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We are always on the look-out for more articles, cartoons and photographs to include in the future editions of [Stonechat](#). Please think about contributing and send any work for publication to me: Tony Scott / Editor, at 4 Hilltop Place, AYR KA7 3PB - or e-mail me at: da.scott@tiscali.co.uk

Sightings to: Ayrshire Bird Recorder Fraser Simpson.
E-mail: recorder@ayrshire-birding.org.uk
For all local birding info: please go to www.ayrshire-birding.org.uk Thanks go to Kevin Waite for his excellent work in keeping this superb website on the go.



Hello again. I hope you have all been enjoying the warm, sunny weather we have currently (19 July). If we're lucky it may even continue throughout the summer! No doubt many of you will have been out and about birding - especially during the months of May and June and we hope you had some great sightings. It always seems odd to be writing about autumn at this time, but sad to say, it is not so far away. However, the darker nights can be brightened a little by the monthly get-togethers at SOC Ayrshire in Monkton. This coming season we have a new chairman, as David Rackham takes over from Angus Hogg. We extend a warm welcome to David and wish him a happy and successful chairmanship. To Angus we say a big thank you for all the good work he has done (and continues to do) on behalf of our branch. We do hope you enjoy the new edition of Stonechat and also the evening meetings and field trips lined up for the coming season. Please tell as many of your friends about us and we hope you may also bring them along to both our talks and outings. Enjoy the rest of the summer. Best wishes - Tony Scott [newsletter editor](#)



An autumn break

by David
and Helen
Rackham

Vying for our attention amongst exotic overseas destinations at the Rutland Water Birdfair last August was a rather dignified stand promoting the Grant Arms Hotel in Granttown-on-Spey. A hastily grabbed leaflet disappeared into the goodybag and there it remained for a few weeks till it worked its way to the top of the "must look through" pile. Five minutes on the 'phone (always nicer than anonymous clicking on the web) and we had booked Sunday to Thursday, dinner, bed and breakfast at the beginning of November. Oh well – at that time of year we'll just need to take plenty of books.

It seemed no time at all till we were cruising up the A9 in the low afternoon sunshine on the Sunday of the change of clocks. The autumn colours were glorious. New snow on the tops around Drumochter Pass had brought the deer down into the valley bottoms. We arrived at the Grant Arms as it was getting dark, and were soon settled cosily into our spacious and comfortable room overlooking the wide main street of the pleasant 18th century town of Granttown. After a very good three course dinner (how would our waistlines cope with four of these?) we explored the rest of the hotel, which included a "club room" set up for the hotel's own Bird Watching and Wildlife Club. There was an impressive range of information nicely set out in the club room and along the walls of the corridor leading to it. Just off the clubroom was a very well equipped lecture theatre. The hotel produced a newsheet (the Daily Tweet), waiting on your breakfast table each morning, as well as a monthly magazine outlining what was happening on the wildlife front. If you did not know the area, these would be invaluable for finding your bearings. We know the area well, but still found the information very useful. The weather forecast had been poor for our week; but these things change - or can be just plain wrong. Our first full day was forecast to be the best of the week; but we had a commitment to meet friends in Granttown that morning. However, one advantage of a cooked breakfast is that you really do not need to bother with lunch, so at midday we were in the car heading for the Glenlivet Estate. This 20,000 hectare estate in the hills east of the Cairngorms is owned by the Crown Estate. Our first stop was Tomintoul where we eventually located the estate office, not signed - in contrast to the tourist information office which was shut for the season. From the estate office, we picked up a booklet on waymarked walks. A pleasant four hour ramble around the Blairfindy Moorland circuit (8 km) blew the cobwebs away, though there was little birdlife of note. We came across a single dead fieldfare, superficially unharmed, three metres from a deer fence erected across a saddle between two valleys. With impeccable timing, it started to rain just as we arrived back at the car.

The forecast for Tuesday had not been good either, but the morning might be OK. The hotel retains some local wildlife guides, and today John Poyner, from Nethybridge, was to be available: in the morning to take a birding walk down through Anagach Woods, which border Grantown to the east; and from lunchtime he and his telescope would be at Findhorn Bay for some sea watching. Despite freezing fog, the walk was lovely: Anagach Wood is genuine Caledonian pine forest. Last summer, capercaillie were reported to have nested in the less frequented area away from the town. Predictably, the parts of the wood closer to the town are prime dog walking territory. Our first interesting sighting was a red squirrel. Separate parties of tits and finches were foraging through the woods; though, as often in winter, the gardens adjacent to the wood were more productive of sightings. It was very misty at the river, but we still picked up a merganser and a dipper.

It was after midday, but we still needed to defrost the car windows before heading off north out of the town and up over Dava Moor. It was a lovely drive to Forres, then down to Findhorn Bay, past the Kinloss air base (no longer RAF, now a base for the Royal Engineers). We soon recognised John Poyner and some other hotel guests with telescopes set up scanning the sea. Light conditions were very good, with the sun behind us and the Sutherland hills to the north pin sharp. By now it should have been raining – in truth, the sky was darkening in the west; but the rain did not arrive till dusk. Birds of note out to sea were Slavonian and great crested grebe, red-throated diver, red-breasted merganser, common and velvet scoter and long-tailed duck – what lovely birds these are! Oystercatcher, turnstone and snow bunting moved along the shoreline.

The temperature was only a few degrees above zero, so, as the sun dropped in the sky, it was time to head inland. We drove along the coast to Elgin for a restorative cup of tea and a nose around some of the shops: Gordon and Macphail in particular being well worth a visit even if you are not a whisky fan. It was dark when we left, and soon raining. This turned to sleet as we drove back across Dava Moor and down into Grantown. A hot bath before an excellent dinner brought another good day to an end. Originally the forecast for Wednesday had been the worst for the week, but the meteorologists had been back-peddalling and now everything looked set for a fine day. And so it proved. A hearty early breakfast set us up for a busy day. Despite again having to give the car a thorough defrost, we were still away from the hotel by 8:30, heading west with the low sun behind us. At Carrbridge we joined the A9 for just a few miles, turning left after the Slocht summit into Strathdearn, which is the upper Findhorn valley. We had the frosty single track road pretty much to ourselves. It took us 11 miles up towards the head of the valley, where we stopped the car, got out and listened. A distant roaring stag told us that the rut was still on, and we soon picked up a herd of about sixty red deer scattered widely across a broad sunlit slope. Further listening revealed a buzzard and raven playing tag. There was also a pair of goosander on the river. Driving back down the valley we had a fantastic view of a pair of red kite wheeling and swerving together above the road. Once back on the A9, we continued towards Inverness, then headed off east to Nairn, where we stretched our legs on the East Beach, before heading back to Grantown. We had lovely views of the very snowy Cairngorms as we approached the town. There was still time for a good walk, so we walked from the hotel down through Anagach Wood, across the Spey and up to the Revack Estate, well known for its tearoom and red squirrels at the bird feeders. Neither disappointed today, nor did the walk back with lots of finches (green, bull and chaffinch) and goldcrest too, stocking up their food reserves in the last of the sun. A detour back through the woods by a less frequented path did not produce much birdlife - mainly because it was now almost dark!

After dinner that night, the hotel hosted a talk by Dr Graham Lenton (from Oxford) on the birds of New Zealand. Needless to say, having spent some time in New Zealand ourselves earlier in the year, we very much enjoyed the talk, which brought back many happy memories. The hotel runs a programme of similar talks throughout the year. See www.bwwc.co.uk – this website has full information on the hotel's Bird Watching and Wildlife Club, and a link to the hotel's own website.

The following day was our last. We checked out and headed back to the A9 and into a heavy, sleety shower. Despite the weather, we stuck to our plan of calling in at the Insh Marshes. In fact the sleet stopped as we kitted up in the car park at the reserve. The poor weather had sent most of the birds into shelter, so there was little to see from the hides apart from roe deer. We walked the short circuit (incorporating some of the new Badenoch Way), now in sunshine, which brought out a family of buzzard and a few flocks of redwing and fieldfare that were moving around in their usual random fashion, and some greylags. Then, after our brief dose of fresh air, it was time to return to the car and head south with just the compulsory stop at House of Bruar to break the trip. Heavy traffic around Glasgow failed to put a damper on what had been an excellent short break - and we had hardly opened a book in the five days away!





Kazakhstan at last!

by
Angus Hogg

For those among you still wondering about the title, ponder no more. For many years I'd been thinking about going to Kazakhstan, but had just never got around to it. Finally, in 2014, I decided to take part in an organised trip to the south-east of the country, and the party landed at Almaty airport in the early hours of May 20th. Flanked by the majestic Tien Shan mountains to the East, Almaty is just like many other cities; bustling and vibrant, with an air of prosperity which this country has enjoyed thanks to its rich natural resources.

OK, enough of the Alan Whicker stuff – we were here to see birds. Our minibus left the city and started the climb up to our first base which was an observatory high in the mountains at an altitude of 3000 metres. As we drove upwards, typical birds included brown dipper and the first of many Hume's leaf warblers. After checking in at the observatory, we went for a stroll around the nearby area and found some real stunners like white-tailed rubythroat, Eversmann's redstart and white-browed tit-warbler right on our doorstep. The mountains produced the occasional golden eagle or lammergeier, while a trip to the Cosmostation provided a pair of Guldenstadt's redstarts – just imagine a song-thrush-sized redstart and you've got the picture! They brightened up an otherwise dismal scene of industrial rubbish – I'm still at a loss to know just what goes on at the Cosmostation but it seemed to range from taking bits off tractors to dumping glass tubes all over the place. As the mist descended, so did we, to have our first night in the “obs.”

Early next morning, we went down into the valley to see if we could access the dam at Big Almaty Lake – we had been denied access the previous day by two small men with big hats who saw it as their duty to guard the dam (against what I'm not sure, since there was hardly any water in it). They were obviously in a much better mood, and it wasn't long before we headed along the footpath at the side of the lake. Here we were to see one of the highlights (for me at least) of the trip: a curious curlew-sized, largely monochrome bird which dwells in mountainous areas along braided streams. The ibisbill is a bird which you really have to go out of your way to see, but the sweat of struggling to find one only added to the excitement when we did. The back-up birds in this area were pretty good too – blue-capped redstart, sulphur-bellied warbler, white-winged grosbeak and nutcracker. As we turned in on day two, someone commented that it had started snowing outside.

Birding in the Kazakh Steppes



Eversmann's redstart



Wallcreeper



White winged woodpecker

Day three dawned to find about 20 cms of snow on the ground and several members of our party in a state of mild panic over our prospects on making it down the mountain. No sweat! Viktor, our driver, gave a typical shrug of the shoulders, laughed, and aimed the bus down the slope. We had some miles to cover to reach our second base in a semi desert area beside the beautiful Lake Bartogai. En route, brief stops were made to find species such as white-crowned penduline tit, azure tit and wallcreeper – well, you feel it's the decent thing to do! Eventually, in the late afternoon, after having lost count of the rollers along the roadside telegraph poles, we arrived at Lake Bartogai. Our approach to it had been preceded by a stop to watch a flock of lesser kestrels catching insects over the nearby steppe. Accommodation for the next two night was in tents – basic, but perfectly adequate.

The temperature was now noticeably warmer – about 27 C warmer - as we headed out to look at the Sogati Plain and Charyn Gorge. Long, rolling, flat as a pancake plains on one side, and huge, breathtakingly high, snow-covered peaks on the other – what a place to go birding! The steppes held thousands of rosy starlings in huge flocks, and specialities such as Macqueen's bustard and Steppe eagle, while the higher parts provided Eastern Imperial eagle, Himalayan griffon vulture and a lone Saker. We left camp on day 5 to head for Kokpek Pass and a magical, butterfly-filled gorge which held both red-headed and white-capped buntings, Hume's lesser whitethroat and the odd golden eagle.

Our morning stop over, it was back to Almaty, before taking the road North, and driving into even flatter (was this *possible*?) countryside, and our second desert camp at Koshengel. However, we had built in a stop at Sorbulak Lake, where some surprises awaited us. Both white and Dalmatian pelicans appeared before us, some late whooper swans stopped by, and the shoreline held small migrant parties of waders including Temminck's stint, Terek sandpiper and little ringed plover. The surrounding reedbeds held marsh harrier, black-necked grebe and garganey, with a few white-headed ducks doing their best to stay hidden. Evening approached as we made our way to the tents and, as the sun set, a great day was capped by the presence of a nightjar flying round the party.

Morning in the desert on day six produced lots of crested and lesser crested larks, as well as views of both greater sand plover and Caspian plover. However, the other “highlight” of the trip was the arrival of some Pallas’s sandgrouse coming in to drink at nearby wells. Ever since reading about the invasion years of the late 19th century when this species arrived on our shores in huge numbers, I had wanted to see it – a bird which certainly did not disappoint, with its extraordinary, elongated outer primary feathers. Later in the morning, we stopped by at a farm steading which had a few trees with some shade and water. These spots are magnets for migrants which, by now, were thundering through. Spotted flycatchers, Hume’s leaf warblers, Eastern nightingales, Blyth’s reed warblers, lesser whitethroats and chiffchaffs were everywhere, while black-bellied sandgrouse constantly “whirred” overhead. Afternoon was spent at Tamgaly watching Eastern rock nuthatch in a gorge which it shared with roller, grey-necked bunting and short-toed eagle. You could get to like this place!

Day seven began with some brief stops in the desert to look (unsuccessfully) for a ground-nesting pair of eagle owls. However we did catch up with Asian desert warbler and more superb views of long-legged buzzard. A few more stops at Tobar Lake produced Shikra, paddyfield warbler and Saxaul sparrow, this last species having its nest in a bus stop! Turanga Forest was the main location for today, and the two key species showed up with admirable decency just as we arrived. Both yellow-eyed stock dove and white-winged woodpecker are very localised breeders, and this is the best area in Kazakhstan to find them. A family party of hoopoes provided alternative entertainment but, as with all good birding spots, it was time to leave just as you really wanted another hour.

The final day saw us leave Koshengel early in the morning to head for the “Magic Tree.” This landmark stands near a goat farm in an otherwise extensive and featureless area of steppe. It has earned the reputation of pulling in birds from all over as they head north through the arid flat lands. Well, you have to be underwhelmed by one location on this kind of trip – and this was it. A few Blyth’s reed warblers swore at us from the tree, but there was little else – until, that is, two other birds appeared on the skyline. A couple of gorgeous Demoiselle cranes were feeding on the higher ground behind the tree, and one eventually chose to fly past the party at close range. A fitting spectacle for our last day.

Kazakhstan will doubtless experience change in the coming years but, with its tiny population, relative to its land mass, there will continue to be wild and lonely expanses of unexploited steppe, resonating to the calls of larks and sandgrouse well into the future. My verdict on the trip? Well worth the wait!



Angus takes up Henry' Challenge

The Gaelic language has close connections with the natural world. For example children may learn their alphabet (18 letters) by reference to the names of plants. The following version is from a poster produced by the Forestry Commission Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage.

My challenge!

Can anyone do likewise for the standard 26 letter alphabet using bird names



Henry Martin

A - Ailm	-	"ay-lim"	elm
B - Beith	-	"bay"	birch
C - Coll	-	"call"	hazel
D - Dair	-	"dahr"	oak
E - Eadha	-	"ehy-ah"	aspen
F - Fearn	-	"feh-arn"	alder
G - Gort	-	"gorsh"	ivy
H - Uath	-	"oo-ah"	hawthorn
I - Iogh	-	"ee-ogg"	yew
L - Luis	-	"looss"	rowan
M - Muin	-	"moon"	vine
N - Nuin	-	"noon"	ash
O - Oir/Onn	-	"ohr/ah-wyn"	gorse
P - Peith bhog	-	"pay voh-k"	downy birch
R - Ruis	-	"roosh"	elder
S - Suil	-	"sool"	willow
T - Teine	-	"chain-yeh"	furze
U - Ur	-	"oor"	heather

Angus replied:

"Just remembered Henry's wee poser in the last edition of *Stonechat* about - a 'bird name for every letter of the alphabet'. How about this list for starters (there are many others - but maybe not for certain letters!):-"

- A - Avocet
- B - Blackbird
- C - Chaffinch
- D - Dipper
- E - Eider
- F - Firecrest
- G - Goldfinch
- H - Hawfinch
- I - Ibisbill
- J - Jackdaw
- K - Kittiwake
- L - Linnet
- M - Merlin
- N - Nightjar
- O - Osprey
- P - Puffin
- Q - Quail
- R - Robin
- S - Starling
- T - Twite
- U - Upcher's warbler
- V - Veery
- W - Willow warbler
- X - Xantu's murrelet
- Y - Yellowhammer
- Z - Zino's petrel



Angus Hogg

U, X and Z are the hard ones with X being the real stinker! *Angus*

The world's first vertical forest



From Henry Martin

I get great pleasure from my membership of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society. The Ayrshire Branch meets in Ayr Town Hall at roughly fortnightly intervals throughout the winter, with a programme of guest speakers of renown and local talent covering a wide range of topics on the countries of the world, its people, topography, geology, climate, natural history and current issues. If you are interested to learn more than visit www.rsgs.org or telephone 01738 455 050 and/or come along to a local meeting.

The Geographer, its periodic newsletter, takes a theme per issue with a range of pertinent articles. The autumn 2013 issue was on the multiple facets of modern forestry and included the following interesting snippet which made me ponder the ornithological consequences.

“Bosco Verticale is a towering 27-storey structure under construction in Milan, Italy. When complete, it will become the world's first vertical forest. Each apartment in the two residential towers of the building will have a balcony planted with a variety of plant species. There will be a total of 900 trees and a wide range of shrubs and floral plants, which would fill a hectare of forest on flat land. Plant irrigation will be supported through the filtering and reuse of greywater produced in the building. Alongside the environmental benefits naturally provided by plant life, the vegetation will protect the building from noise, and will reduce summer temperatures, leading to energy savings.”

Mind you, having experienced the central Ayr murmuration of starlings, and heard the racket once they all plunged into the creeper down the side of the multi-storey car park, I do wonder about the hoped for silence. And, indeed, the dawn chorus could be dramatic assuming, of course, that LIPU (the Italian equivalent of RSPB) persuades the Italians to stop eliminating their bird life! *For excellent pictures, Google 'Bosco Verticale' and enjoy!*



Country Diary

North Ronaldsay, Orkney

Mark Cocker



This article appeared in *The Guardian*, 21 July 2014

Strange to think that the fulmar once had only a single breeding station in all Britain - St. Kilda - until it embarked on a slow expansion around our coasts that has eventually taken it to Kent and Cornwall. It probably arrived at this place in the early 20th century, where it showed astonishing adaptability.

Previously the birds had expressed a preference for sheer cliffs as nesting locations, but this low-lying island only rises to 25 metres. Its one striking feature, in fact the largest artifact in all Orkney, is a sea wall (the "sheep dyke") that bounds the island's entire shore and was built to keep its seaweed-eating sheep off the land and on the rocky beaches.

The 180-year-old drystone wall runs for 12 miles and is now so mottled with the exquisite soft green of sea ivory and the bright orange from *Parietina* lichen that it is a living organism by itself. The dyke represents millions of hours of hard human labour, but to the fulmars it is the most sheltered spot to lay. At intervals in the earth, buttressed at the rear by the dark stone, the parent birds sit patiently on one huge ivory egg or squat with the oil-filled bag of fluff that is the growing chick.

Together, parent and offspring create little pale globes of softness in the wall's shadow. The other adults, many of them mates of the sitting birds or non-breeders, use the dyke as a plaything and alternate sailing down into the lee of the wall with a sweet rise and turn to catch with perfect timing the uplift of the breeze. Wherever you go, these patrolling fulmars cruise back and forth along the line of the dyke, cutting the island's renewed template from the clean air and shaping its character until you cannot think of North Ronaldsay without them. They are the geography of this hard, salt-fashioned place, turned into feather and air.



Photo: Mark Cocker

Wildlife and land ownership in Scotland



George Monbiot - his view of the problems

Power's ability to resist change: this is the story of our times. Morally bankrupt, discredited, widely loathed? No problem: whether it's neoliberal economics, tax avoidance, coal burning, farm subsidies or the House of Lords, somehow the crooked system creeps along. Legally, feudalism in Scotland ended in 2004. In itself, this is an arresting fact. But almost nothing has changed. After 15 years of devolution the nation with the rich world's greatest concentration of land ownership remains as inequitable as ever.

The culture of deference that afflicts the British countryside is nowhere stronger than in the Highlands. Hardly anyone dares challenge the aristocrats, oligarchs, bankers and sheikhs who own so much of this nation, for fear of consequences real or imagined. The Scottish government makes grand statements about land reform, then kisses the baronial boot. The huge estates remain untaxed and scarcely regulated. You begin to grasp the problem when you try to discover who owns them. Fifty percent of the private land in Scotland is in the hands of 432 people - but who are they? Many large estates are registered in the names of made-up companies in the Caribbean. When the Scottish minister Fergus Ewing was challenged on the issue, he claimed that obliging landowners to register estates in countries that aren't tax havens would risk "a negative effect on investment". William Wallace rides again.

Scotland's deer-stalking estates and grouse moors, though they are not agricultural land, benefit from the outrageous advantages that farmers enjoy. They are exempt from capital gains tax, inheritance tax and business rates. Landowners seek to justify their grip on the UK by rebranding themselves as business owners. The Country Landowners' Association has renamed itself the Country Land and Business Association. So why do they not pay business rates on their land? As Andy Wightman, author of *The Poor Had No Lawyers*, argues, these tax exemptions inflate the cost of land, making it impossible for communities to buy. Though estates pay next to nothing to the exchequer, and practice little that resembles farming, they receive millions in subsidies. The new basic payments system the Scottish government is introducing could worsen this injustice. Wightman calculates that the ruler of Dubai could receive £439,00 for the estate in Wester Ross he owns; the Duke of Westminster could find himself enriched by £764,00 a year; and the Duke of Roxburgh by £950,000.

With the help of legislators and taxpayers, the owners of the big estates are ripping apart the fabric of the nation. The hills in many parts look as if they have been camouflaged against military attack, as they have been burned in patches for grouse shooting. It is astonishing, in the 21st century, that people are still allowed to burn mountainsides - destroying their vegetation, roasting their wildlife, vaporising their carbon, creating a telluric eczema of sepia and grey blotches - for any purpose, let alone blasting highland chickens out of the air. Where the hills aren't burned for grouse they are grazed to the roots by overstocked deer, maintained at vast densities to give the bankers waddling over the moors in tweed pantaloons the chance of shooting one.

Hanging over the nation is the shadow of Balmoral, whose extreme and destructive management - clearing, burning, overgrazing - overseen by Prince Philip, president emeritus of the World Wide Fund for Nature, is mimicked by the other landowners. Little has changed since Victoria and Albert adopted an ersatz version of the clothes and customs of the people who had just been cleared from the land. The balmorality is equivalent to Marie Antoinette dressing up as a milkmaid while the people of France starved; but such is Britain's culture of deference that we fail to see it. Today they mix the tartans with the fancy dress of Edwardian squires, harking back to the last time Britain was this unequal.

But despite this lockdown, there is, if not quite a Highland spring, the beginnings of something different: on one side of me, here in Boat of Garten, is the bare, black misery of the Monadhliath mountains; on the other, the great re-wilding that is quickly but quietly spreading through the north-west of the Cairngorms national park.

Across 100,000 hectares, the RSPB, the Forestry Commission, the National Trust and Wildland Ltd (owned by the Danish textiles billionaire Anders Holch Povlsen) are seeking to reverse the destruction, reduce the deer to reasonable numbers, and get trees back on the braes. On Povlson's estates the area of woodland has doubled (to 1,400 hectares) since 2006, solely through the control of deer. It's not land reform, but it's the best that can be done with the current, dire model of Scottish ownership.

The forests at the moment are bright with birdsong. In some places, looking down on lochans surrounded by marshes and regenerating pines, you almost expect to see a moose emerging from the trees. Trees are racing up the denuded hillsides: in Glenmore I've come across young pines, birch and rowan growing at 800 metres. Already people are talking about reintroducing lynx here within 20 years.

As the return of the ospreys to the lakes and forests in this part of the park shows, the potential for ecotourism, which spreads income and employment through the economy, is vast. The contrast with the scoured grouse moors of the east side of the national park, which employ hardly anyone, concentrate wealth in tax havens and are unmysteriously devoid of most birds of prey, could not be greater. It doesn't reverse the other injustices, but it begins to undo the centuries of physical destruction. I would vote yes in September if I lived here, on the grounds that it presents an opportunity to do something new, and I furiously hope, despite the evidence, that an independent Scotland will take it.

It should list all the beneficial owners of the land: impose the taxes Westminster refuses to levy; ensure that only farmers get subsidies and cap them at £30,000 a head; ban burning; control deer numbers; and turn Scotland into a land where you can actually see green shoots of recovery. On Friday (23.06.14) the Land Reform Review Group, set up by the government in Holyrood, will publish its report, and it's likely to be devastating. Will Scotland get off its knees at last?

This article appeared in the Tuesday 20 May 2014 edition of *The Guardian* under the title of: *"I'd vote yes, to rid Scotland of these feudal landowners"*.

George Monbiot's book *Feral: rewilding the land, sea and human life*, was published in paperback last month.

Coastal storms are for Cape birders who love seabirds

By E. Vernon Laux
Cape Cod online



Cape Cod and its surrounding islands have a unique geographic shape that propels them into the upper echelons of birding destinations. The real estate axiom, location, location, location is never more appropriate than when talking about birds and the Cape and islands. The reason the geography is so special is that there is little land and lots of water surrounding it.

For land birds, the familiar song birds in one's yard, and a for a slew of migrants including warblers, vireos, flycatchers, sparrows and more that nest further north, the land provides food, water and a resting place. None of this is available on the ocean for these birds, so during periods of migration the area acts as a glorified life preserver. It is the end of the line for birds dependent on land for survival.

This is why so many common birds and more than a few rare ones are found in this area during migration. The saltwater that surrounds this relatively small land area is a real physical barrier for small land birds. The vast, life-threatening Atlantic Ocean, Cape Cod Bay and Buzzards Bay, as well as Nantucket and Vineyard Sounds, are formidable obstacles for birds that must migrate over, around or across them.

The fact that coastlines, islands and peninsulas concentrate birds has been well known for decades. Virtually all of the migratory hot spots in North America are associated with geographic funnels along coastlines, green areas in major metropolitan regions or offshore islands. The top places to go birding, both in spring and fall, are positioned to funnel birds into limited areas with rivers, mountain chains or shorelines.

For pelagic (ocean-loving) birds and a wide variety of other animals - including fish, marine mammals, sea turtles and a variety of other creatures - the area is also unique. The relatively shallow, cold, nutrient-rich waters of our coastline provide one of the most productive marine environments known on the planet. During all months of the year there are impressive concentrations of sea birds in and around the entire area.

Anytime there is a big storm with strong winds coming off the ocean, either from a hurricane or nor'easter, there is no better place in North America to see pelagic birds from the shore. In fact, Cape Cod, during and after prolonged nor'easters, is the best location in the world, that's right, the world, to see concentrations of many species that are not only rarely spotted from land but hard to see anywhere.

Word has gotten out in the birding community over the past couple of decades and seabird enthusiasts from around New England regularly make the drive, especially in October and November when gales and nor'easters are almost predictable. It is sort of the "anti-tourist", crazed birders driving in some cases for days, from far-flung parts of the country, urged on by visions of storm-driven seabirds pushed up along the beaches.

The shape of Cape Cod - the peninsula resembling a dorsal view of a flexing right arm, with the towns of Bourne and Sandwich representing the shoulder, Chatham the elbow and Provincetown the hand - concentrates sea birds during northeast storms. Eventually tiring of fighting the winds and driving precipitation, the birds are driven near shore all along the Gulf of Maine and the Outer Cape. The longer and harder it blows, the more birds get caught up in the unique circulation created by the Cape.

Birds coming south along the coast of Maine, New Hampshire and the north shore of Massachusetts continue until they eventually fly along the shores of Barnstable, Dennis, Brewster, Orleans, Eastham, Wellfleet, Truro and then Provincetown. This route first takes them south, then turns them east and north. When they hit the end at Provincetown and the unimpeded storm winds buffet them again, rather than fight the winds, they fly with it back to the southwest. They make landfall south of Boston and then continue south and go around Cape Cod Bay again. If the weather is frightful enough, the birds may be trapped into this pattern for days.

When it finally clears, generally with a robust northwest wind clearing everything out, dawn at many places along the shores of Cape Cod Bay are like the best Christmas morning ever for birders. First Encounter Beach in Eastham is the most famous location to witness the spectacle of seabirds as they exit the bay the morning after a big nor'easter finally ends. The strong northwest wind now pushes the birds along the west shore of the Outer Cape affording fantastic views as the birds often are close in as they make their way back out to the open ocean.

At this season, getting out in a boat, taking a whale watching trip or even taking a ferry to one of the islands can be a good way to get close to pelagic birds that are rarely seen from land.



They all make sense but the whale-watcher trips offer chances not only to see the largest animals that have ever lived but have the benefit of having an on-board naturalist to explain and teach about what you are seeing. It also is usually pleasantly cool which is refreshing on these long, hot days.

E. Vernon Laux, June 28, 2014

E. Vernon Laux's birding column appears every Saturday in the Cape Cod Times. Laux is the senior naturalist for the Linda Loring Nature Foundation on Nantucket. You can hear his "Bird News Commentaries" on Wednesday at 8.35 am and 5.45 pm on the Cape's NPR station, WCAI, 90.1, 91.1 and 94.3. (Maybe try online!). He can also be reached at: vlaux@lfnf.org



BIRDING NEW ENGLAND

Tues 19 May - Thurs 04 June 2015

Leader: Angus Hogg

Organised by Tony & Gerda Scott

Join us on an exciting 16-day tour of New England. We will be birding the areas from Cape Cod in the east - visiting Provincetown, Wellfleet Bay, Barnstable Great Marsh and a ferry from Hyannis to the island of Martha's Vineyard. We will also visit Boston, the North Shore and Joppa Flats. We then drive west into the Hampshires and the Berkshire Hills and the area around Northampton MA, with wonderful reserves run by the Mass Audubon Society, such as Arcadia at Easthampton, Amherst Wildwood, Lawrence Swamp and the campus of UMASS - the University of Massachusetts. We also climb higher to the Holyoke Range State Park and The Notch; Farther west to Shelburne Falls and Clarksburg State Park and the Hoosic River area; Visiting Canoe Meadows Wildlife Sanctuary near Pittsfield MA, Tierney Swamp and Springfield Park. On the lookout for higher altitude species at Mount Greylock Summit before driving north into the Green Mountains of Vermont at White River Junction and Montpelier the state capital. East again into New Hampshire and the White Mountains with a trip on the Mount Washington Cog Railway to the summit. Then to Winnepesaukee Lake, the Loon Center and Markus Wildlife Sanctuary. A vast area of diverse habitat and bird species. We will be staying in good quality hotels on a bed and breakfast basis, as is the case in the USA and Canada. **Flights will be from Glasgow with Icelandair, changing 'planes at Keflavik airport in Iceland - and then on to Boston. The overall cost will be £3,700.00 covering all flights, hotels and coach travel within the USA and services of the bird leader as always. Please 'phone 01292 281 085 or e-mail da.scott@tiscali.co.uk for full details and a booking form and a full itinerary.**

Upcoming events

Evening meetings at Monkton Community Church Hall and Pioneer Café
Tuesday 19.00 for 19.30hrs.)

09 September 2014 - Dr. Neil GRUBB - Outlands of the Lothians

14 October 2014 - Sarah BROWN - The "WiSe" (Wildlife Safe_ Scheme

11 November 2014 - Ian THOMSON - Shotguns & short-toed eagles: Birding on Malta

09 December 2014 - Bernard ZONFRILLO - Conservation on Ailsa Craig

13 January 2015 - Neil BIELBY - Birds of Clackmannanshire

10 February 2015 - Eric MEEK - Orkney Memoir

10 March 2015 - Philip COWIE - Millport Field Study Centre, Isle of Cumbrae

14 April 2015 - AGM followed by Ray MURRAY - A winter migrant to India

Field Trips and tours jointly with RSPB Central Ayrshire Local Group

Saturday 20 September 2014 [ISLE OF CUMBRAE](#)

Meet at Largs seafront car park (toilets) 10.30 hrs. Ferry to Cumbrae Slip. Walk around north and west of island to Millport. Bus back to ferry pier. All day trip. Please bring picnic lunch.

Saturday 18 October 2014 [VWT CAERLAVEROCK RESERVE](#)

Meet 11.00 hrs at the reserve car park. Whole day birding trip until c.15.30. Shop and café on site, so we can lunch here or bring our own.

Saturday 01 to Tues 04 November 2014 [WILD GOOSE CHASE ON ISLAY by coach/ ferry](#)

Three nights at the Bridgend Hotel on Islay. Visiting the best birding spots. Coach ferry and three nights half board £450.00. Tour fully booked. Cancellation list available.

Saturday 22 November 2014 [DUMFRIES HOUSE ESTATE, CUMNOCK](#)

Meet at the visitor centre car park at 10.15. Birding walk around the newly landscaped grounds. Lunches available on site or bring your own. Finish around 15.00 hrs.

Saturday 13 December 2014 [LOCH RYAN, STRANRAER & WIG BAY](#)

Meet at Ballantrae car park (toilets) at 10.30 hrs. Whole day trip. Please bring a picnic lunch. Garden Centre with café and toilets a short drive from Wig Bay.

Saturday 24 January 2015 [BIRDING THE GLASGOW AREA WITH JIM COYLE](#)

Meet 10.30 at Rouken Glen car park (toilets). Jim will meet us here and guide us around his favourite birding spots. Please bring a packed lunch. Finish around 15.00 hrs.

Saturday 21 February 2015 [DOONFOOT & GREENAN SHORE, AYR](#)

Meet Greenan Castle car park at 10.00. Birding the bay and coastal strip. Finish 12 noon.

Saturday 21 March 2015 [RSPB LOCHWINNOCH & MUIRSHIEL REGIONAL PARK](#)

Meet 10.30 at Lochwinnoch Reserve. 12.30 move on to Muirshiel and a birding walk around the woods and moorland. Please bring a picnic lunch. Snacks/toilets available at Muirshiel.

Saturday 25 April 2015 [CASTLE KENNEDY GARDENS, STRANRAER](#)

Meet Ballantrae seafront car park for 10.30 (toilets), then to Castle Kennedy, where the rest of the day will be spent birding the lochside, park and gardens. Café and toilets. Leave c.16.00.

Saturday 16 May 2015 [THREAVE ESTATE & KEN-DEE MARSHES RESERVE](#)

Meet 10.30 at New Galloway High Street (toilets). On to Ken-Dee for 11.00 and 13.30 to Threave Estate until c. 16.00 hrs. Full day trip - please bring a picnic lunch.

Saturday 20 - Sunday 21 June 2015 [RSPB LEIGHTON MOSS WEEKEND by coach](#) from Ayr

At Leighton Moss by 12 noon. Birding here until 18.00 hrs. Overnight at the Best Western Leyland Hotel. Sunday visit Brockholes Reserve. Coach and half board c. £160.00.