

# Fife and Kinross Group



## Fife Area Wildlife News

No 110 Autumn 2020/Winter 2021



### Message from Alison Irvine, Chair



I can't believe that my years as chair of SWT Fife and Kinross are coming to a close, as I will stand down at this year's AGM. How time has flown by! I expect most of my predecessors in this post have used their last FAWN article to reflect on what has been achieved during their time, but I am not going to look back, but will look forward. We have been living in a very strange world for the last 8 or 9 months and have come to accept as normal things which would have been completely alien a year ago. One small well-adapted and extremely successful virus (from the virus's point of view) has certainly caused changes in the way we view the world.

Many people have commented on the increased importance of the local natural world to almost everyone, giving them somewhere to go for their one hour of outdoor exercise during lockdown, and just the calm of listening to birds and enjoying nature? Probably all of you reading this are well aware of the benefits of being in the outdoors or you wouldn't be an SWT member, but how many people are discovering this for the first time. I will

allow myself to look back, but by more than 30 years to when I worked as a countryside ranger. Without a doubt the most enjoyable part of the job for me was sharing my knowledge with other people, especially children. Seeing the sheer amazement and enthusiasm which I could trigger by merely turning over a stone, and showing the creepy crawlies underneath, has made me feel that conservation of every local bit of wild outdoors is so worthwhile. So if you have been enjoying any small green area near your home this year, please keep an eye on it and appreciate all the small wild things to be found!

One of the side effects of Covid – 19 has been a dramatic decline in income for many charities, SWT included, but it was very pleasing to hear at the SWT AGM that the national finances are standing up well. The organisation is in good heart, and will be able to continue with the vital conservation work which we are all part of. I have been involved in SWT for a very long time, and I intend to continue to be as involved as I can at a local level to ensure that our reserves are maintained, and that the organisation goes on from strength to strength.

Finally, although as I write this it is impossible to know what stage of lockdown or unlocking we will be at when you receive your FAWN, I hope that most of you have been able to use some of the digital options for events and activities which we have been able to host. I know not everyone has access to a computer, but if anyone in your friends or family does, then it is well worth trying to join in with meetings, talks and the AGM of SWT. I am one of the least computer-tech people around and, if I can manage, I'm sure anyone can! So, although I might not be physically meeting you at events for a while, it will be nice to know that as many of you as possible have joined in digitally.



Robertson is delighted to sponsor the Scottish Wildlife Trust.

As an infrastructure, support services and construction company we realise how important the protection of biodiversity sites is and continually monitor and update our Environmental Policy to reflect this. Our on-site monitoring ensures that we will never knowingly damage or disrupt areas of natural interest.

### Let the Grass Grow Long - Paul Blackburn

Letting the grass grow long is now popular as evident by the number of articles in newspapers. When we moved into our home over 30 years ago we had a tiny front lawn with flowering cherry. After 5 years the cherry was removed and part of the lawn was converted to a flowerbed with geraniums. Over time I gradually became more lax with my mowing regime, prompting comments in the street such as "I can tell your neighbour " is a wildlife gardener, and orange hawkbeeds, yellow hawkweeds and ox eye daisy flowered on the lawn in mid-summer.

We never applied fertiliser or herbicides, and in 2014 a Common Spotted Orchid appeared on the lawn and flowered, although conditions must have been right for some time as it takes a few years for them to flower. It has flowered every year since, with 3 or 4 spikes, but sadly it hasn't spread yet.



Common Spotted Orchid

For the last two years I have let the grass grow long, only cutting it back in late summer, and the changes in the wildlife have been very noticeable. Clouds of tiny moths are disturbed when walking through the grass, and this year for the first time grasshoppers have been present. At least 6 grasshoppers have been singing away on a hot sunny day, their reeling song sounding like a group of free-wheeling cyclists. Sadly the calls are inaudible to some, but they can be heard by using the bat detector. They are surprisingly difficult to spot, but usually can be seen eventually as they spring from one location to another. I managed to net one and identify it as a Common Green Grasshopper, Omocestus viridulus.

I have also seen frogs in the front garden for the first time in many years, perhaps attracted by the damper conditions and the increase in insect numbers.

This summer I tried to increase the diversity of flowers by sowing a seed mix, but I was too lazy with the ground preparation, and this was not a success. I'll transplant some cowslips into the lawn in the autumn and will get some plants of yellow rattle to weaken the grass.

So wildlife gardening is now fashionable – but who cares about fashion when Grasshoppers and frogs are present.

### George Ballantyne (14th November 1934 - 17th July 2020)

I was saddened to hear of the death in July of George Ballantyne, a long term supporter of the SWT. He was also botanical recorder, latterly with Sandy Edwards, for Fife & Kinross for 51 years. I first met George in the 1970s on the (then) SWT Fife & Kinross Branch committee when he was vice-chairman, He edited FAWN for several years in the 1980s and 90s This was carried out meticulously, in line with his professional background as Librarian at the Signet Library, Edinburgh.

George was an exceptional local botanist with several publications to his name including: *The Wild Flowers of Kirkcaldy* 1970 and *Wild Flowers in Fife and Kinross: A Concise Checklist*, 2002. He also edited the botanical section of *The Nature of Fife*, 1998, published for the SWT. Work on what, potentially, would have been his most ambitious publication on the botany of Fife was well underway before, sadly, ill-health led to the abandonment of the project.

I have very happy memories of days out botanising with George together with Bill Hay, great friends, who between them had a wonderful knowledge of the local flora. I loved listening to their debates and their gentle banter. They were both generous with their knowledge, and patient with my inexperience.

George's integrity and straightforward approach was augmented by his quiet sense of humour. He was generous with his time and expertise, both to individuals and to organisations. It was a privilege to know him and to spend time sharing his company and botanical knowledge.

**Jean Stewart**

## RESERVES ROUND-UP

### Bankhead Moss

There is an ongoing problem at Bankhead Moss of Birch seeding on to and invading the raised bog. I have visited Bankhead Moss for 45 years and have seen groups of volunteers and a succession of staff labouring to control the Birch with various methods. The Moss is surrounded by Birch trees so the invasion is almost inevitable. The concern is that if the birch is allowed to mature, the moss will dry out, the raised bog will become a Birch woodland and a rare habitat will be lost. There is no easy answer to this. It's the same principle that if you don't cut your lawn, coarse grasses, shrubs and eventually trees invade the area in the longer term.

My hopes for Bankhead were raised a few years ago when Gordon Corbet identified a species of small (c 5 mm) leaf beetle, *Lochmaea caprea*, feeding on the Birch leaves. This year they seem to be particularly numerous and the contrast between a visit in early August and one on 5 September was dramatic. In August, the Birch saplings were covered in leaves and dominated the view of the moss. By September, thousands of leaf beetles, on average 4-5 per leaf, had devastated the foliage. The beetles appear to strip leaves from the upper side feeding on the epidermis and the main body of the leaf, leaving the lower epidermis as a brown skeletal network.

*Jean Stewart*



## RESERVES ROUND-UP

### Carlingnose

The plants typical of the reserve appeared as usual. There was a small but beautiful display of dropwort on the NE side of the rocky knoll. As usual there were more dropwort plants in the field at the North end of the village. I found several field gentian specimens near the rocky knoll in September and there was a big display of devil's-bit scabious in the late summer. Other plants seen included kidney vetch, bloody cranesbill and plenty of eyebright.

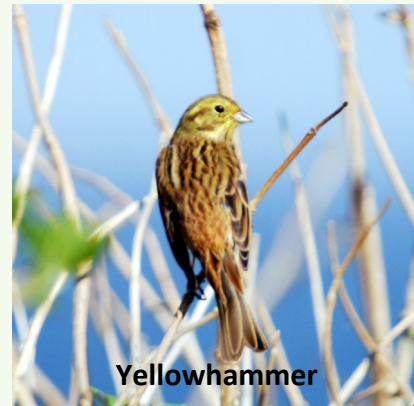
Good news! The common terns took over the ruined pier. There appeared to be no problems with predation by the gulls and I estimated at least 100 individuals were on the pier in June and July. They also bred on the dolphin in West Bay and I saw at least 6 small young being fed there several times in July.

Bird sightings on and near to the reserve have included a yellow hammer on the reserve and a few fulmar pairs on the quarry face above Deep Sea World. Other sightings have been ravens close to the reserve and over the quarry to the North of the village. This was also the place I saw 2 buzzards and 3 peregrines on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June.

*John Done*



**Buzzard**



**Yellowhammer**

### Botanical Monitoring - *Elizabeth Gray*

As soon as the 5 mile travel limit was lifted in these surreal times we are living in, the SWT Fife and Kinross Botanical Monitoring Group were in action. The new criteria included social distancing at all times, not sharing equipment or car journeys and to abstain from the usual jolly picnic lunches and coffees after the work was completed.

Monitoring of the 6 meadows (Kilminning, Fleecefaulds, Cullaloe, Lielowan, Bo'Mains and Carlingnose) was successfully completed in July. Analysis of the results, with a view to inform management plans, is ongoing.

### Events Updates and Latest News

Be sure to regularly check our web site:

(<http://www.swt-fife.org.uk/>)

and Facebook pages

(<https://www.facebook.com/swtfifeandkinrossmc>)

for news and important changes and updates to the programme plus FAWN in colour!



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