

Doing a BTO Upland Rovers square in Ayrshire

The recent Upland Rovers initiative by the BTO has proved to be a great success, especially amongst birders who enjoy the physical challenge of surveying upland areas – but also amongst hikers who are keen to contribute to science and who either have or are willing to acquire the skills required to identify the fewer species in these upland habitats.

I took on an [Upland Rovers](#) square near Carsphairn last year, to supplement the two lowland squares that I cover for the BTO's Breeding Bird Survey (BBS). I knew that the Uplands Rover square was going to be straightforward to survey as it adopts the same survey methods as the BBS, but I also knew that it was going to be a physical challenge for as I was still recovering from a badly broken leg and shattered ankle when I fell off a cliff whilst researching a volcano in Chile the year before – but that's another story!

So, here's a brief and illustrated account of my experience of doing my first BTO Upland Rovers square.

I'd decided some weeks in advance to do my Upland Rovers square over Easter 2019 simply because there was an SOC outing on the day before. This was a superbly warm and sunny weekend, and on arriving at Loch Doon on a bright and sunny Saturday morning, it was clear that hordes of people had decided to spend the Easter weekend camping and partying.



Loch Doon in stunning sunny weather in Easter 2019.

But the paths down Ness Glen were fairly quiet, and of course the top path is best for birds, as it is far enough away from noise of the River Doon below. It was too early for the Ospreys that nest opposite the dam, but two Red Kites were quartering the moor just west of the Roundhouse. Sightings of these wonderful birds have been steadily increasing in this area, which is good news indeed. Willow Warblers were much in evidence in the woods, along with numerous Tits, Chaffinches, Wrens. It's always good to see a Treecreeper, and two were spotted. Most of the times that I have seen Treecreepers has been when I've stood still for a minute or two in a suitable spot, slowly scanning slowly around, trying to catch (in my peripheral vision) the little jerks they make as they move up the tree trunk, or the short flights that they make from one tree to another. A couple of Great-Spotted Woodpeckers were also spotted, and they are a bit easier to ID as they give their presence away by their strident call.



The path along Ness Glen, by the River Doon.

After the SOC outing I went for a bike ride down to the head of the loch, which is what we always used to call it when I lived in nearby Bellsbank. Though technically I suppose it's 'up' the loch if one considers the head to be up. But as gravity keeps the loch level the same at both ends, there's really no up or down....

And then it was off to a lonely camping spot near Carsphairn in preparation for an early start the next morning on my Upland Rovers square.



Camping the night before doing an Upland Rovers survey.

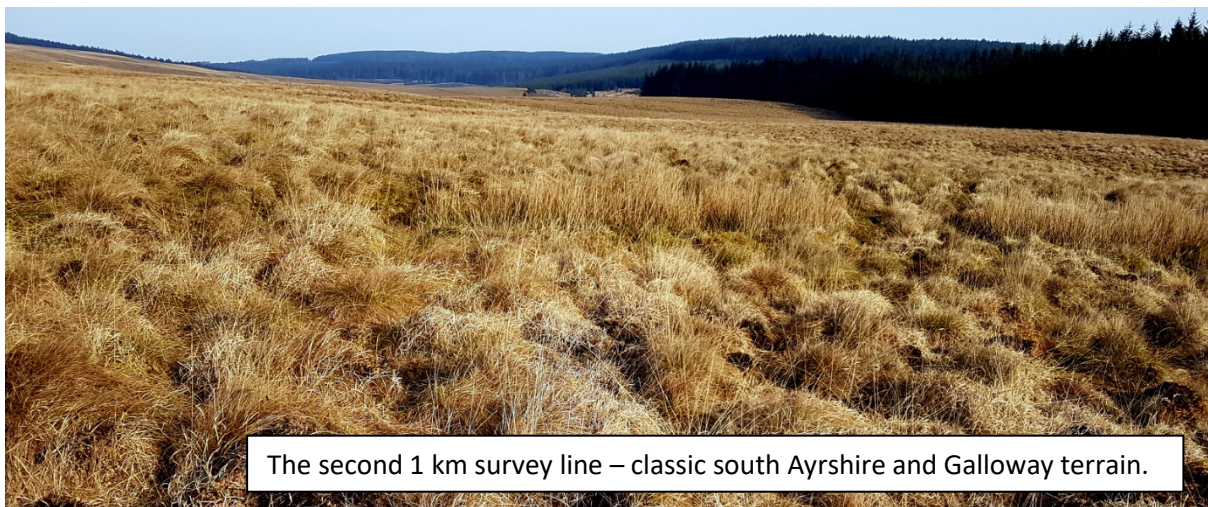
Being pre-midge season this was a most delightful evening. I camped just downstream from an old and small concrete road bridge, and in the peaty pool were numerous small and shy trout. Very pleasant to watch whilst having a dram or four.



The old concrete bridge by the tent, and the pool where the wee trout frolic.

Up early (0530) for a quick coffee, and then a 20-minute walk to the start of the survey. This was very straightforward as it was along a fire road through a mature conifer forest, in which there were substantial areas of water-laden ground with numerous small trees and shrubs. Within these areas there was a glut of singing Willow Warblers, and in one 100 m transect I counted 7 that were singing. I took much more time over this transect than usual to avoid overcounting, and indeed when I entered the data into the BTO website afterwards a warning flag came up saying this was well beyond normal limits and was I sure? Yes, I was.

Then, to access the second c. 1 km survey line, one followed a rough and trackless fire break with rough grass and moss covering old rotting trees etc – classic terrain for an ankle injury. The second survey line went more-or-less straight across classic Ayrshire-Galloway boggy and trackless terrain, with numerous grassy tussocks standing proud of waterlogged ground, and areas of sucking sphagnum moss that were nearly knee deep in places. Of the two survey lines, this is the species-poor one, and contained just a few Meadow Pipits and Skylarks, but flying over was a solitary Carrion Crow, and a few Linnets and Lesser Redpolls.



The second 1 km survey line – classic south Ayrshire and Galloway terrain.

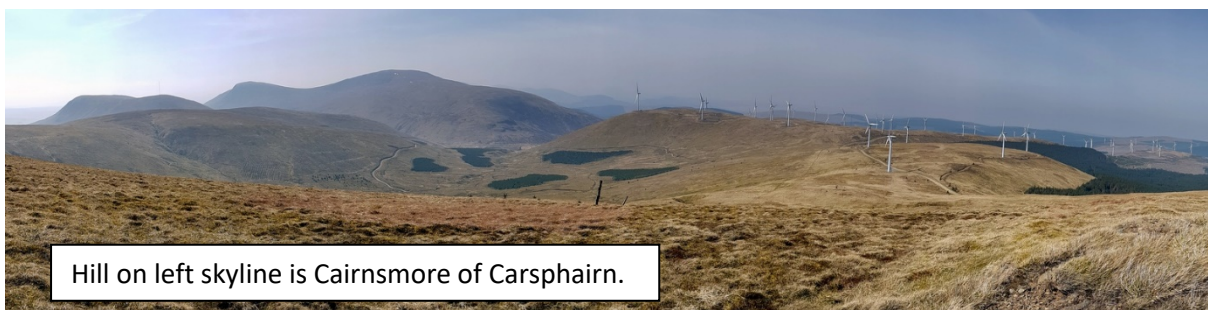
On getting back to the car my boots were soaked through, as were my trousers up to my knees. But hey – that's normal for this terrain. It was most pleasant rehydrating in the sun with coffee and water whilst sitting in the chair by the burn.

But it's still early, and it's a lovely day, so time to get the mountain bike out of the car, assemble it, and do the circular route I'd planed in advance. I'd decided to head up to the top of Windy Standard – a hill I hadn't been up for over 40 years since I led an Ayr ATC (Air Training Corps) group up there when I was 16.



For a mountain-biker like me, wind farms are great as they offer the opportunity to get to the tops of decent hills on decent tracks, which are rideable all the way if one has both the energy and the skills. And I knew that Windy Standard was carpeted in a wind farm, so its top was a viable target. It was a hot slog to get to the top, and I readily admit to having pushed a few hundred metres of the steepest part, which also happened to be have the loosest gravel. (This is usually the case, as these places are invariably where vehicles slip most and chew up the gravel.) The views from the top were great, and I could look over to the brooding granite mass of the Cairnsmore of Carsphairn, a hill that I mapped when I was an undergraduate geology student. But that's another story....

I expected the wind farm to be fairly barren with respect to birds, but I was pleasantly surprised by the abundance of one particular bird – Skylarks. Riding uphill through a wind farm in sunshine you're going at a slow pace (well, I have to), so you have plenty of time to listen and to look around. I was genuinely astonished by the abundance of singing Skylarks, and it made the uphill slog that much more enjoyable. I suppose that the combination of whooshing turbine blades and Skylarks singing is simply a modern take on the windmill and Skylark combination.



The top of Windy Standard is much as I remember it, and the peculiar but distinctive (to me) spongy but fairly dry grass and moss combination was still there. It's quite unlike any hilltop surface that I've encountered anywhere else in Scotland, but those with more extensive hill bagging achievements than me have probably seen its like in many other places.



After the uphill comes the downhill, and swooping downhill back to the car at high speed is always exhilarating, though it is not conducive to either hearing or observing birds of course. Still, a few Buzzards were surprised as I came whizzing round corners, and it's always good to catch them unawares.

The drive back home was most pleasant, and memories of a cracking Easter 2019 weekend spent in nature will live long in the memory. I'm hoping for similarly fine weather for my 2020 visit....

Finally, should you be interested in an Uplands Rover square, Near Ayrshire or further afield, there's a map showing available squares [here](#). Nearby, there's a vacant one near New Cumnock, and another down near Stranraer, NE of Cairnryan.