Merlot was a good choice. Tea and coffee was served and we had our very own space to complete today's bird list. A great start to the holiday!



Konik pony



Clandeboyne Lodge main building



Clandeboyne at night

Day 2 Tuesday 16 May 2017

**Groomsport Harbour: WWT Castle Espie Wetland Centre and Quoile Pondage NNR.**



Black guillemots at Groomsport



WWT Castle Espie



Bufflehead

After a fine breakfast, we left Clandeboy Lodge at 09.00 hrs to head into a day of mainly sunshine with a few showers and temperatures of 16 degrees. Our first port of call was Groomsport Harbour, just along the coast from Bangor. We were here for 45 minutes and enjoyed close-up views of black guillemots on the harbour wall and in the water. Jim also had a long-distance view of red-throated diver, plus a few eider, black-headed gulls and herring gulls. It was a relatively short drive from Groomsport to WWT's excellent Castle Espie Reserve and Wetland Centre on the shores of Strangford Lough. We had allowed a long stay here as there was so much to see and so many areas to walk and birdwatch. Arrival was at 10.45 and we were here until 15.00 hrs. The main attractions include the wide mix of views across the estuary and tidal lagoons, eel grass mats, woodland walks and the collection of exotic water birds. The visitor centre is set in a wildlife garden and has energy systems fuelled by sun and wind. We had plenty of time to enjoy all the reserve had to offer and still time left for a leisurely lunch with superb views of the exotic birds collection. After lunch we got close up views of these water birds from all parts of the globe, including bufflehead, hooded merganser and other delights. Wild birds on the reserve included greylag, shelduck, shoveler, teal, moorhen, coot, grey heron, little egret, oystercatcher, black-tailed godwits, redshank, common tern, swift, barn swallow, sand martin, pheasant and more. From Castle Espie, we headed south for Downpatrick and Quoile Pondage National Nature Reserve. Garry suggested we miss out the visitor centre and head straight to the Castle Island hide where we should get the most interesting sightings. On arrival, the hide was locked and we had to return to the visitor centre where we were hailed by (as it turned out) head ranger Rory. We told him about the locked hide and he immediately shot off to find the key and we met him at Castle Island hide, together with two of his friends. We spent a good hour viewing not just the beautiful surroundings, but excellent sightings of breeding great crested grebes. There were also tufted duck on the water, along with gadwall, mallard and moorhen. Grey heron, sparrowhawk, buzzard and kestrel were also seen here.



Castle Espie



Quoile Pondage NNR



Great crested grebe



**We were back at our hotel for 18.30 and Gerda and I had something rather special to celebrate, our Golden Wedding Day. 50 years of happy married life!** We met for drinks in our special dining suite around 19.15 hrs and dinner was at 20.00 hrs. Just a few of the photographs taken then are shown here. A great evening with our friends and an excellent day overall. We also had a very enjoyable dinner which included a smoky butternut squash, quinoa, pomegranate, toasted almonds, mint leaves and Feta cheese salad. The mains included point cut braised beef (meltingly tender) with red onion and pancetta jus. Or a mature Cheddar and leek quiche with rocket salad. Plus the usual choice of vegetables and potatoes. The dessert was a deconstructed banoffee cheesecake. A great way to round off a very special day for us.



Day 3 Wednesday 17 May 2017

**RSPB Portmore Lough Reserve; Castlewellan and lunch at the Magheira Inn;  
Murlough National Nature Reserve and St. John's Point Lighthouse.**

Leaving after breakfast at 08.45, we first made a detour to a Sainsbury's supermarket to allow a few necessary purchases to be made. Then, a drive around the busy Belfast ring road to reach the M1 and south to junction 9 (Moirá). We then took the road to Aghalee and the nearby RSPB Portmore Lough reserve - arriving 10.20 for a 90 minute visit. From the viewpoint there is a great panoramic view across the reserve area to the lough. There were quite a few tree sparrows seen, as well as willow warbler, blackcap, robin and song thrush singing beautifully. Sedge warblers could be heard as we made our way across the meadows to the hide, and both house martins and barn swallows were swooping over our heads. From the hide we had shelduck, whooper swan, mute swan, tufted duck, shoveler, wigeon, little grebe, great-crested grebe, swift and moorhen. Common terns were noted on the rafts together with black-headed gulls plus a few Med gulls .

One of the highlights at this delightful reserve was hearing two male quails calling from the long grass of the meadows as we returned from the hide. After this, it was time to leave again and back to the M1 and north to junction 6 (Lisburn), the A49 to Ballynahinch, A24 to Clough and Castlewellan. Arriving at our lunch venue, the Maghera Inn, at 13.10, we found a warm welcome and all our tables set and waiting for us. This was Northern Ireland's 'Pub of the Year' in 2015 and their publicity boasts: "If Percy French (Irish song writer/composer) had ever written about this pub, there's only one title which would fit - "The Star of the County Down." It is indeed in an idyllic setting at the foot of the Mourne mountains. The publicity blurb continues..."It is a great pub and simply cannot be overshadowed - not even by the Mountains of Mourne."

After a fine lunch (their seafood chowder is excellent) we left again at 14.45 for the short run to the Murlough NNR, in a spectacular location at the edge of Dundrum Bay and the Mournes. From 15.00 to 16.15 hrs, we meandered through the heathland tracks to the shore. We had superb views (many close-up) of four cuckoos, stonechat, goldfinch, linnet, chaffinch, pied wagtail, meadow pipit, hooded crow, dunnock, raven and buzzard. Then - out in the bay, a great northern diver. Leaving Murlough, we took the road back to Clough on a series of narrow, unclassified roads out to St. John's Point and the lighthouse for a very short seawatch. However, we did manage Manx shearwater, gannet, cormorant, oystercatcher, razorbill, common guillemot, kittiwake and a variety of gulls. At 17.30 it was time to head back through Killough, Downpatrick and Newtonards to arrive at the 'Clandeboy Lodge' for 19.00 hrs. Dinner was at 20.00 again and featured pan-seared fillet of chicken with Irish cider and tarragon cream sauce, as well as a triple chocolate trifle to finish. A starter and a vegetarian option were available, of course. After dinner we settled down in our private space to complete today's bird sightings list. A most enjoyable day.



Portmore Lough Reserve  
Cuckoo, Murlough NNR



Scanning the water



Common terns and black-headed gull



Birding Dundrum Bay with Mourne Mountains



Amongst the dunes at Murlough

## Day 4 Thursday 18 May 2017

**The Antrim Glens; Altarichard Viewing Point: The Causeway Coast; Carrick-a-Rede; The Giant's Causeway; The Best Western White Horse Hotel, Derry.**

Garry Wilkinson (2nd left) guides us through the Antrim Glens



Altarichard - an area of blanket bog



This morning we were joined by Garry Wilkinson (Chair of Northern Ireland Ornithologists' Club), who kindly offered to show us some of the best birding spots in the north of Ireland. It was great to have his company and see some of the outstanding landscapes and bird highlights of the region. Garry would be with us for two days. It was to be a sunny start to the day with a few heavy showers in the afternoon. We left our superb hotel, 'Clandeboy Lodge' with some regret, it had been a most enjoyable stay. Setting out at 09.00 hrs (Garry driving his own vehicle as pilot), we first drove north along the M1 to Ballymena (stopping to buy some lunch at a service area). We then took various unclassified roads, (a bit of a challenge for John and our heavily laden coach) as we drove through the beautiful Antrim Glens and the moorlands around and below Slievenorra mountain (508 metres). Stopping at one the highest points of the road, we scanned the area for raptors. Garry says this is generally a good place for hen harrier, but they were not co-operating today (although Molly was the only one to see a hen harrier disappear over a ridge). However, as we walked for a while, we saw and heard cuckoo, jay, raven and plenty of meadow and rock pipits. A stop farther down the road in an area of woodland, where a stream ran under the road, is a usual haunt for dipper, and those arriving first at the stream got a glimpse of this lovely bird. Another stop at the stream farther along gave us a pair of grey wagtails. Then it was up to the highest point on the moor, an area of blanket bog at a reserve area known as Altarichard. After a short stop here - we headed down towards Ballycastle and along the Causeway Coast to Carrick-a-Rede. This National Trust property was alive with visitors and we were lucky to find a space to park our coach. Time for a picnic lunch before a walk in the sunshine to view the famous rope bridge. John and Mike actually managed to get to the bridge in the short time we had, but the queue was too long and they didn't have the time to wait to cross over to the island. The sea was a glorious colour and we had good views from the cliff path of fulmar, gannet, both black and common guillemots, kittiwake, common and sandwich tern and a variety of gulls. At 14.45 we drove on to the Giant's Causeway where we were booked in for 15.15 hrs. The National Trust have built an amazing visitor centre to cater for the flocks of tourists arriving by coach and car. Three buses operate a shuttle service down to the famous 'Stones' - the Giant's Causeway itself. This is Northern Ireland's iconic World Heritage Site and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Some heavy showers were interspersed by periods of bright sunshine. Not much chance of birding though, as breathtaking numbers of visitors were milling around, and this was not yet the main holiday season!



Above: The coast and the Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge. Below: Giant's Causeway.



We did see a fair number of ravens overhead and on the high cliffs and their croaking was unmistakable. Plenty of crows around too, plus a buzzard, and a kestrel also put in an appearance. We were, of course, able to marvel at the 40,000 or so basalt stone columns left by volcanic eruption over 60 million years ago. We were here until 17.30, giving us plenty of time to make use of the information available at the state-of-the-art visitor centre. From here we drove directly to our new home for the next four nights, the Best Western White Horse Hotel at Clooney on the outskirts of Derry. Arriving at 18.40, we were efficiently and pleasantly allocated our rooms and had time to enjoy a relaxing drink at the bar before dinner at 20.00 hrs. The cuisine may not have been up to Clondeboy Lodge standards, but it was well cooked and plentiful. A choice of starters and main courses. The duck legs in orange sauce was good and everyone seemed to be happy with their choices. After dinner, Jim led the bird sightings reports for the day, along with Garry, who was staying with us until tomorrow evening.

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Day 5 Friday 19 May 2017

### **Glenveagh National Park in County Donegal- plus the Inch Levels Wildfowl Reserve.**

Breakfast from 07.15 and a departure at 08.45. A day of sunshine, showers.....and midges! A humid 17 degrees C. Garry joins us on the coach today as we head for the open border with the Republic of Ireland near Letterkenny. As we drove on, the landscape turned from arable fields to wild moorland the closer we got to Glenveagh. We arrived at the national park for 10.15 and we stayed until 15.00 hrs. The publicity tells us that Glenveagh is a remote and hauntingly beautiful wilderness of rugged mountains, pristine lakes, tumbling waterfalls and native oak woodland. It is all of this and more - including midges! Garry and Jim gathered a group together to walk along the

newly built path which follows the loughside to the castle and gardens. Gerda and I joined Ian and Monica, Molly, Fionna and Sue to the visitor centre before taking the shuttle bus to Glenveagh Castle, a late 19th century castellated mansion built as a hunting lodge. At the same time, Scots pine woodlands were planted and red deer introduced. The castle gardens are a delight, boasting a multitude of exotic plants with colourful rhododendron species, azaleas, Chilean firebushes, and more. Bird life was good here, with the sight and sound of song thrushes singing out their delightful and melodic tunes. 12 crossbills were seen, along with siskin, blackcap, spotted flycatcher, goldfinch, bullfinch, and out on the open moorland and hills - swift, cuckoo and buzzards. Herons were by the loughside too. Soon it was time for lunch and a welcoming tea room awaited us, where a selection of freshly made salads and quiches were enjoyed. Later, some of us walked by the lough and through the Tuscan garden and the so-called Swiss walk. Jim and Garry's group climbed to a high viewpoint in the hope of golden eagle sightings. Sadly, none were seen today. In 2005, some 42 golden eagles were released here in Glenveagh by the Irish Raptor Study Group and the Curlew Trust. Back at the visitor centre, we could at least enjoy a film about the re-introduction of golden eagles and also a documentary about the wildlife of the estate and the history of Glenveagh.

We drove back through Letterkenny and joined the N13 to the Inch Levels wildfowl reserve, parking at the Pump House, from where we walked to the Tready hide. (Here from 16.00 - 17.15 hrs). The walk to the hide was accompanied by beautiful birdsong with song thrushes, willow warblers, common whitethroats and blackcaps creating a superb, natural symphony. From the hide we had views of greylag, shelduck, tufted duck, shoveler, gadwall, teal, great-crested grebe, grey heron, lapwing and more. We arrived back at the White Horse Hotel for 18.00 hrs, where we said our goodbyes to Garry and thanked him for all his help and great company. We look forward to meeting him again. Dinner was at 19.30 hrs tonight and I must say, the roast topside of Irish beef was excellent, accompanied by an Argentinian Shiraz. Perfect.



Images of Glenveagh with the Castle and garden, the loughside walk, song thrush and spotted flycatcher.

