

## Machrihanish Seabird / Wildlife Observatory

### Ornithological Review for 2005

The Observatory opened on 13th March and was manned daily until 10th October for a total of 1,400 hours. An Observatory leaflet, sponsored by **SNH** and **WHELK**, was distributed around Kintyre and helped to attract record numbers of visitors (2,500+) to appreciate birds and other wildlife (particularly seals!) around Machrihanish.

Thanks to long hours of hard work, our Director – **John McGlynn** and secretary / treasurer – **Nancie Smith** – obtained generous grants from **SNH** and **WHELK** which enabled us to purchase much additional digiscoping equipment including an auxiliary camera (Nikon Coolpix 4500) and a Swarovski 80 HD telescope. I'm sure the many visitors who enjoyed terrific views of wildlife through this first-rate optical and digital equipment would be very grateful if they fully understood the huge amount of paperwork and numerous meetings this protracted effort involved. . .

Thanks **John & Nancie!**

An exceptional feature at the Observatory now is the presence of a 15inch flatscreen monitor, which can be attached to any digital camera using the camera's video output lead. Throughout the season I used this to showcase our extensive digital library of local and migratory wildlife images. This proved extremely popular with visitors of all ages. In addition, the flatscreen can be used as a monitor when digiscoping from the Observatory, making it so much easier to focus than having to rely on the tiny LCD monitor of a digital camera. Another advantage is that visitors enjoyed live views of the wildlife around the Observatory via the monitor.

Meeting so many visitors with such a wide variety of digital camera's was a constant source of amazement to me. Many were able to 'hook up' to our equipment and take high-magnification images of ever present **Grey** and **Common Seals** hauled out on the rocks and off-duty nesting shorebirds, such as **Oystercatcher** and **Ringed Plover**. Others just simply placed their camera against the eyepiece of our telescope and many came up with really decent images.

Argyll Bird Club members are very welcome to bring their digital camera/digiscoping equipment along to the Observatory. The advantage of the controlled conditions with a large monitor and a concrete floor (reducing camera shake) could lead to an improvement in your digital image! Don't forget to bring the video output lead for the camera.

In the last Seabird Observatory report I predicted that, during 2005, there would be an upsurge in records for **Mediterranean Gulls** in Argyll. I tried in vain to justify this prediction around Machrihanish/The Laggan. However, at least two birds were found in other areas of Argyll (Knapdale and Lochgilphead) and both were digiscoped by their finder, Jim Dickson. Therefore, I feel partially vindicated—many thanks Jim!

## 2005 Highlights...

The following seasonal notes highlight the very best of 2005 and include data on an unprecedented summer influx/movement of seabirds, a remarkable visible migration of **Northern Wheatears** in September and a couple of major rarities—a **Macaronesian Shearwater** in July and single **Roseate Terns** in early and mid August.



**Little Grebe** © Eddie Maguire

## Spring...

An easterly near-gale on 28th April brought a summer-plumaged **Little Grebe** to shelter in the rock pools in front of the Observatory, allowing an opportunity to bring the digiscoping gear into action. This individual had a lime-coloured gape patch (see image above), which should have been yellow. **Purple Sandpipers** peaked at 22 on 17th March with the last bird of the spring logged on 19th May. **Iceland Gulls** (all records refer to first-winter birds) were present when the Observatory opened on 13th March and were showing well daily (usually 1–3) for an unbroken 47 days to 28th April, with a peak of five together at the Marine Research Laboratory outflow on 18th-21st March. The only record after this was one >S (flying south) on 21st May. **Glaucous Gulls** were much thinner on the ground, with only a first-winter regular during March/April.

A colour-ringed **Black-legged Kittiwake** was ashore (briefly) on 14th March. This adult was ringed at La Pointe Du Raz, Finistere, France during late June 2002 and was resighted seven times in its natal colony during 2nd May–27th July 2004, behaving as a male. This is our fourth (first adult) from France (3 first-summer birds in 2000).

Some migrant arrival dates in March were as follows; **Northern Wheatear**, one on 14th and three on 22nd; **White Wagtail**, one on 24th with a peak of 39 >S/2hrs (flying south in 2 two hours) in a NW wind force 2/3 on 6th May. Obviously, these birds should have been orientating N, but the wind was against them. April saw the arrival of **Sandwich Terns** with two on 2nd (peak 18 on 25th April), then the first **Swallow** on 6th, a **Whimbrel** on 14th (peak only ten on 25th April) and two **Arctic Terns** on 24th (main arrival 13th May).

Other interesting spring arrivals included four **Bewick's Swans** (at Stewarton) on 15th March, a **Hoopoe** (at Muasdale) 3rd– 11th May, an **Osprey** on 27th April and 9th May and a **Hobby** on 27th May.

The wintering **Lesser Canada Goose** was still present during early April (to at least 10th) whilst the **Canada x Barnacle** hybrids (74 birds) remained at The Laggan all summer.

## Summer Seabird Bonanza...

The period 7th-10th July was rousing at the Observatory, with breathtaking numbers of seabirds appearing in/off Machrihanish Bay. In fact, numbers of many species were unprecedented and the overall total of birds passing was at times overwhelming, especially on 9th July, when c.20,000 birds were logged.

On the 9th, with poor visibility, fog banks and calm weather, it was obvious as I approached the Observatory that, like yesterday, massive numbers of seabirds were still all around the point and in Machrihanish Bay. **Gannets** were plunging-diving everywhere, hordes of **Black-legged Kittiwakes** were patrolling offshore and 'trains' of auk spp., up to 80 strong at times, were rushing into and out of the bay. During 10 hours of observation, the following astonishing numbers of seabirds were logged flying south (data for 8 hours observation on 8th July appears in brackets and an asterisk indicates record numbers).

**Manx Shearwater** 2,500 (4,000); **Storm Petrel** 130 (60); **Gannet** 1,000+ (460); **Arctic Skua** 6 (8); **Arctic Tern** 170, including 2 immature (70); **Common Tern** 118 (30); \***Black-legged Kittiwake** 7,400 (3,800); \*auk spp. 9,000 (8,000) with samples showing the vast majority (70%) were **Razorbills**. The Observatory record one day-total for \***Puffins** was well shattered (three times) during this period with 210 (160) and 107 on 7th July! In addition, around a dozen **Bottlenose Dolphins** were logged.

So, where did these birds come from? The nearest major seabird colony to Machrihanish is RSPB's Rathlin Island Reserve some 16 miles to the west, in Northern Ireland. Regular age sampling of **Kittiwakes** showed that a massive 96% were adults (and therefore potential breeding birds) whilst tiny **Guillemot** and **Razorbill** chicks were abundant on the sea, indicating that a very recent

exodus had taken place from a nearby large colony, and, that huge numbers of other foraging seabirds (i.e. **Kittiwakes** and auks carrying sand-eels to the south) were obviously still feeding youngsters ashore. The numbers of seabirds involved in these movements (excluding **Gannets**) suggests that the majority were probably breeding birds from Rathlin Island foraging at a major food source.

During this period, the Marine Research Laboratory adjacent to the Observatory reported well above average numbers of sand-eels in their salt water intake tanks.

## **Autumn...**

Small numbers of **Red-throated Divers** were noted regularly heading for the North Channel narrows, but peaked at only 28 >S/4 hrs on 27th Sep. Single **Black-throated Divers** were seen >S on 28th Sep and 5th Oct and at least one **Great Northern Diver** summered.

**Manx Shearwater** passage was dreadful (almost non-existent) over the autumn; the best movement occurred, unusually, during late summer when 2,100 >S/3 hrs on 21st July. On this date too came the most notable rarity of the year—a fly-by **Macaronesian Shearwater** (formerly **Little Shearwater**). This is my second (single observer) claim for this species at the Observatory (one in Sep 2000) and since that first claim, I have looked at around 100,000 **Manx Shearwaters** (including 10,000+ in one day) before finding this second bird! Amazingly, one was reported a few days later at Corsewall Point (Dumfries and Galloway). All past records of this species are currently under review by British Birds Rarities Committee (I won't be holding my breath!).

**Sooty Shearwaters** were scarce (again) with only seven >S/1 hr on 2nd Aug, six >S/1 hr on 5th Aug, one on 24th Aug and four >S/10 minutes on 14th Sep. Continuing a run of lean years, **Balearic Shearwaters** had a poor showing too, with only one on 29th Aug and two on 8th Sept. For years, Argyll was the area to get to grips with this species, but it now appears to be more frequent on the east coast of Scotland.

**Leach's Petrel**, an Observatory speciality during rough onshore weather conditions, managed only low profile appearances with four >S on 24th Aug, four on 23rd Sep, 18 >S/6 hrs on 27th Sep and seven >S/2 hrs on 1st Oct.

Good numbers of **Whooper Swans** were staying off-passage at The Laggan from early Oct and peaked at 70 on 27th Oct (Karen Judd). **Brent Goose** was, as usual, the earliest of the geese with 80 in off the sea on 15th Sep and c.100 >S on 30th Sep, on which date 60 **Barnacle Geese** >S too. The only **Pinkfoot** was a single (off-passage) during 23rd –26th Sep.

Other wildfowl included seven **Pintail** >S on 8th Sep, 55 **Scaup** >S on 30th Sep, a single **Long-tailed Duck** >S on 14th Sep with a further three >S on 27th Sep, and two drake **Velvet Scoters** >N on 25th Sep. An in-flight drake **Eider** on 24th Aug was quite early and rivals the earliest drake ever seen in flight here after the completion of wing moult. The first flight has been recorded as late as 6th Sep in some years.

The following three species just made the logsheet this autumn. A **Goosander** and an **Osprey** - both on 24th Sep - and a **Corn Crake** at Ballygroggan (near Machrihanish) during 19-25 July. The crake was caught by a cat, rescued by farmer Malcolm Holder, then ringed and released (apparently unharmed).

The best of the waders included a superb total of 55 **Black-tailed Godwits** >S (2 flocks) on 24th Aug, regular **Ruff** at Machrihanish Bay 30th Aug (three)–22nd Sep (one) with peaks of six flying around the point on 4th and four on 7th, two **Little Stints** on 22nd Sep and a single **Curlew Sandpiper** on 4th, 9th and 11th Sep.

A juvenile **Red-necked Phalarope** put in an all too brief appearance (>S) on 27th Aug and, after a tremendous autumn last year (12 birds), one **Grey Phalarope** >S on 13th Sept.

The only **Pomarine Skua** was an adult >S on 26th July whilst there was a total of 44 **Arctic Skuas** >S on 24 dates with a peak of seven >S/4 hrs on 26th July. The total included 19 dark morph, 17 pale morph, six undetermined as to age/morph, one intermediate morph and a second-summer type which was digiscoped in flight (see image below).



**Arctic Skua** – second-summer type © Eddie Maguire

**Bonxies** totalled 35 > on 17 dates during 20th July–10th Oct with a notable showing of 9 >S/6 hrs on 10th Aug. The first two juvenile **Kittiwakes** appeared on 3rd Aug (bang on time), although many aged samples over the autumn period showed a worrying low mean of only 29% juvenile.

After a superb autumn total last year (9 birds), **Little Gull** just made the logsheet with a juvenile >S on 30th Aug. Apparently, breeding populations of **Roseate Terns** are doing extremely well, but the species is a major rarity in Argyll, and in many other parts of Scotland, so it was gripping to find single adults >S on 7th

and 14th Aug (both calling and on passage with **Common** and **Arctic Terns**). **Sandwich Terns**, another speciality at Machrihanish, were present as usual all summer (eight birds). Coition was noted many times and many fantastic display flights were performed high over Machrihanish village. Although there was no indication of nesting, the earliest ever juvenile appeared on 8th July! The peak count later on was 8 (including two juvs) on 22nd Aug.

**Little Terns** can be relied on to appear during the last 10 days of July and showed just how punctual they are when 5 (including 2 juveniles) >S on 23rd. After the amazing record numbers in early July, **Puffins** were scarce over the autumn period with only a handful of records; the last one >S on 14th Sep.



**Northern Wheatear** – Greenland race © Eddie Maguire

**White Wagtail** peaks during Sep were 45 on 1st, 50 >S/6hrs on 6th, 95 >S/5 hrs on 8th and 55 >S/3 hrs on 12th. Only eight could be found around the bay on 18th and the last bird was seen on 28th (none seen Oct).

A visible migration of **Northern Wheatears** took place on 10<sup>th</sup> Sep when a record 132 were logged during a 3 hour period. Birds were coming in at wave height from the W (Rathlin Island/Northern Ireland) and NW (Islay) flying strongly in small loose groups of 3–5 birds into an easterly offshore wind (force 4), then resting for a few minutes before moving onto the NE (Machrihanish Bay). All birds that were scrutinised well had very rusty-looking breasts/underparts (Greenland race; see image above) and all were juveniles. This passage stopped around 1100 hrs and coincided with the wind dropping suddenly to force 1. Later counts included 40 the next day and 38 on 16th Sep.

Several **Swallow** movements occurred during Sept with early morning counts of 140 >S on 12th and 120 >S on 24th. These birds probably roosted in reedbeds at Machrihanish Water.

There was an extraordinary claim of a **Chough** over the uplands at Ballygroggan Farm, Machrihanish on 11th Oct!

**Twite** numbers have been falling alarmingly at Machrihanish for a number of years through loss of foraging habitat on Uisaed Point, so it was great seeing regular flocks of over 100 with a reasonable peak of 160 on 3rd Oct.

Other noteworthy passerines included an exceptional flock of at least 12 **Bullfinches** at Lossit Estate on 5th Oct, a couple of **Crossbills** on the shore (foraging on Seapink seeds) on 19th June and single **Snow Buntings** on 24th Sep and 1st Oct.



**Whimbrel** © Eddie Maguire

## **Acknowledgements**

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**Peregrine Falcon** © Eddie Maguire



**Otter** © Eddie Maguire





**Bottlenose Dolphin** off Machrihanish, September '05  
© Eddie Maguire

Ends