

**STIRLING MEMBERS CENTRE**  
**Newsletter and Activities**  
**Programme**  
**March 2010**



**Monitoring the Internationally Important Wintering Wetland Bird Populations in the Forth Estuary**

Viewers of BBC's Spring and Autumn Watch programmes will be familiar with the enormous flocks of geese, swans, ducks and waders that migrate to over-winter in the UK before returning to their breeding areas in Greenland, Iceland, Scandinavia, Western Russia etc.. Some of these birds just stop off to rest and refuel on their way further south but the majority stay on our estuaries, lakes and flooded countryside.

In winter the UK hosts internationally important numbers of many types of wetland birds (ie more than 1% of all the individuals of that species). This is because we have nearly a third of Europe's estuaries and compared with Northern and Eastern Europe our winters are relatively mild leaving the feeding sites unfrozen. The concentration of all these water birds into relatively few sites provides the opportunity to

monitor their populations and once a month throughout the winter just over 3000 volunteers go out to allocated sites and count the different species. In our Members Centre area 44 volunteers are involved monitoring the Forth, Teith and Devon. This scheme has been running for 60 years and is currently known as the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) which is coordinated by a team of professionals based at the British Trust for Ornithology's (BTO) HQ in Thetford.

In the UK 218 "principal sites" have been identified as supporting 10,000 waterbirds or internationally important numbers of at least one species. Of these the Forth Estuary ranks 12<sup>th</sup> with a five year average of 85,000 birds compared with 368,000 in the Wash and 120,000 in the Solway. We have internationally important numbers of Pink-footed and Icelandic Greylag Geese, Shelduck, Slavonian Grebe, Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit, Turnstone and Redshank. In addition, seventeen other species are defined as nationally important and of these we have the biggest GB populations of Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser, Red-necked Grebe and Shag.



Goldeneye (Neil Calbrade/BTO)



Red-Breasted Merganser  
(Jill Pakenham/BTO)

The WeBS Alerts system identifies species that have undergone major reductions in numbers. A "High Alert" is issued if the population of any species declines by more than 50% over the short (5yrs), medium (10yrs) or long (25yrs) term. Worryingly in the most recent report (<http://www.bto.org/webs/alerts/>) a whole series of Forth species have triggered this alert including Scaup, Great Crested Grebe, Common Scoter, Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser, Golden and Grey Plover, Knot and Bar-tailed Godwit. Fortunately there are also a few species which are increasing like the Curlew and Velvet Scoter. If a decline is common to all the birds' UK sites then a generic cause is implicated such as adverse conditions in the breeding grounds. However if the Forth population is declining while the UK population is static then a local cause is more likely. Along the Forth pressure from developments like the new bridges and disturbance due to easier access are given as reasons for the decline. Ironically

improving the water quality has also probably been detrimental to some species. For example the discharge of spent grain from breweries and distilleries used to provide a great source of food for some ducks.



Shelduck  
(Jill Pakenham/BTO)

Under treaty obligations specified in the EC Birds Directive (1979) and the International Ramsar Convention (Ramsar, Iran, 1971) the bird populations in the Firth of Forth require automatic designation as both a Ramsar Site and an SPA (EC Special Protection Areas). This gives them the highest level of protection with the possibility of EC fines if we are in default. The Scottish Wildlife Trust plays its part in this conservation activity having three wetland bird reserves in the upper Forth estuary at Alloa Inch, Tullibody Inch and Cambus Pools.

Alloa Inch is a 100 acre island just upstream of the town. Once a productive farm it was abandoned when flooded by salty river water. Now it hosts thousands of geese particularly in spring when flocks from the south use it as a stop over as they migrate north. Unfortunately it is difficult to get across to the island but large numbers of wetland birds can be seen from the footpaths which follow the river

banks from Cambus upstream to our Cambus Pools reserve and down stream to Alloa Inch.

## More Volunteers Wanted to Monitor Garden Birds

BTO urgently needs more Scots to become Garden Birdwatchers to monitor both birds and other wildlife in their gardens. The information is collected on a weekly basis either on-line or by paper forms and takes only minutes of your time. It enables BTO to support informed conservation and is a great way to increase your knowledge and interest in the creatures which share our gardens. Like many good things it costs a little - around 30p per week-which includes an excellent quarterly magazine. Please contact the editor for details or go to [www.bto.org/gbw](http://www.bto.org/gbw). Warning - this activity becomes addictive!

## Winter / Spring Activities

Our web site [www.swtstirling.org.uk](http://www.swtstirling.org.uk) contains details of the talks and conservation activities we organize. At time of publications the organisers of field work had not finalized their programmes. When the information becomes available we will put it on our website. In addition there is information about how to enroll children in the WATCH group, who to contact when biodiversity is threatened by development and how to report unusual wildlife sightings.

## Illustrated Talks.

Our talks are held on the second Monday of the month at 7.30pm in the new Raploch Community Campus in Drip Road Stirling (behind Sainsburys). There is a large car park beside the building which you enter through the glass fronted section facing Drip road. Cost £2  
**Non Members Welcome**

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|------------------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| Monday March 8 <sup>th</sup> 2010  | <b><u>'Wildlife of the Cairngorms National Park'</u></b> | Allan Bantick (Chairman SWT) |
| Monday April 12 <sup>th</sup> 2010 | <b><u>Work of the Woodland Trust in Scotland</u></b>     | J. Christie Plus short AGM   |

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Blue Tit  
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