

Machrihanish Seabird / Wildlife Observatory

Ornithological Review for 2006

The Seabird Observatory was manned daily from May to November.

Throughout the season, 2,700 visitors enjoyed grand views of our local Grey and Common Seals, breeding shorebirds, and of course, loads of fly-by seabirds (not to mention our wonderful scenery). Frequent digital wildlife slide shows proved very popular with visitors and a regular Otter and the occasional pod of Bottlenose Dolphin proved a real treat for many.

The Trust Committee recently reviewed the seasonal operation and creative functions of the Seabird Observatory and identified a number of potential improvements, including extending the observatory, as soon as finances permit.

Our main objectives are : to collect and archive records of seabirds and other species at Machrihanish; to publish annual / biannual reports; to encourage birdwatchers, local folk, tourists and schools to visit and become involved at the observatory; and, through digiscoping, continue our wildlife photography project by accumulating images of local / migratory birds and other wildlife.

On 6th Oct, the Seabird Observatory featured on Radio Scotland's 'Out and about' programme hosted by Mark Steven. Mark was particularly enthralled with the whole concept of digiscoping and really enthusiastic when viewing and talking about our local wildlife. We also enlightened listeners on how certain weather conditions can effect the movements of seabirds and why the topography of the area is often a very important factor in bringing many species really close to this promontory.

The following notes include all highlights at the Observatory along with significant records at The Laggan and a few other locations in south Kintyre.

During March–April, the Observatory was manned intermittently while the warden carried out a population study of **Common Raven** in Kintyre for Scottish Natural Heritage. Some preliminary results of the study are included below.

Daily observations began in earnest on 1st May.

A surprising find on 4th February was a female type **Reed Bunting** 800ft ASL, just below The Gap, Mull of Kintyre.

A **Eurasian Jay** was screeching at a **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** near Dalsmerran on 5th February and on 9th February, 20+ **Common Bullfinches** were in the small plantation at top of Borgadelmore Glen (Mull of Kintyre); 10 flew low to the NW over open moorland towards The Gap and about the same

time, a **Merlin** (on territory?) was chasing a **Sky Lark** high over the glen. This record demonstrates just how early some species return to upland habitats. An assembly of around 55 **Rock Pipits** on 100 metres of seaweed at Machrihanish on 12th February was noteworthy.

Twite have been rather scarce with only a small wintering flock (20) near Westport: a pair has been very regular around the observatory.

During March, a **Black-billed Magpie** was at Drumlemble on 20th and what was probably the same bird was regularly visiting a garden at Machrihanish 16th April – 10th May.

the first **Northern Wheatear** arrived on 16th followed by a **White Wagtail** next day (peak only 20+ on 30th April) and two **Snow Buntings** flew S on 24th.

Migrants at Balnamoil, Mull of Kintyre on 28th included 10+ **Northern Wheatears**, 4 **Chiffchaffs** and at least two **Ring Ouzels**.

A flock of 60 **Fieldfares** flew high to the N over Lossit Estate on 24th.

Common Shelduck peaked at 18 on 19th (an early first brood of 7 appeared by the Observatory on 7th May followed by a B/12 on 20th May).

Whooper Swans were moving north to breeding grounds in Iceland throughout late March / April with peaks of 38 on 30th March (and 18 on 2nd April).

Wintering **Purple Sandpipers** were a daily feature with a peak of 16 on 30th along with small numbers of **Ruddy Turnstones** - peak only 10 in March (18 flew N on 17th April).

During April, a **Barn Swallow** flew around the Observatory on 4th (peak 20 >S on 15th), two **Sandwich Terns** arrived back, slightly later than usual, on 8th (peaks so far were seven on 19th and 12 flying S on 6th May), a male **Whinchat** stopped briefly on 10th then the first **Common Cuckoo** was heard near Whitehouse on 17th followed by one at Machrihanish Golf Course on 21st. **Whimbrel** were present almost daily from 20th (3): the best flock noted was 60 flying N on 27th when a **Common Sandpiper** flew N (the first song of this species was not heard at the Observatory until 7th May).

Two **Bohemian Waxwings** turned up at Feorlan near the Mull of Kintyre on 7th. Only one was present on 8th; it settled and was feeding regularly at a bird table until it left overnight 16th / 17th. It was reported to have eaten a whole apple just before departure.

A very nervous migrant female **Black Redstart** was found close to the Observatory on 24th (in the marine research laboratory complex).

Some **Carrion Crows** were noted moving S during April with two on 17th, nine on 28th and four on 29th whilst a communal roost of 140 **Hooded Crow** was found in a Sitka Spruce plantation at Skeroblin Loch on 28th.

A recent population study of **Common Ravens** in Kintyre has revealed a minimum 42 active nest sites and three communal roost sites with a minimum population surplus of around 300 immature birds. The Ronachan roost held in excess of 130 birds during March, the highest count at Skeroblin Loch roost was 59 in early April and the Glen Kerran roost held a max of 82 in early May. There is certainly more than 42 breeding pairs of **Common Ravens** in Kintyre and the true figure could well be around, or even in excess of, 65 - 70 breeding pairs. The known structure of the **Common Raven** population at present, including breeding birds (minimum 42 pairs), the population surplus

(minimum 300 birds), and this year's fledglings / juveniles (maximum 126 birds assuming average brood of three) will shortly raise the total population to around 500 birds.

However, the projected figure for the breeding population on the peninsula is estimated to be around 70 pairs; this would give a total population in excess of 700 birds.

The North American **Laughing Gull** was last seen on the evening of 15th April (almost in full breeding plumage) standing patiently beside the fish and chip van by the Kinloch Green, Campbeltown.

A neat summer-plumaged adult **Little Gull** was trailing behind a pack of **Black-legged Kittiwakes** that were moving S on 17th April.

60 **Eurasian Curlews** flew N on 16th April, a tight flock of 12 **Black-tailed Godwits** flew E over The Laggan the same day and single winter-plumaged **Bar-tailed Godwits** flew S on 26th and 29th April.

On 18th April 60 **Eurasian Golden Plovers** were panicking high over Machrihanish although the only raptor noted in the area was a male **Hen Harrier** low over the golf course.

The **Eider** 'club' by the Observatory proved a constant source of amusement to us and many of our visitors with the highest count being 180 birds on 23rd April. On this date the flock comprised 112 adult drakes, 22 immature drakes and 46 females. The first brood (only one duckling) appeared on 23rd May (first brood has been as late as 29th – 30th May in recent years).

45 **Sanderling** flew N on 26th followed by a further 30 on 29th (a splendid flock of 115 birds were at Machrihanish Bay on 4th May).

Small numbers of **Eurasian Siskin** were calling high over the Observatory as they moved north during late March / April with the largest flock 10 on 28th April.

Unusually, **Little Terns** appeared before both **Arctic** (2nd May) and **Common Terns** (3rd May) with three on 30th April (and two on 4th May then two were seen by the ferry terminal at Tayinloan on 5th May).

Although seawatching was mainly unproductive throughout this period with no skuas until 19th May, no white-winged gulls and only light movements of **Manx Shearwaters**, a few scarce species and other interesting events did much to relieve the tedium during May.

A single, slightly early, **Common Swift** flew S over the sea into a SE gale on 3rd. This species usually arrives over Campbeltown around 10th May, however, this year three arrived during fine weather on 6th and 14 were over the town on 8th.

A pack of about 50 **Whimbrel** were feeding / resting on grassland by the ferry terminal at Tayinloan on 5th. Also on 5th, a very interesting record was three male **Blackcaps** in full song at Achamore Gardens, Gigha.

The only **Common Scoters** seen were eight birds flying S on 4th, a single pale-breasted **Brent Goose** flew N on 11th and an **Osprey** was reported at West Loch Tarbert on 21st. An enterprising pair of **Rooks** nested successfully on a chimney pot at the corner of Cross St. / Main St. in the centre of Campbeltown by the old town hall and there was full grown youngsters standing on the nest on 7th May.

A surprising late passage of **Arctic Skuas** occurred on 19th with a record spring total of 25 drifting N / 6 hrs in a westerly force 5 with poor visibility. The

birds were all adults, most passed through during the morning, travelling mainly singly, and the total included 16 dark and 9 pale morphs. The following day, 9 birds flew S in a NW force 4-5 (7 were dark morphs) and on the evening of 21st, a single pale morph was harassing **Sandwich Terns** in Machrihanish Bay.

An intermediate phase **Northern Fulmar** flew S on 19th.

Single immature **Black-throated Divers** flew S on 3rd May and N on 19th while the wintering **Great Northern Divers**, most in summer plumage, started 'yelping' from mid-April although none were noted flying until 28th April: superb displays were appreciated from a pack of 26 birds on 3rd May.

An adult **Pomarine Skua** sporting full 'spoons' startled delighted observers on 24th when it suddenly appeared just outside the window of the Observatory; it was moving very slowly, almost motionless at times, into a westerly force 5/6. Two other single adult 'Poms' flew S on 24th and 29th and in the aftermath of the late great spring passage of **Arctic Skuas**, a dark type adult stayed off-passage 24th - 1st June (see photo in Sept Eider).

In June, there were 35 **Sanderling** on 9th, a single **Ruddy Turnstone** all month, six **Crossbills** at Lossit Estate on 12th and a **Corn Crake** calling at Brunerican, Southend on 15th. The first **Storm Petrel** and an immature **Great Northern Diver** were offshore on 20th and on 24th 8 **Puffins** flew S / 6 hrs among 1,300 auk sp..

The first **Eider** duckling appeared on 23rd May and the latest (just hatched) was a single on 1st July.

Some scarce / unexpected species and other events were a feature of June: a **Yellow Wagtail** was calling as it flew north on 4th and a female **Goldeneye** was off-passage 7th-18th. A surprising movement of **Leach's Petrels** occurred on 22nd in a WNW force 5-6 with poor visibility and light rain (not the exact catalyst for the appearance of this species at Machrihanish) when a total of 11 flew S between 08:30 - 0940 hrs. Suddenly, **Storm Petrels** took over the scene and in 6 hrs from around 10:00 hrs 200 birds had passed to the south. Many loose groups of 3-8 birds were moving slowly, feeding as they went. Other species overtaking the petrels during this rousing 6 hr seawatch included 5 **Red-throated Divers**, 80 **Fulmars**, 800 **Manx Shearwaters** and a drake **Tufted duck**. The only other interesting seabird movement of the month came on 30th when 1,200 **Manx Shearwaters** and 1,700 **Black-legged Kittiwakes** flew S / 7 hrs.

Breeding success for both **Common Eiders** and **Common Shelduck** was exceptional this year with record numbers of ducklings. A count between the Observatory and the village (1 km) on 16th June produced 57 and 37 respectively. Six pairs of **Shelduck** bred this year, many more than usual, and one pair produced a brood of 12!

Early July was outstanding for seabirds foraging around the point and in Machrihanish Bay (and well to the N) but not as spectacular as the unprecedented numbers encountered during summer 2005. The best day this year was on 2nd July when during 7 hrs of observation the following were estimated flying S well offshore and out of the bay: 5,500+ auk sp., 1,800 **Manx Shearwaters**, 600+ **Northern Gannets** and 2,500 **Black-legged Kittiwakes**. Regular id samples from the auk 'trains' revealed that, unlike

2005, the vast majority (77%) were **Razorbills**. **Puffin** peaked on 5th with 30 flying S / 6 hrs as did **Storm Petrel** when 22 flew S. In addition, a first-summer **Little Gull** (second this year) was a good find on 1st dip-feeding below **Kittiwakes**.

After a long absence as a breeding species on Kintyre, **Little Terns** returned in spectacular fashion. At the historical site, Rhunahaorine Point, Blair Urqhart (SNH: Kintyre Officer) and I (under license) monitored activity at the colony for several hours on 13th July. We arrived at the following: adult minimum 28, fledged minimum 2 and unfledged minimum 7.

This eventful visit brought back memories from 32 years ago when I camped out at 'Point Sands' every weekend throughout the breeding season. As honorary warden for SWT I was enthusiastic about controlling increasing human disturbance not only of **Little Tern**, but also a sizeable **Arctic Tern** colony.

During July, a second-summer type **Arctic Tern** appeared on 3^d, then a third-summer type **Pomarine Skua** went S on 12th followed by the first **Arctic Skua** of the autumn period on 21st.

The first **Red Knot** also appeared on 21st along with **Sanderling** (18) and **Common Redshank** (40). Single **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Common Greenshanks** (peak 3 on 26th) and 140 **Dunlins** were off-passage on 23rd.

Two now predictive events in July showed just how consistent some species are at arriving in this area: the first **Sandwich Tern** juveniles (3) were offshore on 19th (usually always arrive just before 20th) and the only two **Little Terns** of the autumn (an adult and a juvenile) were in Machrihanish Bay on 29th (usually always appear as fly-by's S during last 10 days of July).

With persistent E / SE winds, the autumn was generally abysmal for seabird movements; very few **Manx Shearwaters**, skuas and petrels were seen. Only 22 **Arctic Skuas** were logged flying S on 12 dates 21st July (1) – 28th Sept (2) with a peak of only 6 on 1st Aug. **Great Skuas** too were well down on previous years with only 11 birds going S on 10 dates 1st Aug (2) – 7th Oct (1).

Serious seawatching interest was rekindled during August when a very probable **Macaronesian Shearwater** flew S on 5th (too distant to obtain a reliable plumage description). **Arctic Tern** numbers were very low with a peak of only 9 on 12th (including 2 juveniles and another second-summer type) and only a single **Common Tern** juvenile put in an appearance on 29th.

The second **Yellow Wagtail** of the year flew N on 7th.

Whimbrel were scarce with only one on 7th, 8 on 12th and 2 on 23rd and **Bar-tailed Godwit** peaked at only 5 on 23rd.

Noisy groups of **Common Swifts** were a daily feature over Campbeltown all summer with an impressive single flock of 52 spiralling high over the town centre on 6th Aug. The last one was seen at dawn on 12th.

The first juvenile **Kittiwake** on 12th Aug was around 10 days later than normal.

Several **Merlin**, **Sparrowhawk**, **Peregrine** and **Hen Harrier** were very active around the Observatory and at The Laggan from 20th.

Sandwich Terns were regular all summer and later there was a flock of 27 (including 8 juveniles) on 23rd.

A **Red-necked Phalarope** foraging well offshore on 29th was confidently identified by its very distinctive in-flight (zig-zag) feeding behaviour, but, was just too far away for a detailed plumage description to be taken.

September was quite eventful too. On 1st, a **Ruff** and a **Grey Phalarope** flew S and a **Great Crested Grebe** was found foraging in the bay. **White Wagtails** were thin on the ground with a max of only 6 on 6th. A **Northern Pintail** flew S on 9th, a juvenile **Hobby** gave excellent views around Machrihanish village on 3 dates 13th – 18th, then on 11th, a colour-ringed **Twite** ringed at Bank's Marsh, The Ribble in spring 2005 was photographed just outside the Observatory.

Eight highly vocal **Siskin** flew high to the S on 12th and a big charm of 45 **Goldfinch** was a pleasing sight around the village on 15th.

The first **Brent Goose** flew S on 18th in the near company of 7 **Common Scoters** and later the same day a **Little Stint** was found at The Battery pool by the first tee on the golf course. 3 passed S at the Observatory on 21st, 7 were in the bay on 28th with the last 2 on 2nd Oct. A total of 19 **Greater Scaup** flew S on 19th and next day, 16 **Storm Petrels** flew S / 2 hrs pm and 250 **Ringed Plovers** (moult flock) and 100 **Sanderling** were loafing in the bay.

On 24th, Hugh Nicol had a fortunate encounter with a **Eurasian Dotterel** on Remuil Hill (304 m ASL) 3 km south of Cnoc Moy.

The first in-flight drake **Eider** noted after the moult period were singles on 27th Aug followed by one on 1st Sept.

At the Laggan, the first **White-fronted Geese** (23) arrived back on 30th

Apart from mainly S / SE winds and rain, October was fairly interesting too; on 1st, Kenny Maben (postman) reported a gathering of 18 **Common Buzzards** in one field near Caliburn Quarry (Loch Lussa road).

On the shore, our third **Little Gull** record of the year came on 1st when 2 first-winter were found at a gull roost by Machrihanish Water mouth. A juvenile **Arctic Tern** was also there.

Twite peaked at only 80 on 1st, a **Long-tailed Duck** going S on 4th took a shortcut across the point and on 7th during a 5 hr seawatch 18 **Red-throated Divers**, 7 **Gadwall** and 33 **Greater Scaup** flew S.

The only **Grey Plover** of the year was one in the bay on 9th whilst the longest staying **Ruff** ever recorded here arrived at Westparkfergus, The Laggan, on 8th Oct and stayed for at least 50 days (last seen on 28th Nov and always in the company of **Lapwings**).

The first **Purple Sandpipers** (3) appeared on 14th, a **Blackcap** was skulking in a decaying nettle bed by the Observatory on 16th and the last **Northern Wheatear** of the year was at Westparkfergus on 18th.

The first returning adult **Great Northern Diver** was in the bay on 18th with 9 **Northern Pintail** and 64 **Greater Scaup** nearby, and by Machrihanish Water mouth, a juvenile **Great Cormorant** sporting a tall green colour-ring with white letters 'CBB' was photographed; this bird, still present on 27th, was ringed on Puffin Island, N Wales.

On 19th, a **Lesser Black-backed Gull** showing characteristics of the darker backed subspecies *Larus fuscus intermedius* was photographed by me at Machrihanish Bay (Chris Pendlebury at BTO – among many others – 'put his

hat in the ring' and accepted the digiscoped image as *L. f. intermedius*). Apparently this is the first time this race has been photographed in Argyll – a superb coup for the Observatory!!!

The latest **Sandwich Tern** was a first-winter going S on 26th on which date a drake **Northern Shoveler** arrived and stayed off-passage by the Observatory to 1st Nov. Around 2000 **Herring Gulls** and 550 **Common Gulls** were foraging in The Laggan throughout the month.

Pink-footed Geese occur at The Laggan mostly in small numbers especially during the late autumn period and occasionally one or two stay for the winter. However, it was to prove a remarkable autumn / early winter for this species; 60 arrived in off the sea on 19th and surprisingly, had increased to 160 the following day. Numbers then remained stable until 1st Nov when 170 were present, although there was a further increase to 182 by 3rd before an exceptional flock of 252 were meticulously counted on 16th. Persistent E winds obviously forced these birds W of the main migration route. When I left Kintyre for the W Midlands (at the end of November) the 'pinks' looked well settled in for the winter.

The largest pack of **Whooper Swans** reported was 60 >S over Stewarton on 22nd Oct.

During November, the weather pattern established earlier dominated. Very late **Common Sandpipers** were surprise finds on 2nd and 27th (our latest ever) and on 6th a total of 47 **Purple Sandpipers** flew S with a further 34 S on 11th. Also on this date, a **Leach's Petrel** and a **Grey Phalarope** were battling S close to the shore.

White-winged gulls were really scarce here this year, so a first-winter **Iceland Gull** by the Observatory on 13th – 14th was a very welcome sight.

A **Black-throated Diver** flew S on 13th then *another* first-winter **Little Gull** was found on 21st travelling S among **Kittiwakes** (as usual).

There was still plenty of action going on at The Laggan; **Sky Larks** were plentiful with an estimated 900 in a potato field at Westparkfergus on 3rd. Several times we watched a **Merlin** going nearly vertical after a lark; one chase, at great height, was relentless and eventually the raptor and prey appeared as a single speck against a blue sky; breathtaking stuff!

A routine foray through these farmlands on 11th revealed 1,260 **White-fronted Geese**, 160 **Greylags**, 3 'real' **Barnacles** and 66 'hybrid blacks' (**Canada x Barnacle**). Two **Brent Geese** were also there.

Whooper Swan numbers peaked at only 19 this month and two adults sporting yellow colour-rings were photographed. '73P' arrived at Westparkfergus about 10th and was still present on 28th and 'B67', found on 15th, was last seen on 22nd (details pending). In addition, on 13th, a dull orange neck-collar (P3X) on a **White-front** was eventually read.

There were some notable wader counts too; **Golden Plover** numbers increased dramatically throughout the month and by 27th an amazing flock of 1,200+ were present along with 1,000+ **Lapwings**. An inland **Red Knot** (rare here in winter and rare inland) was also there with 12 **Dunlins**.

There was an influx / passage of **Stonechats** with a good presence here, and by the Observatory, all month.

Given the prevailing weather conditions this autumn there were no records of **Sooty** and **Balearic Shearwaters** or **Sabine's Gull** and, it was yet another blank year for **Mediterranean Gull** (maybe next season!).

John McGlynn (Director at the Observatory) visited regularly during December and reported a first-winter **Little Gull** on 5th; this brings the year total to a pleasing five records involving six birds (an adult in spring, a first-summer in July and 4 first-winter later). John also logged a **Leach's Petrel** on 12th December.

Seabird Observatory enquiries; tel. 07919 660 292 or 07833 133 947

E-mail - machrihanishbirds@btinternet.com

Web site – <http://www.machrihanishbirds.org.uk>

Eddie Maguire - Warden