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Scotland's Bird Club Ayrshire Branch

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 and welcome to our summer/autumn edition of 'Stonechat'. We have a great selection of talks and field trips for you this season, including a winter weekend to RSPB Leighton Moss and WWT Martin Mere reserves in Lancashire (18/19 November) by coach from Ayr. We are also planning a ten day holiday to Dorset which will run from 28 May to 06 June 2018. Also inside the newsletter, our new Chairman, Pat Gibbs, gives an introduction; plus part two of Angus Hogg's fascinating article on pipits; Brian Lennox has an account of his short stay around Laguna de Gallocanta in Aragon, with two of his friends and their tour leaders, Jeremy and Jeanette Brock. There is a poem, "Mysterious Isles," by Heidi Scott (when aged 13); and an article by Patrick Barkham (for The Guardian) on illegal bird trapping on Cyprus. We hope you have enjoyed the summer and are looking forward to many interesting talks and field trips over the winter months. **Tony Scott newsletter editor**

Notes from the Chair

Grey heron.
Culzean in
spring 2017



Pat Gibbs

As I write these, my first ever, chairman's notes in early August I am astounded by how fast spring and summer have passed. It seems only a few weeks ago that we held our AGM. It must be something to do with anno Domini.

Recently whilst working on my Alloway allotment I met a small group of visitors from Tyneside and passed a casual comment about it being a lovely day. The unexpected response from one lady was - 'yes, we are very lucky, we could be living in a multi storey in Kensington'. This very succinct reply set me thinking the whole day about how privileged we all are living in such a beautiful and varied environment as Scotland and how we should strive to protect it.

On two occasions within the last couple of months I have seen graphic examples of the choices we and our elected representatives must make in the protection of our environment. On a family holiday at the Orroland estate on the Solway we could see across to the Cumbrian coast and a huge marine wind farm, with Sellafield nuclear power plant steaming away in the background. The same dichotomy was seen whilst sailing round Cumbrae with the Turbine Testbed adjacent to the decommissioning of Hunterston power station.

We will all have our views about the proliferation of wind and solar farms but surely with sensitive location they are a preferable short term alternative to 400 years of nuclear decommissioning. Who was on the throne 400 years ago?

Now on to birds (at last I hear you say).

Our garden is full of adult and immature small birds of all the usual species but what has been most noticeable is the dramatic increase in some. Coal tits are not only becoming more prolific but seem to be more tame, often feeding only a foot away from where you are working. Goldfinches are abundant as are greenfinches whose number seem to be recovering rapidly. On a recent visit to Ayr hospital I was delighted to see a mixed flock of about 100 goldfinches and linnets feeding on seeding thistles adjacent to the helipad.

Two sightings of red kites and one hunting barn owl have been made at Northpark Alloway football field.



Images of Mingulay from an SOC/RSPB Ayrshire birding tour in June 2006

This year's Islay holiday was enhanced by almost continuous views of great northern divers from our cottage windows. The wheeling and diving flights of choughs and the sightings of peregrine and harrier are always a joy. Skylarks with their uplifting almost chuckling melodies were a particular feature this visit.

Close encounters with birds are experiences to be treasured for most of us who are not involved in mist netting or ringing. I had such an experience with an injured heron which had got a fishing hook and line caught in its throat. On picking it up I was astounded how small it was. All neck, bill and legs it was like holding an animated set of bagpipes, and the colours! The bird survived but the vet got a bloody nose!

Many years ago on a private visit to Ailsa Craig, a friend and I were lucky enough to meet Sarah Wanless who was doing her PhD study on gannets. The experience of hanging over the cliff edge whilst she, on the end of an abseil rope, weighed the chicks was scary but unforgettable.

On Mingulay, when returning from St. Kilda, we sat waiting for puffins to return from their fishing foray wondering how close we could get. Not only did they get close but seemed fascinated by trainer laces.

This year's club committee will see a number of changes (as well as the chairman). John Rogers has now left and we thank him for his support and good sense of humour - not to mention his photography.

David Rackham has kindly agreed to remain our SOC Council representative.

We welcome three new face to their first full year on the committee namely:

Brian Dodson - Syllabus, John Drummond and Brian Lennox.

In closing can I thank all members for their continued support - the club will only be as good as its membership's enthusiasm.

Also please be forgiving of your new Chairman!

Pat

Pipits - the Sequel

Angus Hogg

Rock Pipits

And you thought it couldn't get any worse! Well, truthfully, it *could*. Although we now know that water pipits can be identified with a wee bit of care, identification of rock pipits is not so straightforward as many of the field guides suggest. An example of this can be seen in the two photos below – both show rock pipits, but at different times of year:-



Rock pipit at Doonfoot November 2013



Rock pipit at Troon

July 2012

Both birds show many differences in plumage, and it's hard to believe that it's the same species you're looking at! However, the two photos illustrate just how confusing it can be to identify what many people would regard as a "dull" bird (and not worth a second look?). So, how have we arrived at the point where we're almost considering taking up stamp collecting? Well, the two birds look similar in size and structure: they share the same habitat: and they give the same call (OK, I know that's cheating since you can't **hear** a still photograph). The next step is to look at the plumages. The November bird looks really crisp, with a lovely olive-green cast to its upperparts, and fresh upper wing coverts with their dark centres and whitish tips. Sometime during the early autumn it would have undergone a post-breeding moult and is in excellent condition.

The July bird, by contrast, looks like it's been dragged through a hedge backwards! Its worn, grey plumage shows little or none of the neatness of the November bird. The upperparts appear very plain and lack the greenish tinge of the other bird, while the upper wing coverts have all but vanished as a feature. Even the dark streaking on the breast looks worn and almost mottled in appearance. Well, it has just come to the end of the breeding season, and the plumage has obviously just lasted long enough. Time to moult!

Most of the rock pipits we have, locally, in Ayrshire tend to look like the November bird for much of the year and exhibit the following features:-

- * a basically dull, olive/green upper side to the body plumage, with heavy, dark streaking on the back
- * a paler, off-white (even yellowish) underside, normally quite heavily streaked on the breast and belly
- * the dark belly streaks, when fresh, appear very dark greenish – sometimes dark brown, but become much darker (almost black) as the bird's plumage wears
- * the head colour shows little contrast with the rest of the upperparts, and, when fresh, it lacks the water pipit's well defined supercilium. Instead, an obvious pale eye-ring can be seen.
- * dark brown legs and a slightly more robust bill than Water Pipit. This bill can vary from all black, to black with a dull pinkish colour on much of the lower mandible

There are other plumage features but, bearing in mind that the rigours of the breeding season can alter the colour and tone of the plumage (and the timing of these changes varies from bird to bird), have a look at the two photos below:-



Bird A Turnberry Point 2010



Bird B Maidens 2011

See if you can guess the month in which the two photos were taken (answers at the end of the article).

Strangers on the Shore

I guess I'd be giving my age away if I referred to Acker Bilk here. However, the point of this section is to highlight something which very few people notice during the spring migration period i.e. many of the migrant rock pipits which occasionally gather on seaweed piles don't look like **our** birds. Rock pipits **are** migratory, although seldom forming large aggregations – a “flock” of 20+ would be notable. During March and April, around the time when many white wagtails throng our shorelines, you'll sometimes notice small numbers of odd-looking rock pipits. Just **why** are they odd-looking, I hear you ask? Have a look at the 2 photos below, and see what you think:-



Rock pipits on Maidens foreshore 12 March 2011



Several features might strike the observer right away – the left hand bird is very pale, shows a clear, white supercilium, and has reasonably fresh upper wing coverts. The bird on the right is very grey, also has a clear white supercilium and also has fresh upper wing coverts. The right hand bird also shows a faint pinkish tinge (honest!) to its very white and poorly streaked underparts. To adapt a much used Star Trek phrase: “They're rock pipits Jim, but not as we know them.”

Much has been said and written in recent years about “Scandinavian” rock pipits, and I suppose that some of our migrant birds fit with the descriptions given in the various field guides for these birds.

However, even specialised books dealing with pipits and wagtails fail to agree on basic identification features, moult timings and extent etc. Within the UK, there used to be at least 3 breeding races of rock pipit, all of which vary in plumage tones according to most sources. The so-called Scandinavian rock pipit is said to winter in the UK, but is also stated to be largely inseparable from our rock pipits at that period. Confused?? You're not alone!

Most Scandinavian rock pipits are said not to assume much, or any, pinkish-ness on the breast in fresh, pre-breeding, spring plumage – yet a few have been seen in Ayrshire which were quite obviously pink on an almost clear whitish breast. It was this feature, along with the clear white or whitish supercilium which caused some confusion among local birders in Ayrshire during the “discovery” years of the early 1970s when the first water pipits were being identified in the county. But, are these recent “odd-looking” birds **Scandinavian** rock pipits? To be honest, I'm not totally sure, and some may not be anything more than examples of what were formerly thought to be individual races (*kleinschmidti* from the Faroes, and Northern Isles, and *meinertzhageni* from the Outer Hebrides). Let me throw another idea into the ring here. What if rock pipits exhibit the same variation in plumage as meadow pipits? That's nothing more than mere speculation, but I remain intrigued by these strangers which appear regularly along our shorelines in spring.

No doubt, like so many other recent discoveries, work on DNA sequencing may hold the key to their true identities. One thing is certain – rock pipits are most certainly **not** dull!

* **Answer to earlier bird photo question:** the bird on the left was one of a breeding pair at Turnberry lighthouse on 24th April. The right hand bird was photographed at Maidens on 12 November.

Angus Hogg 3 April 2017



Two more April puzzles on Maidens foreshore



Birds and landscapes of the Dorset coast

Leader: Jim Thomson
Organisers: Tony & Gerda Scott

Monday
28 May
to Wednesday
06 June
2018

Join us for nine nights as we tour the most interesting birding sites and places of natural beauty along the beautiful Dorset Coast. We will travel by coach from Ayr and stay overnight at a three star hotel en route to Dorset and again on the return, calling at reserves on the way south and north. **We will be staying for seven nights at a three or four star hotel in Dorset - all on a dinner, bed and breakfast basis.** We will be planning to spend time at the extensive RSPB Arne Reserve, part of a number of exciting protected areas around Poole Harbour and the Isle of Purbeck. Tidal mudflats and saltings surround the harbour with the richest areas in the west and south. The open, dry heaths of the Isle of Purbeck are mainly heather and gorse with some bracken. **Spring and autumn bring a great variety of waders to the harbour and coastal bushes attract wryneck, Icterine, melodious and yellow-browed warblers.** In summer, little egret, common and sandwich terns nest on Brownsea Island. Dartford warblers are on the heath, as well as nightjar at dusk. Areas of woodland hold sparrowhawk, green and great spotted woodpeckers and marsh tit. Red kites, peregrines and hen harriers are also about.

We will also visit Studland Heath Reserve; RSPB Radipole Lake and Lodmore; Chessil Beach and the Jurassic Coast; Portland Bill and the cliffs around Durlston Head where a variety of auks breed, including puffins and razorbills. We will also take the time to travel to Corfe Castle and a ride on the Swanage steam railway. **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 £1100.00 for the ten days/nine nights trip - inclusive of all travel and hotel accommodation.** Full details available in the autumn.



We hope to stay at Best Western Hotels throughout our stay. We are currently looking at the BW Plus Lancashire Manor Hotel near Wigan (3*); The BW Hotel Rembrandt in Weymouth (3*) or the BW Hotel Royale at East Cliff, Bournemouth; On the way north, possibly the BW Tillington Hall hotel, Stafford (3*). As usual, Dodds of Troon will be providing a coach and driver, either John or Derek. If you would like to join this tour, please request an itinerary from Tony & Gerda Scott, 4 Hilltop Place, Ayr KA7 3PB or please telephone us on 01292 281 085 or e-mail Tony Scott on: da.scott@tiscali.co.uk



More than 800,000 songbirds illegally killed at army base

**Industrial-scale trapping for food at site in Cyprus
RSPB urges MoD to stamp out crime by clearing area**



Patrick Barkham This article appeared in The Guardian on 16.03.2017

More than 800,000 songbirds including blackcaps, robins and garden warblers, were killed illegally last autumn on a British military base in Cyprus, say conservationists. Research by RSPB and Birdlife Cyprus identified a record number of illegal and virtually invisible “mist” nets set to trap migrating birds on British territory in the Mediterranean. The number of nets discovered on Ministry of Defence land in Cyprus has increased by 183% since monitoring began in 2002.

Trapping of small birds for human food has happened for centuries in Cyprus, yet despite being outlawed in 1974 is now practised on an industrial scale. The birds are served as a traditional “ambelopoulia” dish at the island’s restaurants. “The British base is the number one bird killing hotspot on the whole island of Cyprus,” said Martin Harper, RSPB conservation director, who called on the British government to help military base police stop the illegal killing. “Many much-loved garden bird species are being trapped and killed for huge profit by criminal gangs.”

A report from the conservation groups estimates more than 2.3m birds, covering about 153 species, were killed across Cyprus last autumn. Trappers have planted non-native Australian acacia trees on MoD land to lure birds and placed long lines of bird nets in the trees. The military administration removed 54 acres of acacia over two years but were forced to almost abandon clearances last autumn, removing just seven acres, after trappers staged protests and a base blockade. The trappers also deploy electronic calling devices over the base at night to lure birds. The conservation charities said they feared some parts of the military base were becoming no-go areas for the committed but outnumbered police.

“The trappers’ brazen prevention of the removal of their criminal infrastructure from MoD land could never be tolerated here in the UK,” said Harper. “The UK government must therefore provide enforcement support....and safely remove the remaining 90 acres of acacia so that they cannot be used to kill hundreds of thousands more birds.” The MoD said: “Our enforcement activity has led to a record number of arrests, equipment seizures, prosecutions and fines. For the second year running we’ve halted the rising trend in numbers of birds being killed by poachers. We continue to work with the RSPB and Birdlife Cyprus to implement a long-term strategy.”

Conservation scientists in Cyprus have developed a DNA bar coding database which they hope could be used as a forensic tool that will deter cafes from risking prosecution by serving up the birds.