

# Owl

a poem by Janet Wiltshire



Janet Wiltshire, who was both an artist and a poet, was born in Cambridge in 1927, and after her Father's death in 1940 spent the war years in America. Returning to England, she married in 1947, and she and her husband spent many years sharing a spacious Georgian house in the Chilterns with two other couples, where they raised their two children and helped to look after 27 acres of gardens, fields and trees. They moved to Ayr in 1969 where they stayed happily and almost uninterrupted for the next 40 years, until Janet's death in 2009.

This poem was kindly submitted for publication in [Stonechat](#) by Susan Porteous

## Owl

*We only knew him by his special hoot  
haunting our dreams, until we found  
an image on the morning window pane,  
soft and precise and ghostly white.*

*We wondered at the spread of wings,  
each feather pencilled on the pane,  
the streaked plumage of the breast,  
spiked talons braced to meet the jolt.*

*He must have thumped upon the glass  
to engrave so clear a picture there,  
yet not so hard he could not fly away  
unbloodied and without a feather's loss,  
affronted but still dignified.*



# Wild goose chase on the Island of Islay

Tony Scott



On board MV 'Finlaggan' in the Sound of Islay

A report on the November long-weekend which Gerda and I organised for our SOC Ayrshire and RSPB Central Ayrshire groups. Fifteen members took part and the leader was [Jim Thomson](#). We were away from Saturday the 1st to Tuesday the 4th of November 2014. A very sad note which we must record is that one of our members (of both SOC and RSPB), [Joan Strachan](#), passed away during the month of October. She was not only booked on the long-weekend, but the trip to Islay was her idea. She had not joined us for any extended holiday for about eighteen months, but had said that if we decided to visit any Scottish island she would be with us. [The Islay holiday was and is dedicated to Joan, a friend who will be sadly missed](#). She has travelled with us to many destinations including Sri Lanka, Hong Kong, the United Arab Emirates (another of her suggestions), the Netherlands, the Harz mountains and southern Germany, Burgenland in Austria, Cyprus and many other places over a twenty year period of time.

Most of our group met at Dodds coach depot in Ayr for a 07.30 hrs start, heading first to Kilmarnock to collect Robin and Ingrid, then on to Dumbarton where Molly (Lothians branch), had stayed overnight at the Travel Lodge. At around 08.45, our group of 15 was complete, and John, our long-time driver from Dodds of Troon was steering us northwards along Loch Lomondside and through the glorious autumn colours which were still able to enchant. The patches of soft sunlight illuminated the warm hues of the surrounding hills as we joined the queue for a convoy along the old military road over the Rest and Be Thankful, as a landslip had once again closed A83 at this point. We were in luck, having a mere ten minute wait before our line of traffic began to roll. A buzzard flew from the nearby woodland before we started to climb. Soon we were bowling into Inveraray and a most welcome coffee stop. We made it down through Lochgilphead and Ardrishaig to reach the CalMac terminal at Kennacraig by 12.20. We had doubts about the weather, as the previous weekend had seen cancellations due to high winds. There was still a big sea out there, but the large MV 'Finlaggan' a fine vessel of 5,209 tonnes from the Remontowa shipbuilders in Gdansk, made light work of the rollers which the south-westerly was blowing up the Firth of Lorne. We soon reached the shelter of the Sound of Islay, where birding was taking place from the top deck. 16 great northern divers were seen, some fairly close, as well as three red-throats, scaup, eider and numerous deer were roaming the wild and rocky shores of nearby Jura.

Very soon, around 15.00 hrs, we were driving ashore at Port Askaig. It is a mere twenty-minute drive from here to the Bridgend Hotel, where we were staying. Before getting there, we were able to see flocks of white-fronted geese and a few greylags too. 30 whooper swans had also been noted on the mainland, plus another two here on Islay. A warm welcome awaited us at our hotel by hotel manager Lorna (who some of us had known at the Turnberry Hotel). The hotel had received a recent refurbishment, and the rooms were spacious and well appointed. The cosy bar attracted many of us each evening, sitting around a roaring log fire with a glass of Islay ale in hand, or maybe a malt from Laphroaig. This is the life!

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Our first dinner at the Bridgend Hotel would set the scene for all three nights. The consensus of opinion was that the quality and presentation of the food and the friendliness of the staff was really excellent. Fine food from the west of Scotland's natural larder included mouth-watering delicacies such as baked Loch Gruinart oysters on a bed of spinach with an Isle of Mull Cheddar sauce; Grilled Isle of Gigha halibut, Islay langoustines and linguine in a shellfish bisque; Loin of Argyll lamb with braised potatoes, honey-roast parsnips and a turnip puree. Just a few of the fine things on offer and I won't even start on the desserts! This was the overture to the days of birding highlights due to begin just after first light tomorrow.



Photos clockwise from top left: Molly, Deone, Ingrid, Robin, Henry and others; Anne, Gerda and our oldest member Charlie (95); Gigha halibut with langoustines; The cosy bar; Jim - our bird leader and Ian, treasurer of both SOC Ayrshire and RSPB.

The following morning dawned bright, sunny and with a stiff southerly breeze. After a hearty breakfast, we headed off to Gruinart Flats which proved to be one of the highlights of the weekend. Birding from the elevated position of our 22-seat coach, we had tremendous views of large groups of barnacle geese, white fronted geese and ...what was that.....Geoff pointed us in the direction of a smaller Canada goose, which Robin managed to get a good photograph of. It was indeed a Richardson's, which the warden at the RSPB centre confirmed. We also had great views of peregrine and common buzzard, big flocks of golden plover looking resplendent in the rays of the sun, lapwing flocks and over 100 whooper swans. Up at the visitor centre, the wardens James and Mandy welcomed us and told us what had been about and what we may see and where. The Richardson's goose was a prize, and Robin promised to send a copy of his super photograph to them. Mine (shown overleaf) was nowhere near as good! We spent some time at the visitor centre and hides where female hen harrier were seen - four in all. Later, I managed, along with Gerda, Henry and Robin, a great view of a male hen harrier on a hillock above the centre. It was time to move on, and our next port of call was indeed a port, Port Charlotte, where we warmed up with lunch at Yan's Bistro, before retracing our steps along the west side of Loch Gruinart to Ardnave Loch for choughs (40+ were seen). Today we also had sightings of six grey heron, 500+ white-fronted geese, four greylag, 20,000+ barnacle geese, shelduck, northern pintail, shoveler, teal, tufted duck, eider, smew, red-breasted merganser, four female and one male hen harrier, buzzard, oystercatcher, redshank, curlew, black-headed, common and lesser black-backed gulls, collared dove, rock and meadow pipits, pied and grey wagtails, wren, stonechat, song thrush, redwing and fieldfare, treecreeper, raven, goldfinch, greenfinch, yellowhammer and more.

So at the end of a perfect birding day, we made our way back to the Bridgend Hotel for some relaxation before the bird call in the bar at 18.15. Another chance to sample the real ales which came from the brewery a mere ten minutes walk from the hotel. Local names are used to designate the various ales, from the light session ale 'Finlaggan' at 3.8%, the favourite 'Saligo' ale at 4.4% to the spiky winter 'Kildalton ale' at 5.5%. Dinner followed at 19.30 hrs.



Photos clockwise from top left: Richardson's Canada with a barnacle goose; Jim grabs a photo of the unusual visitor, while Geoff and Jean look on; a flock of barnacle geese above the RSPB visitor centre as a male hen harrier flies over.

Monday morning and a most unfortunate event had taken place the previous evening. Molly had been informed that her brother was ill and had to return to Edinburgh; the hotel staff had booked a flight for her from the island to Glasgow. So after breakfast, we said goodbye to Molly and wished her and her brother well as she left in a taxi. We saw her aircraft arrive over Laggan Bay as we drove along the 'High Road' from Bridgend to Port Ellen. The sun was shining which helped to lift the spirits, as did the numerous flocks of barnacle geese and eight buzzards, mainly sitting on top of telegraph poles. We passed the distilleries of Laphroaig, Lagavulin and Ardbeg as we progressed slowly along the narrow roads which brought us to Aros Bay and on to Claggain Bay where we parked our coach for a short walk and to scan the Firth of Lorne. Numerous red and roe deer were around, including a very fine red deer stag close to the road. 12 great northern divers were viewed out in the bay, as well as shag, cormorant and shelduck. We had seen golden eagle here on a previous visit, but our luck was not in today. The narrow wooded valley nearby held quite a few woodland birds, and amongst the great, coal and blue tits, robins and dunnocks, we were amazed to find a late chiffchaff hanging around.

From here we drove back to Kildalton Cross and ruined church, an almost magic spot with its fascinating graveyard and ancient headstones - many covered in lichen. Rain was forecast for around lunchtime and the predictions were true. So at about 12.30, we made our way to the Old Kiln Café at the Ardbeg distillery for a most enjoyable light lunch of smoked haddock chowder and many other choices. We were even persuaded to try a Corryvreckan malt (at least, some of us were) which was delicious and it was so good that we bought a bottle of the stuff! The rain still fell as we attempted to scan the harbour at Port Ellen, but we decided to continue to Bowmore, where a couple of the more hardy types braved the harbour and, for their dedication, notched up a Slavonian grebe. Others found a cosy café to warm up in!



Our last day on Islay and the sun was shining. A final great breakfast before a walk around Bridgend, venturing into the Islay House estate in the hope of finding lots of woodland birds. It was a pleasant walk, but virtually bird free apart from a few robins, dunnock and a song thrush. At ten o'clock we were ready to depart after saying our goodbyes to Lorna and the great staff at the Bridgend Hotel. We had thoroughly enjoyed our stay and would recommend the hotel and restaurant to anyone thinking of an Islay visit. This morning we drove along the east side of Loch Gruinart and the conditions were perfect for viewing a whole variety of waders and geese, using the coach as a windshield from the strong north-westerly blast! 500+ white-fronted geese were seen, six greylag and over 10,000 barnacles. 200+ common teal were visible from our watchpoint halfway along the minor road towards Gortantaoid Point. Other species seen from here included around 50 scaup, 15 shelduck, red-breasted merganser, two sparrowhawk, a pair of peregrines, one merlin, oystercatcher, heron, 200 or so golden plover, lapwing flocks, 100+ redshank, two greenshank, eight bar-tailed godwit, and a few curlew. Later in the day we notched up ten buzzard and both a male and female hen harrier. After a brief stop at the RSPB Loch Gruinart visitor centre, we drove around Loch Gorm, parking at the wide and wonderful Machir Bay, where huge rollers were thundering in from the north west. Around 12.30 we arrived at the Kilchoman Farm distillery, partaking of lunch at the café and visitor centre. One of our best sightings was to occur as we returned to the coach. Two juvenile golden eagles were soaring to the north of the car park, and as we drove off we lost sight of the two birds until we came to a spot near Loch Gorm. Not only were the two golden eagles seen again - and closer than before, two buzzards were also nearby and this sight was a superb way to bring our birding break on Islay to a happy conclusion. We made our way to Loch Indaal, through Bridgend and to our ferry at Port Askaig. MV 'Finlaggan' appeared, towering over the small harbour and the diminutive ferry which plies back and forth across the Sound of Islay to Jura. We departed promptly at 15.30 for a pleasant crossing to Kennacraig. At 18.45 we were parking in front of the George Hotel in Inveraray, where we had booked in for dinner. Everyone was delighted with the offerings here and some daily specials included Argyll Choucroute - a slowly braised pork belly and ham hough in beer, with sauerkraut, baby potatoes and pork and leek sausage in an Arran mustard sauce. Others tried Braised Beef Cheeks Bourguignon in a smoked bacon, baby onion and red wine sauce. We left here at 20.15 and John had us safely back home to Kilmarnock and then Ayr for 23.00 hrs. Another excellent birding experience, tinged with sadness at Molly's predicament. She did arrive safely back in Edinburgh on Monday evening, but it was a most stressful time for her.



Clockwise from above: Viewpoint at Loch Gruinart; Shelduck fly in: Machir Bay; MV 'Finlaggan' arrives at Port Askaig.



# Young Birders' Training Course

Jane Cleaver



Reading shag rings on the Isle of May

**Last July, six young birdwatchers from different corners of the country, (Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Wales, Merseyside and Essex) travelled to Anstruther in Fife to take part in the inaugural 'Young Birders' Training Course', a new joint venture between the SOC and the Isle of May Bird Observatory (IoMBO).**

**The chosen six had been selected from a pool of nearly 40 young ornithologists/biologists/conservationists and zoologists (aged between 16 and 25 years) who had all submitted an application to SOC last Easter, after hearing about the opportunity through university, a local recorder, on Facebook, or as in a few cases – a tweet from Chris Packham!**

The first of its kind in Scotland and likely the wider UK, the Young Birders' Training Course presented a unique opportunity for budding ornithologists in its setting and teaching. Those selected to take part in the week-long opportunity would benefit from a thorough introduction to the daily recording of birds and other taxa, monitoring, ringing and activities such as visible migration watches and co-ordinated seawatching counts. Being based at the Isle of May Bird Observatory, the students would have the chance to experience observatory and island life, working alongside staff and volunteers from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH).

What's more, thanks to legacy donations from SOC members and supporters past, the Club was able to fund the course for the students and cover the cost of ferry transport to the island, accommodation, resources and food. A token contribution of £25 to put towards meal expenses was asked of each participant and they had to pay their own way to Anstruther.

And so, on the 5<sup>th</sup> July last year, the RIB Osprey set off from Anstruther Harbour with the six participants on board (three male, three female), alongside three leaders (Stuart Rivers, Mark Oskien and Pam Moncur), for an unforgettable opportunity on a National Nature Reserve, five miles off the coast of Fife.

A detailed summary of the students' time and daily activities on the island is published in *Scottish Birds* 34 (4) P324 - 327, alongside a write up of their collective presentation at the 2014 Annual SOC Conference P316-317.

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However it was unanimous from all corners that the course had been a resounding success, drawing a firm line under the SOC's investment of staff time, money and resources into such a project.

*"The week was simply incredible to put it simply! I had never visited a sea bird colony before, and considering I had never seen puffins before I was dumbfounded when confronted with 46,000 pairs of them. Not only that but we were given the opportunity to help the guys with SNH & CEH with puffin netting and so got to ring my first ever birds which were two stunning adult puffins. The flexibility of the team over at fluke street made a real difference to the week for me, as a recent graduate zoologist I found it really interesting to see in the field research like that. It has inspired me so much I am even considering trying to secure a position there for next year.... we would love to see it continue as an annual event so other young birders have the same opportunity".*

Harry Martin, 2014 Young Birders Training Course participant

Well I'm delighted to say that it didn't take much discussion at SOC Council to decide to run the course again in 2015, when six more young birdwatchers will have the chance to take part in this unforgettable and far reaching experience. As yet the dates are to be confirmed, however full details will be made available on the SOC website from early March onwards.

## Jane Cleaver SOC Development Officer



Above: Dan and a kittiwake;  
Right: On board the RIB 'Osprey'



Images courtesy of [Stuart Rivers](#)

## Upcoming events

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

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 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. £240.00. **Fully booked.**

Friday 06 March 2015

## SOC Ayrshire evening meal out at The Waterfront

### 4 South Harbour Street, Ayr

19.00 hrs for 19.30 hrs. [Please book in advance with David Rackham at the February evening meeting.](#) Alternatively, please send your booking by post to David Rackham, 18 Bathurst Drive, AYR KA7 4QN, enclosing a cheque. [Cost is £15.50 per person for two courses and coffee, with any extras \(such as drinks and an extra course\) payable to The Waterfront on the night.](#) Cheques should be made payable to SOC Ayrshire.