

Fife and Kinross Members Centre



Fife Area Wildlife News

No 93 Spring 2015



Message from Alison Irvine, Our New Chair



For many years as an enthusiastic SWT member I have read the Chair's column in FAWN – little did I think that one day it would be my job to write it! I have been involved with SWT in Fife since the early 1980s when somehow, I can't remember quite how, I was

introduced to Frank and Carol Spragge. They persuaded me to join SWT and before long I was on the Cupar/ Ceres local group committee. I can remember organising a daffodil day at Mountquhanie which had a huge turnout of the public. Really, it seemed to happen without any problems and without batting an eye, while nowadays I expect we would be so bogged down in risk assessments and insurance things it would be a bureaucratic nightmare!

My interest in wildlife started at a very young age, inspired by my mother who still gets great pleasure from watching birds in the garden and seeing the wild flowers and butterflies all appear in their due season. All my early memories seem to be about wildlife. When I started school I had a mile to walk across moorland. I remember chasing a poor Curlew chick trying to catch it, and I was always in trouble for being late when I had become distracted by some beastie

or other. I was lucky enough to have inspiring teachers at school who guided me to biology and eventually to do ecology at Edinburgh University. Straight from there into a Rangers job in Fife, first at Lochore Meadows, then the Lomonds, East Fife area, Levenmouth and from there to my current role as an access officer with Fife Council. Really in my entire work life to date I have been dealing with the interface of people and the countryside, and I hope that will help me in my new job as Chair.

Back in the early 1980s, as now, the work of the SWT at a local level depends on the hard work of so many enthusiastic volunteers, everyone doing just what they feel they can manage, no matter how much or how little. I see my role in the Chair as a sort of guide, making sure that people are involved and don't feel missed out, but also that we are not taking advantage of anyone's generosity with their time. I am really looking forward to meeting people, and getting back in touch with the workings of the Trust at both a local and national level. Many of my predecessors in the Chairman's role are still active in the Trust and I know that they will give me support to take the Members group forward, and I know, you, the members will do as much as you can. So if you find me twisting your arm to take on some small job then don't say you weren't warned! Supporting conservation work in Fife can take many forms from monitoring and surveys, to baking and fund-raising to just being really enthusiastic about the wildlife of Fife and the work of SWT. I'm sure there is something that we can all contribute to the thriving future of our reserves and wildlife in Fife.

WILD THINGS by Deborah Cottam

Thank you, everyone, for your support during my time as Vice-Chair of the Fife and Kinross Group. Stepping down from this role means I can concentrate on the Wildlife Watch group, Wild Things, run in collaboration with Nikki Macdonald, Education Officer at St Andrews Botanic, where we hold most meetings in the Glass Class. As I write, we are halfway through our annual programme of ten meetings. A flavour of our activities so far: we bioblitzed; searched unsuccessfully for White-tailed Eagles in the rain at Kinshaldy – which led me to construct life-size wings for the children to get an idea of the birds' size; built hedgehog houses in the Botanic; made Christmas decorations from natural materials; customised bird-boxes and made bird feeders; and much more. New members are always welcome, just email deborahcottam@gmail.com. At the moment we are the only watch group I know of in our area; there is lots of support nationally if anyone wants to start up another group, and Nikki and I would offer advice!



Adding a personal touch to bird boxes for the Friendly Wood in the Botanic

Ready for take-off in eagle's wings!



Robertson is delighted to sponsor the Scottish Wildlife Trust.

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CAMERON HIDE: The end of an era

The John Wiffen Memorial Hide at Cameron Reservoir, March 1985 to December 1993

By Jean Stewart



November sunset over Cameron

Cameron Reservoir lies four miles south west of St Andrews. In the 1980s, the main attraction for visiting birdwatchers was the arrival at dusk in late autumn and winter of thousands of Pink-footed Geese which roosted on the water. In 1984 the hide which had previously served at the Scottish Wildlife Trust's Loch of the Lowes reserve was acquired by the Fife and Kinross branch of the SWT and erected on the north bank of Cameron Reservoir, with the support of the local branch of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club. The hide was jointly managed by the SWT and SOC with the first honorary warden being John Wiffen. John died in 1989 and in 1990, the hide took on the name of the John Wiffen Memorial Hide. Subsequent honorary wardens were Bryan Gill, Ian Cumming and Sheila Taylor. In recent years the hide was being used much less than before, mainly because of the demise of the goose roost. The boardwalk was also in a dangerous condition and in 2012 local office bearers of the SOC and SWT decided to close the hide and remove part of the boardwalk.

A log book had been kept in the hide and sightings were recorded in great detail. A few months ago, I acquired from Fife Nature the log book covering the period March 1985 to December 1993 and this makes fascinating reading, partly for the bird records but also as a social history of the birdwatchers who visited it. Sadly several have subsequently died but some are still very active locally and the childish writing of others is testament to those who cut their early bird-watching teeth in this period and are now in their thirties or forties.

Full records were submitted at the time for inclusion in Fife annual bird reports. I have extracted some of the comments and records which I thought would be of general interest. Both the SWT and SOC have agreed that the logbook should be passed to Elizabeth Wiffen, John's widow, and their daughter, Alison.

In the 1980 and 1990s, the arrival of thousands of Pink-footed Geese at the Cameron roost was a dramatic spectacle enjoyed by birdwatchers and many others. Numbers of geese averaged 6,000 with over 8,000 in 1985, then rising to over 11,000 in 1992 and a peak in October 1993 of 27,300. One can detect the sense of excitement and awe in the log book comments, *west end of the reservoir was black with birds; another splendid display; a spectacular sight, c5,000 birds all in front of the hide; magnificent show, all over in a quarter of an hour;*

thousands of geese, incredible sight and sound; marvellous sight, whiffling their way down.

The last comment originally said 'whiffling??' and was corrected in a subsequent entry by another observer. The dialogue between consecutive entries is a feature of the logbook. A favourite of mine is from 1988 when Jean Grant who undertook the regular wildfowl counts at Cameron was obviously frustrated by a large willow in front of the hide. Her entry ends: *PS Is it possible to decapitate that willow bush John?! Two days later, John replied: PS Willow trees decapitated Jean. (Greenpeace and Friends of the Willows have got your address).* Sometimes when few birds were around, *never a goose, in sight or sound*, bored observers took to other amusements eg Frank Spragge asked: *If a duck has ducklings, does a coot have cootlings?* There was a lively discussion about the activities of Carrion Crows apparently scavenging on the ice near roosting geese. It was assumed they were pecking at the goose droppings but FS watched c100 one day and concluded that the Crows did not seem to be all



The hide viewed from the south bank

that interested in the old goose turds, they require the freshest ingredients.

Many entries record the maintenance work done on the hide and management of the footpaths, boardwalk etc. In the early days of the hide, 'Herb' (Herbert Whyte) features a great deal but there are many others, particularly John's daughter Alison. The work was obviously appreciated by subsequent visitors, *a very smart lawn-like approach to the hide these days; Congratulations on the work done on the hide and approach track! Most impressive.*

One can feel the mood in the hide, depending on the weather and the absence of birds, *freezing, am not lingering today; very cold westerly wind blowing down the loch; foggy, no geese seen or heard.* On other days, bright sunshine raised the spirits although visibility was more difficult looking across the water. There were a number of comments about the position of the hide on the north shore with viewing directly into the sun but unfortunately it had not been possible to obtain permission for a site on the south side. At times, the hide was very crowded, especially with visiting groups and Young Ornithologist Club members, *hide full to capacity, 7 ads and 12 juvs.*

Over the years many observers mentioned hearing shooting in the area and speculated that this had disturbed the geese. The true reason for the decline and eventual demise of the major roost of Pink-footed Geese has never been fully established but there was certainly a period when the behaviour of shooting parties from abroad was unacceptable.

Reports of rarer birds, underlined or marked by exclamation marks were followed by a flurry of entries as word spread amongst local birdwatchers, in those days by a 'cascade' of telephone calls.

Excitement was palpable on some occasions at seeing, although not on the same dates: Red-necked, Black-necked and Slavonian Grebe, Green and Wood Sandpiper, Snow Goose, Hen Harrier, Grasshopper Warbler (heard only), Green-winged Teal, Black Tern, Bean Goose etc. A pair of Red-necked Grebes in June 1992 caused some excitement but soon disappeared. Short-eared Owls were at that time seen regularly hunting around the margins of the reservoir but they are now much less frequent. Conversely, there was some excitement but also doubt when a Common Buzzard, a regular sight today, was first spotted. Identification of a Ruddy Duck in 1986 caused problems as *this is not in the Handbook*. The first brood on Cameron appeared in 1993 but with a national cull under discussion, this was not mentioned until the end of that year. Many observers were quite lyrical in their descriptions, *hundreds of Swifts hawking over the water; air filled with their (geese) wonderful cries; opened the flap to find a fine Greenshank right in front of the hide*. JW described two Great-crested Grebe chicks, *still striped*, being fed by their parents, *feeding bill-tip to bill-tip*. Great

deal of 'aggro' between young....sometimes discipline asserted by adults on young. Fine turn of speed shown by both young. Young dashed hither and thither waiting for adults to appear, when both were submerged.

Other wildlife was recorded around the reservoir including mammals such as Roe Deer and Fox, butterflies and flowering plants such as Marsh Marigold, Lady's Smock, Ragged Robin and Primroses. Views of *gossamer threads, hanging in the air* were recorded several times. Some had very close encounters with wildlife whilst sitting in the hide, three roosting Wrens were disturbed one day, as was a small bat on another. A female Kestrel tried to enter the occupied hide, surprising both itself and the observer.

I was an irregular visitor to Cameron hide during the period covered by the log book but I knew many of the contributors, indeed I married one of them. Reading the entries gave me a vivid impression of the hide and the people who enjoyed using it, who knew and respected each other. Memories flooded back, both of great sightings of birds and gentle banter with fellow birdwatchers. Perhaps one day, when the management arrangements for Cameron are finally sorted out, we can improve conditions for birds in the area by some imaginative habitat creation, and perhaps that atmosphere of camaraderie may emerge again with a new generation. It's good to dream.

SPRING MUSINGS

By Elizabeth Gray (Co-convenor: Kilminning Coast Reserve)

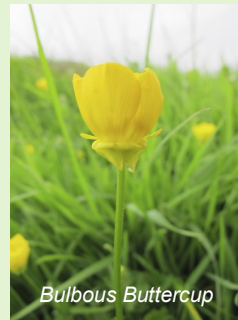
Spring is in the air - at least it will be by the time you read this. For me, now, it is deep, dark January but of course we can also have beautiful sunny winter days. Nevertheless, my thoughts are turning to Spring and wondering what floristic delights the Kilminning SWT site will have this year. The 2013 botanical site condition monitoring results for the western section were particularly poor and worse than the previous year. There was a lot of rank grass preventing the growth of meadow flowers and also some sheep were still on the reserve up to June 2013 chomping away at the prettier flowers. It was decided to place a lot of sheep on the reserve over the winter 2013/14 to attempt to reduce the grass height and remove them by the end of February to allow any flowering plants present, to flower. This resulted in carpets of Lesser Celandine (*Ranunculus ficaria*), Wild Hyacinth (*Hyacinthoides non-scriptus*) everywhere. *Primula vulgaris* and *Caltha palustris* were amongst some other delights by April 28th 2014.



Wild Hyacinth

By mid May the yellow carpet turned blue due to the continued growth of the Wild Hyacinth and also noted was Bulbous Buttercup (*Ranunculus bulbosus*) an indicator of healthy wildflower meadows. In the car park area, hybrid Wild Hyacinths were spotted - not a good omen. By end June/July there were well over 30 Northern Marsh-orchids

in a different area of the reserve from where one was noted in a previous year. Later, instead of one Agrimony (*Agrimonia eupatoria*) plant recorded in 2012, there were many. The 2014 botanical site condition monitoring showed a great improvement from the previous two years.



Bulbous Buttercup



Northern Marsh-Orchid

The car park area for Kilminning was also a delight to visit in 2014. In previous years there was an increasing number of caravans with an increasing amount of rubbish and damage. Early in 2014 a seven foot high fixed barrier was erected on the approach to the car park area and Fife Council, very kindly, cleared up all of the rubbish and broken glass so the site was back to pristine condition. A great space for coastal bird watching and picnicking. Now we need to keep an eye on possible development of Crail Airfield which is almost adjacent to the SWT Reserve. A planning application for a major development is being considered but any application would or should be accompanied by an Environmental Impact Assessment.

With Spring approaching, I am also looking at the Field Studies Council (FSC) website for a botanical course - which one shall I choose this year? There are lots of interesting natural history courses available covering a huge number of areas. The Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) also arrange a number of exciting outings. They can be viewed on their website.

EVENTS SPRING/ SUMMER 2015

Any suggestions? Able to lead a walk? Give a talk? Get in touch with Paul Blackburn.



All welcome. We advise sturdy footwear and suitable clothing for outdoor events.

Thurs 19th March 7.30pm Illustrated Talk – Wildlife and Landscapes of Australia by Christine Schulte

Joint meeting with Kinross Camera Club, Kinross Church Centre, High Street, Kinross, KY13 8AR. Free admission.

Fri 24th April 7.30 p.m. - Great Crested Newt Outing

Please note The Date for this will be confirmed a fortnight in advance (see below)

David Bell will tell us about the Great Crested Newt conservation work that has been happening in Pitmedden Forest. Then there will be time for a tea or coffee, before beginning a search for the newts at around 9.00 p.m.

Great Crested Newts only emerge after darkness so the outing will end around 2230hrs. Bring a torch, flask and wear sensible outdoor gear,

The emergence date of Great Crested Newts is highly variable so the date will be confirmed nearer the time. If you are interested register with the Secretary and who will email out the date when it is confirmed .

Meet at the entrance to Pitmedden Forest on the Strathmiglo road NGR NO 1879 1411.

Sun 24th May—Outing: Cullaloe Reserve 10.00 a.m.

Discover the wildlife of Cullaloe Reserve with Alistair Shuttleworth. Birds , wildflowers and insects – if we're lucky we might get to sample the results from an overnight moth trap. Poplar Hawkmoth could provide the highlight!

Meet at Cullaloe Car Park NT 186 878

Sat 4th July 2.00 p.m. - Outing: Dumbarrie Links

Reserve

A guided walk with Gordon Corbet, Reserve Warden. Meet at Temple car park (east end of Lower Largo) NO 424 026

MOTHING EVENTS LED BY TIM BRAIN

Fri 27th March – Cullaloe. Meet in car park at 7.30pm.

Sat 23rd May – Cullaloe. Meet in car park at 9.30pm

Fri 29th May – Bankhead Moss. Meet in car park at 9.30pm.

Fri 19th June – Barnyard's Marsh. Meet in car park at 10.00pm.

Sat 11th July - Lielowan Meadow. Meet at old lime kilns at 10.00 p.m.

N.B. For ALL mothing events: (i) it is essential that you contact Tim on 01577 840317 to confirm times and that the event is going ahead; (ii) ensure suitable footwear and bring a torch.

Reserve Manager's Update

by Rory Sandison

Our reserves in Fife are looking forward to spring! Its been a very busy winter with new stock joining the herd and flock (thanks to HLF Funding from the Save Our Magnificent Meadows Partnership), activities to protect the raised bog at Bankhead Moss, scrub management at Carlingnose Point and a long list of other important tasks.

Can I pass on my sincere thanks to all the volunteers who helped with these tasks and with checking the livestock and reserves over the past few months. New for 2015 are a number of grassland themed events which will be run by the Jupiter Urban Wildlife Centre Rangers.

Details of these SOMM Funded events can be found on the SWT website and in the SWT events diary. I want to hear your view on our reserves – if you have any queries please contact me on rsandison@swt.org.uk and if you have any queries regarding the livestock please contact lmacgregor@scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk.



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