

**Protecting Scotland's wildlife for the future**

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**DAWN - Newsletter of the North Angus and Angus & Dundee Groups**

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**Number 135 - July 2021**

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## **Annual General Meeting**

Thursday 22nd April

It was the most unusual AGM so far. As with the previous AGM, for 2019, which we were finally able to organise rather late last year, all proceedings took place over Zoom. It is thought that around 30 members joined in over the internet. Zoom certainly is not the same as any meeting face-to-face but much better than nothing at all. What made this AGM unique was that we had decided that the best way to run it was to hold the lecture first and then the business meeting afterwards and we duly invited our speaker, Ken Slater, to talk about his favourite subject.

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## **Introduction**

The restrictions imposed by Covid-19 have continued but nevertheless, your members' group has been able to continue with a range of virus-safe activities. All the group meetings, lectures and the range of committee meetings have been by Zoom, very ably presided over by our computer expert, Andy Wakelin. And then, on a beautiful day, we arranged a carefully staged, socially-distant and well spaced virus-defeating foray to admire what must be the best show of bluebells in Angus. We look forward to the rest of the year and, perhaps, the further easing of the restrictions on activities. Whatever happens, all the meetings of the winter session are likely to be on Zoom until further notice. After all, who knows what might happen, with the potentials for further outbreaks of new varieties, more lock-downs and further restrictions? Meanwhile, stay safe and we wish you 'all the best'!

## **The Bessie Ducker Story**

The topic was that iconic and unique little bird, the dipper, so-called because when standing on a rock, they often bob up and down. Roughly the size of a chunky robin, with dark plumage overall but a distinctive white throat and breast, the 'Bessie Ducker' name is a local one but appropriate nonetheless, since it spends most of its time ducking into and out of the water of a clean running stream while hunting among the stones and riffles around them for their prey of water insects and larvae. These range from mayfly and stonefly larvae and adults, caddisfly larvae to small fish, such as minnows. Ken has spent years studying these fascinating birds in local streams and rivers in lowland Angus, such as along the Dighty to the north of and around Dundee and connected burns, and will be releasing a paper describing his researches in the not too distant future.

Dippers are semi-aquatic songbirds, plunging into clean fast-running streams to hunt. In this they are unique and possess a variety of adaptations, ranging from strong feet and legs to dense and waterproof plumage. They partly open their wings to move underwater and press themselves to the bottom. In fact, dippers have evolved a large preen gland, some eight times larger than would be expected, producing the oil which the birds work into the feathers to prevent them absorbing water.

Their territories are linear, as might be expected, along the stream, and in the Dighty catchment are some 500 m length. These are defended vigorously as both feeding and breeding territories. The birds nest in concealed sites such as under stone bridges

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## **IMPORTANT FOR ALL MEMBERS**

If you didn't receive notice of the AGM and talk or of the cancellation of the usual January outing, then please make sure that you are able to receive notification using the new system run by HQ in Edinburgh. It's easy; just go on to the SWT main website, move down to the bottom of the first page and click on the button in the blue-band to register. You'll be asked to give your name and email address and then click on the box for local group information. You can choose as well whether or not you want to receive other types of information.

<https://scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk/>

and in tangled tree roots. The young are hatched naked and blind but grow and fledge rapidly when fed their rich insect diet. The young leave the nest at about 24 days old

The main techniques used by Ken and his collaborators in their studies of these birds included close observations of their behaviour, aided by constantly-manned mist nets strung across the water. These are very fine mesh baggy nets spread across a known fly-way into which the birds blunder and fall into one of the folded bags. To prevent the birds from coming to harm they are rapidly retrieved and removed from the net, measured, rings are secured around their legs as appropriate and then released unharmed, although perhaps a little ruffled. Each bird is tagged with a unique light metal ring on a leg and also marked with a series of coloured light plastic rings which allow them to be identified and recorded from a distance using binoculars.



By these means our speaker, Ken Slater, has been able to make numerous interesting observations. Males rarely move far, staying close to their territories but females, in contrast, seem to move much further. They may move even to different river systems, often over considerable distances, 24-25 km away. The furthest travelled bird he recorded was some 30 km from the territory where it hatched. As is common with many small birds they are not particularly long-lived, although longer than similar-sized song birds. The oldest he has found was a female around 7 or more years old.

After his relatively brief but highly informative and stimulating talk, Ken attracted a number of interested questions from his audience. He was duly thanked by his hosts but, rather unfortunately, the applause did not come strongly over Zoom.

## AGM

The Angus and Dundee annual general meeting to deal with the business of the group took over immediately the talk finished.

The chair welcomed all members to the meeting. After apologies, the minutes of the last meeting were discussed and, with minor corrections, passed. Matters arising were debated briefly before moving on to what was a rather brief meeting. The chair remarked that with the lack of activities in 2020 there was little to report on and went on to thank all members involved. Our new Treasurer, Robin Key, was able to take the meeting through the accounts, which had been sent out by email earlier, and these were passed. He reported that the annual generous grant from the Larg Trust had arrived.

The Secretary duly delivered her report on what had been happening the previous year and then

brought forward the confirmation or re-election of the various committees and sub-committees. After a few more points and a short discussion the meeting ended.

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## Bluebell Wood Outing

Sunday 16th May

With the easing of restrictions towards the end of April, the committee decided that it would be worthwhile to try to organise a carefully staged visit and admire the best bluebell wood in Angus. This is Ruthven Wood on the River Isla in the north-western corner of Angus. The spacious rough car-park is up a narrow track and those who'd booked were given a time slot to arrive to avoid blockages on the track.

A masked volunteer at the car-park was able to direct each carload into a space, issue instructions and a map and direct visitors – at well spaced intervals – so that each family group was likely to see another group only at a distance, if at all, along the marked path through the wood and along above the River Isla. Fortunately the weather was ideal, cool but bright and sunny with only a light wind.

The long cold spell had delayed the flowering of many species, including the bluebells. These were true bluebells or wild hyacinths

(*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*), not to be confused with the Scots bluebell or harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*), which is a very different plant and flowers later in the year.



MichaelMaggs, CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons

It wasn't long, however, before we saw them in full flower and it was obvious that they were the true British bluebell, with their lopsided flower heads and constricted bell-shaped flowers, and there were no crosses with any of the introduced Spanish bluebell. A range of other early spring flowers could be seen, along with hearing a selection of the calls and songs of local and spring migrant birds.

Along part of the Isla, the effects of the local beavers were obvious. A considerable number of moderately-sized trees had been felled, most down by the river but some surprisingly far up the bank. Even more surprising, we were able to see where beavers had chewed fairly large branches off felled trees even high up the bank and well away from the water.

It was an excellent outing and a great start to the season. It remains a question whether any more outings will be able to be organised.

## News from the Reserves

All SWT hides were re-opened for the first time on the 1st May. Of course, social distancing rules still applied, the numbers in each hide at any one time were restricted and face-masks were required but it was still a notable milestone.

**Balgavies Loch** The loch awoke from its winter sleep as usual, but the unusually dry spell early on and then the remarkably cold spell in later April and May meant that nesting and flowering were all delayed. The ospreys had arrived and, at the time of writing, were still sitting.

There had been a hold-up with funding so that the drainage scheme changes couldn't go ahead. Neither has any progress been made with the fence along the road above the south meadow.

**Lintrathen Loch** Lintrathen has been quiet but with the hides opened again under the new rules, cautious visitors should be able to view the wildlife around.

**Montrose Basin** The Basin Visitors' Centre re-opened on the first of May but with considerable restrictions in place. Numbers allowed in at any one time are controlled and all visitors must be booked-in well in advance, allowing time for cleaning down in between; strict hand-cleaning for visitors is in place and each space at a fixed telescope or viewing point is separated from the others by large perspex screens.

Spoonbills have been seen as well as the little egrets, with ospreys and swallows heralding summer. A number of other spring migrants have flown in and we hope that the tern raft will be used once again and up to 100 are showing an interest but at the time of writing none had yet taken up residence. A Wall butterfly (*Lassiommata megera*) was seen by one of the staff recently.

The sand martin wall is gone and is being replaced with a new sand martin habitat structure. There is a new kids' activity area nearly ready for opening just beside the VC. There are a few events planned for the summer.

**Seaton Cliffs, Arbroath** The cliffs are busy with nesting seabirds and bright with flowers. The season was late but eventually bursting forth. The dangerous stretch of path has been blocked at each end by a large concrete barrier with a closed sign. We hope that visitors will finally pay attention to the state of path and leave the barriers alone.

**The Miley, Dundee** The Miley continues operations, with the regular weekly clean-ups by either socially-spaced volunteers or tight family groups. It has been a particularly active year so far – which is described in the Dundee Group report below.

## Dundee Group

The Dundee Group has been busy, despite the usual restrictions due to the pandemic. The local group was approached by the National Wildlife Trusts' Organiser, Marie Butler, to see if we were interested in receiving any of the series of bird boxes that were being offered by the National Lottery organisation, Camelot. And of course, we were. It wasn't long before we started to organise the hand-over arrangements through Lisa Fox Bennet, based in Edinburgh, the Scottish representative for Camelot.

At first we were told that the number of bird boxes would be about half a dozen and we planned to put several up along the Miley and donate the others to local schools. Eventually, however, we received the grand total of 26 boxes, each solidly constructed by Lottery winners of thick strong plywood and painted. One of them even contained a CCTV camera. Each box was checked to make sure it is easy to open for annual cleaning-out and that the drain holes are clear and a suitable backing board added for easy attachment to a tree. The boxes were handed over at a small socially-distanced event along the Miley on Tuesday 20th April that had been organised by Lisa, from Camelot. They arranged for several of the Lottery winners who'd constructed them to appear and provided a photographer so that a number of articles with good photographs appeared the next day in the papers, ranging from the Courier locally to several nationals. The event provided excellent publicity for both Camelot and the Trust, not forgetting with publicising the Miley itself. A week later a small hand-over ceremony was arranged to supply Kings Park Special School with the camera box and 5 other boxes for the school grounds. Again, we gained useful publicity but this time only in the Courier.

The Group, with the help of the Trust's north-east reserves manager, have also be trying to plan for work on the drainage ditch and clearing of the path to take place early in the year. It was hoped that we'd be able arrange for a local firm to gain access with a small digger to dig out the ditch and remove the spoil. The group had been promised a generous donation from the firm of Karl Stortz that would cover nearly the complete cost of the work but at the time of writing no donation had yet arrived. We aim, though, to have the work done as soon as possible.

Mary Harwood

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## Summer Programme

The rest of the summer programme is uncertain. It will have to wait until the pandemic is fully under control and dies down completely. Please keep an eye on our website for any changes to events. The winter programme is also likely to be by zoom and will be announced in good time.

## Other Wildlife Sightings

Blue-tailed damselflies have been seen at the Basin Visitor Centre as well as lots of green-veined white butterflies.

Siskins seem more common in gardens this year - even those without nearby conifers.

Starlings have had a good breeding season with lots of juveniles seen begging for food from adult birds.

Moths have been hard to find during May and June and are really late in coming to moth traps in any numbers.



Siskin



Blue-tailed damselfly



Common carpet moth

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To see these photos in full colour, you can download this (and past) Newsletters from the website at

[www.swtdundeeangus.org.uk/newsletters](http://www.swtdundeeangus.org.uk/newsletters)

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## Diary Dates

**Every Weds in July 2021  
and 4th Aug 2021**

**Wild About The Basin 10:30am - 12:00pm**

A range of nature-themed children's activities at Montrose Basin, depending on the weather and tides.

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### Montrose Basin Visitor Centre News

Opening times are: Thu-Mon (closed Tue, Wed), 10:30am-5pm (closed 12:15-13:15 for cleaning). We still have time slots but can very often accept people on the door just like the olden days.

More details can be found on

[www.scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk](http://www.scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk)

Or

[www.facebook.com/MontroseBasin/](https://www.facebook.com/MontroseBasin/)



Scottish Wildlife Trust Family Membership includes children's Wildlife Watch membership. For the activity programme for the Montrose Watch Group see the website at: [tinyurl.com/SWTMontroseW](http://tinyurl.com/SWTMontroseW)

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### The World "Wild" Web

Angus and Dundee Group website is at

[swtdundeeangus.org.uk](http://swtdundeeangus.org.uk)

and you can email on

[info@swtdundeeangus.org.uk](mailto:info@swtdundeeangus.org.uk)

More information about Montrose Basin can be found at

[www.montrosebasin.org.uk](http://www.montrosebasin.org.uk)

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### Dundee Conservation Volunteers

Contact John Whyman on (01382) 431848 (daytime), or 07940 165997 (mobile) for details of the current programme. A Sunday activity occurs once a month. The SWT minibus leaves Seagate Bus Station at 9:30am to the activity destination. Wear old clothes and stout boots. Bring waterproofs and lunch.

It's your chance to help conserve wildlife actively!

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### November Newsletter Copy Deadline - 13th Sept 2021

If you have any report or item of news or details of future events that should be included in the next newsletter, please send it as soon as possible to the editor at [jim.strath91@gmail.com](mailto:jim.strath91@gmail.com)

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The Scottish Wildlife Trust is a company limited by guarantee, registered in Scotland (registered number SC040247), having its registered office at Harbourside House, 110 Commercial Street, Edinburgh EH6 6NF. It is also a Scottish registered charity (charity number SC005792).